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Ethnic quotas and political representation in Colombia: wedged open or revolving doors?

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ABSTRACT

Ethnoracial legislative quotas promised to enable long-term transformations towards more just political representation. These mechanisms were designed to “open doors” to historically marginalized groups and, eventually, normalize the election of minority candidates, facilitating their re-election and access to leadership. Have these promises been fulfilled? To answer this question, we examine the ethnoracial composition of the Chamber of Representatives (2002–2026) in Colombia – a pioneer in adopting ethnoracial reserved congressional seats. Comparing self-identification and skin tone data, we find that the number of self-identified Indigenous and Afro-Colombian legislators shows a moderate increase, while people with darker skin tones are critically underrepresented with no consistent increase over time. Meanwhile, women representatives are disproportionately white. The contrasting findings suggest the politicization of racial and ethnic identities: reserved seats may lead to greater self-identification by candidates over time, as identity becomes a more central to political and electoral dynamics, without changing observable racial composition.

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In 2022, Colombia elected its first Black woman Vice President, Francia Márquez. Having garnered 800,000 votes in the presidential primaries (third among all primary contenders), Márquez earned her position in the left-wing coalition Pacto Histórico (Historic Pact) – as running mate to President Gustavo Petro (Santaaulalia 2012). Márquez was key to Petro’s victory – she brought with her massive support from Colombia’s predominantly Black, Pacific region, which ultimately put the Colombian left in power for the first time in history. Márquez’ Vice-Presidency was only one of the expressions of Pacto Histórico’s emphasis on racial representation in the 2022 elections, which also included nominating and electing several self-identified Black and Indigenous candidates to congress. This emphasis on racial inclusion is part of a longer-term “multicultural” turn in Colombia that dates to the 1991 Constitution.

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Since independence, Colombia had prided itself as a “racial democracy”; a country where, supposedly, skin colour did not determine an individual’s life prospects. In the 1980s, however, student movements challenged this discourse – locating the roots of Colombia’s civil conflict in socioeconomic inequalities and the inability of the political class to represent all Colombians (Lemaitre Ripoli 2005; Van Cott 2017). This political moment eventually led to a new constitution written with significant input from leftist and Indigenous delegates, dubbed the “Inclusive Constitution” and “an ideological rupture” with the past (Van Cott 2017; Agudelo 2002; Holguín Sarria 2002). The Constitution mandated two reserved seats in the Senate for Indigenous representatives, and for Congress to create formal representation for Afro-Colombians from the Pacific region. The *Cámara de Representantes* (Chamber of Representatives) later created two seats for Afro-Colombians and one for an Indigenous representative. Amongst other measures, this demonstrated an historic shift from a nation that claimed to be color-blind, to one that increasingly recognized the relationship between race, ethnicity, and persistent inequalities.

By establishing reserved congressional seats, Colombia became a pioneer in the use of formal institutional mechanisms to guarantee a voice for ethnic and racial minorities. Numerous Latin American countries followed Colombia’s lead, including Venezuela, Peru, Mexico, and Bolivia. By the early twenty-first century, countries across the globe began to adopt mechanisms to insure the presence of previously marginalized groups (Bird 2009; Htun 2024; Krook 1990, chap. 4).

In theory, quotas not only provide voice, they acculturate citizens to more diverse representatives and, eventually, elect members of historically marginalized groups to open legislative seats (Paxton and Hughes 2018; Krook 1990; Tripp and Kang 2014; Jones 2023; Hughes et al. 2011). Moreover, quotas lay the groundwork for more diverse leadership within political bodies as members from historically marginalized backgrounds gain experience over time (Aldrich and Daniel 2005). However, critics warn that reinforcing identity politics through quotas reifies categories without recognition of the diversity within them, undermining a collective sense of citizenship, or politicizing racial identities (Okin 2016; Tebble 2021; Elstain 2017; De Micheli 1984).

Thirty years after the adoption of Colombia’s special legislative seats, to what degree has its legislature become more inclusive? Have these seats had spillover effects, leading to the election of more Indigenous and Afro-Colombians and their greater representation among the legislature’s leadership? To answer these questions, we examine the changing racial and ethnic composition of the last six legislatures of Colombia’s Chamber of Representatives (2002–2026), using two different approaches. The first is self-identification data (Indigenous and Afro-Colombian) reported either by legislators themselves (i.e. Congressional webpage, social media), or reported by the news. The second approach uses skin tone as a proxy for race, given that other scholars have argued that complexion is the best predictor of racial identification (Telles and Paschel 2013).

This methodology generates both empirical and theoretical contributions. Empirically, the results are important for understanding racial representation – both in Colombia and in Latin America – because they analyze racial representation over time. To date, most studies empirically documenting the racial composition of Latin American legislatures provide one-year snapshots and do not illuminate trends (Janusz 2023; Htun 2014). Only a few capture change over time (e.g. Rejón 1990). Theoretically, our two-fold

approach allow us to make significant contributions to debates on quotas. Both measures reveal whether or not there have been spillover effects of quotas – meaning the election, re-election, and leadership prospects of minoritized groups in the Congress, beyond the reserved seats. Our approaches unveil somewhat different results. The number of self-identified Indigenous and Afro-Colombian legislators shows a moderate increase, with a more uneven rise for women than men. By contrast, our data on skin tone shows that people with darker skin tones have been critically underrepresented, with no discernible pattern or consistent increase over time. Moreover, both those with perceived darker skin tones and those that self-identify are less likely to be re-elected or placed in leadership positions. Women representatives are disproportionately white. The contrasting findings between our two measures of ethnoracial composition speak more directly to the question of politicization of identities; they suggest that reserved seats may lead to greater self-identification by candidates over time, as identity becomes a more important part of the political and electoral dynamics, without changing observable racial composition.

Theories on quotas and inclusion

There is significant normative debate over quotas. Those opposed say quotas undercut the imagined community of citizenship by fostering connection with identity-based groups rather than the broader polity. They argue that – by focusing on specific identities and accentuating differences – quotas risk ignoring within-group variation and cross-group interrelations, and may provoke conflict (Okin 2016; Tebble 2021; Elshtain 2017; Sowell 2014). Conversely, proponents argue the inclusion of historically marginalized groups is an acknowledgement of their equal value and in and of itself a form of justice (Phillips 2024; Kymlicka 2009) that promotes greater democratic stability (Burlet and Reid 2016; Madrid 2014). Advocates argue quotas change societal norms and generate spillover effects over time: electing marginalized groups to political office normalizes their election, even outside of the quota mechanism (Paxton and Hughes 2018; Krok 1990; Tripp and Kang 2014; Jones 2023; Hughes et al. 2011). Therefore, quotas need only be a temporary measure, and render strict proportional representation unnecessary.

Empirical work on these questions is inconclusive. Some studies show that quotas can change norms – Indian voters continue to elect female leaders after quotas were removed (Beaman et al. 2012; Bhavnani 2009) and women elected via quotas in South Korea are more likely to be re-elected to a single-member district where quotas do not apply (Shin 1966). These results align with broader findings, which have shown that incumbency is one of the best predictors for electoral success (Carson, Engstrom, and Roberts 2018; Schlesinger 2022; Fiorina 2022); arguably, once the quota “jumpstarts” a legislator’s career, their quality and experience can ensure continued electoral success. However, other studies find less evidence to support the transformative power that quotas supposedly have to increase “sustainable” representation (Darhour and Dahlerup 2022).

Related to spillover effects is leadership; beyond winning an elected office, can quotas facilitate promotion of members of historically marginalized groups to leadership positions? Arguably, a foot in the door eventually leads to leadership opportunities. Research in Sweden suggests this is true for gender quotas (O’Brien and Rickne 2019); but there is not much more evidence. Studies in the United States show light-skinned deputies have

greater access to leadership and have greater success in passing legislation than darker-skinned legislators (Griffin and Keane 2020; Haynie 2023; D'Andra Orey, Overby, and Larimer 2007). Still, race and legislative leadership are critically understudied in Latin America, with only a few exceptions (Rejón 1990; Bueno and Dunning 2013; Bailey 2016; Campos and Machado 2007) and the impact of ethnoracial quotas on leadership remains unexplored.

Finally, do quotas politicize ethnoracial identities? To our knowledge, the literature on quotas has not considered the matter, but studies of affirmative action suggest politicizing effects. For example, affirmative action policies have led Brazilians to “reclassify” themselves as Black, as Blackness has become more accepted and has entailed potential benefits (De Micheli 1984). Similarly, Latinx youth in the United States shift their racial self-identification to align with others’ perceptions of their racial identity (Irizarry, Monk, and Cobb 2019). Therefore, ethnoracial political quotas could potentially lead to greater self-identification among legislators as ethnoracial categories become more socially acceptable and politically profitable.

Race and democracy in Colombia

Latin America has been slow to admit the existence of racial inequalities in its societies. For decades, research on race was discouraged by ideologies of racial harmony, strategically orchestrated by political elites (Sue 1990; Wade 2002; Paschel 2010). Often, national myths denied the existence of racial problems but – even though racial characteristics frequently mapped onto economic inequalities – political leaders focused on class, rather than race distinctions.

Colombia is arguably the birthplace of “racial democracy”. La “Gran Colombia” (spanning today’s Colombia and Venezuela) was ground-zero in the struggle for independence from Spain (Lasso 2007); with racial equality and the abolition of slavery being central concerns of the insurgent cause. In 1810, Colombia abolished the Spanish caste system – an elaborate structure of human categorization based on “racial purity”(Knight 2004). With independence, the country cemented its racial discourse in a series of laws that promoted equality, including the gradual end of slavery by 1852 (Helg 2002, 163–164).

As Colombia entered its nation-building phase, its population was principally white, mestizo (mixed Spanish and Indigenous descent), Afrodescendant, and just 16% Indigenous (Larson 1996, 82). Under Spanish rule, many of the Indigenous communities located in the geographic boundaries that would later become Colombia were placed on Indigenous reservations. New Colombian leaders focused their efforts on “integrating” Indigenous populations; and these efforts were largely successful in the Northern highlands where reservations were privatized and interracial marriage became commonplace (Larson 1996). But in Colombia’s South, Indigenous peoples of Popoyán and Pasto militantly defended their reservations and their governance (Rappaport 2012), which was crucial to future Indigenous organizing, and the maintenance of Indigenous cultures (Laurent 2007).

Within the broad categories of “Indigenous” and “Afrodescendant” Colombians there is significant variation. Colombia is home to 115 Indigenous *pueblos* (peoples) who live in rural and urban contexts (on/off reservations), some of which maintain their languages and customs more than others. They are concentrated in the provinces of La Guajira,

Córdoba, Sucre, Cauca, Nariño and Chocó. The largest of these pueblos are the Wayuu, Zenu, Nasa and Pastos which together constitute 58.1% of the Indigenous population (DANE 2007). The Afro-Colombian population – concentrated in the provinces of Chocó, the Archipiélago of San Andrés, Bolívar, Valle del Cauca, and Cauca (DANE 2007) – is distributed in three main groups: those living in urban areas (particularly near the Caribbean coast and the Cauca Valley, in cities like Cartagena and Cali), the “Rai-zales” residing in the Caribbean islands of San Andrés and Providencia, and the rural “black communities” living predominantly in the Pacific region (Wade 1995).

The Afrodescendant population was the greater preoccupation for new (largely white) national leaders – divided between the Liberal and Conservative parties. Racial democracy was central to Liberals’ political campaigns, wooing the votes of Afrodescendants in the Caribbean. Their discourse, however, required racial differences not be mentioned – a conundrum for Blacks that welcomed equal citizenship but, under these terms, could not claim recognition as Afrodescendants (McGraw 2007). Dissonant with these egalitarian discourses, ample evidence demonstrates Colombian leaders and intellectuals overtly disparaging Blacks (de Friedemann 2013), and state administrators blaming the country’s lack of development on its racial composition (McGraw 2007, 14; Appelbaum 2012). One state response to racial concerns was to encourage racial mixing to achieve lighter skin tones (Larson 1996, 75; Appelbaum 2012, 4).

This racial democracy discourse has several current impacts; including a custom of down-playing racial differences, despite Afrodescendants and Indigenous peoples being marginalized and deprived of the same rights as lighter skinned citizens (Urrea Giraldo, Viáfara López, and Vigora 2008, 110). Physical features such as skin tone and hair texture continued to serve as markers for social stratification, which is evident in the disadvantage of dark-skinned Colombians in education and employment (Urrea Giraldo, Viáfara López, and Vigora 2008). Furthermore, due to this discourse, few Afrodescendants historically chose to self-identify as “Afro-Colombian” (Pisano 1998). Identification by Indigenous peoples has varied – some chose integration, while others fiercely defended their national identities.

Persistent and deep inequalities – both ethnoracial and socioeconomic – eventually broke down the apparent consensus around racial democracy. In the 1980s, massive social protests pressured for a new Constitution (Pérez Caballero et al. 2015; Lemaitre Ripoli 2005; Van Cott 2017). In response to delegates’ demands for land rights, political autonomy, and guaranteed representation, the 1991 constitution officially recognized multiculturalism, including the creation of ethnic quotas for political representation in Congress. Articles 171 and 176 of the Constitution called for two Indigenous reserved seats in the Senate and for Congress to create representation for Afro-Colombians of Colombia’s Pacific Coast (Laurent 2007; Holguín Sarria 2002; Agudelo 2002; Paschel 2010). In 1993, the legislature created two seats for Afro-Colombians from the Pacific region in the Chamber of Representatives. The two Indigenous senate seats were first used in the 1991 national elections and the two Afro-Colombian chamber seats in 1994. Due to contestation in the courts, the Afro-Colombian seats were suspended for the 1998 election before returning in 2002. The same year, an Indigenous reserved seat in the lower house was added. Rather than creating group-specific constituencies for these reserved seats, the law enables all voters to choose the district in which they cast

their vote: the ordinary districts or the special ones (i.e. Indigenous and Afrodescendant); therefore, in practice, the constituency for the minority self-selects from a national pool.

The debates over specific mechanisms for Afro-Colombian inclusion were like those of the theorists outlined previously; opponents argued special seats could lead to greater division, even apartheid, while proponents argued such mechanisms were key to addressing past wrongs (Paschel 1999, 736). Ultimately, small but effective Afro-Colombian organizations strategically seized upon convergent changes in global policy norms (i.e. multiculturalism) and domestic political disequilibrium (i.e. the 1991 constitutional reform), framing their demands in ethnic, rather than racial terms, following the Indigenous model (Wade 2005; Telles and Bailey 2014, 1565; Paschel 2010). The decision was controversial, as only a small fraction of the total Afro-Colombian population thought of themselves as communities with their own cultural identity, authorities, and land (Hoffmann 2004, 16). It also meant that the reserved Congressional seats were specifically for the black communities of the Pacific region, for which the “ethnic” argument was successfully made (Restrepo 2023).

These demands were originally captured in a transitory constitutional provision (Artículo Transitorio 55), that eventually gave way to Law 70 – Law of Black Communities – which recognized the political and territorial rights of Afro-Colombian communities (Valencia Ángulo 2019). The law effectively disrupted the way that the Colombian state had imagined the nation until then – as racially mixed and culturally homogeneous (Paschel 2010). Law 70 is one of the most comprehensive laws for Afrodescendant populations in Latin America given its ambitious aims: (a) recognize collective land rights for Afro-Colombians living in the Pacific Coast; (b) establish mechanisms for the protection of socioeconomic and cultural rights of Afro-Colombians; and (c) mandate education programmes that incorporate the history of Afro-Colombian communities into the education curriculum at all levels (Paschel 1999, 729, 738). Importantly, the state committed to grant historically marginalized groups access to high public administration posts (Valencia Ángulo 2019, 134–135).

The long-standing history of reserved seats in Colombia, along with the evolution of race and ethnic relations in the country, makes it a good case to study the long-term impacts of quotas. Do quotas lead to electing more members of historically marginalized groups (beyond the reserved seats), or lead to more individuals from these groups being re-elected and advancing to leadership positions? Answering these questions is particularly interesting in a context where ethnic and racial differences have historically been minimized.

Data and methods

We explore the ramifications of ethnoracial quotas in Colombia examining the last six terms of the Colombian Chamber of Representatives (2002–2026). Historical data on the members of the Colombian Congress is not easily accessible through official channels (i.e. the websites have improved over time, but information on earlier legislatures is sparse). However, reliable data is available through Congreso Visible, an online platform managed by the Universidad de Los Andes.

Given the lack of official data on ethnoracial self-identification, we develop two measures to indicate legislators’ race/ethnicity: “skin color” (coded from portraits of the legislators) and reported self-identification.

Studies demonstrate that skin colour regularly elicits a racial ideology or schema where people are aware of human colour variation (Roth 2002, 12; Telles 2002), it is main variable of social stratification (Telles 2012, 16) and, the best predictor for racial identification in some Latin American countries (Telles and Paschel 2013; Monk 2017; Banton 2009). Scholars have used many methods to measure skin tone (Dixon and Telles 2012), but we – like others (Janusz et al. 2018; Rejón and Bárcena 2025) – asked two (Colombian) coders to independently classify the skin colour of each legislator using the PERLA palette (Telles 2012), which includes eleven skin tones. Then, we averaged their scores and rounded the result to the closest category in the palette.

This method, as any other, has advantages and limitations. Coders are not neutral when recording physical traits; their measurements are volatile and other factors such as names, hair, clothing, and gender influence how they assess skin colour (Campbell and Troyer 1998; Golash-Boza and Darity 2016; Garcia and Abascal 2001; Abrajano, Elmendorf, and Quinn 2023). In response to these limitations, some have used automated algorithms to isolate skin colour and classify portraits accordingly, but the reliability of these tools depends on criteria our sample does not meet (Rejón and Ma 2025; Rejón 2023). Furthermore, we are interested in “impressionistic race” (Wade 2009), meaning how people react and judge others varies not only on skin colour but on other factors (i.e. hair texture, lip shape, Indigenous dress). Therefore, we use the human-coded “skin tone” measure, which ranges from 2 to 11 in our sample (no legislators were classified in 1, the darkest category).

Our second ethn racial indicator is closer to the gold standard for racial classification: self-identification (Del Popolo and Schkolnik 2021). This data allows us to see to what extent identification has evolved with the implementation of the special seats in Colombia. We coded this variable positively when: the member was elected to one of the special seats for Indigenous or Afrodescendants (except for two mestizo members that were controversially elected to the Afro-Colombian seats in 2014; see Htun 2004, Chapter 5); the member’s biography states their ethn racial identity (i.e. Congreso Visible or Chamber’s website); or the member was identified as Indigenous or Afro-Colombian in their social media or a news/academic source. In a few cases, interviews were a source. Given this approach, it is possible that we have undercounted members that self-identify as Indigenous or Afro-descendant if they do not appear in any of these sources. Using both approaches maximizes the benefits of each, while mitigating their limitations.

We pulled biographical and legislative data for the six legislatures between 2002 and 2024, for a total of 1,212 profiles: 1,109 of which contained a photo, with missing photos concentrated in earlier legislative periods. To this database, we added variables such as leadership (defined as President or Vice President of the Chamber of Representatives) and, crucial to our study, “skin colour” and racial self-identification.

In the next section, we compare the race of representatives to census data of the Indigenous and Afrodescendant population in their districts. After decades of omission, most Latin American countries are now using self-identification to count Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations (Htun 2004). Yet, census data, in Colombia and elsewhere, have varied significantly depending on how questions have been worded (Wade 2000; Loveman 2009, chap. 6; Angosto Ferrández and Kradolfer 2020). The 2005 census questionnaire asked people if based on their “culture, pueblo or physical features” if they

themselves, or others, identified them as Indigenous, Roma, Raizal, Palenquero, or “Negro(a), mulato(a), afrocolombiano(a) o afrodescendiente” (Black, mulato, Afro-Colombian or Afrodescendant). (As previously noted, Raizal and Palenquero are Afrodescendants from specific parts of Colombia.) With this phrasing, the Afro-Colombian population “grew” to 11% from the previous census (Urrea Giraldo, Viáfara López, and Vigora 2008, 125) while the Indigenous population was 3.4%. With same question in 2018, the estimate of Afrodescendants shrunk to 9.34% (DANE 2019), yet for Indigenous peoples it grew to 4.4% and the number of Indigenous *pueblos* also grew, from 93 to 115 (DANE 2007). The government statistics agency attributed the drop in Afrodescendants to incomplete questionnaires, inability to locate some residents, and difficulty reaching some areas due to security concerns. The opposite was true for Indigenous peoples (DANE 2007; 2019).

Findings and discussion

Thirty years after the introduction of special legislative seats in Colombia, is its lower chamber more inclusive? Is its leadership more diverse? We compare the answers to these questions using our two measurement approaches and conclude reflecting on the implications of our contrasting findings.

Spillover beyond reserved seats

Figure 1 examines whether Colombia’s special districts have led to greater racial diversity among congressional representatives beyond these reserved seats. Note that the total number of legislators in the Chamber marginally varies every term, which has a small impact in the percentages show in the plot.

Notably, when measured by self-identification, Indigenous and Afrodescendant members of the Chamber of Representatives grew between 2002 and 2022. At least two Indigenous members have been elected to the Chamber (1.17% and 1.09%) since

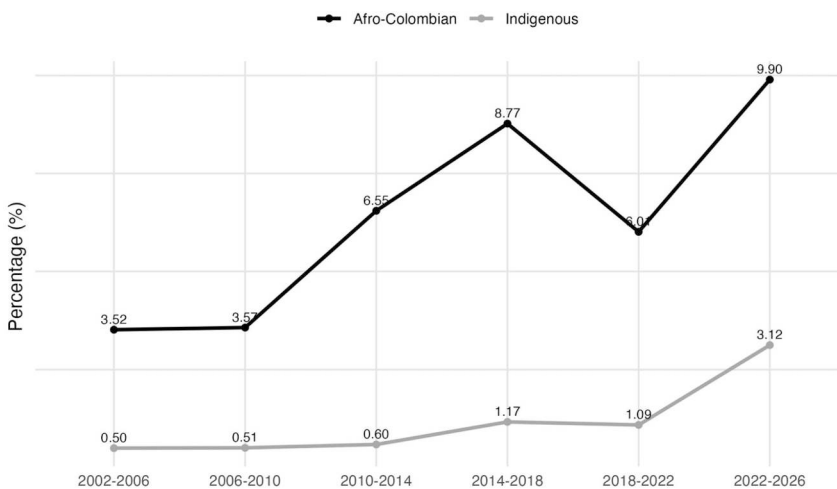


Figure 1. Afro-Colombians and Indigenous Peoples in the lower chamber by identity.

2014, but the number rose to six (3.12%) in 2022, with Pacto Histórico's victory. The increased trend for Afro-Colombians is a bit different. 2010 is the election year where an increase takes hold, and ten Afrodescendants (6.55%) are elected, over seven in the previous two elections. One high-point for Afro-Colombian representation was the 2014 election, with fifteen self-identified members (8.77%). Their numbers then dropped to eleven (6.01%) in 2018, only to climb to a record nineteen (9.90%) self-identified members in 2022. While it is not a straight line, the overall trend according to self-identification is upward.

Even if moderate, the increase in the number of legislators coded positively in our self-identification measure contrasts with our findings in the skin tone measure (Figure 2).

Notably, there is not a clear growth trend over time of darker skinned members. If anything, there are more dark-skinned members in the 2006–2010 period, the same period our self-identification numbers show lower representation. It is evident that the darker tones are the smallest in the sample, by a large margin. The presence of dark skin tones, even if in minimal proportions, does show some diversity in pigmentation in Colombia – unlike countries whose parliaments are almost entirely white (Malhotra and Raso 2005; Guan and Pietsch 1982). Yet, light-skinned people clearly dominate Colombia's lower chamber.

A comparison of the two measures raises the question of where those who self-identify fall on the complexion palette. Table 1 shows that those that self-identify as Afro-Colombian and Indigenous, for the most part, present near the middle of the palette, with even a few relatively “white” Afro-Colombians. We also explored whether the “skin colour” distribution of individuals who identify as Afro-Colombian or Indigenous has changed over time, and found no obvious trend.

Perhaps surprisingly, Table 1 shows that five legislators with skin 9 and 10 identify as Afro-Colombian. These are only two (multiply reelected) legislators. One is Jack Housni (Partido Liberal), representative for San Andrés y Providencia (a “Raizales” region in the Caribbean), to whom we return below.

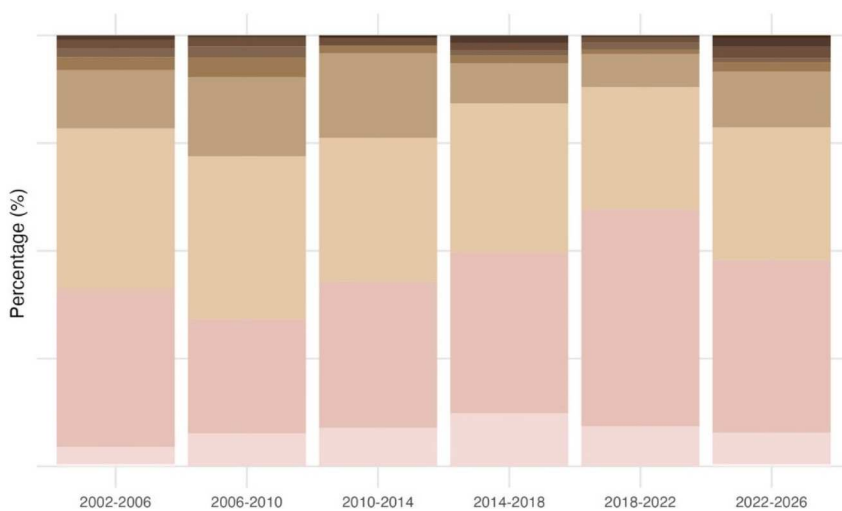


Figure 2. Composition of the Colombian chamber of representatives by skin tone.

Table 1. Self-identified representatives by skin tone (2002–2026).

	Afro-Colombian	Indigenous	No record	Total
2	2(100.0%)	0	0	2(0.2%)
3	9(81.8%)	0	2(18.2%)	11(1.0%)
4	17(81.0%)	0	4(19.0%)	21(1.9%)
5	11(68.8%)	0	5(31.2%)	16(1.4%)
6	6(22.2%)	1(3.7%)	20(74.1%)	27(2.4%)
7	14(9.3%)	6(4.0%)	131(86.8%)	151(13.6%)
8	6(1.6%)	4(1.1%)	364(97.3%)	374(33.7%)
9	4(1.0%)	2(0.5%)	409(98.6%)	415(37.4%)
10	1(1.1%)	0	89(98.9%)	90(8.1%)
11	0	0	2(100.0%)	2(0.2%)
Total	70(6.3%)	13(1.2%)	1026(92.5%)	1109(100.0%)

Considering skin tone in relationship to the broader demographics of Colombia (and the specific demographics of the region individual legislators represent, using the latest census as reference), the level of underrepresentation is critical. Even the sum of the six darkest tones in the palette 6.9% is below the 9.34% of the population that identified as Afrodescendant in 2018 (DANE 2019). Most of the legislators are tone eight or lighter, which confirms the documented preference for mestizo and white appearances (Urrea Giraldo, Viáfara López, and Vigora 2008).

Table 2 displays 2005 Census data for those regions with the highest proportions of Indigenous and Afrodescendant Colombians and the skin colour distribution of the political representatives of these electoral districts. Apart from Chocó, districts with larger portions of Indigenous and Afrodescendants are for the most part not electing dark-skinned legislators. Admittedly, individuals that self-identify in the census as Afro-Colombian and Indigenous will come from a range of skin tones. While not shown in Table 2, most legislators elected via the reserved seats for Afrodescendants are of perceived tones 4 (21.4%) and 5 (35.7%).

While these are only descriptive statistics, when measured by self-identity, it does appear that there is some spillover effect of quotas as more self-identified Indigenous and Afrodescendants have been elected over time, outside the reserved seats. It is of course hard to separate whether this spillover effect is a result of the reserved seats, or other processes. One possibility is that political parties began to recruit Afro-Colombians and Indigenous candidates, perhaps even due to the reserved seats. Yet there has not been a strong connection between the major political parties and the reserved seats. Candidates for reserved seats must be a member of an Indigenous or Afro-Colombian party – thus these seats have spawned small ethnic parties. It was only in 2022 that ethnoracial identity became central to major party; the Pacto Histórico leftist coalition that won the presidency in 2022 had a clear platform of ethnoracial inclusion. Their focus did lead to the higher numbers of self-identified Afro-Colombians and Indigenous members from that party: two Indigenous representatives and two Afro-Colombian representatives, outside the reserved seats. Yet, these numbers are relatively minor; Afro-Colombians for example have a long history of running as center-left Liberal Party candidates, without necessarily identifying as Afro-Colombian. And, while their concentration is highest in the Liberal Party, Afro-Colombians, and to a lesser extent Indigenous representatives, are found across the political spectrum.

Tables 3 and 4 present the largest parties in our sample, and their distribution in terms of skin tone and ethnoracial self-identification. The self-identification (Table 3) reveals that

Table 2. Representative's skin tone in districts with the highest % of Indigenous and Afro-Colombians.

Region	Chamber of Representatives # (%)											
	Ind	Afro-Colombian	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Vaupés	66.65	1.55	0	0	0	0	1(8.3)	6(50.0)	5(41.7)	0	0	0
Guainía	64.9	1.04	0	0	0	0	2(14.3)	2(14.3)	10(71.4)	2(14.3)	0	0
La Guajira	44.94	14.82	0	0	0	0	1(7.1)	6(42.9)	3(21.4)	3(21.4)	1(7.1)	0
Vichada	44.35	2.83	0	0	0	0	0	2(16.7)	6(50.0)	3(25.0)	1(8.3)	0
Amazonas	43.43	1.98	0	0	0	0	2(18.2)	5(45.5)	3(27.3)	1(9.1)	0	0
Chocó	12.67	82.12	0	5(27.8)	10(55.6)	2(11.1)	1(5.6)	0	0	0	0	0
San Andrés y Providencia	0.1	56.98	0	1(7.1)	1(7.1)	2(14.3)	0	6(42.9)	1(7.1)	2(14.3)	1(7.1)	0
Bolívar	0.11	27.61	0	0	1(2.2)	0	5(10.9)	7(15.2)	10(21.7)	19(41.3)	4(8.7)	0
Valle del Cauca	0.56	27.2	2(2.5)	1(1.2)	4(5.0)	3(3.8)	2(2.5)	14(17.5)	22(27.5)	24(30.0)	7(8.8)	1(1.2)
Cauca	21.55	22.2	0	0	0	0	1(3.7)	7(25.9)	8(29.6)	9(33.3)	2(7.4)	0

Source: 2005 Census data.

†

Table 3. Party and self-identification.

	PDA	Pacto Histórico	Alianza Verde	Liberal	Cambio Radical	Partido de la U	Conservador	Centro Democrático	Convergencia Ciudadana	Total
Afro-Colombian	1(2.3%)	2(4.5%)	0	23(52.3%)	5(11.4%)	9(20.5%)	1(2.3%)	3(6.8%)	0	44(5.0%)
Indigenous	2(28.6%)	2(28.6%)	0	0	1(14.3%)	2(28.6%)	0	0	0	7(0.8%)
No record	12(1.4%)	26(3.1%)	27(3.2%)	225(26.9%)	107(12.8%)	154(18.4%)	181(21.7%)	65(7.8%)	17(2.0%)	835(94.2%)
Total	15(1.7%)	30(3.4%)	27(3.0%)	248(28.0%)	113(12.8%)	165(18.6%)	182(20.5%)	68(7.7%)	17(1.9%)	886(100.0%)

Table 4. Party and skin colour.

	PDA	Pacto Histórico	Alianza Verde	Liberal	Cambio Radical	Partido de la U	Conservador	Centro Democrático	Convergencia Ciudadana	Total
2	0	1(100.0%)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1(0.1%)
3	0	0	0	4(66.7%)	1(16.7%)	1(16.7%)	0	0	0	6(0.7%)
4	0	1(5.9%)	0	5(29.4%)	4(23.5%)	4(23.5%)	0	3(17.6%)	0	17(1.9%)
5	1(12.5%)	1(12.5%)	0	2(25.0%)	1(12.5%)	2(25.0%)	0	0	1(12.5%)	8(0.9%)
6	0	0	1(5.9%)	5(29.4%)	2(11.8%)	4(23.5%)	1(5.9%)	1(5.9%)	1(5.9%)	17(1.9%)
7	3(2.5%)	3(2.5%)	1(0.8%)	41(33.9%)	17(14.0%)	20(16.5%)	21(17.4%)	5(4.1%)	4(3.3%)	121(13.7%)
8	3(1.0%)	10(3.3%)	11(3.7%)	86(28.8%)	40(13.4%)	58(19.4%)	57(19.1%)	22(7.4%)	6(2.0%)	299(33.7%)
9	5(1.5%)	12(3.6%)	9(2.7%)	81(24.0%)	42(12.5%)	57(16.9%)	88(26.1%)	32(9.5%)	5(1.5%)	337(38.0%)
10	3(3.8%)	1(1.3%)	5(6.3%)	24(30.4%)	6(7.6%)	19(24.1%)	15(19.0%)	5(6.3%)	0	79(8.9%)
11	0	1(100.0%)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1(0.1%)
Total	15(1.7%)	30(3.4%)	27(3.0%)	248(28.0%)	113(12.8%)	165(18.6%)	182(20.5%)	68(7.7%)	17(1.9%)	886(100.0%)

he Liberal party hosts 52.3% of the Afro-Colombian deputies among these parties; center-right parties (Partido de la U and Cambio Radical) have 20.5% and 11.4%, and Centro Democrático (arguably a far-right party) 6.8%. Indigenous legislators are found on the left and right, in Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA), Pacto Histórico, and Partido de la U, with 2 (28.6%) each. Many self-identified members are not represented in the table as they belong to small ethnic parties dedicated to the reserved seats.

Regarding skin tone, [Table 4](#) shows most candidates concentrate in tones 8–10 across all parties. Relative to size, though, Cambio Radical seems to be the party with more legislators in the dark end of the colour palette; its proportions for tones 3–5 are similar to Liberal Colombiano, a party double their size. PDA, Conservador Colombiano and Alianza Verde seem to be the “whitest” parties, with only one legislator across tones 1–6. A full examination of the correlations between party ideology, deputies, and constituencies – merits its own research.

The fact that legislatures do not show a clear skin tone change over time, but do show a change in self-identification, gives support to the idea that greater inclusion is largely based on a politicization of identity. One could even argue that the emphasis on ethnoracial identity by the Pacto Histórico is politicization, especially given that the skin tones of its representatives are not very different from the median Colombian political party. Moreover, the information displayed in [Table 2](#) suggests that at a district level, voters favour perceived lighter-skinned candidates, even in districts with large proportions of self-identified Afro-Colombian and Indigenous residents. Some suggest that clientelistic politics in these regions has marginalized candidates with ethnic agendas (Agudelo 2000; 2023; Escandón Vega 1995).

Gender and ethnoracial representation

Looking within categories is essential for identifying potential exclusions masked by broader groupings. When we observe gender within these groups ([Table 5](#)), the numbers of self-identified Afro-Colombian and Indigenous women elected to the Chamber are low, by either measure. Only three self-identified Indigenous women have ever been elected to Colombia’s Chamber of Representatives, and they have either been the only Indigenous person elected that term (Orsinia Polanco, elected to the reserved Indigenous seat in 2006), or have been one of two representatives – at least until 2022, when one of the six self-identified Indigenous Chamber members was a

Table 5. Skin tone by sex.

	Actual		Expected Female (normalized)
	Female	Male	
2	0	2	0.33
3	0	11	1.82
4	5	16	2.67
5	4	12	1.98
6	2	25	4.13
7	17	134	22.16
8	38	336	55.57
9	84	331	54.75
10	32	58	9.59
11	1	1	0.16

woman. Thus, even though in some legislatures Indigenous women have been half, or all, the Indigenous representatives in the Chamber, in three of the six legislatures we study they were not represented at all and are just a fraction of the latest, most inclusive, legislature. For self-identified Afro-Colombian women, only between zero and two served in the lower chamber until 2022, when six Afro-Colombian women were elected, including Ana Monsalve to one of the reserved seats for Afro-Colombians. The latest election is quite significant for increasing their representation.

When looking at gender and racial representation measured by complexion, it is interesting to note that the higher proportion of women concentrates in the whiter end of the spectrum. [Table 5](#) presents the raw and normalized numbers (the proportion of women in each tone that we should expect, if women were distributed in the same way across skin tones as men) of men and women by perceived skin. Because women, over this time frame, made up 16.5% of the chamber of representatives, if like men, they should be about 16% of men's proportion in each tone. The discrepancies between the "actual" female column and the "expected" female columns suggest that among the five darkest categories (2-6), women are similarly represented to men. But among the next five categories, women are disproportionately whiter. While other studies that suggest that racial discrimination is undeniably gendered (Gonzales Matute 2008), these findings suggest that while whiter tones for women are preferred by voters, men and women with the perceived darkest skin tones face greater challenges to election than their lighter-skinned peers.

The finding of low numbers of self-identified Indigenous and Afrodescendant women in the Chamber, and the disproportionate representation of whiter women, have implications for what we know about gender and ethnoracial quotas. In contrast to some statistical studies, the Colombian reserved ethnoracial seats do not appear to favour the election of minority women (Holmsten, Hughes, and Moser 1997; Hughes 2015).

Incumbency

Recall that incumbency is one of the best predictors for electoral success. Accordingly, once the ethnic quota "grants" experience to a legislator, it should put them in a good position to win re-election. Observing the names of the legislators that appear in more than one legislature, we can identify those re-elected between 2002 and 2024, and how many times. We constructed a numerical variable that gives 0 to a legislator's first period of service, 1 to the second, and so on. [Table 6](#) shows the average number of reelections for each skin colour and by ethnoracial self-identification.

Like our previous findings, the legislators in the darkest skin tones appear to be at a disadvantage, with lower re-election levels than the overall average, which is 0.473. According to self-identification, Indigenous representatives have a substantially lower reelection rate. Notably, this does not appear to be the case for Afro-Colombians; however, it is important to note how Jack Housni (coded in the whiter categories for skin tone and re-elected multiple times) skews the average of the small sample of Afro-Colombian legislators. Removing him from the calculation, the average reelection for Afro-Colombians falls to 0.447. Overall, there are lower re-election levels for marginalized groups across both approaches. Of course, multiple reasons could explain this phenomenon and further research should discard the effects of other confounding

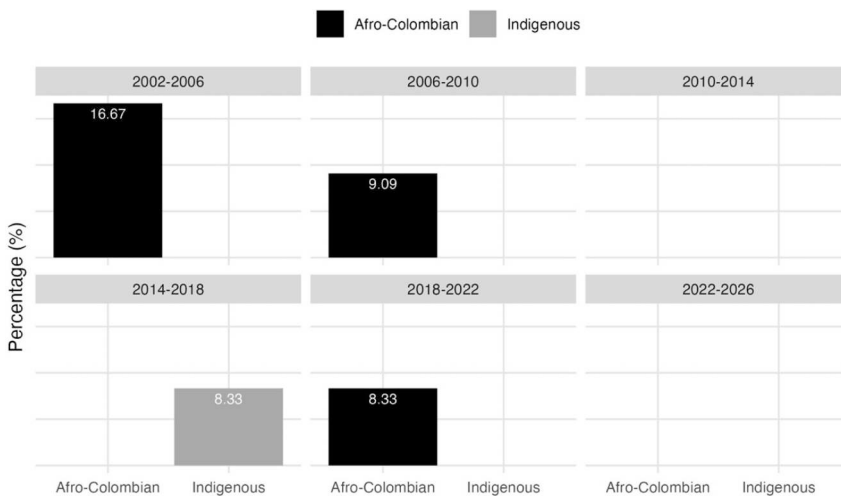
Table 6. Average number of re-elections.

Skin tone	Average	Self-ID	Average
2	0	Afro-Colombian	0.471
3	0.182	Indigenous	0
4	0.333	No record	0.474
5	0.438		
6	0.185		
7	0.391		
8	0.471		
9	0.545		
10	0.411		
11	0.5		

variables. The data also needs to be statistically tested to corroborate that the insights it suggests are not consequences, for instance, of limitations with the size or the distribution of the sample. As they stand, however, these findings warrant supplementary research.

Leadership

Lastly, we look at leadership: the Chamber Directorate (*Mesa Directiva*), which is comprised of an annually elected president and two vice-presidents. This means that over a four-year electoral term, there are twelve opportunities to be elected to a leadership position. Our data does not include leaders for the 2025–2026 period, as these were not yet available at the time of writing. If ethnic quotas have spillover effects to change cultural norms, we would expect them to “open doors” and facilitate promotion of members of historically marginalized groups to leadership positions. Based on our self-identification data, Afro-Colombian or Indigenous membership on the Chamber Directorate is rare. Figure 3 shows the presence of Afro-Colombians and Indigenous legislators in these positions of leadership has not consistently increased. If anything, the percentage of Afro-Colombian leaders has declined since earlier legislatures. Also notably, all these leaders were male.

**Figure 3.** Leadership of the chamber and ethnoracial self-identification.

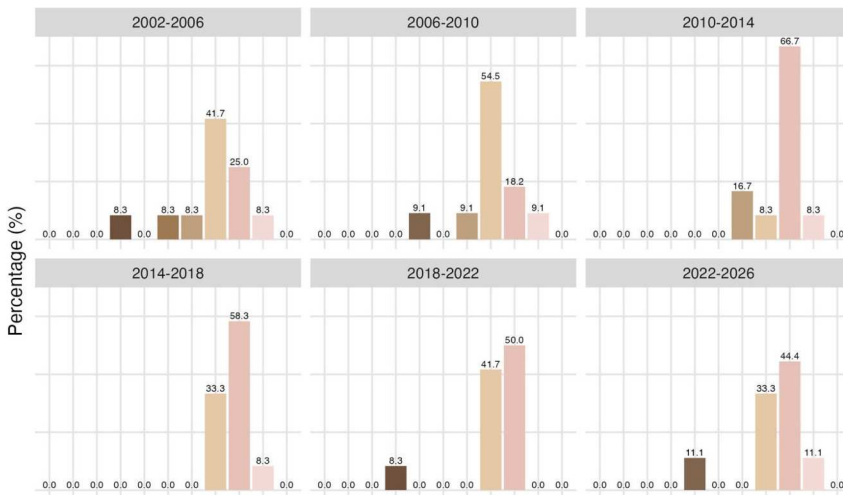


Figure 4. Leadership of the chamber by skin tone.

Observing the evolution of skin tone distribution of those in leadership is even more revealing. [Figure 4](#) shows the percentages of those with the darkest skin tones is low, and it has decreased over time. Notably, even though only 0.18% of the legislators are on tone 11, this group is consistently overrepresented in leadership positions.

Conclusion

The scholarship on legislative quotas argues that these mechanisms are temporary solutions that can facilitate long-term transformations towards more just representation. In theory, quotas eventually lead to the election of members of historically marginalized groups to open legislative seats, as exposure to more diverse representation changes social norms. Likewise, quotas are supposed to “open doors” to legislative leadership and re-election. Decades after the implementation of quotas around the world, are these promises being fulfilled?

Colombia is a pioneer in the use of reserved seats to guarantee the political representation of ethnoracial minorities. We studied the changing racial and ethnic composition of the last six legislatures of Colombia’s Chamber of Representatives (2002–2026), using two different approaches: self-identification and skin tone. On the one hand, the number of self-identified Indigenous and Afro-Colombian legislators moderately increased, with a more uneven rise for women than men. On the other hand, our data on skin tone shows that people with darker skin tones have been critically and consistently underrepresented, are less likely to be re-elected, and are less likely to obtain leadership positions. Lighter-skinned women are over-represented in comparison to men, while both women and men among the perceived darkest skin tones are underrepresented. These findings, by themselves, represent an important empirical contribution, particularly to the scholarship on ethnic quotas in Latin America. Overall, there is limited evidence to support the supposed normative benefits of quotas: no clear upward trend over time, no increased access to leadership position, and no better chance for re-election.

Interestingly, these contrasting findings raise questions about the politicization of identities, as they suggest that reserved seats may lead to greater self-identification by candidates over time, as identity becomes a more important part of the political and electoral dynamics. But the fact that this increased self-identification is not matched by a diversification in skin tone raises interesting questions regarding the motivations and drivers behind the trend. The fact that legislators with perceived lighter skin tones represent a significant portion of the self-identified Afro-Colombian representatives places even more importance on the question of the politicization of identity.

Resolving this question escapes the scope of this article, but we suggest three starting points for further research. First, research suggests that racial literacy is on the rise (Rejón 1990; Mitchell-Walthour 2014). As activists and scholars challenge official narratives of “racial democracy” and new census questions “create” identities, it is possible that people are starting to realize they belong to a category they did not know existed. Second, this sudden identity “shift” could be an unintended consequence of state-led educational expansion for the lower classes (or in Colombia specifically, education mandated by Law 70), which has exposed people to information and socialization, leading some to develop a sense of shared-fate and, with it, racialized political identities (De Micheli 1984). Finally, it might be the case that certain ethnoracial identities are becoming “politically profitable”, so people are more easily identifying as such. Research in Brazil demonstrates a similar phenomenon in the context of affirmative action in higher (Moraes Silva, Toste Daflon, and Giraut 2016).

Overall, our findings confirm that quotas and reserved seats are not an automatic remedy for political underrepresentation (Grofman 2011, 99; Forest 1994). Our results suggest that, in Colombia at least, these mechanisms have fallen short of their normative promises. However, this should not be taken as a call to discontinue or cancel these mechanisms; on the contrary, it is a call to refine and improve them. For example, in Colombia the reserved seats are few relative to the size of the legislature and the national voting process for these seats has sometimes caused confusion (Htun 2014). Moreover, it is still the case that legislators from ethnic backgrounds tend to be more responsive to ethnic constituents and more productive in proposing legislation in favour of marginalized groups (Broockman 2014; Mügge, van der Pas, and van de Wardt 2024; Ewig 2011).

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