

# THE WARNING FOR THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION COMES BEFORE ELECTION DAY

## Signals of criminal-group interference with the free vote

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Communication brief based on [the report \*Voting Under Fear: signals of criminal-group interference and coercion in the 2026 elections\*](#).

With two weeks remaining before the presidential election, the legitimacy of the process may be compromised before voters reach the polls. **Instituto de Ciencia Política** identified signals of criminal-group interference with the free vote, **327,000 valid votes** and nearly **half a million registered voters** assigned to polling stations with atypical electoral signals, as well as critical territories that should be verified before the presidential election.

The public debate on the free vote is already under way, and political figures from different sides have expressed concern about electoral coercion. ICP's alert is not based on recent political statements, but on a technical exercise launched before the congressional election of March 8, 2026, and sustained throughout the electoral cycle. Its purpose is preventive and technical, and it does not constitute support for any campaign.

## WHAT DID ICP REVIEW AND WHAT DID IT FIND?

The alert is based on two complementary components: **the 2026 Electoral Environment Oversight Initiative**, which brings together the territorial deployment of citizen observers, dialogue with political parties and open-source monitoring; and a **statistical electoral analysis of the 2026 congressional elections**, conducted at the polling-station level and cross-referenced with territorial risk variables.

### 2026 Electoral Environment Oversight Initiative

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An initiative carried out by the **Instituto de Ciencia Política and Fundación Colombia 2050**, with **126 citizen observers** in **42 prioritized municipalities**, **139**

**polling stations and 15 departments.** It is registered with the Personería de Bogotá (filing PDRCAL 21-737) and recognized by the National Electoral Council (communication CNE-S-2026-000676).

The 2026 Electoral Environment Oversight Initiative seeks to contribute to the transparency and integrity of the electoral process by monitoring and documenting risks associated with interference and coercion by illegal armed groups and criminal structures, including subtle and persistent forms of territorial pressure.

## Findings

- **41% of the observers (52 of 126) reported some form of presence of actors with the capacity to interfere in their territories.** The most frequent form was latent presence: “they are felt, but not directly seen”, with 44 reports (35%). This is consistent with a pattern of silent control, in which open violence is not always necessary because social control has already been consolidated.
- **86% of the observers (108 of 126) identified at least one unusual situation during the pre-electoral period.** The two most frequent categories were difficulties moving freely within the municipality and unexpected incentives in exchange for votes, both with 32 reports (25.3%). This shows that restrictions on mobility and vote buying operate as cross-cutting mechanisms for capturing the electoral environment.
- **91% of the observers (115 of 126) responded that “it is not clear who benefits” from the interference.** This finding is consistent with a model of electoral capture through subjugation, rather than partisan alignment. Actors with the capacity to interfere operate with sufficient discretion to prevent direct attribution.
- **Only 19% of the prioritized municipalities (8 of 42) were able to complete the planned institutional visits.** This low rate, together with the documented practice of equating the absence of formal complaints with the absence of risk, reveals a gap between territorial realities and institutional readings of electoral risk.
- **Vote buying has ceased to be a marginal phenomenon and has become a structural mechanism of electoral capture.** The Oversight Initiative documented price ranges, photographic verification systems and deferred payment upon delivery of the voting certificate. The amounts ranged from **COP 20,000 per vote (approximately USD 5.27)**

to COP 500,000 (**approximately USD 131.69**), the highest figure documented, reported in Bajo Baudó.

- **The political parties consulted reported security-related impacts that restricted political participation in territories with the presence or control of criminal groups.** ICP held four meetings with parties that presented congressional lists; these spaces mainly reported restrictions on campaigning and extortion of candidates to enter certain municipalities, with amounts between COP 500,000 and COP 1,000,000 (**approximately USD 131.69 to USD 263.38**). These situations were concentrated in Arauca, Cauca, Nariño and Chocó.
- **Open-source monitoring documented 66 unique electoral-security incidents between March 1 and March 8.** Of these, 33 (50%) were classified as high alert. Norte de Santander (28.8%), Caquetá (18.2%) and Cauca (12.1%) concentrated 59.1% of the documented incidents.
- **The typology of documented threats confirms that electoral risk goes beyond disruptions to public order.** Open-source monitoring recorded the presence of illegal armed groups, restrictions on campaigning or vote buying, threats to election day, restrictions on mobility, violent acts against civil society and direct attacks on electoral infrastructure.

**Five emblematic territorial cases documented during election day on March 8, 2026**

Case	Department	Documented modality
<b>San Vicente del Caguán</b> (La Novia Celestial rural settlement)	Caquetá	WhatsApp message sent to community coordinators demanding the voting certificate under threat of “fines”.
<b>Guaviare</b>	Guaviare	Pamphlet signed by the Amazonas Bloc of the FARC-EP dissidents, restricting the transport of people linked to campaigns and requiring the voting certificate for transit.
<b>El Tarra</b> (Escuela Nueva El Paso)	Norte de Santander	Confirmed presence of armed groups in the vicinity of the polling station.

Case	Department	Documented modality
<b>Guapi and López de Micay</b>	Cauca	Community leaders accompanied voters to the voting table and recorded in notebooks which option they marked, systematically violating ballot secrecy.
<b>Bajo Baudó</b> (Pizarro)	Chocó	Physical and verbal coercion of Indigenous communities to vote as a group; “refreshment” payments of COP 300,000 to COP 500,000 <b>(approximately USD 79.01 to USD 131.69)</b> upon delivery of the voting certificate.

## Statistical electoral analysis of the 2026 congressional elections

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The statistical electoral analysis was conducted using the results of the 2026 congressional elections at the polling-station level. It used an audited database of **26,924 records** (13,464 for the House of Representatives and 13,460 for the Senate), corresponding to **13,465 unique physical polling stations** in **32 departments and Bogotá D.C.**

The analysis cross-referenced electoral results by polling station with territorial risk variables, such as documented armed presence, alerts issued by the Ombudsman’s Office and electoral risk categories defined by the Electoral Observation Mission (MOE).

This is a statistical electoral and security analysis that identifies polling stations with atypical signals warranting verification by the competent authorities. It does not seek to demonstrate causality or attribute responsibility to specific campaigns, parties or candidates.

### What is meant by an atypical polling station

A polling station was classified as atypical when at least three of the following five electoral signals coincided:

- High vote concentration, measured through the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index.
- A disproportionate margin between the first and second candidates.

- Unusually high or low voter turnout, above 90% or below 15%.
- Majority dominance by an option or candidate, with 60% or more of the votes.
- A very wide margin in polling stations with significant vote volume, when the difference between first and second place exceeds 90% in stations with 200 votes or more.

In addition, the analysis incorporated a special criterion for polling stations where blank, null or unmarked votes won in municipalities with active territorial risk. These cases do not indicate vote concentration in favor of a candidate, but rather possible suppression of electoral choice, forced abstention or the blocking of political competition in risk territories.

## Findings

- **1,019 records (3.78% of the total) show at least three atypical situations in the 2026 congressional elections.** These signals include high vote concentration, a pronounced distance between the two leading candidates, anomalous turnout, majority dominance by an option and a wide margin in polling stations with significant vote volume. The pattern is consistent with scenarios of forced or captured electoral dominance.
- **The analysis identified 722 unique physical polling stations with at least three convergent atypical electoral signals.** These are complemented by 103 unique physical polling stations where blank, null or unmarked votes won in municipalities with active territorial risk.
- **The overall universe of anomalies comprises 825 unique physical polling stations, 327,196 valid votes and a potential electorate of 494,434 registered voters.** This scale activates an institutional alert because, in a presidential election, the possible effect of these votes does not depend on their territorial location but on their national aggregation.
- **89.49% of atypical records have at least one armed actor reported in the municipality, and 86.35% are located in territories with a specific MOE risk categorization.** The relevance of the finding increases because of its territorial correlation: atypical electoral signals converge with previously documented risk factors.

- **172 records (0.64% of the total) show blank, null or unmarked votes as the winning option.** Of these, 82.6% are located in municipalities with the maximum Territorial Risk Index, and 90.1% have documented armed presence. These cases are consistent with hypotheses of suppression of electoral choice or forced abstention in conflict environments.
- **Municipalities classified by MOE as under Coercive Control show rates of atypical polling stations above the national average.** In stations with one armed actor present, the rate was 15.5% for the House of Representatives and 14.3% for the Senate, compared with a national average of 3.78%. This pattern is consistent with the hypothesis that electoral anomaly requires consolidated territorial control rather than active violence.
- **Vote concentration increases in territories with armed presence.** The candidate-level HHI rose from 0.141 in polling stations without armed presence to 0.205 in stations with two armed actors, representing 45% higher concentration. In municipalities classified as under Coercive Control, the average HHI exceeds the national value by more than 50%: 0.254 compared with 0.169.
- **353 unique physical polling stations are to be referred to the competent authorities.** Of these, 250 correspond to the standard atypicality criterion — IAE  $\geq 3$ , territorial risk  $\geq 1$  and volume  $\geq 200$  votes — and 103 correspond to the special criterion of blank, null or unmarked votes in municipalities with active territorial risk. In total, there are 458 cases when disaggregated by electoral body, House of Representatives and Senate.
- **The subset to be referred to the authorities concentrates 266,617 valid votes and a potential electorate of 410,121 registered voters.** These cases do not constitute proof of an electoral crime, but they are statistical configurations that warrant institutional attention and reinforced verification.

## KEY ALERTS

**There is a risk of criminal interference with the free vote**

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In specific territories of the country, there are signals of interference by armed groups and criminal structures in the electoral environment, with the capacity to affect the freedom of the vote. If a person arrives to vote under pressure, surveillance, fear or conditioning, the freedom of suffrage has already been affected before entering the polling station.

This is not merely a hypothesis; it has been documented in specific territories of the country through territorial oversight, statistical analysis and open-source monitoring.

### **327,000 votes in polling stations with atypical electoral signals and indications of criminal-group interference activate an alert for the presidential election**

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ICP identified 327,000 valid votes in polling stations with atypical electoral signals and a potential electorate of nearly half a million registered voters in those same locations. In a presidential election, where votes are aggregated nationally and not by territorial constituency, no bloc in areas with signals of criminal interference can be treated as marginal.

In a close contest, this universe could affect the outcome. These polling stations should be prioritized by authorities, oversight bodies and observation missions before presidential election day.

### **The risk to the presidential election arises before election day, where criminal groups appear to be conditioning the vote**

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The risks that may compromise the legitimacy of the presidential election do not begin with the count or on election day. They arise beforehand, in territories where criminal groups appear to be conditioning how citizens vote, whether they vote and for whom they vote.

Interference often operates silently: 35% of observers reported “latent” presence of armed actors, and 91% could not identify specific political beneficiaries. These two findings are consistent with a pattern of consolidated social control.

In territories under criminal pressure, the absence of formal complaints does not reflect the absence of risk, but rather fear, distrust or lack of guarantees for reporting. Observation must reach the electoral environment itself: mobility,

community pressure, fear of reporting, informal restrictions and the real conditions for voting freely.

## NECESSARY CLARIFICATIONS

- ICP does not accuse any campaign or candidate. It presents signals that must be verified by the competent authorities.
- This exercise began before the congressional election and has been sustained throughout the electoral cycle, independently of any recent political statement or context.
- An electoral atypicality does not in itself prove an electoral crime. It is a signal that warrants review when it coincides with territorial risk factors.
- The inputs reviewed are not added together as a single database. The Oversight Initiative, the electoral analysis and open-source monitoring have different methodologies and should be read as complementary.
- Territorial risk variables operate at the municipal level, while electoral variables operate at the polling-station level. For this reason, ICP refers to signals that warrant reinforced verification, not to judicial conclusions.
- The alert does not seek to disregard electoral results. It seeks to verify, document and prevent risks to the free vote before the presidential election.

## CALL BY THE INSTITUTO DE CIENCIA POLÍTICA

ICP is bringing these findings to the attention of the competent authorities so that they may be verified and investigated, accompanied by the list of 353 prioritized unique physical polling stations. In addition, ICP will expand the Electoral Environment Oversight Initiative for the first and second presidential rounds, with 204 observers in 117 municipalities, in order to strengthen monitoring in critical territories.

In light of signals of criminal-group interference with the free vote, ICP calls for action before presidential election day:

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- **Electoral, judicial and oversight authorities:** verify the prioritized territories and polling stations based on the list made available by ICP; investigate the documented signals; activate safe reporting channels deployed in the territories, especially where fear may prevent citizens from reporting; and reinforce institutional presence in critical areas in the weeks prior to the election, not only on voting day.
- **National and international observation missions:** prioritize critical territories and document the electoral environment, including restrictions on mobility, community pressure, surveillance, social control and the real conditions for voting freely. Assess the substantive quality of competition in territories where political pluralism has been conditioned by territorial control.
- **Presidential candidates and campaigns:** publicly reject any interference by criminal groups, wherever it comes from and whoever it may benefit; provide verifiable information to the authorities; and demand guarantees for the free vote in all territories, including those where they do not have electoral strength.
- **Civil society and public opinion:** make visible forms of pressure that do not always appear as open violence, but that may condition the vote in a close presidential election; and avoid normalizing coercive practices under the argument that “they have always happened”.

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