Voting Intentions and Sociopolitical Factors in Generation Z in Ecuador

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Abstract. Generation Z represents a sociodemographic segment with intriguing sociocultural and political characteristics that significantly distinguish it from previous generations. Access to technology drastically influences the behavior and operational dynamics of this generation, as it is the first population segment to be immersed from an early age in a digitalized environment, with access to various virtual social platforms through mobile devices—shaping their way of thinking and acting. This article explores the voting intention of Generation Z through a qualitative and quantitative study, within the context of the 2023 presidential elections in Ecuador. The research shows that this generation seeks a significant change in government administration. 51% consider a candidate based on their profile and proposals rather than political affiliation; 37.5% are inclined toward a strong, energetic profile that makes more authoritarian decisions; 45% report being influenced in their vote by political leaders and public figures, followed by 25% by their parents, 6.2% by teachers and mentors, and 4.8% by influencers.

Keywords: Generation Z, voting intention, politics in Ecuador, electoral participation, political leadership

1 Introduction

In a global context where democracies are undergoing significant changes, Generation Z emerges as a decisive group in the reshaping of the political landscape. With unique characteristics, this generation has been shaped by unlimited access to information, digitalization, and the transformation of social dynamics. Unlike previous generations, centennials show less affiliation to traditional party structures, basing their voting intention on attributes such as the candidate's authenticity, clarity of proposals, and leadership capacity. In this sense, the present study seeks to understand the fac-

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tors that influence Generation Z's voting intention by analyzing the priorities, expectations, and perceptions that guide their electoral behavior.

Analyzing this phenomenon is crucial for designing effective political communication strategies and developing initiatives that encourage informed participation. Likewise, this study will help understand the impact of digitalization on democratic processes and the evolution of political decision-making among young Ecuadorians. The relevance of this study lies in the need to understand how Generation Z—a group representing a growing portion of the electorate—perceives and engages in politics. As these young people gain the right to vote, their impact on elections becomes increasingly significant, making it imperative to analyze their motivations and preferences. The current political context in Ecuador is characterized by increasing distrust in institutions, ideological polarization, and the rise of new leaderships that appeal to a young electorate. Considering these changes, it is essential to study the electoral behavior of Generation Z to anticipate future trends and design strategies that foster stronger civic engagement and a more representative democracy. From an academic perspective, this research will contribute to the literature on youth participation, digital democracy, and electoral behavior. The findings will serve as a reference for future studies in the field of political communication and electoral sociology, facilitating a better understanding of how new generations are transforming democratic systems.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Demographic and Sociocultural Characteristics of Generation Z

Generation Z, also known as the "Millennial Generation," includes individuals born approximately between the mid-1990s and the mid-2010s. This segment has been studied across various academic disciplines due to its notable demographic and sociocultural features, which distinguish it from previous generations and mark a turning point in political communication. According to a Think with Google article, "Generation Z's racial and ethnic diversity is 10% greater than that of millennials."[1]. This generation shows a deeper understanding of human diversity. In Ecuador, this diversity is reflected in its ethnic composition, which includes Indigenous groups such as the Kichwa, Shuar, and Waorani, as well as mestizo and Afro-Ecuadorian populations [2].

Generation Z in Latin America has also experienced significant demographic growth compared to past generations. "Adolescents and youth from Generation Z currently represent 22% of Latin America's population, and this proportion is expected to remain steady until 2030 with a variation of 1%" [3]. This poses both challenges and opportunities in terms of education and employment. Generation Z is characterized by activism and social awareness. According to Verdú, this generation exhibits a strong commitment to social causes as a vehicle for social change. Unlike earlier generations such as Gen X or the Baby Boomers, Generation Z has shown an innate ability to question established norms and seek new ways of thinking and acting [4].

Another notable characteristic of Generation Z in Latin America is its diverse identity and inclusive attitude. According to an Ipsos survey, "17% of Generation Z currently identify as LGBT+." [5] This attitude is reflected in the acceptance of concepts such as gender fluidity, same-sex marriage, and respect for Indigenous and Afrodescendant cultures. In Ecuador, for instance, visibility and activism among LGBTQ+ youth have increased. A study by the University of Cuenca revealed that "4% of Generation Z identify with a gender other than male or female, compared to only 1% of the adult population, which shows greater identification with the male gender" [6].

However, despite these positive traits, Generation Z in Latin America also faces significant challenges, including labor precarity. According to an article in Equal Times, "Latin American youth are at the epicenter of this transformation, where inequalities, labor informality, and the need to adapt to the age of artificial intelligence (AI) pose major challenges. A study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) indicates that youth unemployment in Latin America and the Caribbean decreased to 13.6% in 2023, continuing a three-year downward trend" [7]. In Ecuador, the trend is similar, as "youth unemployment reached 7.8%, which is 4 percentage points higher than the national average" [8], evidencing the challenges youth face in the labor market.

On the technological front, a defining feature of Generation Z in Latin America is its immersion in technology and social media. According to Rodríguez and González (2023), "unlike other generations, Gen Z doesn't know a world without the internet. Their smartphones are constant companions, and they use social media—primarily Instagram—as their main communication tool" (p. 2) [3].

Generation Z have lived their entire lives in a digital environment, where technology, internet access, and information are omnipresent. However, even as internet access has increased, inequalities persist in terms of device availability and connectivity in rural and marginalized communities. "In total, 32% of the population in Latin America and the Caribbean—approximately 244 million people—lack internet access. The connectivity gap is even more pronounced between urban and rural populations, reaching differences of up to 40 percentage points." [9] This disparity can affect the educational and professional opportunities of Generation Z in the region.

Generation Z is reshaping how people live, relate, learn, and work. The influence of digital life is extending to previous generations—challenging structures, breaking paradigms, and promoting transformation in every area of life. Understanding their behavior, motivations, needs, and values is therefore crucial to adapting, modernizing, and evolving communication strategies, channels, and tools. Generation Z cannot imagine a world without the internet or social networks like Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok. In Ecuador, internet access has increased significantly in recent years, especially among urban youth, leading to greater connectivity and access to information. As of 2020, 61.7% of urban households had internet access, compared to 34.7% in rural areas [9]. However, the digital connectivity gap between urban and rural areas remains a critical factor in digital growth.

2.2 Political Communication in Generation Z

To better understand Generation Z's electoral voting intentions, it is essential to examine the role this generation plays in politics, particularly regarding political communication. “Political communication is a process through which political actors transmit messages with the goal of influencing public opinion and electoral behavior” [10]. This discipline encompasses both verbal and non-verbal aspects, such as clothing, behavior, culture, tone of voice, and more. A key implication of political communication, especially during elections, is the increase in citizen participation. According to Sánchez, “exposure to various types of media and campaign messages has a positive impact on youth political engagement” [11], a crucial element for democracy and civil society participation.

These negative perceptions are exacerbated by rampant corruption. Corruption has been a persistent issue in Ecuador, with cases of embezzlement, bribery, and nepotism involving high-level politicians and government officials. “Corruption in Ecuador is a persistent problem that undermines public spending efficiency and erodes trust in institutions” [12]. Furthermore, it extends beyond traditional political actors, involving all members of society and encompassing the dissemination of information about politicians and their activities through media platforms, including social media.

According to Alvin, and Hasugian [13], political communication plays a vital role in democracy by highlighting the importance of individual participation. In a healthy democratic society, citizens possess inherent political rights that contribute to a dynamic political landscape. The historical connection between democracy and citizenship underscores the importance of individuals in shaping political discourse and decision-making processes.

Alvin [13] argues that every member of the political community, regardless of status, has a voice that deserves to be heard. In today’s political context, broad participation in constitutional processes is needed to determine leadership and legislative frameworks that best represent the population. Therefore, political communication is not limited to politicians or elites but extends to every individual within a democratic society. For example, during protests against legislative proposals, individuals—including students—gather in parliamentary buildings, collectively becoming political actors in their respective contexts.

Generation Z’s participation in politics, although mostly passive, is motivated by a desire to exercise their political rights—primarily through voting during elections. Despite their interest in political involvement, Generation Z expresses concern about the lack of accessible information, especially regarding entry into politics, party affiliations, and financial requirements. While they show high levels of political interest, their passive participation and lack of information hinder deeper engagement. Addressing these issues is crucial to fostering an informed and committed political citizenship.

As previously mentioned, historical events and recent trends have significantly impacted Generation Z's voting behavior. As noted by Álvarez [14], the 2019 national and Indigenous strike in Ecuador was a historic 12-day event triggered by economic measures announced by President Lenín Moreno’s government, which disproportionately affected vulnerable sectors. The conflict escalated with the repeal of Decree 883, which had eliminated fuel subsidies. A live broadcast negotiation between the gov-

ernment and Indigenous representatives—unprecedented in the country's history—led to the decree's repeal. The strike involved various social sectors and unions, expanding beyond fuel prices to broader concerns of social and economic dissatisfaction. It revealed polarization between urban populations, Indigenous communities, and peripheral zones that mobilized in defense of their rights and territories. The conflict also exposed racial and ethnocentric tensions, with stigmatization and discrimination toward Indigenous people by dominant urban groups. The media played a controversial role by failing to adequately report on events and censoring certain perspectives.

A significant historical precedent was the national strike in June 2022. According to Caiza, Morocho, Tipanguano, and Santamaría [15], the Indigenous movement in Ecuador, led by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), organized the strike due to the government's failure to meet promises affecting rural sectors. Despite President Lasso's calls for peaceful dialogue, the protests intensified, resulting in economic losses and political tension. Demands included reduced fuel prices and economic relief for indebted families. Although an agreement was reached, the movement faced criticism for allegedly violating constitutional rights.

Ecuador's ongoing prison and security crisis has also drawn serious concern. The citizen security system relies on coordination between police, the justice system, and prisons—where the failure of one institution impacts the others, exacerbating violence. Carrión Mena [16] argues that prisons, instead of serving as tools for deterrence and rehabilitation, often function as "crime universities," as evidenced by high recidivism rates. Despite increased arrests, violence continues to rise, and the prison system remains overcrowded, with population densities exceeding international standards. Ecuadorian prisons are severely under-resourced, with most detainees awaiting trial and lacking adequate food, medical care, and legal assistance. The most emblematic case is the Litoral Penitentiary, where overcrowding has led to extreme violence.

To understand the electoral behavior of Generation Z, it is important to analyze three key factors that largely determine their voting intentions: socioeconomic, ideological, and technological factors.

The economic situation of a country—resulting from the lack of opportunities previously discussed—and the specific challenges faced by Generation Z directly influence this group's political preferences. In Ecuador, the country is currently facing a severe economic crisis, and the conditions and opportunities available to young people appear bleak and discouraging. According to the report "Perspectives and Labor Challenges for Youth in Ecuador", the unemployment rate among youth aged 18 to 26 reached 7.7%, representing 52% of the total unemployed population in the country [17]. This situation affects young people's perceptions of the effectiveness and fulfillment of public policies, as well as their choices of candidates and political parties.

Ideological beliefs and inclinations shape young voters' political preferences and therefore determine their voting intentions for certain candidates and political affiliations. It is worth noting that young people's political and ideological positions are primarily influenced by family, work, or educational environments. "The family plays a fundamental role in shaping young people's political participation, as it is within the household that values, beliefs, and attitudes are transmitted and later reflected in their political involvement" [18]. As previously mentioned in the analysis of Generation

Z's behavior, this group tends to lean toward more progressive stances that support social rights policies.

Technological factors are playing an increasingly critical role in shaping the voting behavior of young people. Access to mobile devices, digital social networks, and a hyperconnected environment provides exposure to a vast amount of information and ideological trends. Generation Z has grown up in a digitalized setting, with easy access to news, political propaganda, and participation tools. "Young people become involved in public affairs through new technologies, as these allow them to understand what is happening in political reality" [19]. As shown throughout this article, access to technology and the internet—especially among urban youth—has significantly increased.

Thus, the social and cultural characteristics of Generation Z become crucial elements in studying their active political participation and the factors that shape their voting intentions.

3 Methodology

This research combine both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the voting intentions of Generation Z in Ecuador during the 2023 presidential elections. A structured survey was designed to gather data on political preferences, influencing factors, and perceptions of leadership among youth aged 16 to 25.

The study was based on stratified random sampling, segmenting the population by city of residence. The sample consisted of 280 valid surveys, distributed across five Ecuadorian cities: Quito, Guayaquil, Manta, Portoviejo, and Ambato. Participants were selected randomly to ensure balanced representation of the age group and proportional distribution based on each city's population size. It presents a confidence level of 90% and a margin of error of ±5%, ensuring that the findings accurately reflect the trends within the studied population.

The survey was conducted through a digital platform, using social media such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp for dissemination. This method was chosen due to the high usage of these platforms by Generation Z and their central role in shaping youth political opinions and behaviors.

The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions designed to evaluate various aspects of voting intention, including: candidate preference and political orientation; influencing factors in voting decisions (e.g., political leaders, public figures, family members, influencers, teachers); perceptions of ideal leadership (strong and authoritarian vs. collaborative and conciliatory); and priority areas for public policy (e.g., security, employment, education, economy, health, corruption). The instrument demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, indicating strong reliability in measuring the targeted constructs. The design of the instrument ensured the validity of the results through a process of review and pilot testing before implementation.

4 Results and Analysis

The political orientation of centennials is mainly divided into two large categories: those who have no specific political affiliation (27.68%) or who are unfamiliar with ideological positions (23.21%). Together, this represents a total of 51.07% of citizens who do not vote based on political beliefs, but rather for other reasons.

However, a notable percentage of citizens do have a defined political preference. 16.96% identify with the right, whether conservative and liberal or non-conservative and protectionist. Another group, comprising 11.31%, aligns with leftist ideologies, while 9.52% lean toward center-left. Surprisingly, only a small group, 5.65%, identifies with centrist ideologies.

When we cross political orientation with voting intention, we see that both apolitical individuals and those unfamiliar with political ideologies predominantly voted for Daniel Noboa, with 16.96%. Only a small portion, 2.09%, voted for Luisa González. This shows that factors external to the political climate influenced this group, who ultimately based their decisions on various other considerations.

What centennials are telling us is that Ecuador needs a "radical change." They do not want to continue with the current situation and believe it is necessary to undo what has been done incorrectly and recover what has been lost. Notably, when we cross the desire for change with voting intention, we see that Luisa González received 96.30% support and Daniel Noboa 92.68%.

This suggests that both candidates are perceived as representatives of radical change, as they exceed the overall average support for such change (81.23%) by over 14%.

Among centennials, 104 respondents—representing 37.55%—prefer a strong, energetic leader who makes more authoritarian decisions. In contrast, 46 respondents (16.25%) prefer a leader who makes decisions based on consensus or agreement with all sectors, which is considered more democratic.

However, they also value a leader who leads by example and motivates citizens, with 27.8% indicating this preference, and another 19.13% preferring a leader who includes everyone in their plans and projects, working collaboratively. These two traits can be found in both authoritarian and democratic leaders, as motivating others is an inherent trait of leadership, and inclusion does not necessarily indicate democracy—it can also reflect shared values within a social group.

Among Noboa's voters (82 responses), 31.71% prefer a strong and authoritarian leader. Another 28.05% want to be included in his project, while only 17.07% want Noboa to be a consensus-builder. On the other hand, among Luisa González's voters (27 responses), only 18.52% favor a consensus-oriented leader. It is evident that people are looking for a decisive, tough leader. Interestingly, Otto is perceived more as someone who partially seeks consensus.

In open-ended responses, centennials identified the following three main qualities in a desirable national leader: (18.09%) 51 mentioned honesty; (11.35%) 32 mentioned leadership; (10.99%) 31 mentioned knowledge and intelligence; (8.16%) 23 agreed with the leader's proposals; (7.45%) 21 mentioned loyalty, responsibility, and

commitment; (6.74%) 19 appreciated personality traits like empathy and character; and 17 referred to ideology.

Traits such as honesty, credibility, coherence, loyalty, responsibility, and commitment are all essential to establishing a leader's trustworthiness. A credible leader is one whose thoughts, words, and actions align—strengthening their ability to influence and govern effectively. From the 82 responses, (18.29%) 15 mentioned knowledge and intelligence, (12.20%) 10 mentioned honesty, and (12.20%) 10 mentioned leadership in reference to Daniel Noboa. Additionally, (9.76%) 8 emphasized his proposals. Voters perceived that Noboa demonstrated greater preparedness during the debate compared to other candidates, with leadership metrics showing a more balanced distribution.

It is evident that centennials are motivated by both the candidates' proposals and the country's current situation. This shows that their vote is not solely based on emotions but also involves rational considerations. Their voting decisions are influenced by the policies candidates present during debates and campaigns.

Rational debate provides an opportunity for voters to evaluate candidates' proposals and plans more objectively. However, that does not mean emotions play no role. Voters consider both rational analysis and emotional connection when choosing a leader who can address the country's challenges. Nevertheless, these voters have access to an infinite amount of information on the internet—information that may not always be verified or accurate. This can influence the criteria by which they make their final decision.

There has long been debate about the influence of celebrities and public figures on voters simply due to their fame, expertise, or attractiveness. The results show that 45.02% of centennials are influenced by political leaders and public figures—mainly politicians or well-known, credible figures who inspire trust. Parents are the second most influential, with 25.83%.

Other indirect factors must also be studied, as they may relate to communication strategies aimed at gaining voters' trust. Professors and mentors influence 6.27% of respondents, while well-known influencers (such as YouTubers, TikTokers, Twitter users, and Facebook personalities) account for 4.82%. This indicates that the influence of leaders and parents remains strong in early adulthood and has not been displaced by the internet or social media. Interestingly, respondents with left-wing ideologies are less influenced by their parents compared to those on the right, where parental influence approaches 30%.

Regarding Luisa González, based on 27 survey responses, her voters most often cite "others" as their second source of influence, diverging from the pattern observed among Noboa and Topic voters, who rank parents or mentors second. Although the sample is relatively small, this data shows a clear difference.

Most of the sample—156 individuals (55.7%)—indicated that the government should focus on security. This includes fighting organized crime, reclaiming public spaces, and rehabilitating prisons to improve control. Improving security is also seen as a way to stimulate employment and economic recovery.

Whoever leads this necessary change must focus on the voters' top priorities: security (79.78%), employment (62.09%), and health (60.65%). In addition, new change

proposals are expected in economic policy (40.43%), education (39.05%), and anti-corruption measures (32.49%).

Candidate Jan Topic stood out with 56 responses, earning 89.9% support as the candidate who best addressed the demand for security, which was the generation's top concern (55.7%). Interestingly, Daniel Noboa received 75.61% support for his security approach, despite not making it the focus of his campaign. Instead, he emphasized employment and received 68.29% support in that area—ranking second after Luisa González, who gained 70.37%.

5 Discussion

Generation Z has demonstrated to be a segment of voters with distinctive characteristics that challenge traditional patterns of political participation. The findings of this study reveal that over 51% of respondents do not identify with any specific political affiliation, instead making decisions based on the candidate's profile and proposals. This aligns with the theoretical framework, which explains that this generation has grown up in a digitalized environment with constant access to information, diminishing their reliance on traditional party structures.

According to previous studies on Generation Z, this group is characterized by skepticism toward institutions and a preference for figures who embody authenticity and a commitment to change. The survey results support this theory, showing that 37.5% of respondents favor a strong, energetic leader who makes authoritarian decisions. This may be partially explained by the political and social crisis in Ecuador, which has increased the demand for firm leadership and rapid decisions. However, this trend is also concerning from a democratic perspective, as it may indicate a leaning toward more centralized forms of governance.

The impact of social media on political opinion formation is another key factor influencing Generation Z's voting behavior. The survey revealed that 45% of respondents are influenced by political leaders and public figures on digital platforms, confirming the role of social networks as a space for political identity construction. This matches the theoretical discussion, which emphasized that this generation relies heavily on the internet as a primary source of information, placing greater trust in content from influencers and digital personalities than in traditional media.

Nonetheless, overexposure to digital content also carries risks. The lack of knowledge about political ideologies, evident in the 23.21% of respondents who admitted to not understanding different ideological currents, suggests that Generation Z may be vulnerable to misinformation and manipulation. This highlights the importance of promoting civic and digital education to help them develop critical thinking skills and distinguish between reliable information and biased content.

Another important finding is Generation Z's strong demand for structural change in government management. A remarkable 96.3% of Luisa González's voters and 92.68% of Daniel Noboa's voters expressed support for significant transformation. This demand aligns with the economic and social challenges faced by Ecuadorian youth, such as unemployment and insecurity. Thus, the results reinforce the idea pre-

sented in the theoretical framework that Generation Z is concerned with economic and labor stability. The study also found that security is the top concern for 55.7% of respondents, followed by employment (62.09%) and health (60.65%). These findings support the theory that Generation Z is a pragmatic generation, seeking concrete solutions to immediate problems rather than adhering to long-term ideological discourses.

In conclusion, Generation Z in Ecuador emerges as a group of independent voters, highly influenced by the digital environment and clearly favoring leaders who represent structural change. However, their limited understanding of political ideologies and heavy reliance on social media for information may pose a challenge to the development of a more critical and informed political participation.

6 Conclusions

Generation Z in Ecuador shows a clear preference for candidates who present concrete proposals and demonstrate strong leadership skills, rather than those aligned with traditional political parties. This reflects a shift toward pragmatism and results-oriented decision-making among young voters. The current political and economic instability in the country appears to be fueling a preference for authoritarian and resolute leaders. While this leadership style may offer a sense of control and immediate action, it also poses a potential risk to democratic institutions and long-term political stability. Social media has become the primary source of political information for this generation, largely due to their constant exposure to digital content. However, this overexposure also makes them more vulnerable to misinformation, manipulation, and algorithm-driven echo chambers.

A notable gap in knowledge about political ideologies among respondents underscores the urgent need to reinforce civic education. Empowering young citizens with the tools to critically assess political discourse is essential to fostering informed and responsible participation. There is a strong and widespread demand for structural reforms in government management. This is evidenced by a high percentage of respondents expressing a desire for radical transformation, signaling deep dissatisfaction with the status quo. Security, employment, and health emerged as the top policy priorities for Generation Z. This suggests a pragmatic approach to politics, where tangible outcomes and solutions are valued over ideological narratives. The influence of public and political figures on social media significantly outweighs that of traditional media channels, indicating a major transformation in the dynamics of political communication and opinion formation.

Ultimately, Generation Z represents both a challenge and an opportunity for political parties. To remain relevant, political actors must adapt to new digital forms of communication and reimagine how they engage with citizens in participatory processes.

7 Recommendations

To address the challenges identified, it is crucial to implement digital civic education programs that foster media literacy and critical thinking among young people. This will better equip them to navigate the complex information environment of social media and engage with politics in a more informed manner. Youth participation in politics must be actively encouraged through debate forums, youth councils, and decision-making spaces within both political parties and civil society organizations.

Promoting youth leadership in government institutions and public policy development can help align political agendas with generational concerns. Still, structural barriers and generational biases within political systems may limit the speed of such transformations. Public policy should prioritize security, employment, and health—areas identified as top concerns by Generation Z.

The sample was limited to specific age groups and geographic areas, which may not fully capture the diversity within Generation Z across Ecuador. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias.

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