



Digital Political Communication, the Emotionalization of the Vote and Polarization in the 2025 Ecuadorian Presidential Run-Off

Verónica Palacios*¹  Victor Soto¹  Daniela Gallardo¹ 

¹Universidad Nacional de Loja, Loja 110150, Ecuador
veronica.palacios@unl.edu.ec

Abstract. This study analyses the relationship between political communication strategies and voting decisions during the 2025 Ecuadorian presidential run-off. Using a mixed-methods approach with a non-experimental, cross-sectional and descriptive-interpretative design, the study integrated surveys of 471 citizens, interviews with experts in political communication and systematic observation of the mandatory presidential debate. The results show that the campaign was structured around strategies of contrast, emotional appeals and short digital content, shifting the focus away from policy proposals. Social media was the main source of political information, although family conversations retained a significant role as spaces for validation. The public perceived the campaign as largely negative and lacking in transparency. Furthermore, fear of the opposing candidate emerged as a decisive factor in voter volatility. It is concluded that emotionalization, polarization and digital mediatization had a significant impact on electoral behavior.

Keywords: Political Communication, Social Media, Public Opinion, Political Behavior, Ecuador.

1 Introduction

Contemporary political communication takes place in an environment characterized by mediatization, audience fragmentation and the growing centrality of digital platforms. Mazzoleni [1] argues that today's inevitable mediatization forces politics to prioritize spectacle over its traditional logic. In this context, election campaigns are no longer limited to the dissemination of policy proposals, but instead employ narrative, emotional and visual strategies aimed at competing for attention, constructing political identity and shaping public perception. This media-driven logic and the multi-channel digital landscape have transformed electoral competition into a highly symbolic process, in which the candidate's image, the thematic framing and the circulation of short-form content play a decisive role in shaping public opinion [2].

From this perspective, political communication is understood as a set of planned strategies designed to influence the electorate through messages, channels and symbolic resources aimed at strengthening support, evoking emotions and distinguishing the candidate from their opponents [3]. In polarized electoral contexts, these strategies shift towards forms of communication based on contrast, personalization, attack and appeals to fear, where framing guides public interpretation by emphasizing risks.

According to Habermas [4], this process undermines the authenticity of public opinion through the manipulation of agendas. In Ecuador, this resulted in an agenda-setting process in which the media and online platforms structured the debate, imposing predominantly negative themes and attributes [5]. In turn, studies on electoral behavior show that voting decisions are not determined solely by rational calculations regarding government's plan, but also by partisan allegiances, political emotions, perceived leadership qualities and interpersonal ties.

In Latin America, presidential run-offs provide particularly fertile ground for the intensification of these dynamics. According to Zovatto [6], these processes take the form of hyper-polarized scenarios where political identity is constructed through the rejection of the opponent. As the contest is narrowed down to two candidates, the campaign takes on a dual dynamic, which simplifies the political offering and accentuates the confrontation between opposing visions. In such contexts, the vote is seen more as a defensive reaction based on fear or mistrust of the opposing alternative, rather than as a positive endorsement of a particular candidate. Thus, the 'tactical vote', the 'punishment vote' and the 'anti-opponent vote' become key concepts for understanding electoral behavior in highly polarized environments.

The 2025 Ecuadorian presidential run-off provides a significant case study for analyzing these transformations. The contest between Daniel Noboa and Luisa González unfolded against a backdrop of fierce political confrontation, the intensive circulation of digital content, the strategic use of social media, and the prevalence of narratives centered on fear, economic stability, security, the return of 'Correísmo' and political renewal. In this process, digital platforms particularly TikTok, Facebook, X and Instagram served as spaces for amplifying messages, circulating memes, launching reputational attacks and providing emotional validation of political positions. However, the influence of this content cannot be understood solely in terms of direct exposure to it, but must also be considered in relation to its interaction with family conversations, opinion leaders, traditional media and the electorate's pre-existing perceptions.

Although research exists on digital campaigns, polarization and electoral behavior in Latin America, there are still few studies that provide a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between political communication strategies, digital news consumption and voting decisions in the context of Ecuadorian run-off elections. This gap is significant because current campaigns combine traditional means of persuasion with algorithmic dynamics, emotional content and forms of citizen interaction that can alter the way voters interpret candidates and justify their final decision. In this regard, Van der Meer et al. [7] analyze how media use and perceptions of disinformation influence optimistic bias and third-person perception in contexts of high media dependence.

In this vein, this research analyses the relationship between the political communication strategies deployed during the 2025 Ecuadorian presidential run-off and the electorate's voting decision. To this end, the study examines the tactics employed by the candidates in mainstream media, on the ground and within digital ecosystems; the candidates' image-building; their discursive performance in the presidential debate; and citizens' perceptions of the tone of the campaign, sources of information, digital interaction and the factors that influenced the stability or change in their voting intentions. The study aims to provide empirical evidence on how the emotionalization of political communication, campaign negativity and the central role of social media influence electoral behavior in polarized democratic contexts.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Research design

The research was conducted using a mixed-methods approach, with a non-experimental, cross-sectional design of a descriptive-interpretative nature. A convergent mixed-methods design was adopted, as quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed in a complementary manner, with the aim of understanding the relationship between the political communication strategies deployed during the 2025 Ecuadorian presidential run-off and the electorate's voting decisions.

The quantitative component identified trends in public perception regarding the tone of the campaign, sources of political information, the level of digital interaction, and factors associated with the stability or change in voting intentions. The qualitative component, meanwhile, examined in depth the communication tactics, image-building, discursive performance and argumentative strategies of the campaigns led by Daniel Noboa and Luisa González. The two components were integrated through methodological triangulation, comparing the results of the survey, interviews with experts and systematic observation of the mandatory presidential debate.

2.2 Population and sample

The reference population consisted of Ecuadorian citizens eligible to vote in the 2025 General Elections. The universe under consideration comprised 13,279,827 registered voters. For the quantitative component, a sample of 471 citizens aged 18 and over was used; these participants were administered a structured survey on news consumption, perceptions of the campaign and voting intentions.

The sample was a non-probabilistic convenience sample, comprising citizens who voluntarily agreed to take part in the study. This methodological precision helps to avoid overestimating the statistical significance of the results and frames the findings within the context of descriptive trends observed in the sample analyzed. For the qualitative component, non-probabilistic judgement-based sampling was used, involving the selection of two experts in political communication. This approach enabled the inclusion of specialist perspectives to interpret campaign strategies, the construction of

public image, the use of political narratives, and the relationship between electoral communication and citizen behavior.

2.3 Data collection techniques and instruments

The research employed three data collection techniques: a survey, in-depth interviews and systematic observation. A structured questionnaire comprising 12 items was administered, designed to measure citizens' perceptions of political communication during the second round of the election. The questionnaire was organized into four dimensions: news consumption, perceptions of the tone and content of the campaign, citizen interaction on social media, and factors associated with voting decisions. The questions included closed-ended response options and rating scales, which made it possible to determine frequencies and percentages regarding the predominant trends in the sample.

In-depth interviews were conducted with two experts in political communication. These interviews enabled an analysis of the candidates' campaign strategies, the construction of their public images, the use of emotional and contrast-based tactics, as well as the presence of narratives linked to fear, political renewal, the legacy of the Correa era, and tactical voting.

A systematic observation matrix was applied to the mandatory presidential debate for the 2025 run-off election. This matrix examined the dimensions of verbal communication, non-verbal communication, discursive tone, clarity of argument, mastery of the subject matter, use of slogans and confrontation strategies. The observation of the debate was incorporated as qualitative data to compare the candidates' public performance with citizens' perceptions gathered in the survey.

The instruments were reviewed by experts to assess the relevance of the items, the clarity of the categories of analysis and their alignment with the research objectives.

2.4 Procedure

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, based on the calculation of absolute frequencies and percentages. This procedure enabled the identification of the main trends within the sample regarding sources of political information, participation on social media, perceptions of the tone of the campaign, the influence of digital content, and factors related to the stability or volatility of the vote.

The qualitative data derived from the interviews and observation of the debate were processed using thematic content analysis. To this end, categories were identified relating to campaign narratives, image-building, discursive tone, argumentative strategies, emotional appeals, the use of political attacks and the ways in which candidates sought to differentiate themselves.

Finally, the quantitative and qualitative results were integrated through methodological triangulation. This integration contrasted public perception with expert analysis and direct observation of the debate, with the aim of establishing a broader understanding of the impact of political communication strategies on voting decisions during the 2025 Ecuadorian presidential run-off.

2.5 Ethical considerations

Participation by respondents was voluntary and anonymous. The information collected was used exclusively for academic purposes and was processed in aggregate form, without identifying individual participants. In the case of interviews with experts, the information was used for analytical purposes, in accordance with the criteria of confidentiality and consent applicable to social research.

3 Results

3.1 Qualitative analysis: Political communication strategies in the 2025 Ecuadorian presidential run-off

From the perspective of the experts consulted, an analysis of the political communication strategies deployed during the 2025 Ecuadorian presidential run-off reveals a contest structured primarily around polarization, discursive confrontation and emotional appeals. The campaigns of Daniel Noboa and Luisa González employed distinct tactics across traditional media, on the ground, in digital ecosystems and in crisis management, although both campaigns resorted to contrasting strategies to position their respective interpretative frameworks before the electorate.

Daniel Noboa's campaign focused on building an image of renewal, technical efficiency and a break from traditional politics. His communication strategy articulated the concept of 'New Ecuador' as a symbolic means of breaking with the political past. This narrative was underpinned by the candidate's positioning as a young, pragmatic figure capable of offering immediate solutions to problems associated with security, the institutional crisis and economic stability.

In contrast, Luisa González's candidacy was based on a strategy of symbolic continuity with the *Revolución Ciudadana* (Citizen Revolution Movement). Her campaign appealed to memories of the Correa administration through references to stability, public works and the restoration of the state. However, this anchoring in the past also acted as a strategic limitation, as the candidate faced difficulties in distancing herself from the negative perceptions associated with former President Rafael Correa, particularly those linked to fears of de-dollarization, the return of old political elites and ideological polarization.

In the broadcast campaign – that is, in the mainstream media Noboa opted for a strategy of controlled exposure. Her selection of interviews and public appearances allowed her to project an image of competence and minimize situations of direct confrontation. González, for her part, adopted a more reactive approach, characterized by the need to respond to criticisms and rhetorical crises that arose during the campaign.

In the on-the-ground campaign, Noboa combined his role as acting president with government communication initiatives, which helped to showcase tangible results and link his candidacy to immediate governance. González prioritized grassroots mobilization, regional tours and meetings with party members and supporters, strengthening ties with his party organization.

In the digital sphere, both campaigns utilized short-form content, audiovisual resources, memes, political satire and contrasting narratives. However, Noboa's campaign demonstrated a greater ability to adapt to the language of digital platforms, particularly through the use of humorous content, influencers and formats designed for rapid circulation on TikTok. González's campaign employed tactics of criticism and contrast in response to the government's failure to deliver, although its digital strategy took a more defensive stance against the narratives set by his opponent.

Crisis management was also a central component of the contest. Noboa responded to attacks relating to his business and family circles with a narrative of strategic victimization and political renewal. González, by contrast, focused on raising questions about the labor and tax conditions of the Noboa business group linked to his opponent. In both cases, the campaign centered less on policy proposals and more on the ability to sow suspicion, fear or mistrust regarding the opposing candidate.

The technical implementation of these strategies is broken down in Table 1, which compares the tactics employed across the four electoral battlefronts:

Table 1. Comparison of strategic and tactical dimensions of the election

Strategic dimension	Daniel Noboa's tactics	Luisa González's tactics
Air campaign (Conventional media)	Media protection	Reactive stance
	Careful selection of interviews to avoid confrontation and project technical competence.	Constant crisis management resulting from errors made by her communications team.
Ground campaign (Local)	Tactical overlap	Grassroots mobilization
	Use of state inaugurations (acting president) to demonstrate the fulfilment of promises in real time.	Focus on rallies and marches to demonstrate the party's grassroots strength.
Digital ecosystem (Technology and innovation)	Intrusive marketing	Contrast strategies
	Use of influencers, satire (Rana René) and mass advertising to humanize his image and launch attacks.	Use of defensive slogans ('No, Noboa, no') and exposing the opponent's tax debts.
Crisis management (Counter-attack)	Strategic victimization	Direct attack
	Positioning himself as a leader of renewal persecuted by the old guard.	Highlighting labor irregularities at companies within his rival's family-owned holding company.

3.1.1. Building the candidates' political image. Based on the criteria provided by the experts consulted and observation of the presidential debate, it is established that image-building was one of the most significant elements of the run-off election. This process involves understanding the candidate's profile and context, actively developing their image and core message, and implementing tactics to shape their reputation and connect with the electorate. In both cases, communication was not limited to verbal content, but incorporated visual, gestural, symbolic and emotional elements aimed at shaping a specific perception of leadership.

Daniel Noboa projected an image associated with authority, youth and technical competence. His attire, body language and the staging of his public appearances reinforced a narrative of youthful, anti-establishment and modern leadership. During the presidential debate, his non-verbal communication sought to convey control and confidence, although there were moments of body swaying – suggesting a sense of discomfort and facial expressions that clashed with the image he was projecting and his speech.

Luisa González crafted an image linked to political experience, a connection with the people and the continuity of a historic project. During the debate, her appearance and body language sought to balance composure and firmness of speech with social sensitivity, using visual elements associated with national identity. However, her physical stiffness and limited movements revealed moments of tension.

By comparison, Noboa succeeded in more clearly establishing an archetype of renewal in contrast to traditional politics, whilst González maintained an identity more dependent on the legacy of the Correa era and an archetypal syncretism that made it difficult to consolidate a unique and stable image among sections of the electorate not aligned with her candidacy. This difference affected both candidates' ability to connect with swing or moderate voters. Whilst Noboa appealed to the promise of the future, González appealed to the restoration of a better past.

3.1.2. Discursive performance and argumentative strategies in the presidential debate. The presidential debate, held during the second round of the Ecuadorian election, was mandatory and served as a forum for the public validation of the communication strategies previously deployed by the candidates. An observational analysis of the candidates' discursive performance during the debate helped to identify differences in tone, clarity, argumentation and the handling of confrontational frameworks.

Luisa González adopted an energetic, direct and confrontational tone. Her speech was based on references to her previous experience with the Revolución Ciudadana (Citizen Revolution Movement) and direct challenges to her opponent. The candidate sought to position herself as a choice with knowledge of the state and the capacity for institutional recovery. Although she demonstrated knowledge and technical competence, moments of hesitation and verbal inaccuracies were identified. Daniel Noboa, for his part, maintained a more persuasive, technical and pragmatic tone, prioritizing brief messages, statements about his track record and appeals to stability, order and

renewal. Although his performance projected control, it also revealed a reliance on his notes and less developed arguments on certain topics.

In terms of argumentative strategies, González more frequently resorted to arguments based on experience, comparisons with previous administrations and direct criticism of the model represented by her opponent. Noboa, by contrast, relied on arguments of symbolic contrast, positioning his candidacy as an expression of the future and associating his opponent with the political past. This opposition between the future and the past became one of the central themes of the debate.

Slogans also played a significant role. 'The New Ecuador', in Noboa's case, served as an anchor phrase aimed at projecting a break with the past, modernization and renewal. 'We've already done it', in González's case, evoked memories of her track record and experience.

Table 2. summary of key narratives and slogans

Candidate	Slogan / Key phrase	Frame of reference	Areas of attack
Daniel Noboa	"The New Ecuador"	Break with the past / Future / Technical management	Family liabilities / Anti-statism
Luisa González	"We've Already Done It"	Memory / Rescue / Experience	De-dollarization / Past

3.2. Quantitative analysis: Public perception of communication strategies, news consumption and levels of digital interaction during the run-off election

3.2.1. News consumption and the central role of social media. The survey results show that social media was the main source of political information during the run-off election. 87 per cent of respondents stated that they had used social media as a source of electoral information. Family conversations came second, at 31 per cent, ahead of television and radio, which accounted for 21 per cent. This finding is significant because it shows that, against a backdrop of information overload and mistrust of the campaign, interpersonal relationships continued to serve as spaces for political validation.

Campaign events had a lower impact, at 14 per cent, whilst print and digital newspapers accounted for just 5 per cent. These results suggest that the regional campaign and the print media played a secondary role compared to digital communication and interpersonal interactions.

Table 3. Main source of political information

Source of information	Frequency (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
Social media	409	87%
Family conversation	145	31%
Television/radio	101	21%

Campaign events	68	14%
Newspaper (print or digital)	25	5%

3.2.3. Public perception of the predominant content of the campaign. The results show that the predominant political content during the run-off was perceived as negative and confrontational. 72% of respondents identified attacks or criticism as the most prevalent type of content in the campaign. This figure far exceeds the proportion who cited emotional appeals (26%) and concrete proposals (24%).

Advertising on billboards and leaflets accounted for 21 per cent, whilst 6 per cent of respondents stated that they had not identified any predominant type of content. These figures show that public perception was shaped more by political attacks than by discussion of policy programmers.

This finding suggests that the campaign was structured primarily as a contest of contrasts, in which messages aimed at undermining the opponent’s image received greater visibility than political proposals.

Table 4. Predominant political content

Type of content	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Attacks or criticisms	338	72%
Emotional speeches	123	26%
Concrete proposals	111	24%
Advertising on billboards and leaflets	98	21%
None	27	6%

3.2.4. Citizen engagement on social media. Analysis of the level of citizen participation on social media shows that the electorate did not interact uniformly with digital political content. 45 per cent of respondents stated that they had participated solely as spectators, whilst 32 per cent indicated that they had participated actively. Meanwhile, 23 per cent stated that they had not participated on social media during the campaign.

These figures reveal a predominance of passive consumption of political content. The majority of citizens viewed posts, videos, memes or campaign messages without necessarily engaging in active debate. The presence of a largely spectator-based electorate encouraged the circulation of emotional messages, attacks and contrasting content, even when these had not been verified.

Table 5. Citizen participation on social media

Level of participation	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
As a spectator only	210	45%
Yes, actively	151	32%
I did not take part	110	23%

3.2.5. Perceptions of ethics and transparency in the campaign. Public perception of ethics and transparency in the campaign was largely negative. 71 per cent of respondents stated that they had not perceived any ethics or transparency during the electoral process, compared with 11 per cent who did identify these attributes. Furthermore, 18 per cent said they did not know whether the campaign had been ethical or transparent.

These results reflect a perceived decline in public trust in the communication practices employed during the run-off election. The high proportion of negative responses may be linked to the prevalence of attacks, disinformation, manipulated content and confrontational strategies that dominated the public discourse. The percentage of undecided respondents is also significant, as it shows that a section of the electorate lacked sufficient criteria to assess the campaign’s transparency.

Table 6. Perception of ethics and transparency

Response	Frequency (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
No	333	71%
Don’t know	83	18%
Yes	55	11%

3.2.6. The prevalence of negativity in the campaign. Public opinion confirms a deeply hostile electoral climate. 55 per cent of those surveyed described the tone of the contest as ‘very negative’ and 20 per cent as ‘somewhat negative’; this cumulative 75 per cent negativity correlates with the perceived lack of ethics and the prevalence of attacks analyzed previously.

In contrast, the data reveals a marginal presence of favorable perceptions. Barely 7 per cent described the tone as “very positive” and 8 per cent as “somewhat positive”. This combined 15 per cent confirms that messages of hope failed to break through the barrier of conflict or connect with the general sentiment. Similarly, the fact that only 10 per cent of respondents remained neutral confirms that the campaign was extremely polarized, showing that the messages were designed to provoke strong emotions, forcing voters to take sides.

Table 7. Predominant tone of the campaign

Campaign tone	Frequency (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
Very positive	35	7%
Somewhat positive	36	8%
Neutral	49	10%
Somewhat negative	92	20%
Very negative	259	55%

3.2.7. Level of influence of social media on public opinion. The data obtained reveal a significant contradiction: although the electorate consumes digital information on a

massive scale, the majority underestimate its actual impact. When asked about the extent to which social media influenced their vote, 42% of respondents stated that it had ‘no’ influence on their decision.

This perception of immunity contrasts with the 8% who admit to being completely influenced and the 6% who acknowledge that it had a considerable influence. However, the real impact of the campaign is evident in the 21 per cent of citizens who acknowledge a moderate influence and the 23 per cent who admit to a slight impact; when these segments are combined, it can be seen that 44 per cent of the population accept that the digital content influenced their thinking. The fact that the majority group state they were ‘not affected at all’ confirms the existence of third-person bias.

Table 8. Influence of social media on public opinion

Campaign tone	Frequency (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
Yes, completely	38	8%
Quiet a lot	29	6%
Moderately	98	21%
Slight (minimal impact)	108	23%
None (no influence)	198	42%

3.2.8. Voting firmness and factors of electoral stability. The results on voting firmness show that 20 per cent of respondents maintained their vote based on ideological affinity, representing the most solid core of the electorate. However, the effectiveness of the smear campaign is reflected in the 14 per cent of citizens who did not change their decision due to their rejection of the other option. This figure is crucial, as it reveals that voting ‘against’ carries almost as much weight as direct confidence in one’s own candidate, which barely reached 9 per cent.

On the other hand, the viability of the government’s plan was the least decisive factor in voting firmness, at just 7 per cent. This figure illustrates the trend whereby, in an environment saturated with confrontation and ethical mistrust, technical proposals were sidelined in favor of emotional responses.

Table 9. Percentage distribution of voting firmness among the electorate

Reason for voting firmness	Frequency (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
Ideological affinity with the party	92	20%
Rejection of the other option	64	14%
Confidence in their candidate	42	9%
Most viable government’s program	32	7%

In contrast to the steadfastness analyzed, the data obtained regarding citizens who did change their vote reveals that the main factor behind the volatility was fear of the opponent, accounting for 22 per cent under the logic of tactical voting. This figure confirms that smear campaigns were decisive in shifting voting intentions through aversion

to the opponent, far outweighing other factors such as recommendations from leaders (13 per cent) or the candidates’ policy proposals and charisma (7 per cent each).

Finally, 2 per cent of residual votes identified as ‘Others’ points to a niche of democratic apathy and disillusionment, comprising citizens who voted merely to fulfil a legal obligation and remained immune to both campaign promises and digital fear-mongering tactics.

Table 10. Percentage distribution of voting volatility within the electorate

Reason for change in vote	Frequency (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
Fear of the opposing candidate (tactical voting)	103	22%
Recommendation by leaders or political figures	61	13%
Proposals from the other candidate	34	7%
The other candidate’s image and charisma	34	7%
Other	9	2%

4 Discussion

The first significant finding of this research is the shift in campaign messaging towards short-form digital content (memes and *shorts*). This phenomenon supports the thesis put forward by Mazzoleni [1], who argues that contemporary politics is undergoing an inevitable phase of mediatization, in which the politics of spectacle and entertainment take precedence over traditional politics. The standardization of the meme as a tool for confrontation, identified in the strategies of Noboa and González, demonstrates that, in the run-off, communication did not seek ideological depth, but rather adaptation to the algorithms of rapid consumption on platforms such as TikTok.

Daniel Noboa’s strategy, identified by experts as a construction of the ‘technical outsider’ and the ‘hero’ archetype, capitalized on the sentiment of rejection towards Correísmo by framing his campaign in terms of the future and renewal. In contrast, Luisa González employed a strategy of anchoring and symbolic transfer towards the figure of Rafael Correa, appealing to the retrospective vote defined by Downs [8], whereby the voter assesses the past performance of the party in power, using economic or social performance as the main indicator, to predict future outcomes. However, the theory of framing [9], explains González’s decline; her inability to distance herself from the negative frames imposed by the opposition limited her growth beyond her core vote

The perception held by 72 per cent of those surveyed that attacks and criticism predominated, along with the 75 per cent of voters who considered the tone of the campaign to be between negative and somewhat negative, confirms that the contest unfolded under a strategy of reputational annihilation. According to Zovatto [6], this scenario is typical of hyper-polarized electoral processes in Latin America, in which protest voting prevails and where political identity is constructed on the basis of rejection of the opponent.

A key finding of this research is the discrepancy between the saturation of contrast-based campaigns and the perceived influence on the electorate; despite the negativity detected, 42 per cent of respondents stated that social media had no effect whatsoever on their opinion. This perception of immunity, coupled with the fact that 45 per cent of the electorate acted as passive spectators, demonstrates the validity of the Third-Person Effect [10], whereby individuals tend to underestimate the impact of persuasive messages on themselves whilst overestimating it in others.

This interpretation shows that, in order to protect their self-esteem and sense of rationality, voters deny being influenced by campaigns they consider to be underhand or unethical. By convincing themselves of their own immunity, they lower their critical defenses [7], against seemingly harmless formats such as memes or short videos. This allows framing and algorithms to subconsciously shape their perception, leading citizens to make decisions based on fear or rejection of their opponent, whilst firmly believing that their vote is the result of their own independent judgement.

This lack of direct interaction on the part of the voter also generates what Bravo [11], identify as a high susceptibility to disinformation. In the absence of any verification process or public debate on the part of the user, highly emotionally charged content such as the deepfakes and voice cloning detected during the campaign penetrates uncritically.

The fact that 71 per cent of the population distrusts the ethics of the campaign, coupled with the 18 per cent who expressed uncertainty, reveals a state of informational disorientation. Cazarín [12] argues that current communication strategies prioritize image-building over ethical content, which, in this context of negative saturation, has eroded perceptions of institutional transparency, leaving one-fifth of the electorate in a state of perpetual doubt.

Given the crisis of media credibility and the toxicity of the digital environment, the finding that family conversations exert greater influence than television is crucial. This shift in trust aligns with the thesis of Hameleers [13], who argue that when citizens perceive information from traditional media as false or intentionally misleading, they tend to turn away from them and turn to alternative sources.

In the context of the 2025 run-off election, this disengagement not only boosted social media usage but also reaffirmed the validity of the Social Approach proposed by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet [14], who demonstrated that reference groups such as family and friends exert greater influence than the mass media by acting as reinforcing filters; their central conclusion being that voting decisions are largely predetermined by the social structure to which the individual belongs. As suggested by Binder [15], faced with the saturation of bots and troll centers, citizens regard interpersonal communication as a shield against external manipulation, seeking within their primary social networks the validation needed to consolidate their final decision in the face of an information ecosystem perceived as hostile

The prevalence of fear of the opponent as a decisive factor in volatile voting confirms that voting decisions have moved away from Downs' [8], Rational Choice theory towards the Psychological Approach of the Michigan school [16], which focuses on how pre-existing personal attitudes and identifications filter campaign information.

Volatility was not a process of analyzing government plans that influenced only 7 per cent of the vote, but rather a reactive response to perceived risk. This demonstrates that emotional mobilization and the use of contrast strategies in campaigns were more effective than leadership or the soundness of policy proposals.

5 Conclusions

The 2025 Ecuadorian presidential run-off election revealed a significant transformation in the dynamics of electoral political communication. The campaigns of Daniel Noboa and Luisa González were not structured primarily around policy debate, but rather around contrast strategies, image-building, emotional appeals and the intensive circulation of digital content.

The results suggest that social media played a central role in voters' information-gathering experience. Its predominance as a source of political information confirms that the digital environment has become a decisive space for the presentation, circulation and reinterpretation of electoral messages. However, this central role did not mean the disappearance of interpersonal communication, as family conversations continued to play an important part as mechanisms for validating, interpreting and reaffirming political preferences.

The research also shows that the campaign was largely perceived as negative and lacking in transparency. The prevalence of attacks and criticism, coupled with the perceived lack of concrete proposals, reveals a contest geared more towards delegitimizing the opponent than towards substantive debate on government plans.

There is a contradiction between the high consumption of political information on social media and the low self-perceived level of digital influence. Although a significant proportion of the electorate used these platforms as their main source of information, many citizens stated that digital content did not affect their opinion. This dissonance suggests that the political influence of social media is not always consciously recognized by voters, but may operate through exposure, the repetition of narrative frameworks and the circulation of political emotions.

Furthermore, the data suggest that voting decisions, particularly among the most volatile segments, were more closely linked to emotional factors than to a rational assessment of policy proposals. Fear of the opposing candidate and rejection of the opposing option carried greater weight than the viability of the government's program or the candidates' charisma.

Finally, the study provides evidence on the relationship between digital political communication, the emotionalization of the vote and polarization in Latin American run-off elections. Its findings highlight the democratic risks posed by campaigns centered on negativity, disinformation, emotional manipulation and the replacement of policy-based debate with brief, high-impact content. Consequently, it is necessary to strengthen citizens' media and digital literacy, as well as to promote more transparent, ethical and public-deliberation-oriented practices in political communication.

6 References

1. Mazzoleni, G.: Introducción a la Comunicación Política [Introduction to Political Communication]. Alianza Editorial (2024).
2. Del Olmo, R.: Comunicación política: estrategias y técnicas [Political communication: strategies and techniques]. <https://bit.ly/4c7kt0Z> (2023).
3. Sibaja, G.: Herramientas de comunicación política [Political communication tools]. 1st edn. IFED - TSE, San José, Costa Rica (2020).
4. Habermas, J.: Historia y crítica de la opinión pública. La transformación estructural de la vida pública [History and critique of public opinion. The structural transformation of the public sphere]. Editorial Gustavo Gili, SL (1994).
5. Ardèvol, A., Gil de Zúñiga, H., McCombs, M.: Orígenes y desarrollo de la teoría de la agenda setting en Comunicación. Tendencias en España (2014-2019) [Origins and development of agenda setting theory in Communication. Trends in Spain (2014-2019)]. *Profesional de la información* 9(4) (2020). <https://doi.org/10.3145/epi.2020.jul.14>
6. Zovatto, D.: El superciclo electoral latinoamericano 2021 - 2024 [The Latin American electoral supercycle 2021 - 2024]. *Diálogo Política* (2022). <https://bit.ly/4d8MG8R>
7. Van der Meer, T.G.L.A., Brosius, A., Hameleers, M.: The role of media use and misinformation perceptions in optimistic bias and third-person perceptions in times of high media dependency]. *Mass Communication and Society* 26(3), 438–462 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2022.2039202>
8. Downs, A.: *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. Harper & Row (1957).
9. McCombs, M.: Estableciendo la agenda: El impacto de los medios en la opinión pública y en el conocimiento [Setting the agenda: The news media and public opinion]. Paidós (2006).
10. Davison, W.P.: The third-person effect in communication. *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1983).
11. Bravo, J., Larrea, C., Ruales, R.: Redes Sociales y Política 2.0: Nuevas Técnicas de Campaña en la Era Digital [Social Networks and Politics 2.0: New Campaigning Techniques in the Digital Era]. *Revista Enfoques de la Comunicación* (10) (2023). <https://bit.ly/4bUaPOb>
12. Cazarín, A.: Comunicación política 2023: elecciones, estrategias y contextos [Political communication 2023: elections, strategies and contexts]. *Enfoques de Comunicación* (10), 451–473 (2023). <https://bit.ly/4sxoWQr>
13. Hameleers, M., Brosius, A., de Vreese, C.H.: ¿En quién confiar? Whom to trust? Media exposure patterns of citizens with perceptions of misinformation and disinformation related to the news media. *European Journal of Communication* 37(3), 237–268 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1177/02673231211072667>
14. Lazarsfeld, P.F., Berelson, B., Gaudet, H.: La elección de la gente: Cómo el votante toma una decisión en una campaña presidencial [The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign]. Columbia University Press (1944).
15. Binder, A., Stubenvoll, M., Hirsch, M., Matthes, J.: Why Am I Getting This Ad? How the Degree of Targeting Disclosures and Political Fit Affect Persuasion Knowledge, Party Evaluation, and Online Privacy Behaviors. *Journal of Advertising* 51(2), 206–222 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.2015727>
16. Campbell, A., Converse, P.E., Miller, W.E., Stokes, D.E.: El votante americano [The American voter]. Wiley (1960).

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

