

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The influence of social media in the second round of the 2021 Ecuadorian presidential elections

La influencia de las redes sociales en la segunda vuelta presidencial de Ecuador 2021

Cesar E. Andraus  • Orlando R. Lazo 
Rauny J. Limonta  • John D. Daza 

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Abstract This study analyzes the use of social media in political communication during the second round of the 2021 Ecuadorian presidential elections, highlighting the increasing importance of these platforms in campaign strategies. The objective was to investigate how candidates Andrés Arauz and Guillermo Lasso utilized social media (Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube) and assess their user interaction and response effectiveness. The methodology employed was a mixed descriptive approach based on a netnographic analysis, which allowed observation and comparison of the candidates' activity from March 16 to April 8, 2021. The findings show that Arauz stood out on Twitter due to his high level of activity and interaction. At the same time, Lasso excelled on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, achieving higher engagement and views. Differences in user response suggest the importance of tailoring political communication strategies to the particular characteristics of each platform, demonstrating that not only the quantity but also the relevance of content is crucial for capturing attention and fostering audience engagement. The conclusions underscore the need to design effective multichannel strategies that align with the habits and expectations of digital audiences, solidifying social media as an essential tool for mobilization and connecting with the electorate in the contemporary era.

Keywords political communication, social media, netnography, electoral campaigns, digital strategies.

Resumen El estudio analiza el uso de redes sociales en la comunicación política durante la segunda vuelta de las elecciones presidenciales de Ecuador 2021, enfocándose en las estrategias de campaña de Andrés Arauz y Guillermo Lasso. El objetivo fue examinar cómo emplearon Twitter, Instagram, TikTok y YouTube, evaluando su efectividad en términos de interacción y respuesta de los usuarios mediante un análisis netnográfico descriptivo realizado entre el 16 de marzo y el 8 de abril de 2021. Los resultados muestran que Arauz destacó en Twitter por su alta actividad e interacción, mientras que Lasso obtuvo mayor participación en Instagram, TikTok y YouTube. Esto evidencia la necesidad de adaptar las estrategias según las características de cada plataforma, resaltando que no solo la cantidad, sino también la relevancia del contenido, es crucial para generar engagement. En conclusión, el estudio subraya la importancia de diseñar estrategias multicanal efectivas que respondan a los hábitos y expectativas de las audiencias digitales. Las redes sociales se consolidan como herramientas esenciales para la movilización y conexión con el electorado en el contexto actual.

Palabras clave comunicación política, redes sociales, netnografía, campañas electorales, estrategias digitales.

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✉ Cesar E. Andraus
ceandraus@sangregorio.edu.ec

Universidad San Gregorio de Portoviejo, Ecuador.

Introduction

Technological progress and globalization have profoundly transformed communication dynamics, with social media emerging as indispensable tools in political communication. Their growing popularity and accessibility have cemented their use in political strategies, providing an effective channel for interaction between politicians and citizens at all levels of society.

According to Crespo et al. (2021), politics is inherently a communicative act, where communication is ever-present in any political activity: “whenever there is politics, there will—at least potentially—be communication” (p. 11). Tahan (2016) emphasizes that social media enables active user participation, sometimes surpassing the influence of mass media, as it studies and responds to audience expectations. This capacity for interaction and influence has integrated social media as an essential tool during electoral processes (Miquel-Segarra et al., 2020).

Tahan (2016) notes that social media platforms encourage active participation from netizens, even more so than traditional media, by analyzing user behavior through their expectations. Given these networks’ substantial influence, their use has been implemented within the political context, particularly during electoral processes (Miquel-Segarra et al., 2020).

The use of social media in politics allows candidates to capture the attention of apolitical individuals or those indifferent to politics, increasing the likelihood of influencing their decisions. Previous research suggests that social media activity, such as direct interaction between candidates and voters, can positively impact voters’ perceptions (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009; Zhang et al., 2010). Social media has proven advantageous in the electoral sphere due to lower costs than traditional media, broader message reach, and the capacity to rapidly expand interaction among political actors (Dader & Cheng, 2011).

The use of the Internet in political campaigns reached a significant milestone in the United States during the 1990s (Maarek, 1995), with candidates’ first websites appearing in 1996 and the Internet consolidating its role in the 2004 elections (Gelpi, 2018). An iconic example was Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign, where social media played a pivotal role, leading to a victory showcasing these tools’ global impact on political communication (Owen, 2019).

Wolton (1995) defines political communication as a process where politicians, media, and public opinion interact, exchanging political messages. Ochoa (1999) adds that this process can be carried out by both citizens and the government in individual or collective contexts. Gutiérrez-Rubí (2015) expands this definition by considering it a discipline encompassing actors, functions, discursive strategies, rhetorical models, as well as the study of political institutions and

new communication tools.

In Ecuador, the use of social media in political communication strategies has gained significance in recent electoral processes. The democratization of the internet and the development of ICTs have enabled 80% of the population to access these platforms, with over 10 million internet users and 14 million social media users as of January 2021 (Kemp, 2021).

This netnographic study aims to analyze the use of social media by the candidates in the second round of the 2021 Ecuadorian presidential elections, focusing on the political strategies deployed on their digital platforms as key components of their communication actions. This research underscores the importance of using social media in political campaigns, highlighting their influence on electoral outcomes and providing a methodological framework for future studies in political communication.

Methodology

The research adopts a mixed descriptive approach, employing netnographic analysis to study the logic and behavior of virtual communities on the internet (Turpo, 2008). The social media accounts of the presidential candidates in the second round of the 2021 Ecuadorian elections were examined. The observation period spanned from March 16 to April 8, 2021, covering the duration of the electoral campaign.

The social media platforms analyzed were Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter. Variables measured included likes, dislikes, comments, views, and retweets, as outlined in Table 1. The observation focused on quantifying user interactions and conducting a comparative analysis of the most relevant content on both candidates’ accounts.

Table 1. Observational variables for candidates’ social media

Variable	Social media			
	Instagram	TikTok	Youtube	Twitter
Likes	X	X	X	X
Dislikes	-	-	X	-
Comments	X	X	X	X
Views	X	-	X	-
Retweets	-	-	-	X

Results and discussion

Use of social media in Ecuador

Ecuador, a country with over 17 million inhabitants, has a population distribution in which 64% live in urban areas and 36% in rural zones. This demographic detail is important for contextualizing the use of social media in the country.

According to the latest digital report on Ecuador compiled by Datareportal, there were approximately 14 million social media users in January 2021 (Kemp, 2021), representing about 80% of the total population. However, it is worth noting that one user does not necessarily correspond to a unique individual, as a person may have multiple accounts across different platforms, averaging up to eight accounts per person.

Between 2020 and 2021, the number of social media users in Ecuador increased by 2 million, reflecting a 17% growth (Kemp, 2021). A key aspect of the report is that 98% of users access these platforms through mobile devices, underscoring the critical role of mobile technology in the country's digital connectivity.

Kemp (2021) report also provides specific data on advertising audiences across various platforms. On YouTube, the potential audience in Ecuador reaches 9.5 million users, representing 59.6% of the population over 18 years old. The gender distribution shows 49.2% women and 50.8% men among platform users.

Instagram's potential advertising audience is 5.1 million, equivalent to 37.7% of the Ecuadorian population over 13 years old. Regarding gender distribution, 53.8% of Instagram users are women, while 46.2% are men.

On the other hand, Twitter has a potential advertising audience of 1.15 million users, representing 8.5% of the population over 13 years old. The proportion of users is 38.9% women and 61.1% men, indicating a male-dominated presence on this platform.

These data highlight the significant penetration and use of social media in Ecuador and the differences in potential audience and user composition across platforms—key elements for understanding the country's digital landscape and planning communication strategies.

Political campaigns on social media

The advent of digital channels has transformed traditional political campaigns and become a central component of modern political marketing. Digital platforms have proven effective mediums for interaction between candidates and voters, becoming indispensable tools in any political communication strategy. Today, active participation in social media is almost essential for political involvement (Conexión ESAN, 2020).

López & Cabrera (2014), in their study on political campaigns through social media, highlight the crucial role ICTs play in fostering more participatory and interactive communication. These technological resources aim to inform and facilitate opinion exchange through various tools such as forums, blogs, and social media. This interaction enhances citizen participation and engagement, creating a more dynamic

and bidirectional environment.

Regarding campaign content on social media, Conexión ESAN (2020) emphasizes that posts should form the backbone of a digital marketing strategy. It also notes that content should be based on prior competitor analysis and tailored to meet the following recommendations:

Use modern formats: Social media formats differ from those in other digital media. Social media teams must leverage creativity to deliver messages that are easy to consume and capture public attention.

Concise messaging and visual focus: In an era of information overload and limited attention spans, it is crucial to offer citizens mental shortcuts. Key elements, such as catchy headlines and appealing visuals, can help shift the audience from superficial attention to deep engagement. This is one of the most significant challenges in modern political campaigns.

Adapt content to each platform: Each social network has its own style and unique audience, making it important to avoid posting identical content across all platforms. Different strategies and content must be tailored for Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other networks to align with user profiles.

Engage in forums and communities: Participation in these spaces allows candidates to generate discussions, foster debates, and respond to questions related to their campaigns and other topics of public interest. This interaction increases candidates' visibility and strengthens their connection with voters by directly addressing their concerns.

These strategies underscore the need for candidates and their campaign teams to understand the nuances of each social media platform and use them strategically to maximize reach and impact. The emphasis on creating relevant and distinct content and active engagement has become a cornerstone for successful political campaigns in today's digital environment.

Netnography

Classical ethnography has historically been an essential tool in anthropology for observing and closely understanding communities, their behaviors, and their environments. However, technological changes and the evolution of communication channels have created new contexts that require approaches adapted to digital environments. Modern political communication, driven by the internet, exemplifies how traditional media have made room for digital platforms and social networks.

Today, a significant portion of globally consumed content comes from virtual communities that wield substantial media power in cyberspace. In this context, adapting ethnography to contemporary needs has led to the development of netnography. This qualitative and interpretative methodology, spe-

cifically designed for researching consumer behavior within internet communities and cultures, allows for analyzing social interactions and dynamics on these platforms. As Turpo (2008) states, netnography is a “qualitative and interpretative method specifically designed to investigate consumer behavior in internet communities and cultures” (p. 85).

Previous studies have demonstrated the utility of netnography in exploring and understanding the particularities of virtual communities (Catterall & MacLaran, 2002; Langer & Beckmann, 2005; Kozinets, 2006; Sandlin, 2007; Rokka, 2010; Xun & Reynolds, 2010). This technique has become an effective method for online data collection and for analyzing user behavior from both individual and community perspectives (Kozinets, 1997, 2001, 2002; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998; Giesler, 2006; Rokka & Moisaner, 2009). Furthermore, studies have focused on the character and identity of digital communities (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001; Brown et al., 2003; Muñiz & Schau, 2005; de Valck et al., 2009).

Context of the 2021 Ecuadorian presidential elections

The presidential and vice-presidential elections in Ecuador for the 2021-2025 term were held on February 7, 2021. This electoral process was notable for the diversity of political forces and candidates representing various ideological currents. The “Unión por la esperanza” (UNES) coalition, represented by Andrés Arauz and Carlos Rabascall, secured first place with 32.72% of the vote. The second place was taken by the alliance CREO 21 – PSC 6, represented by Gui-

llermo Lasso and Alfredo Borrero, with 19.74% of the vote.

The third position was closely contested by the Pachakutik Plurinational Unity Movement, whose candidates Yaku Pérez and Virma Cedeño garnered 19.32% of the votes, just shy of Lasso and Borrero’s tally. This narrow margin reflected a competitive race that captured the attention of both the electorate and political analysts. Xavier Hervas and María Sara Jijón from the Democratic Left party came in fourth with 15.68% of the vote, demonstrating significant support from an important population sector.

After the first round, Andrés Arauz and Guillermo Lasso advanced to the second round, which was scheduled for April 11, 2021. This runoff would determine Ecuador’s presidency and vice presidency for the next four years amid significant polarization and an increasing reliance on social media as strategic tools for political communication and voter mobilization.

Findings from the applied instruments

This section presents the results of the netnographic observation conducted on the social media accounts of the presidential candidates for the second round of the 2021 Ecuadorian elections: Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter. The observation was carried out during the campaign period from March 16 to April 8, 2021. Table 2 summarizes the main variables analyzed in this study.

The netnographic analysis of Guillermo Lasso and Andrés Arauz’s social media activity during the second round of the 2021 elections reveals differentiated usa-

Table 2. Summary of variables measured during the second round campaign period

Social media	Variables	Guillermo Lasso	Andrés Arauz	Total
Twitter	Tweets	67	221	288
	Likes	173704	479203	652.907
	Retweets	46432	232127	278.559
	Comments	15898	62203	78.101
Instagram	Post	127	114	241
	Likes	1207149	422806	1.629.955
	Comments	57053	23769	80.822
	Views	745788	90065	835.853
TikTok	Post	23	25	48
	Likes	3193400	805443	3.998.843
	Comments	109259	58342	167.601
	Videos	43	97	140
Youtube	Views	12.366.043	4.527.637	16.893.680
	Likes	7.239	8.424	15.663
	Dislikes	966	752	1.718
	Comments	1.800	2.674	4.474

ge patterns and their ability to mobilize audiences on various platforms. This study highlights how user interaction and response vary significantly across Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, emphasizing the

Twitter: Data shows Andrés Arauz was significantly more active than Guillermo Lasso, posting 221 tweets compared to Lasso's 67. Arauz also garnered more likes, retweets, and comments, suggesting greater dynamism on this platform. This finding aligns with previous studies highlighting Twitter's capacity to facilitate real-time political discussions and promote engagement (Miquel-Segarra et al., 2020). Arauz's strategy on Twitter appeared to boost his visibility and online presence, which are key factors for generating impact and maintaining voter attention.

Instagram: Guillermo Lasso outperformed Arauz in most observed metrics, including likes, comments, and content views. With 13 more posts and a difference of 784,343 likes, Lasso demonstrated better performance on this visually driven platform. This can be attributed to a strategy focused on compelling images and visual messages resonating with his audience. This observation supports the notion that Instagram is a platform where visual quality and storytelling are critical for capturing attention and encouraging interaction (Owen, 2019).

TikTok: This platform exhibited an interesting dynamic; both candidates made similar posts, but Lasso received significantly more engagement from his followers. Data shows that Lasso accumulated 2,387,957 more likes and 50,917 more comments than Arauz. This suggests that Lasso's content strategy on TikTok was more effective in captivating a young and active audience. TikTok's appeal in political campaigns lies in its short, viral video format, which fosters emotional and spontaneous connections with users (Sandlin, 2007).

YouTube: Although Andrés Arauz produced more content, with 97 videos compared to Lasso's 43, Lasso had a substantial lead in total views, with over 12 million compared to Arauz's 4.5 million. This disparity implies that content quality and perceived relevance may outweigh sheer quantity. Additionally, Lasso received 214 more dislikes than Arauz, reflecting a level of polarization in the perception of his content, which could be interpreted as an indicator of controversy and interest generated.

These results suggest that social media serves as a dissemination platform and an interactive space where a candidate's perception can be influenced by their strategic approach and the nature of each social network. Arauz's dominance on Twitter contrasts with Lasso's stronger performance on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, underlining the need for a multichannel strategy tailored to each platform's distinct characteristics.

This study contributes to understanding the role of social media in modern political communication and provides a methodological basis for future research exploring how digital interaction can influence election outcomes. The findings reinforce the notion that a well-structured strategy, which considers the specific attributes of each social network, is essential for maximizing the impact of political communication and strengthening connections with the electorate.

Conclusions

The netnographic analysis of the presidential candidates' social media usage during the second round of the 2021 Ecuadorian elections underscores the importance of tailoring political communication strategies to the unique characteristics of each platform. The results show that while Andrés Arauz achieved more significant interaction on Twitter, Guillermo Lasso excelled on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, demonstrating a more effective use of these networks to capture audience attention and participation. These findings highlight the need for politicians to design multichannel strategies that align with users' expectations and habits on different platforms. Furthermore, they illustrate that interaction and engagement depend not only on the quantity of content but also on its relevance and resonance with the target audience. This study contributes to understanding social media as dynamic, multifaceted spaces crucial in contemporary political communication and electorate mobilizing.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: Andraus, C. E., Lazo, O. R., Limonta,

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Data availability statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Statement on the use of AI

The authors acknowledge the use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies to improve the readability and clarity of the article.

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