



ECUADOR GENERAL ELECTIONS 2025

BACKGROUND

Ecuadorians will head to the polls on **February 9** to elect a new president and 151 members of the National Assembly. This election occurs against the backdrop of somewhat unprecedented circumstances, with violence as a result of organized crime at its peak. Ecuador has undergone a transformation; it has become a focal point in the global cocaine trade in recent years despite decades of anti-drug efforts. Its geography, embedded corruption, the cumulative impact of neoliberal state cutbacks by past administrations, and rural unemployment have all compounded its organized crime crisis and exacerbated widespread violence.

Despite 16 candidates running for the presidency, the election is expected to culminate in a contest between incumbent President Daniel Noboa and progressive opposition leader Luisa González. While Ecuador's electoral system allows for a potential first-round win, polls suggest the race will likely result in a runoff which would take place in April 2025.

The election has profound implications for the broader Latin American region, with either, Azín or González, the frontrunners, representing diametrically opposed political ideologies. Ecuador's growing role as a key cocaine transshipment point has facilitated ties between its local criminal groups and major drug cartels like Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel and Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), accelerating instability in neighboring Colombia and Peru. As the U.S. has identified Ecuador as a priority for counternarcotics aid and is Quito's key security partner, the curbing of its crisis will crucially hinge on material support from the U.S. - this may come under strain if Ecuador seeks to further leverage alternative relationships with China and Russia.

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Fragmentation and Spillover: Ecuador's ongoing battle with escalating cartel violence shows no sign of waning despite Noboa's firm stance on crime throughout his tenure. While homicides fell by 16.5 percent in 2024, January 2025 marked a record-high surge in fatalities per month, reflecting the ineffectiveness of his "war against drug trafficking" strategy. His tactics have utilized decapitation strategies, militarizing prisons, and expanding military powers - ultimately fragmenting key Ecuadorian syndicates like Los Choneros and Los Lobos. These heavy-handed policies have contributed to established cartels like Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG outsourcing parts of their drug supply chain to fragmented, smaller Ecuadorian gangs, which are harder to target. This shift has fueled violent competition as local groups compete for contracts with international cartels, among other factors. The instability has spilled over Ecuador's borders, aggravating the security climate in Colombia and Peru, both of which are grappling with similar cartel-related violence. Moreover, the use of financial resources to militarize Ecuador's security forces has channeled funds away from public investment and structural reforms, deepening the country's socioeconomic challenges and creating long-term governance issues.

"Mano Dura" (Iron Fist) Policies: The militarization of citizen security has undermined responses to organized crime. Inflated powers centralized

KEY INDIVIDUALS

Daniel Noboa Azín: As the youngest president in Ecuador's history and son of the wealthiest man in Ecuador, Noboa has been in power for 18 months. Hard-handed responses to the crime wave propelled his popularity, but governance challenges have caused his approval rating to oscillate. His neoliberal outlook prioritizes ties with the U.S. and the IMF, tax breaks for conglomerates, and military action against drug cartels. Balancing cuts in public spending with escalating violence will remain a challenge, yet his machismo rhetoric has gained traction amid pervasive insecurity.

Luisa González: A proponent of *Correísmo* and member of the Leftist Citizen Revolution Party, she represents a progressive platform centered on social spending, expanded welfare programs and state-led development, embodied by the slogan "revive Ecuador."

KEY DEVELOPMENTS

January 2024: A state of emergency is declared following widespread prison riots and spiraling violence in the criminal hub of Guayaquil, following military interventions.

March 2024: The *Metástasis* corruption scandal erupts, exposing narco-corruption across the highest levels of government in Ecuador and leading to the indictment of over thirty politicians, lawyers and security officials with links to organized crime.

April 2024: A national referendum is held, solidifying President Noboa's "mano dura" (iron fist) policies and expanding the military's role in public security.

April 2024: Noboa orders Ecuador's first power cuts, triggered by an energy



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within a corrupt military through the implementation of “Operation Phoenix” have allowed extrajudicial killings, media suppression, and the overuse of authority. A 2024 security referendum expanded the military’s role in internal security, heightening fears of authoritarianism. While Noboa's measures may have popular appeal in the climate of fear, his focus on force without systemic reforms risks prioritizing short-term results over systemic changes. This could undermine democratic institutions and deepen public mistrust in the military. Despite this, his popularity suggests that public opinion leans toward short-term security guarantees rather than concerns about an authoritarian shift. His recourse to crony capitalism over much-needed reform could further marginalize vulnerable populations, contributing to the social issues that perpetuate this crisis.

U.S. and Regional Security: Violence has accelerated migration, with over 57,000 Ecuadorians crossing into Panama’s Darién Gap in 2023. The U.S. has prioritized Ecuador in its counternarcotics efforts, providing an aid package of \$94 million last year. However, Ecuador’s growing reliance on Chinese surveillance technology and its leveraging of bilateral ties with non-Western states to pursue an alternative development path may hinder future aid from Western states - support the country vitally depends on to curb its organized crime. A security strategy that is dependent on reactive aid packages is tenuous. As Ecuador's role as a key regional hub for drug trafficking expands, its geopolitical position becomes significant amid rising tensions between great powers. A González victory could further shift Ecuador towards China and Russia, echoing the approach of the previous Correa administration (2007 – 2017), which was more critical of the U.S. This could ultimately strain relations with the West and impact future provision of material support.

KEY OUTCOMES

Runoff Election: Despite President Daniel Noboa’s lead, recent polls show that he will fall short of the 50 percent threshold required for a first-round victory, possibly pointing towards an April 13 runoff. A runoff would extend campaign-driven instability, delaying policy decisions on energy shortages and crime.

Noboa’s Likely Victory: Noboa remains ahead in the polls, though his approval has fallen from a high of 80 percent to 39 percent due to energy blackouts and a lack of progress in crime reduction. His incumbency advantage and populist measures—such as electricity subsidies ahead of the vote—have been consequential in cementing his position in a potential runoff. Viewed as a strongman in addressing immediate safety concerns and an outsider to traditional politics, it is likely he retains his edge.

crisis linked to historic droughts, sparking public outrage.

May 2024: Noboa declares a new 60-day state of emergency, to expand executive power, despite the Constitutional Court ruling the previous one unconstitutional, highlighting tensions between the executive and judiciary.

December 2024: The Ecuadorian government authorizes the U.S. military to deploy ships, personnel, equipment, and submarines to the Galápagos Islands. This has led to sovereignty and environmental concerns.

December 2024: Malvinas Case: The military was accused of forcibly disappearing four children who were later found dead. This event sparked human rights criticisms of Noboa’s security policies and unchecked military powers.

POLLS

Polls on Presidential Election Prospects (%) *Source: Comunicaliza*

- **Daniel Noboa: 38.1 %**
- **Luisa Gonzalez: 32.0%**
- **Andrea Gonzalez: 4.3%**
- **Others: 25.6% (13 candidates)**

Survey based on 5,217 online interviews conducted between January 22 – 24 2025.

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