



BRIEFING PAPER

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Ecuador: 2021 presidential election

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Summary

Ecuador held a general election on 7 February 2021 to elect a President, Vice-President and members of the National Assembly.

The country's National Electoral Council (CNE) registered 16 presidential and vice-presidential candidates for the election, with opinion polls pointing to a three-way race between Andrés Arauz, Guillermo Lasso and Yaku Pérez.

The election took place under the cloud of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Government's response to the pandemic and the worsening economic situation were key factors for voters.

None of the candidates secured the 40 per cent of votes required for an outright victory, but Andrés Arauz topped the first round by a significant margin and immediately progressed to the run-off.

It was initially unclear which other candidate would contest the run-off poll as the second- and third-placed candidates were neck-and-neck in the preliminary results and the CNE announced recounts would be held in many provinces.

Once the final result of the first round became clear, it was announced Guillermo Lasso would challenge Arauz in the run-off election on 11 April 2021.

Leading up to the second-round run-off, Arauz posted significant leads in opinion polls. However, on election day, Lasso achieved a surprise win and was elected President.

1. Background

Presidential elections in Ecuador take place every four years and candidates must secure at least 40 per cent of valid votes, plus a difference of at least ten percentage points above the second-placed candidate, to claim victory in the first round.

In a referendum in 2018, Ecuadorians voted by a landslide to reinstate term limits, meaning presidents can serve a maximum of two terms in office.¹ This reversed a decision by former president Rafael Correa to have term limits removed from the constitution in 2015.

Presidential candidates must be Ecuadorian by birth and at least 30 years old.

In Ecuador, voting is compulsory for citizens aged 18 to 65.

Anyone who does not vote faces a fine of ten per cent of the minimum monthly wage (\$40).

Those aged sixteen or seventeen – plus the over-65s – may also vote, although this is voluntary.

For the 2021 elections, more than 13 million people registered to vote, including 410,000 citizens living abroad.²

On 10 February 2020, the National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) announced a general election would be held on 7 February 2021.

As well as electing a president and vice-president, Ecuadorians also cast their votes to elect members of the unicameral, 137-seat National Assembly.

With no candidates securing the required 40 per cent of votes cast in the first round, a run-off poll between the top two candidates was held on 11 April.

¹ [‘Ecuador votes to limit presidents’ terms in blow to Rafael Correa’](#), *the Guardian*, 5 February 2018

² [Explainer: Ecuador’s 2021 Presidential Elections](#), Americas Society / Council of the Americas, 4 February 2021

2. 2021 Presidential election

2.1 Candidates

Ecuador's National Electoral Council (CNE) registered 16 presidential and vice-presidential candidates for the 2021 election³. This figure is the largest in Ecuador's history and makes it difficult for a candidate to win in the first round and avoid a run-off.

Opinion polls suggested the presidential election would be a three-way race between Andrés Arauz, Guillermo Lasso, and Yaku Pérez.

The leading candidates – in alphabetical order – were as follows:

Andrés Arauz - Union for Hope (UNES)

Andrés Arauz was born on 6 February 1985 in Quito.

He is a former adviser on financial policy and director at the Central Bank of Ecuador.

In 2015, during Correa's presidency, Arauz was appointed minister of knowledge and human talent co-ordination. After he was dismissed from this post in a cabinet reshuffle of 2017 Arauz moved to Mexico to begin studying for his PhD.

In August 2020 he was presented as the presidential candidate for the Union for Hope in the 2021 election.

Arauz initially announced Correa would be his running-mate, but a court ruled against this as Correa faced bribery charges. Even so, Arauz has stated that Correa will be one of his advisers, should he become president.

Some commentators have suggested that, in the event of an Arauz victory, Correa will actually be the one governing, albeit by proxy.⁴

Arauz is critical of the IMF debt restructuring deal agreed by the Moreno government and he has indicated he is prepared to walk away from negotiations if necessary.⁵

Internationally, Arauz is best known for being an advocate of complementary digital money systems, which he believes could provide a viable pathway for Ecuador to loosen its dependency on the US dollar.⁶

³ [Know your candidate](#), National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) [accessed 16 February 2021]

⁴ [Ecuador's Upcoming Elections](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies, 3 February 2021

⁵ ['Ecuador presidential contender hits at IMF deal and pledges reforms'](#), *Financial Times*, 23 December 2020

⁶ ['Ecuador's presidential front-runner is a CBDC advocate'](#), *Financial Times*, 10 February 2021

Lucio Gutiérrez - Patriotic Society Party

Lucio Gutiérrez was born on 23 March 1957 in Quito

He began his career in the army rising to the rank of colonel. In 2000 he served a six-month prison sentence for leading a successful coup against President Jamil Mahuad.

Gutiérrez was elected president of Ecuador in the 2002 elections and served from January 2003 to April 2005; his term ending early after protests demanding his resignation.

He unsuccessfully stood as a presidential candidate in the 2009 and 2013 elections.

Gustavo Larrea - Democracy Yes

Larrea was campaign manager for former President Rafael Correa for the 2006 election and held various ministerial positions between 2007 and 2008.

In September 2020 Larrea was registered as the presidential candidate of Democracy Yes for the 2021 election.

Guillermo Lasso - CREO-PSC Alliance

Guillermo Lasso was born on 16 November 1955 in Guayaquil.

After a career in banking, he had short periods in government in the late 1990s and early 2000s, first as governor of Guayas province, then economy minister and roving ambassador.

This is the third time he has run for president.

Lasso founded the Creando Oportunidades (Creating Opportunities—CREO) party to launch his first presidential bid in 2013.

After narrowly losing his second presidential race in 2017 to Lenin Moreno, Lasso contested the results, alleging fraud.

In his 2021 campaign, Lasso has pledged to create one million jobs and implement universal health care.⁷

Yaku Pérez - Plurinational Unity Movement Pachakutik - New Country

Yaku Pérez was born on 26 February 1969 in Cachipucara, Tarqui parish, Cuenca.

He is a lawyer by training and an environmental activist who has fought for water rights and protested against mining activity.

After the October 2019 anti-austerity protests he emerged as the leader of the indigenous Pachakutik party.

Pérez has promised to create a universal basic income. He is against the tax increases outlined in Ecuador's IMF deal and said he would review the deal if elected.⁸

⁷ ['Meet the Candidates: Ecuador'](#), *Americas Quarterly*, 6 January 2021

⁸ *Ibid.*

Juan Fernando Velasco - Build (Construye)

Juan Fernando Velasco was born in 1972 in Quito, he has a background in the music industry. Velasco was selected as the presidential candidate for Ruptura 25 Movement for the 2021 election. He resigned as minister of culture on 28 September 2020 in order to dedicate himself to his presidential campaign for Build (Construye) (formerly Ruptura 25 Movement).

Other candidates

The following candidates also contested the 2021 presidential election: Isidro Romero (Advance), Ximena Peña (Alliance PAIS), Xavier Hervas (Democratic Left), Giovanni Andrade (Ecuadorian Union), Pedro Freile (Friend Movement), Carlos Sagnay (Force Ecuador), Cesar Montufar (Honesty Alliance), Paul Carrasco (Together We Can), Gerson Almeida (United Ecuadorian Movement), Guillermo Celi (United Society More Action) and Juan Fernando Velasco Torres (Movement Builds).

2.2 Election campaign

Ecuador's election took place under the cloud of Covid-19 and widespread discontent over the Government's handling of the pandemic.

The economic crisis in Ecuador worsened under the pandemic and the economy became the main factor for the electorate when casting their vote.

The poverty rate in Ecuador increased from 25.7 per cent to 58.2 per cent between December 2019 and June 2020, with extreme poverty rising from 9.2 per cent to 38.6 per cent. Ecuador's GDP is forecast to grow by just one percent in 2021; the second-lowest predicted growth in Latin America, after Venezuela.⁹

Corruption was another key area for voters in the election, with numerous corruption scandals plaguing the country over the years.

A bribery scandal in 2017 resulted in allegations against major figures in the Correa Government. In April 2020, former President Correa, his vice-president, two of his ministers and a further sixteen people were found guilty of accepting bribes from businesses in exchange for public works contracts between 2012 and 2016.¹⁰

Further corruption scandals have erupted during the pandemic, with at least nine hospitals being investigated for embezzlement.¹¹

Although Correa could not stand in this election, his influence was key and many commentators have suggested the election was largely a vote for- or against- Correismo.

⁹ [Explainer: Ecuador's 2021 Presidential Elections](#), Americas Society / Council of the Americas, 4 February 2021

¹⁰ ['Ecuador's former president convicted on corruption charges'](#), *Financial Times*, 7 April 2020

¹¹ ['Ecuador to vote amid economic crisis and widespread discontent'](#), *Al Jazeera*, 5 February 2021

2.3 Election results (first round), 7 February

Following the presidential election, Ecuador's National Electoral Council (CNE) published the results.¹²

Candidate	Party	No. of valid votes	% of valid votes
Andrés Arauz Galarza	Union for Hope (UNES)	3,033,791	32.72
Guillermo Lasso Mendoza	CREO-PSC Alliance	1,830,172	19.74
Yaku Pérez	Pachakutik - New Country	1,798,057	19.39
Xavier Hervas	Democratic Left	1,453,915	15.68
Pedro Jose Freile	Friend Movement	192,763	2.08
Isidro Romero Carbo	Advance	172,714	1.86
Lucio Gutiérrez	Patriotic Society Party	164,800	1.78
Gerson Almeida	United Ecuadorian Movement	160,572	1.73
Ximena Peña Pacheco	Alliance PAIS	143,160	1.54
Guillermo Celi	United Society More Action	84,640	0.91
Juan Fernando Velasco Torres	Movement Builds	76,349	0.82
Cesar Montufar	Honesty Alliance	57,620	0.62
Gustavo Larrea Cabrera	Democracy Yes	36,903	0.40
Carlos Sagnay de la Bastida	Force Ecuador	26,524	0.29
Giovanny Andrade Salvador	Ecuadorian Union	20,245	0.22
Paul Ernesto Carrasco	Together We Can	19,809	0.21
Total		9,272,034	100.00

None of the candidates secured the 40 per cent required for an outright victory, so it was announced a run-off poll would be held on 11 April between the top two candidates.

Andrés Arauz easily progressed to the run-off, but his challenger was not immediately clear after preliminary results were published.

Guillermo Lasso was slightly ahead of Yaku Pérez and the CNE accepted the candidates' request for a recount and announced a partial recount would take place. This covered all votes in Guayas Province (the province with the highest population in the country) and half of the votes in a further 16 provinces.¹³

Once the recount was complete and all votes were verified, it was announced that Guillermo Lasso would challenge Andrés Arauz in the run-off poll.

Indigenous candidate Yaku Pérez – who narrowly missed out on challenging in the run-off – continued to contest the result and claimed to have been a victim of fraud.

His party refused to back either candidate in the second round and, with voting being compulsory in Ecuador, Pérez publicly annulled his own vote in writing “Yaku president resistance” on his ballot¹⁴.

¹² [Presentation of preliminary results: General Elections 2021](#), National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) [accessed 18 April 2021]

¹³ [‘Ecuador to conduct partial recount in disputed presidential polls’](#), *Al Jazeera*, 13 February 2021

¹⁴ [Photo 2 \(11 April 2021 Tweet\)](#), Yaku Pérez Guartambel official Twitter account [accessed 19 April 2021]

2.4 Election results (run-off poll), 11 April

Following the run-off poll, the CNE published the final election results.¹⁵

Candidate	Party	No. of valid votes	% of valid votes
Guillermo Lasso Mendoza	CREO-PSC Alliance	4,656,426	52.36
Andrés Arauz Galarza	Union for Hope (UNES)	4,236,515	47.64
Total		8,892,941	100.00

After coming second in the 2013 and 2017 presidential elections, Lasso was announced as the winner in this 2021 election. His victory came as a surprise to many as Arauz secured a clear lead in the election's first round and topped opinion polls ahead of the run-off.

2.5 Looking ahead

When Guillermo Lasso is inaugurated on 24 May, he will immediately be faced with several challenges.

The predominant challenge is tackling the coronavirus, which has seen Ecuador suffer the world's second worst rate of excess deaths since the Covid-19 pandemic began¹⁶.

The previous government's handling of the health crisis was widely criticised and Ecuador has had five health ministers in the past year. Also, the coronavirus vaccine rollout is at one of the lowest rates seen in Latin America.

Lasso has pledged nine million Ecuadorians – more than half the population – will receive the vaccine in his first 100 days in office. He has also promised to lead better negotiations with the pharmaceutical companies producing the vaccine¹⁷.

Ecuador's economy, which was in trouble before the pandemic began, is in an even worse position now: Ecuador's central bank reported the country's economy shrinking by 7.8 per cent in 2020 and, in January 2021, half a million Ecuadorians were unemployed¹⁸. In addition, the national debt has increased to 65 per cent of GDP (almost \$64 billion)¹⁹.

Despite the crises facing Ecuador, Lasso may struggle to achieve his aims. With just 12 seats in the 137-seat National Assembly, his CREO party is the smallest of the five main parties and, even when the 19 seats of his Social Christian allies are included, he does not even come close to a parliamentary majority²⁰.

¹⁵ [General Results: General Elections 2021](#), National Electoral Council (Consejo Nacional Electoral, CNE) [accessed 18 April 2021]

¹⁶ ['Coronavirus tracker: the latest figures as countries fight the Covid-19 resurgence'](#), *Financial Times*, 13 April 2021

¹⁷ ['Guillermo Lasso: Conservative ex-banker elected Ecuador president'](#), *BBC News Online*, 12 April 2021

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ ['Former banker Guillermo Lasso elected Ecuador's next president'](#), *Buenos Aires Times*, 12 April 2021

²⁰ ['Ecuador's president-elect faces 'titanic challenges''](#), *Financial Times*, 14 April 2021

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Lasso will have to try to establish a working relationship with the large blocs in the National Assembly, none of which would be natural partners.

The new President must also reach out to those Ecuadorians who have become disillusioned with politicians. Although voting is compulsory in Ecuador, 16.3 per cent of ballots were spoiled and a further 1.6 per cent were left blank²¹.

This represents 1.8 million Ecuadorians voiding their votes – many from indigenous movements²² – although this is partly explained by indigenous candidate Yaku Pérez encouraging his followers to submit blank votes in the second round.

²¹ [‘Guillermo Lasso: Conservative ex-banker elected Ecuador president’](#), *BBC News Online*, 12 April 2021

²² [‘Former banker Guillermo Lasso elected Ecuador’s next president’](#), *Buenos Aires Times*, 12 April 2021

3. UK-Ecuador relations

The UK's diplomatic relations with Ecuador have traditionally been described as being "low-key but cordial"²³.

Relations soured in 2007, with the election of President Rafael Correa and the subsequent change of direction in Ecuador's foreign policy. Rather than aligning with the US and its regional allies, Correa pivoted the country towards a radical bloc led by Venezuela.

Relations improved 2009 with the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall visiting Ecuador in March, and Correa visiting London later that year. When in the UK, Correa gave a lecture at the London School of Economics on his "citizens revolution" in Ecuador.²⁴

Relations deteriorated in 2012 when Julian Assange, founder of the WikiLeaks website, entered the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and sought asylum.

Correa welcomed Assange as an anti-establishment hero and granted the asylum request.

The UK, however, refused to recognise Assange's status under "diplomatic asylum" and said he would not be allowed to leave the Embassy or travel to an airport without risking arrest for breaching bail conditions.

When Lenín Moreno succeeded Correa as Ecuador's president in 2017 there was hope for better relations between the UK and Ecuador.

In March 2018, Ecuador cut off Assange's internet access, saying that he had breached the terms of his asylum by interfering in the affairs of other states.²⁵

Ecuador appointed a new Ambassador to the UK in December 2018 and his priority was to eject Assange and re-establish relations with the UK.

On 10 April 2019, Assange's asylum was revoked and British police were allowed into the Embassy to arrest him.

Foreign Office Minister Sir Alan Duncan welcomed the move, saying: "I look forward to a strong bilateral relationship between the UK and Ecuador in the years ahead."²⁶

More recently, the UK – as part of its post-Brexit trade policy – signed the UK-Andean Countries Trade Agreement in Quito, Ecuador²⁷. This is a trade and continuity agreement between the UK and Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

²³ ['Julian Assange's haven of choice'](#), *the Guardian*, 19 June 2012

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ ['Assange arrest restores diplomatic relations with Ecuador'](#), *the Times*, 12 April 2019

²⁶ [Sir Alan Duncan statement on Julian Assange](#), Foreign and Commonwealth Office press release, 11 April 2019

²⁷ [UK signs trade continuity agreement with Colombia, Ecuador and Peru](#), Department for International Trade press release, 15 May 2019

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