

Election Watch for the Digital Age



Ecuador

Preelection assessment

General elections set for February 2021

February's legislative and presidential elections are widely seen as a determining moment for the trajectory of Ecuadorian democracy. President Lenin Moreno faces a dismal approval rating and will not run for a second term. The political field is highly fractured; no less than 17 candidates are vying for the presidency and a coalition of several parties will be necessary for control of the National Assembly. Legal disputes, economic mismanagement, and policy failures around the COVID-19 pandemic have compounded to create a highly contentious climate ahead of the vote.

The previous president, Raphael Correa, remains a highly influential figure in the political scene, despite his self-exile in Belgium and a tenure marked by attacks on civil society and the media. Correa is prohibited from running for president by a 2018 referendum that reinstated term limits only four years after the pro-Correa legislature voted to remove them. In April, a court sentenced him in absentia to eight years in prison and a ban on engaging in politics for 25 years over bribery and corruption, throwing his vice presidential bid into doubt. The legislative contest is also mired in legal uncertainty. The National Electoral Council suspended the registration of four political parties in July, including Correa's Social Commitment Movement, only for the decision to be overturned by the Election Dispute Tribunal in August.

Ecuador has a score of 61 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects limitations on free expression online and offline, but a relatively strong environment for elections and activities of political parties. The country is rated **Partly Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 65 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties, and **Partly Free** in *Freedom on the Net 2020*, with an internet freedom score of 57 out of 100. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Ecuador country reports in [Freedom in the World](#) and [Freedom on the Net](#).

Freedom House has identified the following as key issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Influence operations:** False and misleading content is likely to proliferate ahead of the election, given a history of influence operations by the country's current and former political leaders. Correa and his allies reportedly used messaging groups to coordinate the dissemination of false and doctored content about the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the use of paid progovernment commentators is reduced under the Moreno administration, Twitter removed a network of inauthentic accounts linked to the ruling party in 2019.

- **Content removal:** Copyright law is frequently exploited for political censorship, with the government requesting several news sites be removed by their hosting companies. The government also has a history of seeking content and account removals on social media platforms. Politicized targeting of news outlets could impact voters' access to information ahead of the election.
- **Harassment and violence:** Political tensions will likely exacerbate instances of harassment against media workers and candidates representing marginalized groups ahead of the election. In February 2020, the founder of a political news channel on Facebook. Women candidates and Afro-Ecuadorians are disproportionately subject to harassment online.
- **Cyberattacks:** Media outlets and numerous candidates were targeted with cyberattacks during the 2017 campaign period, and media outlets have been hacked in the years since. Digital security remains a potential vulnerability ahead of the 2021 election.