

# Chapter 3

## Digital Fascism in Electoral Campaigns: The Criminalization of Political Opponents in the 2025 Ecuadorian Elections

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### ABSTRACT

*Fascism has transformed from a 20th-century political model—characterized by hierarchical organization, a charismatic leader, and state-controlled repression—into a contemporary “digital fascism.” This new variant operates not through centralized party structures, but via decentralized, informal swarms on digital platforms. It adapts traditional authoritarian, exclusionary, and ultranationalist logics to the online ecosystem, employing disinformation, polarization, and hate speech to undermine democratic deliberation. This study analyzes digital fascism strategies through a case study of President Daniel Noboa's official X account (@DanielNoboaOk) during Ecuador's 2025 electoral campaign. Using a mixed-methods approach, it combines qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative engagement metrics. The research examines twelve original posts from January to April 2025 that contain accusations against opponent Luisa González, analyzing discursive frames and viralization strategies to understand this modern authoritarian phenomenon in Latin America.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Fascism, historically understood as a "great political innovation of the 20th century" (Paxton, 2007, p. 13), has undergone a radical transformation in the digital context. According to Paxton (2007), classical fascism was characterized by its hierarchical organization, the cult of a charismatic leader, and the mobilization of masses through vertical party structures, underpinned by secret police that persecuted, detained, tortured, and eliminated those who opposed the government (Rodrigues, 2024). This model, which found resonance in Latin American dictatorships, operated through a logic of centralization and state control.

However, in the 21st century, this phenomenon has mutated into what Fielitz & Holger (2020) and Pereira da Silva (2022) term "digital fascism." This contemporary variant does not depend on traditional hierarchical organizations but is built upon "informal swarms that easily spread to the general public" (Arencón Beltrán et al., 2022). Unlike traditional fascism, which required a pyramidal structure and a repressive state apparatus, digital fascism operates in a decentralized manner, leveraging the reticular architectures of digital platforms to coordinate actions, disseminate exclusionary ideologies, and mobilize followers spontaneously and virally.

This transition does not imply a complete break with the past but rather an adaptation of authoritarian, exclusionary, and ultranationalist logics to the digital ecosystem. Whereas classical fascism manifested in physical spaces and through direct violence, digital fascism expresses itself through practices such as disinformation, polarization, online harassment, and the generation of hate speech (Arencón Beltrán et al., 2022), while maintaining the fundamental objective of undermining democratic deliberation and eliminating dissent.

This study aims to analyze the digital fascism strategies employed by President Daniel Noboa through his official X account @DanielNoboaOk during the 2025 electoral campaign in Ecuador, as an emblematic case study for Latin America. To this end, a mixed-methods approach with an exploratory scope is adopted, combining qualitative discourse analysis with a quantitative analysis of engagement metrics. The sample consists of twelve original posts published between January and April 2025 containing accusations or allegations against the opposing candidate Luisa González or her political movement. Data collection techniques included the systematic capture of tweets and metadata, using ad-hoc coding sheets as primary tools to record discursive categories, interaction metrics, and multimedia elements. Data analysis integrates descriptive statistics with the critical interpretation of discursive frames and viralization strategies.

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