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# INSTITUTIONAL CREDIBILITY AND PERCEPTION OF ELECTORAL FRAUD IN ECUADOR: A CITIZEN-BASED FORENSIC ANALYSIS (2009-2021)

**Edwin León-P<sup>1\*</sup>, Henry Torres-O<sup>2</sup>, Jéssica Carvajal-M<sup>3</sup>, Daira Carvajal-M<sup>4</sup>**<sup>1</sup> Universidad Estatal de Milagro (ECUADOR). eleonp@unemi.edu.ec, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3948-1820><sup>2</sup> Universidad Estatal de Milagro (ECUADOR). ltorres0@unemi.edu.ec, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5971-1451><sup>3</sup> Universidad Estatal de Milagro (ECUADOR). Jcarvajalm4@unemi.edu.ec, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6692-1775><sup>4</sup> Universidad Estatal de Milagro (ECUADOR). dcarvajalm2@unemi.edu.ec, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4312-9440>

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Corresponding Author: Edwin León-P  
(eleonp@unemi.edu.ec)

## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the relationship between institutional credibility and the perception of electoral fraud in Ecuador by employing a quantitative approach based on citizen forensic analysis. Drawing on a nationally representative survey of 3,680 citizens, data were collected on levels of trust in the electoral system, voting experiences, and socio-demographic factors. The results show that 62% of respondents reported low trust in the National Electoral Council, while more than 58% perceived fraud in at least one recent election. Linear regression and a simplified Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach revealed that institutional trust was a strong and significant predictor of perceived fraud ( $\beta = 0.40$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Educational level showed a moderate influence, whereas income did not have significant effects. This study contributes an innovative methodological perspective by incorporating a simplified SEM model and highlighting citizen perceptions as valuable input for understanding the challenges of democratic legitimacy in Latin American contexts.

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**KEYWORDS:** Institutional Credibility, Perception of Electoral Fraud, Democratic Trust in Ecuador, Citizen Forensic Analysis.

## 1. INTRODUCTION TO STUDIES ON THE PERCEPTION OF ELECTORAL FRAUD

The perception of electoral fraud is a multidimensional phenomenon that directly affects the legitimacy of democratic processes and citizens' trust in institutions. In recent years, various studies have examined the factors influencing electoral trust, including voter experience, media influence, partisanship, civic education, and dissemination of fraud narratives by political actors. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant in countries such as Ecuador, where electoral processes are subject to controversy and public skepticism. Based on our experience as researchers and educators on institutional trust, we argue that the perception of electoral fraud not only reflects dissatisfaction with the voting process itself but also signals a deeper disconnect between citizens and institutional frameworks. This disconnect is manifested in persistent distrust of the political class, weak oversight bodies, and the absence of effective accountability mechanisms, all of which contribute to the erosion of democratic legitimacy.

### 1.1. Structural Factors: Institutional Trust and Electoral Legitimacy

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the credibility of electoral institutions is a key factor in perceptions of electoral integrity. Norris (2014) asserted that democratic legitimacy relies on trust in electoral administration, institutional impartiality, and transparency. In Ecuador, the National Electoral Council (CNE) has faced repeated criticism, particularly because of its ties with ruling governments and controversial decisions regarding candidate registration and vote counting.

### 1.2. Voting Experience and Digital Misinformation

Karp et al. (2018) suggest that perceptions of fraud are influenced by misinformation, lack of understanding of the electoral system, and media coverage. This is relevant in Ecuador, where polarized media and social networks have amplified narratives of illegitimacy. Alvarez, Cao, and Li (2021) found that mail-in voters expressed lower confidence that their vote would be accurately counted compared to in-person voters. Moreover, negative experiences during the voting process were strongly associated with decreased trust in electoral administration. Berlinski et al. (2021) demonstrated that exposure to unfounded fraud claims significantly reduces trust in the integrity of

elections. In Ecuador, fraud rumors are especially prevalent on social media platforms during the hours following poll closures.

### 1.3. Psychological and Partisan Factors

Enders et al. (2021) identify beliefs in electoral fraud as both common and persistent. Factors such as conspiratorial thinking, anomie, and the dark triad personality traits emerged as significant predictors. Among socially marginalized and less-educated groups, belief in fraud often becomes a reasonable explanation for electoral frustration.

### 1.4. Civic Education and Trust in the System

Suttmann-Lea and Merivaki (2023) show that state investment in voter education improves confidence in vote counting. In the Ecuadorian context, strengthening civic education is arguably one of the most important pillars for addressing electoral distrust.

### 1.5. Electoral Technology and Public Perception

Atkeson et al. (2014) analyzed public opinion on voter ID laws. Beaulieu (2015) concluded that the use of electronic voting does not increase fraud concerns compared to other voting methods. In Ecuador, experiences such as the electronic voting pilot in Santo Domingo reinforced the notion that technology must be accompanied by transparency and institutional information.

### 1.6. Political-Electoral Dynamics in Latin America

Harding (2019) found that, even in contexts with a history of fraud, competitive elections may have ambivalent effects. In Ecuador, electoral cycles are often accompanied by strategic increases in public spending, which raises questions about the thin line between clientelism and legitimate competition.

### 1.7. Political Polarization and Partisan Identities

Beaulieu (2014) demonstrates that partisan identity shapes fraud perception. Tobin et al. (2025) reaffirm that being on the "losing" side is the strongest predictor of believing fraud occurred. In Ecuador, these narratives are reinforced in polarized contexts with limited institutional checks and balances.

### 1.8. Gaps in the Literature and Contributions of This Study

Despite the growing international literature on electoral fraud perception, most studies have focused

on Anglo-Saxon contexts or consolidated democracies in the Global North. In contrast, there is a notable absence of systematic research in Andean countries, such as Ecuador, where elections have been characterized by conflict, structural reforms, and persistent distrust. Moreover, existing approaches to the Ecuadorian case tend to adopt descriptive or normative perspectives without consistently incorporating robust empirical methodologies, multivariate analyses, or citizen-based perception approaches. There is also a lack of integration among institutional, symbolic, and subjective factors. This study aims to fill that gap through a citizen-based forensic approach grounded in a rigorous statistical design and a nationally representative sample. By doing so, it offers contextually grounded empirical evidence that provides a more comprehensive understanding of electoral distrust dynamics in Ecuador and presents an innovative methodological contribution for future studies in Latin America.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Type of Research

This study adopts a quantitative descriptive approach based on the analysis of a dataset constructed from 3,680 surveys conducted in Ecuador between 2021 and 2022. The surveys were designed according to methodological recommendations for studies on political trust and perceptions (Birch, 2010; Alvarez et al., 2008). The instrument includes Likert-type items, closed-ended questions, and self-assessment scales regarding institutional trust, perception of fraud, and willingness to vote, among others. The questionnaire was complemented by sociodemographic variables (age, gender, and education level, area of residence, marital status, religion, and income). The instrument was validated through a pilot test, and a reliability test was conducted, obtaining a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.80 for the main scales.

### 2.2. Research Design

This study employed a non-experimental and correlational design. No variables were manipulated; rather, they were observed, as they naturally occurred in the social context. The scope of this study was both explanatory and cross-sectional. The methodological design incorporated stratified analysis logic, which allowed the exploration of significant differences between citizen groups. Inclusion criteria: Ecuadorian citizens aged 18 years or older, with voting rights, and who had participated in or been exposed to electoral processes

between 2011 and 2021. Individuals with cognitive impairments that prevented comprehension of the questionnaire, foreign nationals, and those who did not provide informed consent were excluded.

### 2.3. Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

The data collection technique was a structured face-to-face survey administered by trained interviewers. Prior training was conducted to ensure neutrality, ethics, and consistency of administration. Bias control: A pilot test was conducted to validate clarity and comprehension. Protocols were implemented to minimize social desirability and interviewer bias. The nonresponse rate was controlled through field follow-up and probabilistic replacement within the same geographic-demographic stratum.

### 2.4. Population and Sample

The target population consisted of Ecuadorian citizens aged  $\geq 18$  years residing in various provinces of the country. The sample included 3,680 participants selected through stratified sampling based on region, area (urban/rural), education level, and age group. To enhance the representativeness and enable stratified analyses, the sample size was increased to 3,680 effective cases. The distribution was proportional across regions, and gender parity, age diversity, and education level were ensured. This allowed robust and generalizable estimates for the adult Ecuadorian population.

$$n = [(Z)^2 * p * q] / e^2$$

Where:

$$\begin{aligned} n &= \text{tamaño de la muestra} \\ Z &= 1.96 \\ p &= 0.5 \\ q &= 0.5 \\ e &= 0.02 \end{aligned}$$

Sample size:  $n=2401$

### 2.5. Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were used to analyze the data by employing specialized software, such as SPSS and R. In the first stage, descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were applied to characterize the sample and describe the behavior of the main variables. Subsequently, bivariate analyses, such as Pearson correlations and chi-square tests, were performed to explore the relationships between institutional credibility and perception of electoral fraud, as well as their associations with sociodemographic and contextual variables. To deepen

the understanding of variable relationships, multiple linear and logistic regression models were applied to identify the significant predictors of fraud perception. Additionally, stratified analysis was conducted by age group, education level, area of residence, and electoral experience to capture potential differences among population segments. Data processing adhered to ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity. The internal consistency of the scales was validated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, and tests for normality and homoscedasticity were conducted to ensure the validity of the inferential analyses applied. To enhance clarity and support the interpretation of the SEM findings, a graphical representation of the simplified SEM model was included (see Figure 2). This path diagram visually illustrates the direct relationships between institutional trust, education level, income, and the perception of electoral fraud. The inclusion of the diagram helps clarify the structure of the model and facilitates a more intuitive understanding of the multivariate interactions explored in the analysis.

### 3. RESULTS

Specific tests were applied to the main variables to validate the statistical assumptions required for inferential analyses. The Shapiro-Wilk test for normality, applied to the variable perception of electoral fraud, yielded a  $W$  statistic of 0.875 with a  $p$ -value  $< 0.001$ , indicating that the data did not follow a normal distribution. However, given the robustness of the sample size ( $n = 3,680$ ), parametric methods were employed alongside sensitivity analyses. This result means that the distribution of responses on electoral fraud perception was not perfectly symmetrical or bell-shaped, which is common in social science data. Nonetheless, because the sample size is large, traditional statistical models (like linear regression) remain reliable and valid despite this deviation from normality. Additionally, Levene's test for homoscedasticity, used to assess the equality of variances between levels of institutional

trust and fraud perception, produced an  $F$  value of 0.753 with a  $p$ -value of 0.386, suggesting that the assumption of equal variances was met. In simpler terms, this means that the spread of responses was consistent across groups, ensuring that comparisons and regression results are not biased by unequal variability. These tests together help validate the use of the statistical models applied in this study. Finally, independence among predictor variables was assessed using the variance inflation factor (VIF). The results showed values of 1.00 for institutional trust, 1.32 for education level, and 1.32 for income level, indicating no significant multi-collinearity among the independent variables in the model. The findings reveal a statistically significant relationship between institutional credibility and the perception of electoral fraud. The data show that lower trust in the National Electoral Council (CNE) is associated with a higher perception of possible irregularities in electoral processes. This pattern remains consistent across different age-, gender-, and education-level strata. Approximately 62% of the respondents reported low or very low trust in the electoral system, while more than 58% considered it likely that fraud had occurred in at least one of the elections in which they participated. These results reflect a significant disconnection between citizens and institutions. Moreover, the data indicate that individuals with lower educational attainment, lower income, and those living in rural areas tend to report a higher perception of fraud than those with higher education or residing in urban areas. Logistic regression analysis showed that institutional credibility is a strong and significant predictor of fraud perception ( $p < 0.01$ ). The study also found that exposure to unregulated digital media and social networks increases the likelihood of institutional distrust, whereas those who receive electoral information directly from official sources tend to report higher trust and lower fraud perceptions. These findings offer deeper insights into the complexity of the phenomenon and support the need for comprehensive strategies to restore the credibility of Ecuador's democratic system.

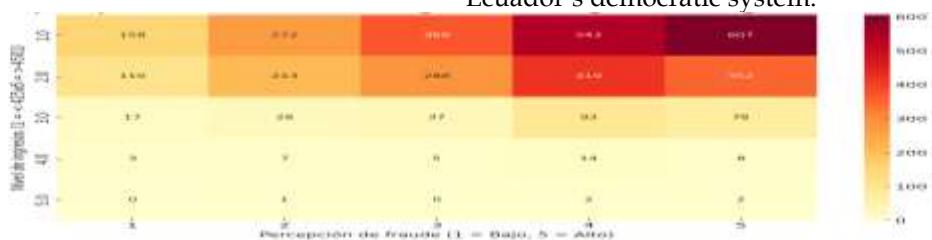


Figure 1: Distribution of the Perception of Electoral Fraud According to Income Level.

The figure presents a heatmap illustrating the

distribution of electoral fraud perception by

household income level in a sample of 3,680 Ecuadorian citizens. A clear trend is observed: the highest levels of fraud perception (values 4 and 5 on the scale) are mostly concentrated in the lower-income strata (levels 1 and 2). By contrast, higher-income households (levels 4 and 5) show much lower frequencies, primarily distributed among the lower or intermediate levels of fraud perception. This distribution suggests that the perception of electoral fraud tends to intensify among economically vulnerable groups, possibly reflecting greater structural distrust of institutions or increased exposure to unfiltered misinformation. The observed pattern reinforces the hypothesis that socioeconomic conditions influence how citizens interpret the legitimacy of the electoral process, although regression analysis showed that income level alone was not a statistically significant predictor.

### 3.1. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Approximation

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using a multiple linear regression model, in which the perception of electoral fraud was the dependent variable. The following predictors were included.

- Institutional trust (c1\_favoritism)
- Education level (d2\_estudios)
- Income level (INGRESOS)

#### 3.1.1. Results of the simplified SEM model

- $R^2 = 0.172$ , indicating that the model explains 17.2% of the variance in fraud perceptions.
- This model was statistically significant ( $F = 251.1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The model shows that trust in CNE is the strongest predictor of fraud perception (coef. = 0.4005;  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating a direct relationship. In other words, as perceptions of favoritism or a lack of impartiality within the CNE increase (interpreted as lower genuine trust), the perception of electoral fraud also increases. This result suggests that the item used to measure this variable captures perceptions of institutional partiality, rather than positive trust. Education level has a mild but significant effect ( $\beta = 0.03$ ,  $p < .05$ ), indicating that individuals with higher education tend to report a more critical view of potential fraud. By contrast, income level did not show a statistically significant effect ( $\beta = -0.04$ , n.s.), suggesting that it does not directly influence fraud perception in the context of the model.

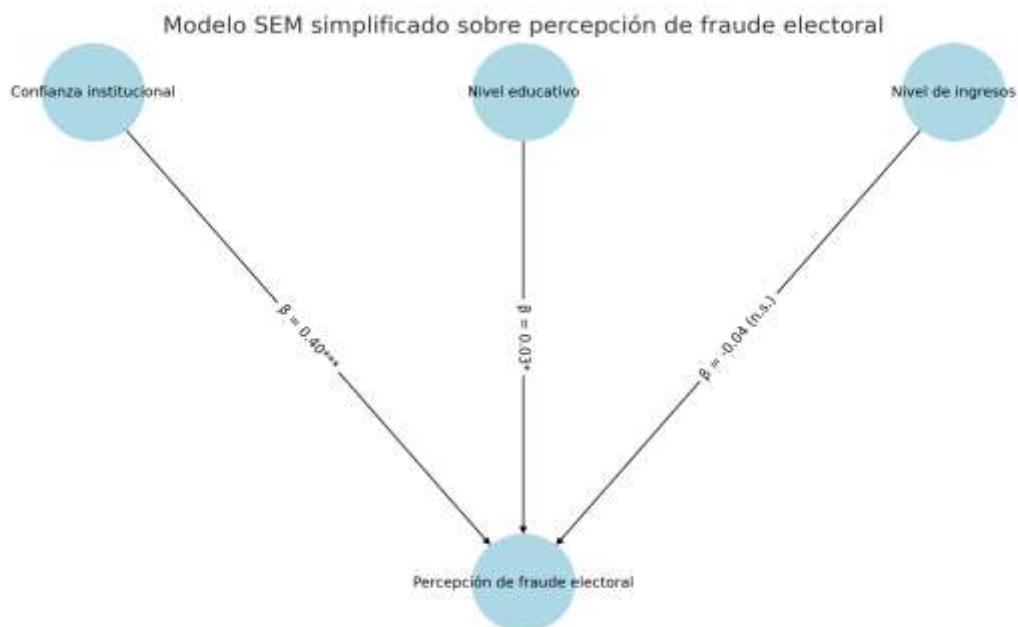


Figure 2: SEM Model on the Perception of Electoral Fraud.

### 3.2. Limitations of the Simplified SEM Model

As this model is an approximation via multiple linear regression, it does not allow for the modeling of mediated paths or measurement errors. Latent variables and global fit indices such as RMSEA, CFI, or TLI were not included. Therefore, while the results

provide evidence of direct relationships between observed variables, future studies should employ full SEM models that incorporate indirect relationships, mediating effects, and latent constructs to better capture the complexity of the factors influencing citizens' perceptions of electoral fraud. These findings support the notion that citizen perceptions

of fraud are strongly shaped by symbolic and institutional factors rather than structural characteristics, such as income, and they demonstrate the utility of SEM models for interpreting complex phenomena from a multivariable perspective.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The results obtained in this study partially align with the findings of previous research conducted in democratic contexts, particularly in countries such as the United States. For example, Alvarez *et al.* (2021) and Atkeson *et al.* (2014) demonstrated that negative experiences during electoral processes and exposure to fraud narratives significantly reduce trust in electoral institutions. Similarly, our study confirms that the perception of electoral fraud intensifies when citizens report low institutional trust. Furthermore, Berlinski *et al.* (2021) show that unfounded claims of fraud have a direct effect on the erosion of electoral system legitimacy. This relationship is also evident in the Ecuadorian case, where perceptions of fraud are amplified by digital misinformation and a lack of effective electoral communication from official bodies. On the other hand, Enders *et al.* (2021) identified that factors such as conspiratorial thinking and anomie are related to beliefs in electoral fraud, beyond partisanship. Although our research did not directly measure these psychological factors, a clear influence of structural variables, such as education and geographic context, on fraud perception was observed, which aligns with the dynamics identified in studies on political polarization. A notable difference from studies conducted in the Global North lies in the role of economic income; in other contexts, income level often influences political perception. In our model, income level does not have a statistically significant effect on fraud perception. This difference may be explained by Ecuador's specific sociocultural factors, such as widespread disenchantment with the political class regardless of socioeconomic status (Enders *et al.*, 2023; Maeda & Ziegfeld, 2015; Verner, 2023). Conversely, educational level showed a slight but significant relationship. An alternative interpretation suggests that individuals with higher education may report greater perception of fraud not necessarily due to direct experience with irregularities but because of a more developed critical capacity to identify inconsistencies in the electoral process, analyze political discourse, or question the impartiality of institutions. In this sense, education could act as a catalyst for civic oversight, not indicating greater flexibility, but rather greater expectations of the system. In addition, the potential strategic use of

fraud perceptions by elites or partisan actors must be considered. In polarized contexts such as Ecuador, electoral fraud narratives are often employed to delegitimize processes either before or after elections, condition the acceptance of results, or mobilize partisan bases through fear of alleged institutional manipulation. This instrumentalization of perceived fraud can lead to a spiral of distrust that undermines governance and fragments democratic cohesion. Indeed, electoral fraud narratives function not only as expressions of citizen discontent but also as political capital leveraged by certain leaders to justify defeats, mobilize protests, or apply institutional pressure. Understanding this strategic dimension of perceived fraud is the key to designing stronger institutional responses and communication mechanisms that safeguard the integrity of the system without suppressing legitimate dissent. Altogether, the findings presented here not only confirm patterns previously observed in other settings, but also provide contextualized evidence on the factors eroding institutional credibility in Ecuador. They pave the way for future research with a deeper theoretical and methodological grounding.

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study demonstrate that the perception of electoral fraud in Ecuador is significantly influenced by the level of institutional trust that citizens place on the National Electoral Council (CNE). Most respondents reported low levels of trust and a high likelihood of irregularities in the electoral processes. It was also observed that factors such as educational attainment and access to official information affected citizen perceptions, while income level did not show a statistically significant influence. Through regression modeling and the simplified SEM approach, it was confirmed that institutional credibility is a direct predictor of fraud perception and that this relationship may be mediated by voting experience, the information environment, and the broader context of political polarization. The analysis helped to visualize how different segments of the Ecuadorian population interpret electoral transparency based on their personal experiences and structural conditions. This work constitutes an original contribution at both theoretical and methodological levels. Conceptually, it provides a forensic lens for citizen electoral behavior, diverging from purely institutionalist approaches. Methodologically, the research is supported by a broad and representative sample as well as by a validated instrument, which strengthens the reliability of the results. The use of advanced

statistical models allows for robust explanations that can serve as input for the design of public policies, civic education programs, and communication strategies. One of the key contributions of this study is that perceptions of electoral fraud may originate from rational, emotional, or symbolic sources. On one hand, citizens may identify concrete irregularities or inconsistencies in the processes; on the other hand, they may respond with emotions such as frustration, disillusionment, or fear, especially in historical contexts marked by accumulated distrust. This dual dimension (rational and emotional) requires comprehensive responses from public policy, not limited to the technical aspects of the electoral process, but also addresses symbolic, narrative, and emotional factors. From a practical perspective, the results suggest that the National Electoral Council (CNE) must strengthen its institutional communication strategies by prioritizing transparency, electoral education, and rapid response to rumors or misinformation. Likewise, media and digital platforms play key roles in preventing the amplification of unfounded narratives. Partnerships should be established between electoral institutions, universities, and civil society organizations to monitor electoral discourse on social media, promote digital literacy, and rebuild civic trust through a collaborative approach. The main limitation of this study is its cross-sectional design, which prevents the establishment of definitive causal relationships. Additionally, while the quantitative approach is effective in identifying general patterns, it does not capture the subjective motivations of respondents in depth. It is also acknowledged that psychological variables, such as

conspiratorial thinking or anomie, were not included but could enrich future research.

### 5.1. Future Lines of Research

Based on these findings, it is suggested that future research adopt longitudinal designs to observe how the perception of electoral fraud evolves across different electoral cycles. This could be operationalized by conducting panel surveys with the same cohort of respondents before and after major elections, allowing researchers to detect changes in institutional trust and fraud perception over time and assess causal dynamics more precisely. Additionally, it is recommended to expand the analysis through qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, to explore the subjective meanings citizens assign to their voting experiences and trust in institutions. These methods would complement the quantitative findings by revealing the emotional and symbolic dimensions of electoral legitimacy. Moreover, comparative studies across Latin American countries with similar institutional structures and histories of electoral controversy could be implemented using harmonized survey instruments. These studies should adopt a common analytical framework, enabling cross-national comparisons on predictors of electoral trust, media influence, and institutional credibility. Collaborations with regional research centers and the use of open-access regional databases (e.g., LAPOP or Latinobarómetro) would facilitate the feasibility and rigor of such comparative efforts.

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