

**Worry about COVID-19 and its effects  
on the online political participation of citizens  
in the Ecuadorian context**

*La preocupación por el COVID-19 y sus efectos en la participación  
política online de la ciudadanía en el contexto ecuatoriano*

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### **Abstract**

*The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has generated worries in citizens due to the administration that Latin American States have been carrying out, especially in relation to political measures adopted to counteract its health, economic and social consequences. These official actions have elicited diverse responses in people to deal with the impact of the pandemic, which may vary in high worry and sense of vulnerability, diverse forms of emotional expression, solidarity actions or political participation. The aim of the study is to explore the role of individual worries experienced in the face of COVID-19 and its impact on political participation through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. The empirical study was based on a non-probabilistic survey of 920 people residing in Quito-Ecuador, applied prior to the general elections held in February 2021. The results show, at a general level, a significant indirect effect of worry about the impact of the pandemic on digital political participation, mediated by political worries. Thus, the politicization of worry about COVID-19 operates as a mechanism that enables the mobilization of political actions through virtual media, which are more intense on Twitter and Facebook, while this mobilizing effect is weakened in the case of WhatsApp. The implications of these findings, regarding the forms of citizen political action that take place in a social context marked by the impact of the health crisis and an ongoing electoral process, are discussed.*

### **Keywords**

worry, COVID-19; online political participation, political concern, social media, Ecuador.

### **Resumen**

La pandemia provocada por el COVID-19 ha generado preocupación en la ciudadanía debido a la administración que están realizando los Estados latinoamericanos, especialmente en relación con las medidas políticas adoptadas para contrarrestar sus repercusiones sanitarias, económicas y sociales. Estas gestiones oficiales suscitan diversas respuestas en las personas para lidiar con el impacto de la pandemia, que pueden variar en una alta preocupación y sensación de vulnerabilidad, diversas formas de expresión emocional, acciones de solidaridad o participación política. El objetivo del estudio es explorar el papel de la preocupación individual experimentada frente al COVID-19 y su incidencia en la participación política a través de medios sociales como Facebook, Twitter y WhatsApp. El estudio empírico se basó en una encuesta no probabilística a 920 personas que residen en Quito-Ecuador, aplicada previo a las elecciones generales celebradas en febrero de 2021. Los resultados obtenidos evidencian, a nivel general, un efecto indirecto significativo de la preocupación por el impacto de la pandemia sobre la participación política digital, mediado por la preocupación política. Así, la politización de la preocupación por el COVID-19 opera como un mecanismo que posibilita la movilización de acciones políticas a través de medios virtuales, que son más intensas por parte de Twitter y Facebook, mientras que dicho efecto movilizador se debilita en el caso de WhatsApp. Las implicaciones de estos hallazgos se discuten en cuanto a las formas de acción política ciudadana que tienen lugar en un contexto social marcado por el impacto de la crisis sanitaria y un proceso electoral en marcha.

### **Palabras clave**

Preocupación, COVID-19, participación política *online*, preocupación política, medios sociales, Ecuador.

## Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, known as COVID-19, has had global consequences, not only in the economic and political sphere, but also in the emotional sphere. In Ecuador, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was presented in February 2020 in the city of Guayaquil (El Comercio, 2020), and due to accelerated increase in cases throughout the country, the national government issues various restrictive measures to confine the population (Presidency of the Republic of Ecuador, 2020). The state of emergency, the suspension of classes, the adoption of teleworking, the limitation of mobility, with the exception of food purchases or medical reasons, are established.

In addition, the emerging health crisis arose in an already existing political, economic and social crisis (Ramírez-Gallegos, 2021), characterized by the population's distrust in the management of Lenin Moreno's government, whose few social policies evidenced the abandonment to the public health system, among other things. In the following months, confinement continued and economic decisions were made, deepening social inequality (Ramírez-Gallegos, 2021). For example, the "Humanitarian Support Act" is approved, which presents a clear employment impact to employers and affects more popular sectors, while increasing levels of poverty and inequality, from 25% in 2019 to 32.4% by the end of 2020 (INEC, 2020).

Regarding the health issue, 2021 began with 213378 confirmed cases and 14051 deaths (Ministerio de Salud Pública, 2021), and corruption in the procurement of equipment and supplies in hospitals was reported, as well as poor vaccine management, which were initially distributed among public officials and their relatives.

In this context of economic crisis, high political mistrust and health emergency, the 2021 presidential elections were held in a social climate of change in the form of participation and motivation of citizens for their involvement in political issues. On the one hand, in order to take care of the health of the population and also to guarantee the exercise of the right to vote and democratic participation, the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States (GS/OAS), creates a Guide to Organizing Elections in Times of Pandemic and urges governments to empower technological tools for all election processes. Social media was also configured as platforms that were critical to campaign strategies for various candidates, who used platforms such as Facebook and Tiktok to conduct their campaigns.

On the citizenship side, recent studies found that Facebook and WhatsApp were the most used networks in this election period in Ecuador (Zumárraga-Espinosa, 2021); these focus primarily as a means of exchange of political information and expression, while the use of Twitter has a greater impact on mobilization activities (Zumárraga-Espinosa *et al.*, 2021).

In this way, social networks became a strategic medium that enhanced the political participation of citizens during pandemic and in political, economic and social instability. For this reason, the aim of this research is the political participation of citizens through social media to inform about the effects that the pandemic has generated on this type of behavior, specifically in the Ecuadorian electoral context of early 2021. In this sense, the worry associated with COVID-19 — and its potential negative social, economic and health impacts — as a psychological variable, constitutes an important cognitive mechanism of influence through which a large-scale threatening event, such as the current health crisis, can affect individual political behavior.

Thus, the purpose of this research is to study the effects of COVID-19 worry on individual political participation developed through social media such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp.

## **The worry associated with COVID-19 and its types of influence on citizens' digital political behavior**

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the ways of political participation that citizens can adopt, favoring participation through the Internet, and discouraging offline modalities due to restrictions imposed on social movement and meetings for biosafety reasons. In view of this, individual online political participation behaviors, specifically those operating through social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp), are interesting as subjects of study in these circumstances. Likewise, while the phenomenon of political participation is among the main objects of study of political science (Teorell, 2006), the explanatory contributions generated from political psychology, as regards the cognitive and emotional processes that lead to political action, are increasingly relevant to specialized literature on the subject (Klandermans, 1984; Redlawsk, 2006). In turn, this is complemented by theoretical

contributions generated from political communication regarding the effects of the Internet and social media on democratic processes (Rojas, 2006).

A way in which the pandemic can influence the digital political participation of citizens is the individual worry that causes this scenario of health crisis. It should be noted that the worry as a psychological construct is characterized by a cognitive activity that is activated in the possibility of a problematic event, with potentially negative consequences. This is a mental process that focuses on the development of solutions and ways to prevent such adverse impacts (Prados-Antieza, 2004). This conceptualization implies that worry acts as a fundamental antecedent for taking action in the face of adverse or threatening situations, preceding the occurrence of negative emotional responses, responsible for acting as motivational forces for the adoption of concrete behavior (Redlawsk, 2006). In addition, one of the ways of assessing worry is to associate it with a particular object and its negative consequences (Prados-Antieza, 2004), such as the COVID-19 pandemic and its social, economic and health implications. Therefore, and because of the latter, the worry about the impact of COVID-19 is relevant as a construct of interest in explaining the effects of the pandemic on the political behavior of citizens through social media.

The study of the relationship between worry due to COVID-19 and participation through social media, adding an electoral context as is the case of Ecuador during the beginning of 2021, requires considering the close interaction between emotions and cognition acting on the individual when expressing opinions, sharing information, or trying to convince others to support a political cause or figure, since thoughts and decisions about candidates tend to be related to the emotionality of voters (Rivera *et al.*, 2021). In this regard, the contributions generated from political psychology regarding the cognitive and emotional processes that are triggered by worry for a threatening event or drastic change of circumstances are relevant. Bearing in mind that the health crisis caused by COVID-19, as a global threat, presents a number of features that have contributed to exacerbating worries of civil society, it leads to worry over the policy and government's capacity to cope with the ravages of the pandemic.

Thus, in the context of COVID-19, the processing of emotional and cognitive information of individuals was affected by a number of different situations. First, exposure to excessive or contradictory information on health risks and exposure to death and contagion led to a series of rumors, misinfor-

mation or false information, particularly spread on social networks (Galarza-Molina & Muñiz, 2021; Pulido *et al.*, 2020; Tsao *et al.*, 2021). Second, uncertainty over measures such as social isolation and the different mourning over the loss of family members, friends or abrupt economic changes, expressed in the significant reduction in income levels or job losses (Ramírez-Ortiz *et al.*, 2020; Rozo-Sánchez *et al.*, 2021). This can be explained in terms of what Leon Festinger, in the mid-1950s, theorized as “cognitive dissonance”, describing it as psychological discomfort because of the inconsistency between what people think and what they do. Cognitive dissonance produces psychological tension, so it is sought to reduce it through mechanisms such as justification or rationalization of contradictions (Festinger, 1957).

In this sense, if the information issued by the authorities and their acts contradict each other, as has happened with many of the Latin American governments, then dissonant situations are created, thus increasing anger, tension, fear, anxiety, depression and despair in people who must also face devastating effects on their economies, social relations and losses that in many cases are irreparable. This sets an emotional challenge for people to cope with COVID-19 (Dinić & Bodroža, 2021; Zajenkowski *et al.*, 2020) and the need to establish cognitive-emotional coping strategies (Rhodes *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, emotional states and efforts to reduce cognitive dissonance in contexts of uncertainty, overload, and high information ambivalence influence on how to act politically in the electoral process, which may be affected by fear, frustration, or uncertainty (Gil-Fortoul, 2021), as well as more prevalent mental affectations such as anxiety, depression, or stress (Tusev *et al.*, 2020). All of the above is initially triggered by the worry regarding the negative consequences of COVID-19.

Although the literature on political participation has been addressed to emotional processes as determining factor of political behavior, it is necessary to increase empirical research focused on worry —understood as a cognitive process that precedes emotional responses— and its effects on political action, particularly COVID-19 pandemic and its influence on political participation channeled online. Worry has been defined as:

A chain of thoughts and images loaded with negative and relatively uncontrollable affection... it represents an attempt to solve mental problems on a subject whose outcome is uncertain and it entails the possibility of one or more negative consequences. (Borkovec *et al.*, 1983, p. 10)

Although worry is related to anxiety, it is also relevant to associate it as a coping strategy to identify problems and ways of solving them (Vetere *et al.*, 2011). On a political level, worry has been linked to the possibilities of change and as a dynamizing element of action (Ema-López, 2004), although without knowing if such worry represents a disruptive emotional state or prosecution. The study of worry has gained interest since COVID-19, associated with uncertainty over the impacts of the pandemic, which places it at a global level, as well as health effects, reduction of economic income or changes in labor rights (Bacon *et al.*, 2020; Guerrero, 2020; Ríos, 2021). Thus, due to the uncertainty of COVID-19 on issues such as the lack of an effective vaccine or medical treatment, the origin of the virus, mutability, its forms of transmission, risk factors, long-term repercussions, etc., worry is one of the initial mental states that people experienced in pandemics, understood as a threat to individual and collective well-being. Thus, political worry has emerged as a key aspect in the psychosocial approach to people's uncertainty about the impacts in various areas associated with the pandemic, but also about how their adverse effects are being managed by governments (Bacon *et al.*, 2020).

At this point, it is interesting to explore the relationship between the worry of COVID-19 and its potential mobilizing or discouraging consequences on the online political behavior of the population (Santana *et al.*, 2020), based on exposure to information about the pandemic, characterized by a highly political aspect (Burdman, 2020; Pérez-Curiel & Velasco Molpeceres, 2020; Rodríguez-Varela & Carbonetti-Parola, 2021). This paper presents the two ways worry about COVID-19 influences political action: first, as a demobilizing route, in which worry about the impact of COVID-19 is associated with a high emotional impact, preventing people from generating strategies of emotional regulation, especially regarding fear management (Muñoz-Fernández *et al.*, 2020; Rodas *et al.*, 2021). Through this first route, the worry for COVID-19 triggers emotional responses linked to fear, which discourages interest in participating in political actions and prioritizes the adoption of self-protection behaviors such as the use of mask, hand washing, the consumption of information concerning the evolution of contagion or biosafety recommendations by health authorities, among others (Renström & Bäck, 2021) and the political aspect will lose interest (Salaverria *et al.*, 2020). Regarding the demobilizing effect of fear, the research conducted by Santana

*et al.* (2020), based on a sample of countries that underwent elections during pandemic, revealed that the countries most affected by the pandemic, in terms of the volume of infections and deaths, the levels of electoral participation of citizens were reduced. This can be due to a greater fear of COVID-19 and its impact on public health, the economy and citizen security. Thus, fear favors the avoidance of any risk related to COVID-19 due to the reduction of the exercise of active citizenship through political participation.

Secondly, a mobilizing path toward political action is proposed, which is generated when this worry is associated with coping strategies that seek solutions to the uncertainty generated by the problematic situation, not just the personal impact. At this point, worry evolves toward a cognitive elaboration that leads to a critical stance toward the state and the measures implemented to deal with the health crisis, the formulation of concrete demands on the political and health authorities, as well as the channeling of those emotions, experienced around the pandemic situation through political expression. Unlike fear, this “politicization” of COVID-19 worry enables emotional responses that favor action, such as anger and anxiety (Zumárraga *et al.*, 2017).

According to the theory of cognitive evaluation, anger happens when the individual can identify the source or the person responsible of a threat and is able to counteract it through his/her actions (Valentino *et al.*, 2011). The responsibility of the State as the body responsible for providing solutions to the health crisis, allows citizens to be able to exercise some control over the pandemic, using political actions aimed at questioning or influencing the decisions of the government and the political system. Thus, anger acts as one of the underlying mechanisms that explain the connection between political worry and political participation. On the other hand, political worry can also lead to anxiety as an emotional response, since, unlike fear, anxiety is distinguished by future assessment of the consequences of a problematic situation (health crisis) and planning of actions to solve them (state action) (Brader & Marcus, 2013). Therefore, anxiety constitutes an emotional state conducive to political action, as has been evidenced in other studies (Renström & Bäck, 2021; Rudolph *et al.*, 2000; Valentino *et al.*, 2008).

Additionally, the cases of corruption, prior to and during the pandemic, have overshadowed the government management of several Latin American countries, adding an additional feature to the political worry that citizens express regarding the health crisis, particularly during elections. This is evi-



dent in studies showing that electoral political participation has increased in Latin America due to COVID-19 (see Covid-19 dossier, Estado de derecho y Procesos Electorales en Latinoamérica, 2021). In addition, the politicization of the COVID-19 worry involves emotional states associated with the political aspect, found in social media such as Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp, a space to express emotional acts, regardless of whether or not they have a relevant impact on the political process (Zumárraga-Espinosa *et al.*, 2020). The way in which political information is being disseminated and expressed in different media, and especially in social media, during the electoral processes held in the midst of the health crisis by COVID-19 is revealed (Zumárraga-Espinosa *et al.*, 2021).

In addition, there is no opposition between emotional and cognitive motivations for the mobilization of different individual political behaviors. In other words, decisions can be guided both by the affective responses of people to different situations, actors or political parties, as well as by their reasoned reflections. Emotional and rational explanations of citizens' political attitudes are not exclusive, but constitutive (Arfuch, 2015). Regarding the latter, Anthony Downs Rational Election Model of 1957 (Montecinos, 2007), states that actors tend to make a rational choice based on maximizing their individual benefits and objectives. In an electoral context, this would enable people to order their reasoning to decide on government authorities based on their offers to solve problems in an environment. According to this approach, citizens would be mobilized by choosing an ideal candidate model, consistent with their thinking and offering attractive answers to their needs. In the psychological sphere, this rational order for decision-making would provide a benefit to people, by relieving anxiety in situations that exceed their capacity for response and by giving elected candidates the power of complex problem decisions faced by society. Therefore, in the midst of an electoral process and having the social media as the main route of political activity, the worry for COVID-19, once politicized, also favors digital political participation thanks to cognitive mechanisms based on the use of the vote as a tool to influence the government management of the health crisis, and thus intervene in the solution of this problem.

Based on the argument presented, this study explores the extent to which the worry produced by COVID-19 relates to the online political participation of the citizenry, which takes place through social media such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. In this sense, it is stated that, on the one hand,

when the worry for COVID-19 is focused on state management, it becomes a political worry, acquiring a mobilizing nature that influences online political participation. However, when this politicization mechanism is not activated, the worry about the pandemic, focused only on personal risks, inhibits individual online political participation. Based on the above, the following assumptions are established:

Hypothesis 1: Worry about the impact of COVID-19 is directly related to political participation in social media.

Hypothesis 2: Political worry in a pandemic context is directly related to political participation through social media.

Hypothesis 3: Political worry is a mediator of the relationship between worry about the impact of COVID-19 and political participation in social media.

## **Method**

### **Sample and Procedure**

The quantitative study was performed on the basis of a non-probabilistic convenience sample made up of 920 people who were 18 years old or older, in the Metropolitan District of Quito (DMQ)-Ecuador. The study participants presented the following sociodemographic profile: female participation was 46.4%, average sample age was 27.5 years old (DT = 10.3)<sup>1</sup>, and 59.2% of participants have completed university studies or postgraduate. In addition, 70.7% of the sample reported family income from \$400 (minimum wage) to \$2000. <sup>1</sup> Considering the limitations of the type of sample carried out, and the sample profile described, it is reasonable that the findings generated by this research will be more representative for youth from urban areas, with higher studies and predominantly middle class.

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<sup>1</sup> The criterion established by the World Bank indicates that middle-class households receive a daily income of \$13 to \$70 (Banco Mundial, 2022). In recent estimates, this organism determined that the middle class in Ecuador experienced a contraction in 2020, from 33.3% to 30.4% (El Universo, 2021). Hence, it is possible to state that the sample analyzed is also overrepresented in relation to middle-class households.

The research carried out is non-experimental, cross-sectional, *ex post facto* and explanatory (Ato *et al.*, 2013). The data collection was conducted from an online questionnaire applied through encuestafacil.com platform. For the distribution of the survey, a database of people interested in participating in the study was constructed, to whom the link of the digital questionnaire was sent via e-mail, reaching a response rate of 84.4%. The data collection was from January to February 2021, prior to parliamentary and presidential elections in Ecuador, in the midst of a pandemic and health emergency due to the COVID-19 virus. Prior to the application of the questionnaire, participants were duly informed about the confidentiality criteria and the objectives of the research. It should be noted that prior to the dissemination and application of the online questionnaire, questions were evaluated to confirm its logical relevance. Study participants completed the digital survey as planned and no time limit was scheduled for this activity.

## Instruments

*Political participation in social media.* The degree of political activism developed through Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp was measured from five reactants, which correspond to expression activities and political mobilization that can be carried out on such digital platforms. For each social environment, participants were asked how often they had adopted the following policy behaviors using a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always): A) write opinions on elections or policy-related issues on their wall or personal profile (Facebook [M = 1.54, DT = .85]; Twitter [M = 1.36; DT = .77]; WhatsApp [M = 1.59; DT = .84]); b) comment on or respond to political or election-related opinions on other people's walls or pages (Facebook [M = 1.56, DT = .85]; Twitter [M = 1.37; DT = .79]; WhatsApp [M = 1.60; DT = .82]); c) share images, videos, links and content related to political issues, public interest issues, candidates or election campaigns (Facebook [M = 1.77, DT = .98]; Twitter [M = 1.38; DT = .80]; WhatsApp [M = 1.67; DT = .88]); d) chat with friends or acquaintances on political issues, issues of public interest, candidates or election campaigns (Facebook [M = 1.85, DT = .96]; Twitter [M = 1.33; DT = .73]; WhatsApp [M = 1.83; DT = .95]); and d) mobilize or attempt to convince other users/contacts to support or join political causes, candidates, or election campaigns (Facebook [M =

1.45, DT = .84]; Twitter [M = 1.29; DT = .71]; WhatsApp [M = 1.44; DT = .81]). Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) showed the one-dimensional nature of the set of items, with an explained variance of 56.74% for Facebook ( $\alpha = .87$ ), 67.01% for Twitter ( $\alpha = .91$ ) and 61.36% for WhatsApp ( $\alpha = .89$ ). In this and future analysis, the EFA was performed with a factorial extraction for maximum plausibility and varimax rotation.

*Worry about the impact of COVID-19:* Participants were consulted on their level of worry about the evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, and the impact it can have on their safety and well-being. To this end, an assessment scale was used with response options ranging from 1 (nothing) to 5 (very much). Specifically, worry was assessed on the following issues: a) the overall economic situation in the country and its potential for reactivation (M = 3.71; DT = 1.17); b) the economic and family situation (M = 3.84; DT = 1.12); c) the hospital system's response to cases of contagion (M = 3.81; DT = 1.23); d) citizen safety in the neighborhood and city (M = 3.69; DT = 1.29). By means of EFA, it was confirmed that the items have a unifactorial structure and an explained variance of 69.96% ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

*Political worry:* The individual worry associated with the response of the government and the political system to the COVID-19 pandemic, considering the electoral context, was measured by 4 reagents with an assessment scale: 1 (Nothing), 2 (Bad), 3 (Partially), 4 (a lot), 5 (very much). The reagents used address worry to the following issues: A) how the central government is managing the health crisis (M = 3.76; DT = 1.26); b) government management about the vaccination process at the national level (M = 3.76; DT = 1.35); c) the capacities and proposals presented by presidential candidates (M = 3.52; DT = 1.36); d) allegations of corruption against politicians and/or public officials (M = 3.76; DT = 1.36). The EFA performed yielded a unifactorial solution with an explained variance of 73.65% ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

*Control variables:* In order for multivariate analysis of interest to be carried out under control conditions, the control variables considered are the sociodemographic aspect, sex, age, educational level and family income of the participants.

## Results

To evaluate the research hypotheses, structural equation models were created. In this sense, a simple partial mediation model is proposed, with political worry as a mediating variable of the relationship between worry for the impact of COVID-19 and political participation in social media. For a comparative reading, the hypothetical model presented will be analyzed for the political participation on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. Finally, the statistical software used was AMOS 23 and the parameter estimation was made for maximum plausibility; the indirect effects were obtained by a bootstrap procedure, based on 5000 samples of re-sampling and 95% confidence intervals with bias correction. In all the analyses of structural equations developed, controls were introduced for sociodemographic variables.

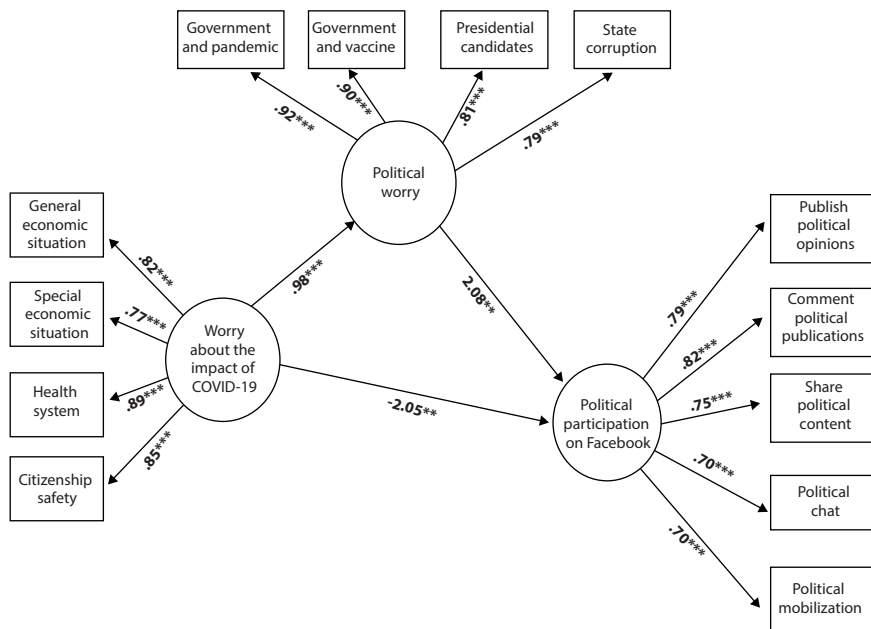
Figure 1 shows the results of the structural equation model for political activism on Facebook. According to the revised goodness-of-fit indicators:  $\chi^2(112) = 549.86$  [ $p < .001$ ]; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .951; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = .941; Incremental Fit Index (IFI) = .951; Good Fit Index (GFI) = .935; Root of Root Mean of Approach Square Error (RMSEA) = .065; The proposed mediation model fits in an acceptable way to the data collected,<sup>2</sup> which is also the case with the other Twitter and WhatsApp. As can be observed, worry about the impact of COVID-19 influences positively on the worry generated about the response of the political system to the health crisis ( $\beta = .98$ ;  $p < .001$ ). In other words, people who are most worried about how the pandemic can affect their safety tend to report a higher level of political worry. On the other hand, there is difference as to the sign of the direct effect that the types of worries analyzed produce on political behavior on Facebook. Thus, while political worry is positively related to political participation on Facebook ( $\beta = 2.08$ ;  $p < .01$ ), worry about the overall impact of COVID-19 negatively affects participation through such a digital platform ( $\beta = -2.05$ ;  $p < .01$ ), all of this considering a political moment of presidential and parliamentary elections.

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2 The conventional cut-off criteria for concluding that a structural equation model has an acceptable fit to the data are: CFI, IFI, TLI, GFI > .90; RMSEA < .08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Schermelleh-Engel *et al.*, 2003).

**Figure 1**

*Worry about the impact of COVID-19, political worry, and political participation on Facebook: Partial simple mediation model*

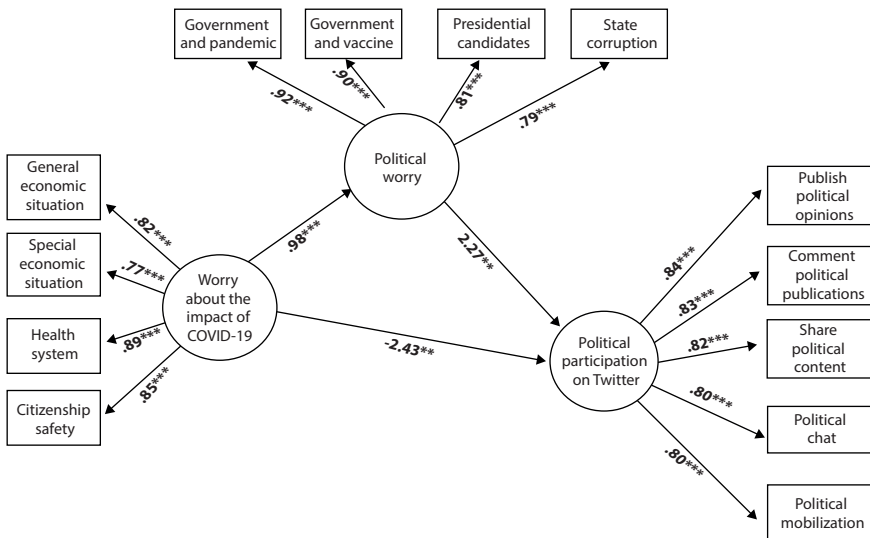


Note: \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .  $N = 920$ . Standardized regression coefficients are presented. Goodness of fit:  $\chi^2(112) = 549.86$  [ $p < .001$ ]; CFI = .951; TLI = .941; IFI = .951; GFI = .935; RMSEA = .065.  $R^2$  of political participation on Facebook = 17.3%. All factor loads reported values equal to or greater than .70. Data collected digitally between January and February 2021, prior to the first round of the electoral process held in that year. Own elaboration.

The mediation analysis supports the existence of a significant indirect effect produced by worry about the impact of COVID-19 on digital political participation, mediated by political worry ( $\beta = 2.04$ ;  $p < .01$ ). This result indicates that once worry about the human, economic and social consequences of the pandemic become political, i.e., politicized, it ends up mobilizing political action via Facebook. In this regard, the partial correlation coefficient between worry for COVID-19 and political participation, controlling the effect of political worry ( $r = -.18$ ;  $gl = 917$ ;  $p < .001$ ), reveals that, worry about the health emergency discourages political behavior on Facebook by nullifying the politicization mechanism.

Regarding Twitter (Figure 2), although relationships of interest have the same pattern observed when analyzing political participation on Facebook, worry about political and governmental action in a pandemic has a relatively stronger mobilizing effect on political participation through Twitter ( $\beta = 2.27$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Something similar occurs with the inhibitory effect generated by the worry focused on the overall impact of COVID-19, which is also intensified regarding political participation in this digital platform ( $\beta = -2.43$ ;  $p < .001$ ). As a result, the indirect effect of COVID-19 worry as a threat to security and personal well-being is to mobilize political activism more forcefully through Twitter ( $\beta = 2.22$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

**Figure 2**  
*Worry about the impact of COVID-19, political worry and political participation via Twitter: Simple Partial Mediation Model*

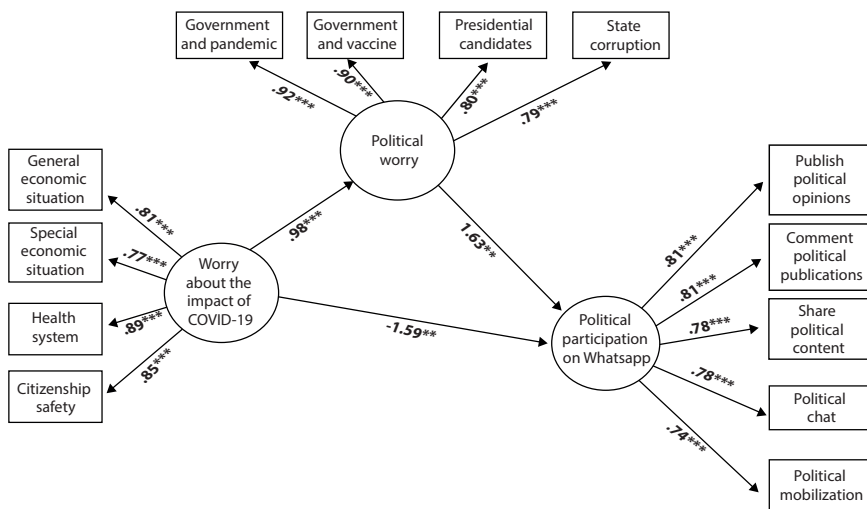


Note. \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .  $N = 920$ . Standardized regression coefficients are presented. Goodness of fit:  $\chi^2 (112) = 534.20$  [ $p < .001$ ]; CFI = .957; TLI = .948; IFI = .957; GFI = .937; RMSEA = .064.  $R^2$  Political participation on Twitter = 23.9%. All factory loads reported values above .70. Data collected digitally between January and February 2021, prior to the first round of the electoral process held in that year. Own elaboration.

Finally, Figure 3 presents the results of political behavior analysis through the WhatsApp instant messaging application. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, both worry about the overall impact of COVID-19 ( $\beta = -1.59$ ;  $p < .01$ ), as the worry about the political situation in the context of the pandemic ( $\beta = 1.63$ ;  $p < .01$ ), influence on a lesser extent the adoption of political behaviors via WhatsApp in an electoral context. Similarly, the indirect effect of COVID-19 worries, through political worry, on political participation in WhatsApp ( $\beta = 1.60$ ;  $p < .01$ ) has a lower magnitude, compared with that observed in social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

**Figure 3**

*Worry about the impact of COVID-19, political worry, and political participation via WhatsApp: Partial simple mediation model*



Note. \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .  $N = 920$ . Standardized regression coefficients are presented. Goodness of fit:  $\chi^2 (112) = 540.29$  [ $p < .001$ ]; CFI = .954; TLI = .944; IFI = .954; GFI = .937; RMSEA = .065.  $R^2$  Political Participation in WhatsApp = 10.7%. All factor loads reported values above .70. Data collected digitally between January and February 2021, prior to the first round of the electoral process held in that year. Own elaboration.



## Discussion and conclusions

This work was intended to contribute to understanding how COVID-19 has influenced the political participation of citizens through social media. Considering an Ecuadorian context nuanced by an ongoing electoral process, the study focused on the mobilizing role that the individual worry associated with COVID-19 can play in the taking of digital political actions through social networks, such as Facebook or Twitter, and instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp. In this sense, the findings presented show that the orientation of this worry produces differentiated effects on digital political participation. On the one hand, the worry focused on the negative impact that COVID-19 can generate on security and welfare tends to disstimulate political behavior in social media, concluding that the data analyzed provide empirical support for hypothesis 1.

On the other hand, the worry that focuses on government action and political system in the health crisis, which we have stated as a political worry, mobilizes positively individual political participation on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp (scenario 2, empirically supported). In a context of political crisis and mistrust of the management capacity of institutions, along with the uncertainty generated by the effects of the pandemic, it is understood that the worry for the election of State representatives is relevant, especially on how they can respond to crises.

The findings in this paper evoke that those who report a greater worry about the overall impact of COVID-19 (e.g., economic, safety, public health, among others) tend to express a higher degree of political worry. According to the mediation analysis carried out, it is possible to state that there is a politicization of the worry caused by COVID-19, in which the worry for the pandemic becomes political worry, related to the response that the State is presenting to the health crisis. In other words, the various situations that have required a state action, especially when such measures are perceived as deficient, with high mistrust or that have deepened the problems associated with the crisis, stimulate favorably the involvement of people in the political-electoral debate and the taking of actions focused on mobilizing others politically.

Thus, while worry about the risks and ravages of COVID-19 turns out to be politically demobilizing, it becomes a mobilizing factor for digital political participation in social media. Therefore, the mediation hypothesis pre-

sented in this research (hypothesis 3), based on the sample studied, could be verified empirically. In this respect, the mistrust toward the state measures, at least in Ecuador, includes a violation of the right to health (Torres-Calderero, 2021), the lack of comprehensive public policies in the socio-economic aspect (Bastidas *et al.*, 2020), the suspension of constitutional guarantees, with an impact on the exercise of human rights (Orellana-Crespo, 2021), would reveal how different factors would explain such political mobilization. These impacts of state measures and how they generate political worry for the population in the pandemic context have also been reported in Argentina (Dettano & Cena, 2021) and Colombia (Rico *et al.*, 2020). In summary, all the proposed working hypotheses obtained favorable empirical evidence, highlighting the mobilizing effect in terms of politicized social media action produced by the worry for COVID-19 once politicized, i.e., transformed into political worry.

On the other hand, the comparative analysis carried out indicates that the health crisis and the worry it caused in the citizens have been critical for the adoption of political behavior through social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. While it was channeled in a lesser extend through instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp. This may be explained because digital political behavior, associated with COVID-19 worries, was influenced by the flow of information, news, and even fakenews related to the pandemic, which took place mainly through social networks.

Finally, it is important to point out that these results are exploratory and must be analyzed cautiously. First, the notion of political worry requires a deeper study, particularly regarding the emotional states that involve greater or lesser worry. Second, this paper did not specifically ask about emotions, so confirmation is required about the impacts of fear, anger, or anxiety, among other emotions. In addition, as a third aspect, it is important that we explore whether such political behavior, beyond electoral processes, remains in those whose worry led to a mobilizing path and how they could be activated by other social media that are progressively presenting more use as a means of political diffusion (for example, TikTok). Also, as noted in the methodological section, the results presented here are not generalized to the entire Ecuadorian population, although they may have greater representativeness in citizenship that fit the sociodemographic profile of the sample studied.

For this reason, it is recommended that future work employ more powerful, probabilistic and national samples. Similarly, while this study employed negative emotions (such as anger, fear, and anxiety) as theoretical mechanisms to explain the relationship between different forms of COVID-19 worry and political behavior in social media, it is necessary to move toward the integration of these emotional responses as explicit variables in the empirical models analyzed, in order to achieve a greater understanding of how emotions influence the political responses that citizens are developing in the face of the current changing scenarios that a pandemic context poses.

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