

Leader cue or partisanship?
Categorizing lasting electoral support for a charismatic movement

Pablo Velasco-Oña
Paolo Moncagatta

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Kenneth Roberts, Christopher L. Carter, and Orçun Selçuk for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. We are also grateful to the participants and discussants at the WAPOR 2025 Annual Conference in Latin America for their constructive feedback.

Leader cue or partisanship?

Categorizing lasting electoral support for a charismatic movement

Pablo Velasco-Oña

Paolo Moncagatta

Abstract

The survival of charismatic movements following the departure of their leader is contingent on their capacity to transform personal loyalty into enduring political support for a broader political platform. In Ecuador, despite the exit of Rafael Correa from the presidency in 2017 and the country in 2018, his movement prevailed as a dominant political force, and the ongoing divide between supporters and opponents of Correa, known as *Correísmo* and *Anticorreísmo* respectively, continues to structure voting behavior. This article analyzes the durability of electoral support for this charismatic movement and identifies two related yet distinct tendencies. A considerable number of adherents self-identify as *Correístas* (supporters of Correa) and exhibit strong partisan loyalty. In contrast, others consider themselves neutral but rely on emotional affinity toward the leader as a voting cue. The present study introduces the concept of charismatic partisanship to distinguish these loyal followers from leader-cued voters. Drawing on original post-electoral surveys from the first and second rounds of three presidential elections (2021-2025), the analysis shows that charismatic partisans are consistently more likely than emotionally attached citizens to support the movement's endorsed candidate.

Keywords: charismatic movement, partisanship, leader cueing, polarization, political support, personalism

Introduction

The role of charismatic leaders in representative democracy has been on the rise on a global scale. This phenomenon can be attributed, in part, to the increasing presence of personalism in citizens' attachments across various political systems (Hayes & McAllister, 1997; Karvonen, 2010; Manin, 1997; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). In Latin America, the legacy of certain leaders has profoundly influenced the political arenas over the course of several decades, such as *Peronismo* in Argentina, *Chavismo* in Venezuela, *Bolsonarismo* in Brazil, *Fujimorismo* in Perú, *Uribismo* in Colombia, and more recently, *Correísmo* in Ecuador. The prevalence of personalistic politics is more evident in countries where party labels have experienced a sustained decay over the last decades (Lupu, 2016; Sánchez-Sibony, 2024). When party brands are not easily distinguishable, citizens may opt to utilize leaders' images as heuristic devices to orient themselves within complex political landscapes (de la Cerda, 2024, 2025). This phenomenon enables the consolidation of personalistic legacies as the predominant organizing element of citizens' political behavior.

The political platforms that originate within a strong leader's network and compete for power are known as charismatic movements (Andrews-Lee, 2021). The persistence of these movements, which often outlast other emerging parties, has long posed a puzzle for the literature. Following the seminal work of Weber (1922), scholars have argued that charismatic bonds are direct, difficult to transfer, and inherently short-lived, such that their survival requires some form of broader institutionalization. This perspective—commonly referred to as routinization theory—remains the dominant view in Latin America. It states that a leader's charismatic legacy must acquire the form of a traditionally institutionalized party form to ensure its survival (Kitschelt, 2000; Loxton & Levitsky, 2018; Madsen & Snow, 1991). In the absence of their founders, these movements are expected to transition from a personalistic nature to the adoption of institutional mechanisms that facilitate their resilience in the face of waning popular support. Within this framework, charisma is seen less as a resource than as an obstacle, serving as an ephemeral tie that undermines the development of institutionalized movements and erodes citizens' programmatic representation.

Nevertheless, a burgeoning body of scholarly work is taking a more critical view of personalism's role and nature. Scholars such as Adam and Maier (2010) contend that the dismissal of the value of personalistic politics stems from a maximalist conception of

democracy—one that overlooks how leaders' traits can function as heuristics for assessing their competence or programmatic stances. Andrews-Lee directly addresses the routinization arguments by advancing the claim that this tradition "overstates the ephemerality of citizens' emotional ties to the charismatic founder" (2021, p. 25). Instead, she asserts that charismatic movements can also function as enduring and stable political platforms in contentious arenas, thereby promoting political identities that coherently organize citizens' preferences and behaviors over the long run. Secondary politicians, perceiving incentives to consolidate a quasi-divine image of the leader, seize the opportunity to present themselves as trustworthy symbolic heirs and become the new recipients of popular support.

In democracies with longstanding party traditions, scholars have also highlighted the growing personalization of citizens' loyalty toward political platforms. The argument is made that the increasing centrality of leaders reshapes the nature of partisanship, often undermining collective identities (Karvonen, 2010). Leaders no longer merely head political platforms; rather, they begin to *personify* them (Barisione, 2009; Blondel, 2010; Garzia, 2014; McAllister, 2007). In other words, the preceding collective form of partisanship evolves into a relationship mediated by the figure of the leader. In the Latin American democracies, however, the notion of a preexisting partisan identity that evolves into a more personalistic orientation is rather atypical. This is primarily since the majority of political parties in the region are characterized by weakness and an absence of organic bases. In contrast, charismatic figures emerge initially in the arena and sometimes succeed in consolidating popular support for themselves and their respective movements. Andrews Lee (2021) and De la Cerda (2024) refer to this enduring bond as *charismatic identity*, which is defined as the sense of group belonging that derives from successful personalistic appeals. Followers remember a leader as an extraordinary, heroic figure, and actively align themselves with his movement in the search of the political alternative that sustains his legacy. It differs from the prevailing notion of the personalization of politics, which assumes a preexisting partisan allegiance that gradually gives way to a personalistic bond. In contrast, charismatic identity emerges through a reversed sequence, in which the leader comes first and the collective identity subsequently crystallizes around him.

While the concept of charismatic identity provides a solution to the puzzle of citizens' attitudes ephemerality set by routinization theory, it gives rise to a new puzzle:

if personalistic appeals can be capitalized by third actors, this implies that the supposedly direct bonds between the leader and the citizens can, in fact, be subject to mediation. The prevailing scholarly consensus in democracies with low partisanship posits that these strong leaders often assume a role that is both polarizing and unmediated, forging direct connections with their constituents without the intermediation of other structures such as partisan claims, ideological positions, or programmatic agendas (Luján & Cyr, 2025; Madsen & Snow, 1991; Selçuk, 2024). If the leader is constantly remembered as an unparalleled figure by their followers, it is reasonable to assume that this will prevent the possibility of proposing a candidate replacement that will be successful in reviving their persona. How, then, should we understand the enduring loyalty of citizens to the leader's movement? Can we distinguish between forms of charismatic identity—one that leans toward a collective partisan identity and another that remains primarily personalistic?

This study suggests that we need to differentiate two distinct types of charismatic bonds derived from a polarizing leader, which are related yet autonomous. On the one hand, charismatic partisanship refers to a crystallized political identity in citizens, who identify themselves with the leader's political project and are subject to mediation by secondary actors. On the other hand, a significant proportion of the population considers itself neutral, yet expresses positive sentiments toward the leader who serves them as a cue for making political decisions. This group is significantly less prone to support the charismatic movement candidates compared to the first. In this sense, the concept of charismatic identity incorporates two forms of bonding between citizens and leaders. The first form is primarily personalistic, while the second is both personalistic and partisan. We contend that these two levels of charismatic identity must be conceptualized independently since they present sustained, significant differences in their behavior.

To engage in this discussion, this paper examines the expressions of *correísmo* in Ecuador. This allows for the analysis of a relevant case of personalistic legacy survival in the absence of massive action from the leader. Not only did Rafael Correa leave power in 2017 and move to Belgium in 2018, but also the three subsequent Ecuadorian presidents have expressed strong opposition to his legacy. Despite this highly unfavorable scenario, his charismatic movement—*Revolución Ciudadana*—has been able to reach the three subsequent presidential ballots and to consecutively elect the largest legislative bloc by a single party. The present study will explore the nature of these personalistic bonds in the first and second rounds of the 2021, 2023, and 2025 presidential elections.

Leaders and partisan identities

The idea of partisanship derived from a personalistic bond may initially appear contradictory, given that this concept has been predominantly employed to address collective identities associated with party labels. The notion of partisanship was initially developed within the context of the United States' institutionalized two-party system (Campbell et al., 1960), and was subsequently adopted by other countries with robust party systems. This tradition sought to propose an alternative explanation to the more socially deterministic cleavage theory by highlighting the relevance of identitarian and emotional processes in political behavior (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2020). Literature on partisanship has long manifested that the long-term relationship between political platforms and their respective citizens produces related notable outcomes such as the internalization of emotions, the formation of distinct political identities, and the consolidation of loyalty over extended periods of time.

Although this concept has proven to be a valuable tool for understanding the socio-political landscape of more affluent nations, its application in developing regions, such as Latin America, has presented significant challenges due to the inherent fragility of party systems in these contexts. While some countries in the region exhibit levels of party identification that can be compared to those in the US, the majority of territories demonstrate marked levels of party volatility and weak party-citizen linkages (Kitschelt et al., 2010; Lupu, 2015). Conventional studies and measures have been challenged by certain scholars. These scholars have indicated that the region's contextual elements are not being taken into account (Carreras et al., 2015; Samuels, 2006) and that it is necessary to go beyond traditional party identification to apprehend the crucial role that enduring emotional linkages play in these societies (Castro Cornejo, 2019; Gunterman, 2020).

Regarding the role of leaders within this theoretical framework, recent studies have identified several points of convergence. Contemporary scholars have underscored the mounting significance of personalistic appeals from political parties to voters. These appeals have the potential to either diminish or reinforce partisan linkages (Rahat & Kenig, 2018). The manifestation of strong leadership, characterized by the embodiment of partisan values, can give rise to a more personalized form of partisanship. This phenomenon can be seen as a departure from the prevailing preexisting collective identities (Garzia, 2014; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). Furthermore, scholars have demonstrated that supporters of strong leaders may exhibit customary partisan

expressions, including affective polarization (Reiljan et al., 2023; Selçuk, 2024) and biased rationality in economic evaluation (Aytaç et al., 2021; Gonthier, 2023; Ortiz Ayala & García Sánchez, 2014). Taken together, these efforts have emphasized the significance of charisma in individuals' connections to their party systems, which should be regarded as an autonomous form of political identity.

Theorizing about charismatic partisanship thus requires a flexible reexamination of the fundamental elements of the concept. Carius-Munz (2020) draws attention to the main purpose of the foundational work of Campbell et al., *The American Voter*, which had the primary objective of providing theoretical tools for explaining fundamentally the lasting loyalty of American citizens to the electoral offer. These authors used the term partisanship “to characterize the individual’s affective orientation to an important *group object* in his environment” and highlighted how this individual attachment “can persist without legal recognition or evidence of formal membership” (Campbell et al., 1960). In this sense, although the study of partisanship was traditionally linked to political parties, Campbell et al.'s original conceptualization provided elements for adaptation to other relevant *group objects* in diverse political contexts (Urban Pappi, 2011). Even if the customary *group object* studied as the source of affection and identity was the traditional political party, the authors opened up the opportunity to conceive of other elements than parties such as ideological blocs *per se* (Bankert et al., 2017; Hagevi, 2015; Rojo-Martínez & Crespo-Martínez, 2023), or, in the case of this paper, a personalistic legacy.

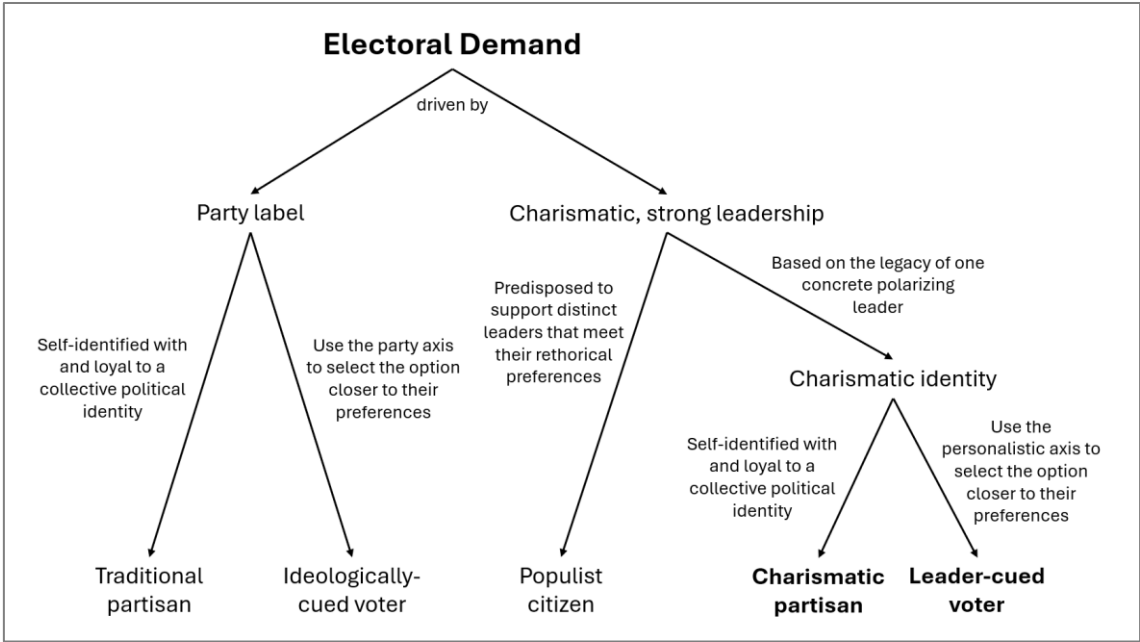
In this document, we argue that a specific form of personalistic bonding shares key similarities to this literature and propose the concept of charismatic partisanship. This political identity, which citizens develop around a charismatic leader and their movement, is defined not only by a direct connection between the individual and the leader but also by a shared sense of in-group belonging that fosters cohesion and identification among members. Adherents of charismatic movements manifest not only emotional favorability towards the leader, but also adopt a political label for themselves (e.g. *Peronismo*, *Bolsonarismo*, *Chavismo*, *Correísmo*) that facilitates recognition among their peers. The phenomenon under examination can be characterized as a crystallized relationship to the leader's personalistic image and to the movement of secondary actors dedicated to maintaining his legacy alive. As with other forms of partisanship, this group exhibits a high degree of loyalty to its political movement over time and may display cognitive biases that facilitate the interpretation of political information. However, the concept has

two particularities. Firstly, the emergence of a preexisting collective form of partisanship is not a prerequisite. In contrast, it is the immediate result of the leader's bond with the citizens being solidified, superseding more extensive political allegiances. Secondly, the political party label does not fully capture the essence of these movements. Rather, the native term embraced by the group itself is more revealing of its identity. In the case of Ecuador, for instance, the native term *Correísmo* is widely adopted by citizens, far more so than the formal party label *Revolución Ciudadana*.

Distinct personalistic bonds

Charismatic partisanship is not the only type of personalistic bonding. In fact, it is not even the most common form. Less crystallized attachments to leaders also exist within party systems and can shape electoral outcomes. In this section, we propose a theoretical distinction between different types of personalistic linkages and emphasize the gap between the two forms of charismatic identity that concern us. While we do not claim that these modes of relating to the political system are always clear-cut or mutually exclusive, we argue that they should be treated as analytically distinct and require their own conceptualization. We also acknowledge that the elements shown on the party side of Figure 1 are not exhaustive. Rather, the proposed division serves the practical purpose of clarifying the relationship of the charismatic bonds analyzed in this paper.

Figure 1. Discerning charismatic identities.



Source: created by the authors.

At least two distinctions are necessary to be made among types of personalistic bonds. First, citizens may exhibit psychological predispositions that lead them to support strong leaders in general. They may do so because they attribute a disproportionate amount of responsibility to these leaders' actions (Metz & Plesz, 2025; Ortiz Ayala & García Sánchez, 2014) or because they are drawn to polarizing personalities (Armendariz Miranda & Cawvey, 2021; García Yapur et al., 2014; Piquet Carneiro, 2011). Such predispositions shape how individuals interpret political contexts, heightening demand for strong leaders. Although different terms have been used to describe these individuals, one common label is *populist citizens* (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020). Their presence can be pivotal in incentivizing the rise of extremist party platforms. Still, this predisposition toward *any* strong leader is conceptually distinct from the concerns of this paper. Moreover, such preferences for new, hardline figures tend to matter more for the emergence of challenger parties (de Vries & Hobolt, 2020) than for established movements like *Revolución Ciudadana*.

Our attention, therefore, turns to the second distinction: the crystallized linkages that a charismatic, polarizing leader can generate with citizens. These linkages—here referred to as *charismatic identity*—are deeply embedded in people's identities, attitudes, and behaviors (Andrews-Lee, 2021; de la Cerda, 2024). Within this category, however, two distinct forms of bonding must be distinguished. On the one side lies charismatic partisanship: a durable political identity resembling traditional partisanship but born and sustained through a personalistic connection. On the other side are charismatic linkages that remain asymmetric, direct, and primarily emotional (Madsen & Snow, 1991). Such established leaders divide electorates along emotional lines, prompting citizens to rely on bounded rationality (Lupia, 2008). In this sense, the positive and negative emotions they evoke become central heuristic cues in political reasoning. Much like voters in strong party systems who rely on the left–right ideological axis, these leader-cued voters orient their political decisions along a pro– or anti–leader axis, choosing the option that aligns most closely with their preferences.

Rather than representing an ephemeral predisposition, emotional connections to a given leader can serve as relevant cues for people's attitudes and decisions (de la Cerda, 2025; Torcal et al., 2025). This attachment is closer to charismatic partisanship than to the notion of the populist citizen, since it remains fundamentally tied to the same leader and endures over time. Still, it should be understood as a phenomenon oriented more

toward the leader than toward the leader's political party. In Ecuador, a charismatic partisan may exhibit strong emotional ties to the leader while also identifying as a *Correísta*—a label that refers to the broader political project of the *Revolución Ciudadana* charismatic movement. The key distinction between leader-cued voters and charismatic partisans therefore lies in the object of their loyalty: the individual leader in the first case, versus the leader's political project in the second. This differentiation is not novel, as it has also been observed in cases such as Argentinian *Peronismo* (Madsen & Snow, 1987). Building on this insight, the present paper develops additional conceptual tools and methodological strategies to distinguish between these phenomena.

The Correísta-Anticorreísta divide in Ecuador

Ecuador is an ideal case study for examining enduring expressions of political loyalty toward a personalistic project. Historically, the country has exhibited a weak party system, characterized by unstable platforms and candidates (Conhagan, 1995). While party labels struggled to become part of people's understanding of politics, charismatic leaders emerged as a suitable, long-term alternative for establishing recognizable political projects. Rafael Correa was the archetype of a strong leader who managed to polarize people around his own figure. Amidst political instability and low trust in the democratic system, Correa emerged as a charismatic outsider who proposed a government plan in line with the regional "pink tide" that took place at the turn of the century (De la Torre, 2013).

As his arrival coincided with a rise in oil prices, Correa employed a series of tools to consolidate his support. These tools included meeting social needs through substantial public spending (Gachet, 2022) and establishing a permanent campaign communication strategy (Conaghan & de la Torre, 2008; de la Torre & Ortiz Lemos, 2016). Moreover, he implemented a plan to centralize power, which weakened the institutions of horizontal accountability as well as opposition political groups (Levitsky & Loxton, 2013). This plan fueled a polarizing discourse between his supporters and opponents (Selçuk, 2024). His approval rating peaked at 86% in June 2013 (Polga-Hecimovich & Sánchez, 2021), and the *Correísta*–*Anticorreísta* divide became so prevalent and widespread that it overshadowed historical electoral divisions based on territory (Polga-Hecimovich, 2014) or class (García, 2012).

Unlike other populists in the region who despised party politics, Rafael Correa sought to reform the institutional system by establishing a political movement based on

his widespread support (Roberts, 2017). His first political party, *Alianza PAIS*, relied on government action to make direct appeals and cultivate a loyal following. Because of the highly personal nature of this charismatic movement and its lack of strong, organic links to established societal organizations, some authors have argued that Correa's base of supporters is likely fragile (Poertner, 2024). Nevertheless, Correa remained popular despite the sharp drop in international oil prices in 2015. In 2017, his party won the national elections with a new candidate, Lenin Moreno, Correa's former vice president. After becoming president, Moreno distanced himself from Correa and his most loyal supporters, many of whom were subjected to aggressive judicial proceedings for corruption. As a result, Correa decided to move to Belgium. Some of his closest collaborators went into self-exile, while a few of his allies who remained in Ecuador were imprisoned. By the end of 2018, Moreno had definitively severed ties with the *Correísta* faction, seizing control of *Alianza PAIS* and expelling its dissenters.

Following the internal crisis, Correa's loyal supporters were forced to find an alternative platform. In the 2019 local elections, they formed a last-minute alliance with a lesser-known national party to register their candidacies. This resulted in their worst historical outcome; they lost every mayoral race and won only two provincial prefectures. In 2021, Correa endorsed his collaborator, the young economist Andrés Arauz, as his presidential candidate. Arauz lost the second round by a margin of five percentage points. Although the *Correísta* movement's partisan base was clearly weakened during this time, it continued to hold the largest bloc in the National Assembly due to opposition fragmentation. Despite forming anti-populist coalitions strong enough to win the presidential elections, political parties opposed to *Correísmo* remained weak, fragmented, and volatile (Moncagatta et al., 2023).

The 2023 local elections reversed the fortunes of the *Correísta* movement. With its new political party, *Revolución Ciudadana*, the movement won nine provincial prefectures and 48 mayoral offices. Notably, the party won control of the mayoral offices in the two most populous cities in the country: Quito and Guayaquil. This unprecedented electoral victory, followed by a reconfiguration of powers, forced the unpopular incumbent President Lasso to invoke the constitutional mechanism of "*Muerte Cruzada*". This mechanism temporarily dissolved the National Assembly and called for anticipated national elections in the same year. In this new episode, which took place in the second half of 2023, the *Correísta* platform increased its representation in the National

Assembly. Luisa González, Correa's new candidate, lost to the young politician Daniel Noboa by a margin of three percentage points in the second round. The 2025 presidential elections featured the same two candidates. *Revolución Ciudadana* once again garnered the most legislative seats, but Noboa widened his lead over Correa's candidate to eleven percentage points in the runoff election.

Despite Correa's physical absence, his charismatic movement has survived and remains a highly competitive force in Ecuadorian politics. Contrary to expectations, its base has consistently supported its endorsed candidates in four general elections. However, traditional measures of partisanship have proven to be inadequate for accurately assessing the size of this highly politicized group. For instance, the 2023 LAPOP survey shows that just 5.2% of Ecuadorians identify with the *Revolución Ciudadana* movement (LAPOP AmericasBarometer, 2023). Understanding this form of electoral loyalty requires the refinement of theoretical and methodological tools. This is the primary objective of our research.

Materials and methods

Our analysis seeks to capture consistent distinctions between the two forms of charismatic identity. To this end, we rely on three unedited electoral surveys, each conducted around a different national election: 2021, 2023, and 2025. The first dataset ($n = 2,862$) was collected via an online panel between February and March 2022 and covers Ecuador's two largest cities, Quito and Guayaquil. The second dataset ($n = 1,233$) was collected through an in-person survey in Quito in October 2023. The third dataset ($n = 1,686$) was gathered from a national sample via a CAWI survey in April 2025. Although these three surveys differ in design and coverage, they share a core set of comparable questions that allow us to understand the emotional and identitarian expressions of *Correísmo*. Importantly, this methodological heterogeneity not only helps mitigate potential field errors but also enables us to test the robustness of our hypothesis across different populations and social contexts.

An initial common indicator of these datasets is the self-identification scale, which distinguishes between those who align with *Correísmo* and those who oppose it. Similar to initial American measures of partisanship (Key, 1968), respondents were presented with five partisan labels ranging from "very *Correísta*" to "very *Anticorreísta*" to choose from. A second crucial indicator is the feeling thermometer toward Rafael Correa. This

question has been verified as an effective measure of affective attachments in multi-party systems (Gidron et al., 2022, p. 9) and allows us to capture emotional bonds. Together, these two indicators allow for comparisons between self-identified partisans and groups that use emotion toward the leader as a cue.

Our exploration of the data is based on two hypotheses. First, we hypothesize that the self-identification scale has a significantly different distribution than the feeling thermometer for the same respondents during all the episodes. As the former requires people to identify with a partisan label, we expect fewer people to polarize over it as compared to the emotional thermometer. To test this, we use the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, which is sensitive to distribution forms.

Secondly, based on their answers to these two questions, we categorize respondents into four groups of citizens. Those who self-identify as *Correísta* are categorized as charismatic partisans. These individuals are distinguished from those who identify as neutral but give a positive response on the feeling thermometer (from 7 to 10) and those who are neutral on both scales (from 4 to 6 on the feeling thermometer). The fourth group is comprised by all other citizens, who are opposed to Correa in the affective and partisan scales. We hypothesize that the four selected groups will show significantly different voting percentages for Correa's presidential candidate in the first and second rounds. For this analysis, we use interval plots and logistic regressions.

Given the potential for slight distortion in electoral results over time, we employed the weighting technique used by Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty (2021) in their global post-electoral survey study. This technique involves assigning weights to survey responses based on observed voting proportions, thereby improving the representativeness of distribution estimates. This correction is particularly useful in distribution plots because it controls for variations caused by differences in survey techniques.

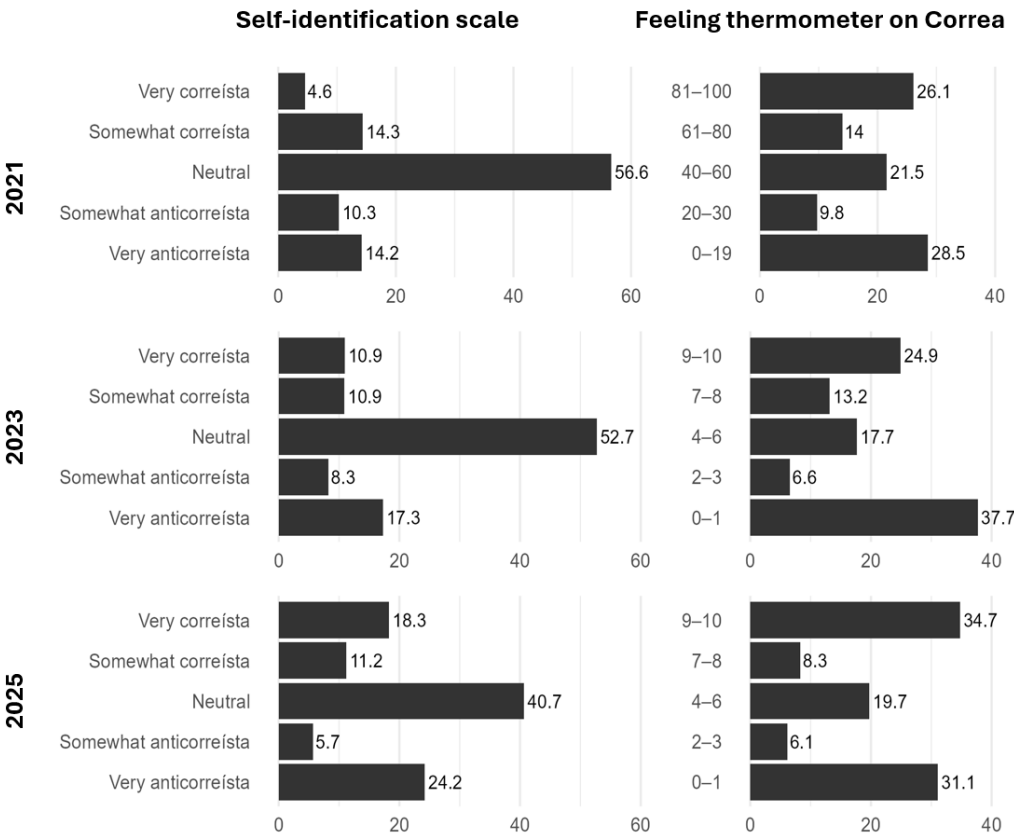
Results

Connected but distinct tendencies

A preliminary examination of the survey data provides an opportunity to compare the distributions of the two scales of personalist expressions. The self-identification scale asked, "On a scale from very *Anticorreísta* to very *Correísta*, where would you place yourself?" and provided five response options. This formulation prompted respondents to

reflect on their political identities. In contrast, the feeling thermometer scale refocused attention on the leader and the emotions he evokes in respondents, moving away from strong group labels. The question asked: "On a scale of 0 to 10 (or 100), where 0 is completely negative and 10 is completely positive, how would you rate your feelings toward Rafael Correa?" Figure 2 shows how these items are distributed across the three survey samples.

Figure 2. Comparison between self-identification scales and feeling thermometers.

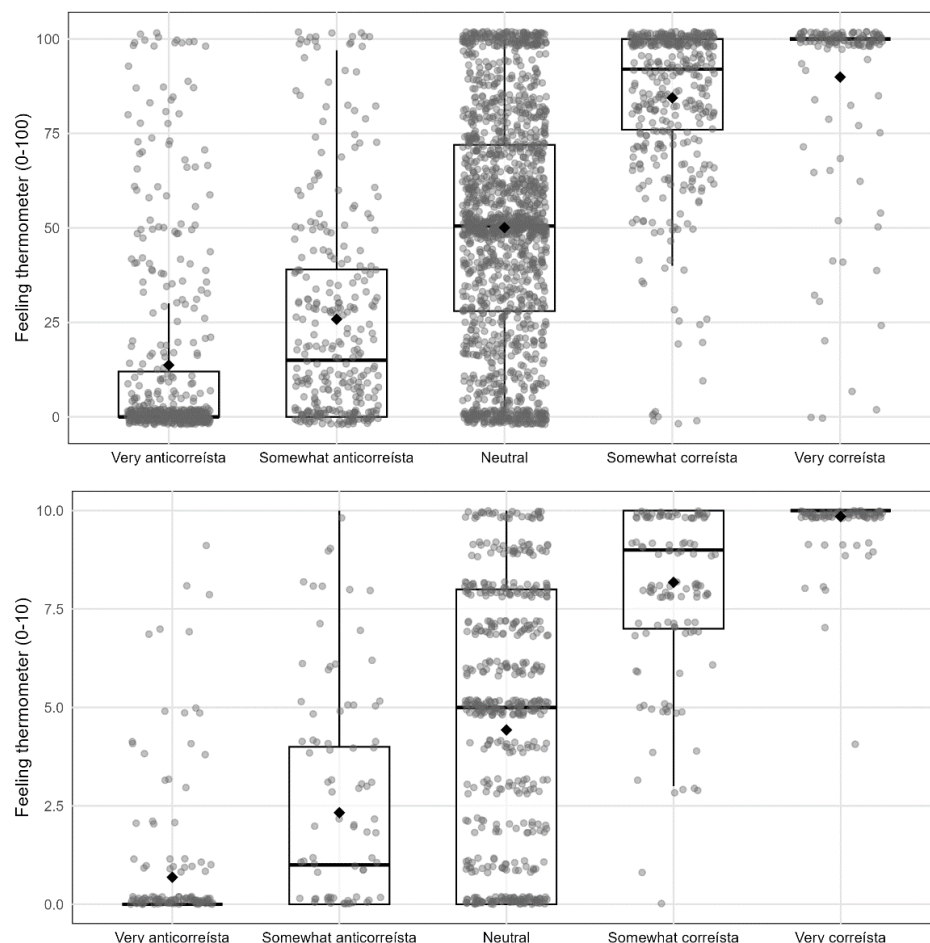


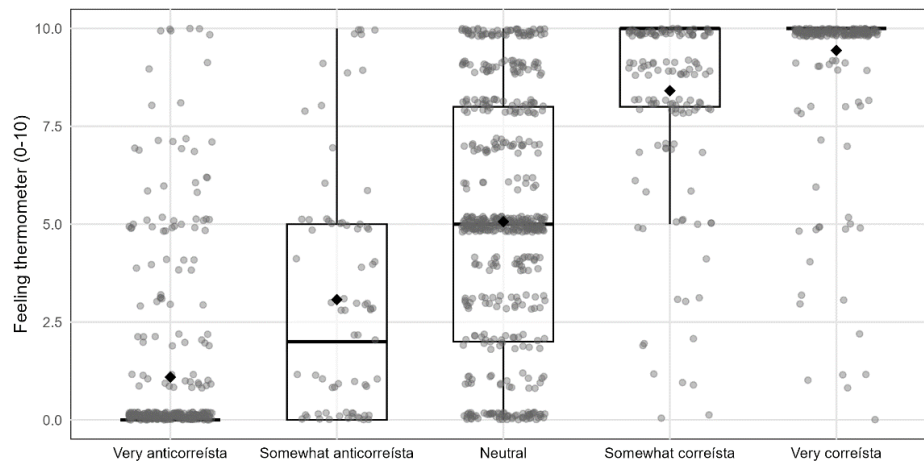
Source: created by the authors based on original survey data.

The feeling thermometers are standardized into five groups to make contrasting the scales easier. While the self-identification scales show low levels of dispersion — with over 40% of respondents identifying as neutral in all cases — the same samples polarize much more sharply when evaluating their feelings toward the leader. Fewer than half of Ecuadorians explicitly adopt the labels *Correísta* or *Anticorreísta* over the years, yet the emotions Correa evokes are far more widely distributed, with only about one-fifth of respondents remaining neutral. Strikingly, this pattern is consistent across all three surveys.

Therefore, the two scales applied to the same sample appear to manifest different phenomena. Group identities and emotions are distributed differently despite being connected to the same personalistic divide. Figure 3 examines the relationship between these scales more closely. It illustrates the values of the feeling thermometer for each self-identified group. As expected, those who have internalized the *Correísta* identity exhibit a much higher proportion of positive emotions than groups at the opposite end of the spectrum. Notably, this image shows emotional heterogeneity among self-reported neutral citizens, who can position themselves at the positive and negative extremes of the feeling thermometer. If not examined critically, this apparent neutrality could obscure our understanding of the full range of personalistic expressions in the population stemming from Correa's image. The scales complement each other, enabling us to evaluate various levels of polarization.

Figure 3. Boxplot exhibiting the relationship between the two scales.





Source: created by the authors based on original survey data.

Since the two scales appear to be related and may present overlapping elements, it is necessary to test the autonomy of these items. In other words, before proceeding with further examination, it is crucial to prove that the scales capture different phenomena. To this end, we applied the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, which is designed to identify statistically significant differences in means and distributions between two questions applied to the same population. Table 3 shows the results of these estimates. In all cases, variation in the answers indicates a significant difference in the paired data. Hypothesis 1 is supported by the analysis of the three datasets.

Table 1. Wilcoxon signed-rank test to test differences in distributions.

Year	Variables	V	p-value	Interpretation
2021	Feeling thermometer versus self-identification	679842	<0.001	Significant difference
2023	Feeling thermometer versus self-identification	133823	0.006	Significant difference
2025	Feeling thermometer versus self-identification	118667	<0.001	Significant difference

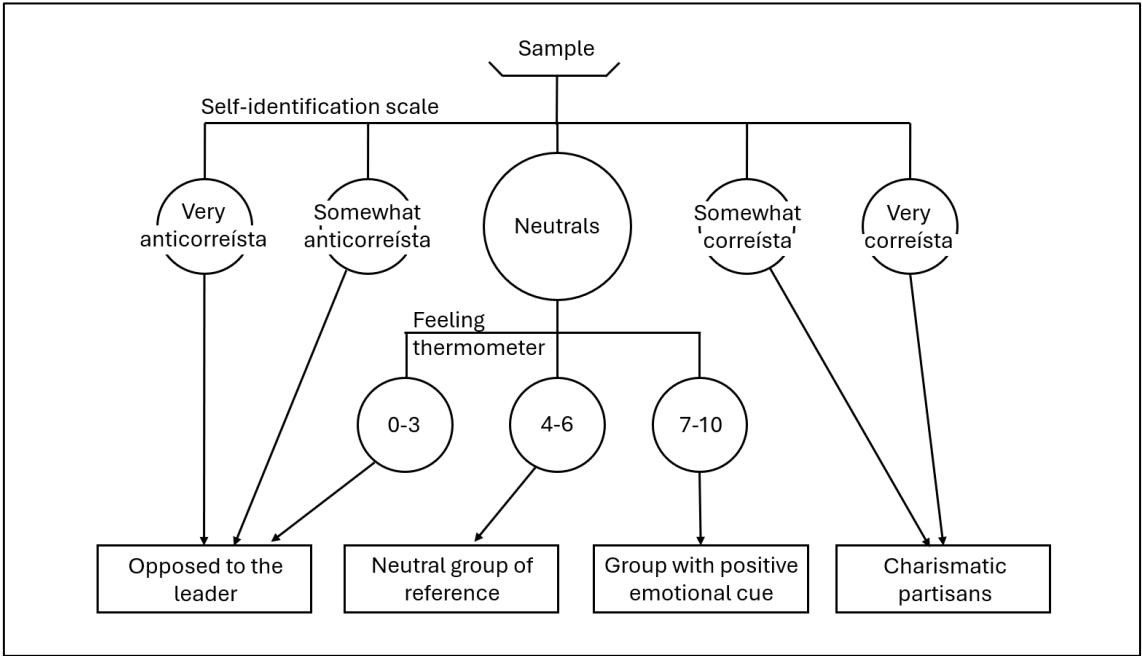
Source: created by the authors based on original survey data.

Charismatic partisanship, leader cue and voting behavior

After proving the autonomy of the two estimates, a third variable was constructed based on them. As shown in Figure 4, self-identified partisans were separated from citizens with emotional attachments. Surveyed individuals who self-identified as very or somewhat *Correísta* were labeled charismatic partisans. Those who identified as neutral were separated into three categories: those who were emotionally attached to the leader and

gave him a value of 7 or higher; those who ranked their feelings as neutral and gave him a value between 4 and 6; and those who felt negative emotions toward him and gave him a value of 3 or lower on the feeling thermometers. The neutral group is used as the reference point for being situated in the center of the distribution on both scales, that is, who we can consider median voter for the purpose of this study. The group with positive attachment is considered to have an enduring positive cue based on their warm feelings toward Correa. All those self-identified as very or somewhat *Anticorreísta* are also included in the group opposed to Correa, since these groups behave similarly for the purposes of this analysis.

Figure 4. Grouping by the nature of the charismatic bond.



Source: created by the authors.

This new variable yields four mutually exclusive groups, distinguishing between self-identified partisans and citizens who define themselves as neutral yet display affective polarization. Table 2 reports the distribution of these groups across the samples. Notably, the resulting categories are of meaningful size, which not only facilitates data analysis but also carries important implications when extrapolating the scale to the broader population.

Table 2. Real group sizes under the new categorization

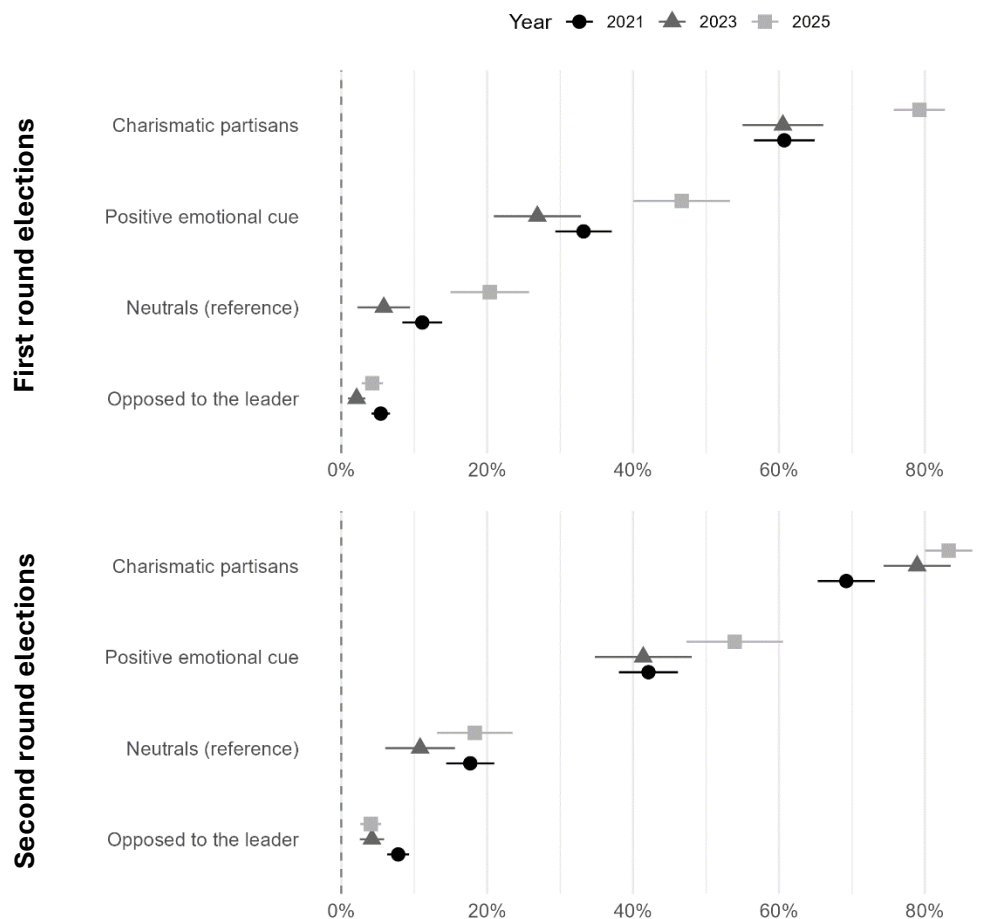
<i>Sample (n)</i>	<i>Opposed to the leader</i>	<i>Neutral group of reference</i>	<i>Group with positive emotional cue</i>	<i>Charismatic partisans</i>

2021	100 % (2862)	43.5 % (1244)	18.0 % (514)	20.0 % (571)	18.6 % (533)
2023	100 % (1233)	45.3 % (558)	13.2 % (163)	17.2 % (212)	24.3 % (300)
2025	100 % (1686)	43.8 % (739)	12.8 % (215)	12.5 % (218)	30.5 % (514)

Source: created by the authors based on original survey data.

Because both charismatic partisans and leader-cued voters express strong positive emotions toward the leader, the following exercise tests whether adopting the partisan label produces significant behavioral differences across electoral episodes. Figure 5 compares the reported voting choices in the first and second rounds of the presidential elections for each group.

Figure 5. Voting choice in favor of Correa's endorsed candidate.



Source: created by the authors based on original survey data.

Once again, the results from the three surveys are remarkably similar and statistically significant. Charismatic partisans strongly supported the *Correísta* candidate from the beginning. In the first rounds, more than 60% chose him/her over all other options, including supporting other candidates, null voting, or abstaining. The group with

a positive emotional cue was less consistent in the first rounds but more similar in the runoff elections. However, their support for *Revolución Ciudadana*'s candidate was considerably lower than that of charismatic partisans in all cases. Interestingly, electoral support from the neutral group is not substantial. In the best-case scenario, it barely surpasses the 20% threshold. The proportion of neutrals supporting Correa's candidate is roughly equal to the difference between the group with a positive emotional cue and the charismatic partisans. Finally, the group opposed to Correa remains consistent, never surpassing the 10% margin in either the first or second rounds.

Table 3. Odd ratios for the logistic regression on first round voting

Term	2021	2023	2025
<i>Intercept (baseline odds for neutrals)</i>	0.12 [0.09, 0.16]	0.08 [0.04, 0.14]	0.30 [0.22, 0.42]
<i>Opposed to leader</i>	0.46 [0.32, 0.66] ***	0.35 [0.16, 0.76] ***	0.17 [0.11, 0.27] ***
<i>Leader emotional cue</i>	3.98 [2.87, 5.53] ***	5.94 [3.09, 11.44] ***	3.42 [2.26, 5.17] ***
<i>Charismatic partisans</i>	12.38 [8.93, 17.18] ***	24.79 [13.14, 46.77] ***	14.94 [10.13, 22.02] ***
<i>N</i>	2862	1233	1686
<i>AIC</i>	2316.6	881.1	1323.1
<i>Nagelkerke R²</i>	0.337	0.485	0.566

Source: created by the authors based on original survey data. Note: Reference category is Neutrals. Odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals in brackets. ***p < .001

To further test the statistical significance of this variation between groups, we applied logistic regression to the binary dependent variable in the first and second rounds: whether respondents reported voting for Correa's candidate or not. The results demonstrate a robust and consistent association between voter identity and emotional alignment with Correa across the three election years: 2021, 2023, and 2025. Charismatic partisans are the most likely to vote for the leader's candidate, with odds ratios of 12.38, 24.79, and 14.94, respectively, in each year, indicating a strong relationship. In contrast, individuals who exhibit only a positive emotional response to the leader have significantly higher odds of voting for Correa's preferred candidate, albeit to a lesser degree, with odds ratios of 3.98, 5.94, and 3.42. These patterns remained robust after controlling for alternative model specifications, and possible confounding variables, such as traditional partisan identification and ideological positioning (see Supplementary Materials).

Table 4. Odd ratios for the logistic regression on second round voting

Term	2021	2023	2025
<i>Intercept (baseline odds for neutrals)</i>	0.16 [0.13, 0.21]	0.12 [0.08, 0.20]	0.27 [0.20, 0.38]
<i>Opposed to leader</i>	0.39 [0.28, 0.55] ***	0.36 [0.19, 0.69] ***	0.19 [0.12, 0.30] ***
<i>Leader emotional cue</i>	3.39 [2.50, 4.58] ***	5.83 [3.33, 10.21] ***	5.23 [3.42, 7.98] ***

<i>Charismatic partisans</i>	10.47 [7.72, 14.20] ***	30.92 [17.59, 54.35] ***	22.19 [14.74, 33.42] ***
<i>N</i>	2862	1233	1686
<i>Aic</i>	2436.6	913.4	1234.6
<i>Nagelkerke r²</i>	0.335	0.546	0.617

Source: created by the authors based on original survey data. Note: Reference category is Neutrals. Odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals in brackets. ***p < .001.

Naturally, the analysis of second-round voting choices revealed stronger partisan polarization than the first round. In 2021, charismatic partisans were 10.47 times more likely to support Correa's candidate than neutrals. This figure peaked at 30.92 times more likely in 2023. Those with positive feelings toward Correa showed intermediate effects, with odds 3.39 times higher in 2021, 5.83 times higher in 2023, and 5.23 times higher in 2025 than neutrals. Across the three elections, voters with only an emotional attachment to the leader were less likely to vote for the candidate of *Revolución Ciudadana* than charismatic partisans, who combined emotional resonance with partisan identification. In relative terms, this gap ranges from -68% to -77% in the first rounds and from -68% to -81% in the second rounds. For instance, in 2025, the odds of voting for Correa's candidate among leader-cued voters are 76% lower than among charismatic partisans: $(1 - (5.23 / 22.19)) \times 100 = 76\%$.

Discussion

A leader's polarizing legacy can crystallize into an enduring divide of a political arena, which takes two forms of expression. First, charismatic partisans are citizens who identify with a label supporting the leader, such as *Correístas*. They combine emotional attachment to the leader with strong loyalty to his movement and, in his absence, actively affirm their belonging to a collective identity committed to sustaining his legacy. Their political support can thus be mediated by fellow *Correísta* partisans. By contrast, a significant group of citizens share a positive emotional attachment to the leader but are unwilling to identify as his supporters. These individuals are less inclined to vote for secondary candidates of the movement, as their connection to the leader is personalistic and more difficult to transfer. Although emotional attachment alone increases the likelihood of voting for Correa's candidates compared to neutral citizens, the fusion of emotional and partisan alignment exerts a much stronger and more consistent influence on voting behavior.

Ecuador provided an ideal case study for exploring how personalistic political identities express over time. Despite Rafael Correa's absence from the country and incumbents actively undermining his legacy, citizens continue to be markedly polarized based on their feelings toward him. While party names and figures are volatile and traditional partisanship identification is low, Ecuadorian electoral alignments are consistently defined by the relationship between citizens and the image of the charismatic leader as the central divide. This scenario allowed us to clearly identify two levels of intensity of political loyalty toward a polarizing leader, which can potentially be measured and replicated in other contemporary scenarios of growing charismatic figures.

These results have two broader implications. From a theoretical standpoint, they challenge the idea that traditional political parties are the exclusive source of partisan identities and allegiances. In this scenario, the charismatic leader emerges as the defining *group object* (Campbell et al., 1960) that organizes loyalties or rivalries in the electorate, offering an alternative source of partisanship. The leader was able to emotionally divide society, organize electoral behavior, and foster a sense of group belonging even years after his physical absence. Consistent with Andrews-Lee's (2021) argument, such a consolidated charismatic identities do not abandon their personalist nature. Rather, Correa's most loyal supporters exhibit both partisan and personalistic tendencies simultaneously. This loyal citizen base provides an obvious incentive for secondary actors to exploit personalism and permanently resurrect the charismatic leader.

From a methodological perspective, the findings challenge the assumption that feeling thermometers and partisan self-identification scales measure the same political expression. Depending on how the questions were worded, survey respondents positioned themselves differently over the same divide, rather than displaying similar levels of polarization. These discrepancies are particularly important in light of the growing literature on affective polarization, which often treats feeling thermometers and self-identification as interchangeable measures of partisanship. In practice, affective attachments and collective political identities are interconnected but distinct. Emotional polarization emerges as a sharper dividing line, while partisan self-identification tends to inflate the share of neutrals—who, paradoxically, may display affective polarization levels equivalent to those of some declared partisans.

References

- Adam, S., & Maier, M. (2010). Personalization of Politics A Critical Review and Agenda for Research. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 34(1), 213–257.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2010.11679101>
- Andrews-Lee, C. (2021). *The emergence and revival of charismatic movements: Argentine Peronism and Venezuelan Chavismo*. Cambridge University Press.
- Armendariz Miranda, P., & Cawvey, M. (2021). Introverted and Closed-Minded: The Psychological Roots of Support for Autocracy in Latin America. *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 13(1), 40–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1866802X21991261>
- Aytaç, S. E., Çarkoğlu, A., & Elçi, E. (2021). Partisanship, elite messages, and support for populism in power. *European Political Science Review*, 13(1), 23–39.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773920000314>
- Bankert, A., Huddy, L., & Rosema, M. (2017). Measuring Partisanship as a Social Identity in Multi-Party Systems. *Political Behavior*, 39(1), 103–132.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-016-9349-5>
- Barisione, M. (2009). So, What Difference Do Leaders Make? Candidates' Images and the “Conditionality” of Leader Effects on Voting. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 19(4), 473–500. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457280903074219>
- Blondel, J. (Ed.). (2010). *Political leadership, parties and citizens: The personalisation of leadership*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203863435>
- Campbell, A., Converse, P., Miller, W., & Stokes, D. (1960). *The American voter* (Unabridged ed). University of Chicago Press.
- Carreras, M., Morgenstern, S., & Su, Y.-P. (2015). Refining the theory of partisan alignments: Evidence from Latin America. *Party Politics*, 21(5), 671–685.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068813491538>
- Castro Cornejo, R. (2019). Partisanship and Question-Wording Effects: Experimental Evidence from Latin America. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 83(1), 26–45.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfz006>

- Conaghan, C., & de la Torre, C. (2008). The Permanent Campaign of Rafael Correa: Making Ecuador's Plebiscitary Presidency. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 13(3), 267–284.
- Conaghan, C. (1995). Politicians against Parties: Discord and Disconnection in Ecuador's Party System. In S. Mainwaring & T. Scully (Eds.), *Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America*. Stanford University Press.
- de la Cerda, N. (2024). *Beyond Partisanship: Political Identities in Comparative Perspective* [The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill University Libraries].
<https://doi.org/10.17615/D246-ZB61>
- de la Cerda, N. (2025). Cueing Without Parties: Experimental Evidence from Peru. *Political Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-025-10059-x>
- De la Torre, C. (2013). Latin America's Authoritarian Drift: Technocratic Populism in Ecuador. *Journal of Democracy*, 24(3), 33–46.
- de la Torre, C., & Ortiz Lemos, A. (2016). Populist polarization and the slow death of democracy in Ecuador. *Democratization*, 23(2), 221–241.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1058784>
- de Vries, C. E., & Hobolt, S. B. (2020). *Political entrepreneurs: The rise of challenger parties in Europe*. Princeton University Press.
- Gachet, A. N. (2022). Help Me Help You? Populism and Distributive Politics in Ecuador. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4236133>
- García, J. (2012). *¿Voto de clase en los nuevos populismos? Los casos de Venezuela, Bolivia y Ecuador*. Universidad de Salamanca.
- García Yapur, F. L., García Orellana, L. A., & Soliz Romero, M. (2014). *MAS Legalmente, IPSP Legítimamente: Ciudadanía y Devenir Estado de Los Campesinos Indígenas En Bolivia*. PIEB/PNUD.
- Garzia, D. (2014). *Personalization of Politics and Electoral Change*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gethin, A., Martínez-Toledano, C., & Piketty, T. (2021). *Political cleavages and social inequalities: A study of fifty democracies, 1948-2020*. Harvard University Press.

- Gidron, N., Sheffer, L., & Mor, G. (2022). Validating the feeling thermometer as a measure of partisan affect in multi-party systems. *Electoral Studies*, 80, 102542.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102542>
- Gonthier, F. (2023). Partisans like any other? How populist supporters assess the economy when their party is in office. *European Political Science Review*, 15(4), 659–670.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773923000206>
- Gunterman, E. (2020). Beyond Party Identification. In *Research Handbook on Political Partisanship*. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788111997>
- Hagevi, M. (2015). Bloc Identification in Multi-Party Systems: The Case of the Swedish Two-Bloc System. *West European Politics*, 38(1), 73–92.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2014.911480>
- Hayes, B. C., & McAllister, I. (1997). Gender, Party Leaders, and Election Outcomes in Australia, Britain, and the United States. *Comparative Political Studies*, 30(1), 3–26.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414097030001001>
- Karvonen, L. (2010). *The personalisation of politics: A study of parliamentary democracies*. ECPR press.
- Key, V. O. (1968). *Politics, parties & pressure groups* (5. ed., 6. print). Crowell.
- Kitschelt, H. (2000). Linkages between Citizens and Politicians in Democratic Polities. *Comparative Political Studies*, 33(6–7), 845–879.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/001041400003300607>
- Kitschelt, H., Hawkins, K. A., Luna, J. P., Rosas, G., & Zechmeister, E. J. (2010). *Latin American Party Systems*. Cambridge University Press.
- LAPOP AmericasBarometer. (2023). *Survey 2023 in Ecuador*. Vandervilt University.
- Levitsky, S., & Loxton, J. (2013). Populism and competitive authoritarianism in the Andes. *Democratization*, 20(1), 107–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.738864>
- Loxton, J., & Levitsky, S. (2018). Personalistic Authoritarian Successor Parties in Latin America. In J. Loxton & S. Mainwaring (Eds.), *Life after Dictatorship* (1st ed., pp. 113–142). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108560566.005>

- Luján, D., & Cyr, J. (2025). Partidos políticos y mecanismos de vinculación en América Latina: Tendencias, desafíos y respuestas. *Colombia Internacional*, 122, 3–30.
<https://doi.org/10.7440/colombiaint122.2025.01>
- Lupia, A. (Ed.). (2008). *Elements of reason: Cognition, choice, and the bounds of rationality* (1. publ. 2000, digital print). Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Lupu, N. (2015). Partisanship in Latin America. In R. Carlin, M. Singer, & E. Zechmeister (Eds.), *The Latin American Voter: Pursuing Representation and Accountability in Challenging Contexts*. University of Michigan Press.
<https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.8402589>
- Lupu, N. (2016). *Party Brands in Crisis: Partisanship, Brand Dilution, and the Breakdown of Political Parties in Latin America* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139683562>
- Madsen, D., & Snow, P. G. (1987). Recruitment Contrasts in A Divided Charismatic Movement. *American Political Science Review*, 81(1), 233–238.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1960787>
- Madsen, D., & Snow, P. G. (1991). *The charismatic bond: Political behavior in time of crisis*. Harvard University Press.
- Manin, B. (1997). *The Principles of Representative Government* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511659935>
- McAllister, I. (2007). The Personalization of Politics. In R. Dalton & H. Klingemann (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*. Oxford University Press.
- Metz, R., & Plesz, B. (2025). The Irresistible Allure of Charismatic Leaders? Populism, Social Identity, and Polarisation. *Politics and Governance*, 13.
<https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.9017>
- Moncagatta, P., Espinosa Fernández De Córdova, C., & Pazmiño, M. (2023). Ganar perdiendo: Oportunidades y limitaciones de una coalición antipopulista en Ecuador. *América Latina Hoy*, 93, e29747. <https://doi.org/10.14201/alh.29747>

- Ortiz Ayala, A., & García Sánchez, M. (2014). Porque te quiero te apoyo: Estilo de gobierno y aprobación presidencial en América Latina. *Revista de ciencia política (Santiago)*, 34(2), 373–398. <https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-090X2014000200002>
- Oscarsson, H., & Holmberg, S. (Eds.). (2020). *Research Handbook on Political Partisanship*. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788111997>
- Piquet Carneiro, G. D. O. (2011). Current supply and demand for neopopulism in Latin America. *International Review of Sociology*, 21(2), 367–389. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2011.581808>
- Poertner, M. (2024). *Creating Partisans: The Organizational Roots of New Parties in Latin America* (1st ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009446327>
- Polga-Hecimovich, J. (2014). Overcoming the Regional Cleavage? Political Party Nationalization in Ecuador since the Return to Democracy. *América Latina Hoy*, 67, 91–118. <https://doi.org/10.14201/alh20146791118>
- Polga-Hecimovich, J., & Sánchez, F. (2021). Ecuador's return to the past. *Journal of Democracy*, 32(3), 5–18.
- Rahat, G., & Kenig, O. (2018). *From Party Politics to Personalized Politics?* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198808008.001.0001>
- Rahat, G., & Sheaffer, T. (2007). The Personalization(s) of Politics: Israel, 1949–2003. *Political Communication*, 24(1), 65–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584600601128739>
- Reiljan, A., Garzia, D., Ferreira Da Silva, F., & Trechsel, A. H. (2023). Patterns of Affective Polarization toward Parties and Leaders across the Democratic World. *American Political Science Review*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000485>
- Roberts, K. (2017). Populism and Political Parties. In *The Oxford handbook of populism*. Oxford university press.
- Rojo-Martínez, J. M., & Crespo-Martínez, I. (2023). «LO POLÍTICO COMO ALGO PERSONAL»: UNA REVISIÓN TEÓRICA SOBRE LA POLARIZACIÓN AFECTIVA. *Revista de ciencia política (Santiago)*, 43(1), 25–48. <https://doi.org/10.4067/s0718-090x2023005000102>

- Rovira Kaltwasser, C., & Van Hauwaert, S. M. (2020). The populist citizen: Empirical evidence from Europe and Latin America. *European Political Science Review*, 12(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773919000262>
- Samuels, D. (2006). Sources of Mass Partisanship in Brazil. *Latin American Politics and Society*, 48(02), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-2456.2006.tb00345.x>
- Sánchez-Sibony, O. (2024). Why Latin American Parties Are Not Coming Back. *Latin American Politics and Society*, 66(3), 164–193. <https://doi.org/10.1017/lap.2023.40>
- Selçuk, O. (2024). *The Authoritarian Divide: Populism, propaganda, and polarization* (1st ed.). University of Notre Dame Press.
- Torcal, M., Martini, S., & Carty, E. (2025). Challenging by Cueing? An Investigation of Party and Leader Cueing Effects Across Mainstream and Challenger Party Voters. *Political Behavior*, 47(1), 267–286. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-024-09950-w>
- Urban Pappi, F. (Ed.). (2011). Party Identification. In *International encyclopedia of political science*. SAGE Publications.
- Weber, M. (1922). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). University of California Press.