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GOVERNMENT FORMATION AND MINISTER TURNOVER IN PRESIDENTIAL CABINETS

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS IN THE AMERICAS

Edited by

Marcelo Camerlo and Cecilia Martínez-Gallardo



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9 Unilateral, against all odds

Portfolio allocation in Ecuador (1979–2015)

*Santiago Basabe-Serrano, John Polga-Hecimovich
and Andrés Mejía Acosta*

Ecuador is a country consistently beset by some of the highest cabinet turnover rates in Latin America. Yet, it does not conform to most explanations of cabinet instability offered by the scholarly literature. The Ecuadorian case deviates from the conventional wisdom in at least two important ways. First, chief executives have almost exclusively adopted strong unilateral strategies to manage their cabinets—staffing without input from political actors outside the president’s own party or circle of confidence—and regardless of variation in their institutional power, partisan power, or public approval ratings. This may be expected of presidents who, like President Rafael Correa (2007–2017), enjoyed the support of a majority coalition or a single government party, benefitted from abundant fiscal revenues, and maintained high levels of public opinion support. However, unilateral strategies were not expected from many of Ecuador’s post-transition (1979–2007) presidents, who lacked the support of a reliable legislative majority and needed to assemble multiparty coalitions to govern, who governed under times of economic distress, and endured low approval ratings. We argue that this is a peculiar feature of coalitional presidentialism in Ecuador. Given that potential coalition parties were reluctant to publicly align themselves with unpopular governments, cabinet positions were not the preferred means of political exchange. Instead, coalition partners preferred other types of exchanges including policy concessions, government appointments, or selective benefits.¹

The second paradox is that Ecuador featured high levels of cabinet volatility, both during the period of fragmented politics and minority governments, as well as during the period of presidential stability and single-party or coalition majorities. We show that political or economic crisis, changes in the governing legislative coalition, and even a minister’s personal characteristics all fail to effectively predict cabinet turnover. This finding challenges the conventional wisdom that executives who enjoy legislative support from a majority party or majority coalition or who govern in stable political economic environments should be able to ensure cabinet and policy stability. We speculate that cabinet volatility in this context may result from the heterogeneous nature of the president’s political base of support and his need to reconcile competing factions within the party.

The rest of the chapter is divided into four parts. The first part offers an overview of the Ecuadorian political system and its institutional features since

democratization. The second part analyzes executives' strategies for cabinet formation, as well as ministers' party affiliations, professional expertise, and loyalty to the president. We underscore the predominance of unilateral strategies for portfolio allocation. The third section discusses some explanations for the recurrent use of unilateral strategies by Ecuadorian presidents. The fourth part addresses the applicability of this volume's theoretical expectations to PAD in Ecuador and sets some pending themes for future research in the study of cabinet formation in presidential regimes.

Institutional background

Two principal periods have characterized the Ecuadorian political system since re-democratization: from 1979 to 2007, when presidents governed with constitutions that gave them fewer institutional powers, and they endured minority legislative support and suboptimal economic conditions, and from 2007 to 2015, when the president governed with a constitution granting him greater legislative powers, enjoyed majority party support in congress, and benefitted from a relative economic bonanza.

The political system

Ecuador was one of Latin America's first third wave democracies, re-adopting civilian rule in 1979. Unlike Argentina or Chile, the armed forces played a leading role in the transition back to democracy. However, despite more than 35 years of civilian rule democratic consolidation has been elusive and the country has experienced a good share of political instability. During this democratic period the country has adopted three constitutions and six constitutional reforms—including a 2015 amendment allowing, among other things, the indefinite re-election by popular vote of any elected authority—and three of the eight elected presidents in the period have been removed by the legislature (with a fourth perishing in an airplane crash). Perhaps most surprising, the party system evolved during this time from one of the most highly fragmented in the world to one in which the ruling *Alianza Patria Activa I Soberana* (*Alianza PAIS* or Country Alliance) controlled more than 70 percent of legislative seats (Pachano, 2008).

During the 1979–2007 period, coalition governments were generally temporary and public policy unstable due to the large number of political veto players and the absence of governments with sufficient legislative representation (Mejía Acosta, 2009; Mejía Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich, 2011). In addition, public policies were developed in the context of endemic corruption and largely based on clientelistic criteria (Jones, 2010: 44). Furthermore, actors with informal veto powers, such as social organizations and the national indigenous confederation (*Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador*, CONAIE), created a context in which uncertainty, social unrest, and a lack of long-term agreements marked the political system. The increasingly limited independence of both supreme and constitutional court judges (Basabe-Serrano, 2012; Conaghan,

2012; Basabe-Serrano and Llanos Escobar, 2014), and the historical disrespect for the rule of law conspired to produce an environment where moments of great political tension were resolved through unconstitutional agreements.² Table 9.1 summarizes this variation in the Ecuadorian political system.

The executive

Even within the context of strong Latin American presidents, Ecuadorian chief executives stand out. Shugart and Carey (1992: 19) identify a variant of presidentialism they termed “pure presidentialism,” in which chief executives possess ample freedom to designate senior government officials, including ministers. Mainwaring and Shugart (2002) argued that, under pure presidentialism, the executive not only has ample powers to appoint but can also disregard legislative dismissal attempts and retain ministers in their posts. Following these definitions, Ecuador would be a case of pure presidentialism between 1998 and 2007, and slightly diminished presidential power over the cabinet after the 2008 constitutional reform.

The 1978 Constitution empowered the National Congress to dismiss ministers through censure (*censura*), establishing a minimum threshold of votes necessary to impeach them and effectively remove them from office. The 1998 Constitution, however, significantly weakened this power. Although congress could still vote to dismiss ministers through censure (with a low 25 percent vote threshold), the power to actually *remove* them was left up to the president. The 2008 Constitution then reinstated the legislature’s power to remove ministers through censure—although requiring a favorable vote of two-thirds of the members of the National Assembly.

The effects of the aforementioned constitutional changes are reflected in ministerial impeachment proceedings. While there were 34 ministerial impeachment trials between 1979 and 1998 (1.7 per year), this number was drastically reduced to five between 1998 and 2008 (0.5 per year). The influence of constitutional design is clearest in these two periods since many other variables related to the political system, such as high party fragmentation and the absence of a majority government, remained constant (Sánchez, 2008; Mejía Acosta, 2009). Although the legislature was again empowered to dismiss ministers since 2008, no impeachment has yet taken place. This is partly due to the legislative pluralities or majorities supporting President Correa since coming to office (2007–2009: 61.53 percent; 2009–2013: 47.58 percent; 2013–2017: 72.99 percent).³

At the administrative level, there are no further legal provisions governing the organization of the cabinet. Each president has the power to increase or decrease the number of ministries according to the needs of his or her government. Variation in the requirements for ministerial appointment has been minimal. The 1978 Constitution established that potential ministers be at least 30 years of age, enjoy full citizenship, and be Ecuadorian by birth. The following constitutions (1998 and 2008) retained the citizenship requirement but widened the pool of potential ministers to include persons who were declared citizens by a “competent authority.” The

Table 9.1 Institutional background in Ecuador (1979–2017)

President	Starts	Ends	President's party	Other parties in government	Cabinet size	Total ministers	President's legislative support	Type of government	President selection	President mandate
Roldós	1979	1981	CFP	–	12	21	Minority	Minority coalition	Elected	Interrupted
Hurtado	1981	1984	DP	–	12	33	Minority	Minority coalition	Succession	Completed
Febres-Cordero	1984	1988	PSC	–	12	34	Minority	Minority single-party	Elected	Completed
Borja	1988	1992	ID	–	12	25	Minority	Minority single-party	Elected	Completed
Durán-Ballén	1992	1996	PUR	–	14	39	Minority	Minority coalition	Elected	Completed
Bucaram	1996	1997	PRE	–	14	16	Minority	Minority single-party	Elected	Interrupted
Alarcón	1997	1998	FRA	–	16	24	Minority	Minority single-party	Appointed	Completed
Mahuad	1998	2000	DP	–	15	25	Minority	Minority single-party	Elected	Interrupted
Noboa	2000	2003	Independent	–	15	31	Minority	Minority single-party	Succession	Completed
Gutiérrez	2003	2005	PSP	Pachakutik, MPD	15	47	Minority	Minority single-party	Elected	Interrupted
Palacio	2005	2007	Independent	–	16	39	Minority	Minority single-party	Appointed	Completed
Correa I	2007	2009	AP	–	28	65	Minority	Majority coalition	Elected	Completed
Correa II	2009	2013	AP	–	29	55	Minority	Majority coalition	Elected	Completed
Correa III	2013	2017	AP	–	29	24	Majority	Majority single-party	Elected	Completed
Moreno	2017	2021	AP	–	23		Majority	Majority single-party	Elected	In course

1998 Constitution maintained the minimum age of 30 years, while the 2008 Constitution eliminated the age restriction. In general, ministers' obligations include (1) advising the president, (2) management of minister's affairs, and (3) providing accountability via reports, hearings, or impeachment proceedings before the legislature.⁴

Presidents in Ecuador have adopted different, informal approaches to cabinet management. Some opt for biweekly meetings with the cabinet while others prioritize informal conversations with individual ministers or groups of ministers as a function of the country's political, social, or economic situation. President Correa held weekly meetings with the cabinet in the country's capital, and also had ministers accompany his weekly national radio and TV program, *Enlace Ciudadano* ("Citizens Outreach"). Additionally, Correa moved meetings with his cabinet to different parts of the country, for one Friday and Saturday of each month. These "traveling cabinets" (*gabinetes itinerantes*) also included managers of public institutions, the provincial governor, and other officials that the president may appoint for the occasion. The provincial prefect, mayors of the cantons of the province, and representatives of civil society could also attend. This "travelling" nature of cabinet management is also a good metaphor to illustrate that generally, the resulting public policies closely reflected the preferences of the chief executive and not necessarily the institutional legacies of each cabinet portfolio. With a few exceptions (Alberto Dahik [1992–1996] and Jorge Glas [2013–2017]), vice presidents have generally not played prominent roles in shaping or managing Ecuadorian cabinets.⁵

The cabinet

Cabinet ministers in Ecuador are subservient to the president in both theory and practice. Their formal influence is manifested in "ministerial agreements" (*acuerdos ministeriales*), legal edicts applicable to the bureaucracy that allow ministers to design public policy in the same way presidents possess decree powers and legislatures lawmaking powers. In this regard, the ministers' regulatory capacity can be as decisive as an executive decree or law that serves as legal support. Informally, as is the case in most political systems, ministers may provide advice and counsel to the president in their corresponding policy domains. Still ministers are often simply tasked with carrying out the dictates of the chief executive.

Ecuador's extended cabinet has traditionally been made up of ministers (*ministros secretarios* or *ministros*) and other officials that presidents have considered especially important in the management of the state. Usually these officials who are part of the executive branch, include the Secretary General of the Public Administration (*Secretaria General de la Administración Pública*), a de facto chief of staff, the National Secretary of Communication (*Secretaria Nacional de Comunicación*), and personal advisers to the president.⁶ When the cabinet's agenda involves technical matters, the president may invite other public officials to participate, such as the president of the Central Bank, any

regulatory superintendents, or, before the adoption of dollarization in 2000, the president of the Monetary Board. Under President Correa, one official with a strong presence in the cabinet was the Secretary of the National Secretariat of Planning and Development (SENPLADES) (Andrade, 2012; Sánchez and Polga-Hecimovich, 2015).

In general, ministries have been bureaucratically organized around the leadership of the minister and a small group of secretaries (*secretarías*) in charge of areas within the ministry; in 2007, President Correa also included the figure of the vice president at this level. In 1998, Jamil Mahuad's government created so-called "super ministries" whose role was to coordinate the work of the ministers belonging to similar sectors. This structure disappeared with the departure of President Mahuad in 2000, before reappearing as "coordinating ministries" in the successive governments of Rafael Correa.⁷ During this period the coordinating ministers gained notoriety in the public eye and greater relevance within the cabinets.⁸ Along with those coordinating ministries, historically the most politically "important" ministries have been those of policy, economics, foreign relations, and defense. In the second tier of importance are the ministries of agriculture, public works, health, education, and social welfare. Ministries of tertiary importance include those of tourism, sports, culture, and environment affairs, among others.⁹

The degree of ministers' influence on executive decisions depends on the electoral strength of the ruling party and presidential approval. When presidents lack a specific party affiliation or hold a legislative minority (e.g., Durán-Ballén, Alarcón, Noboa, Palacio), their ministers enjoy greater decision-making and political maneuvering power. On the other hand, for presidents whose parties have greater electoral support (e.g., Roldós, Febres-Cordero, Bucaram, Mahuad, Gutiérrez), the influence of ministers is selective and depends on the policy domain and political context. Finally, when the president has a broad legislative majority, as is the case with President Correa, the incidence of ministerial decision-making is marginal. From this perspective, there are ministers that exercise greater influence on the decisions of the executive as well as those limited to executing and implementing provisions directly from the president.

Still, it is challenging to determine which ministers act as pure agents of the president and which exercise more autonomy, by, for example, examining patterns of cabinet departure. With the exception of the (very few) cases of legislative impeachment, it is empirically difficult to distinguish ministerial departures due to legitimate political or policy differences with the president. In most cases, ministers often justify their resignations for "personal reasons."¹⁰

Using portfolio allocation and design (PAD) strategies

Legislative fragmentation and the challenge of assembling multiparty legislative coalitions have had an adverse impact on the formation of ministerial cabinets in Ecuador. Despite the fact that the literature has noted that presidents often turn to the appointment of ministers as a tool to form coalitions and influence executive

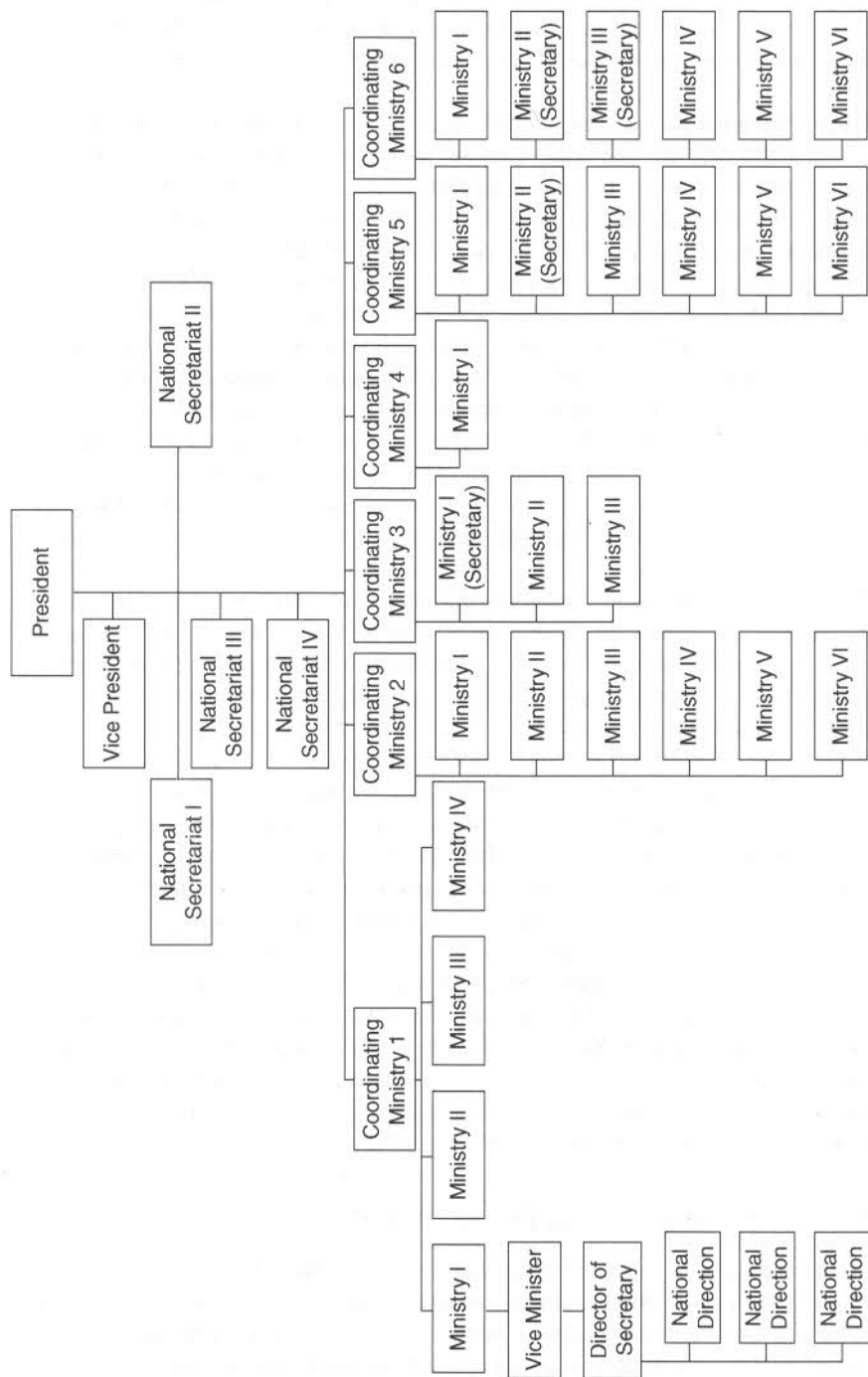


Figure 9.1 The structure of the executive power in Ecuador (2017).

decision-making (Amorim Neto, 2002; Chaisty *et al.*, 2014), the allocation of cabinet portfolios in Ecuador is highly disproportional to—and sometimes altogether ignores—the legislative representation of potential coalition partners. With the exception of a few key ministries such as Public Works or Energy and Mines—which allow the distribution of rents and benefits to interest groups via contracts and concessions—Ecuadorian presidents have generally used other tools to form legislative coalitions.¹¹

According to Mejía Acosta (2009), this is partly explained by the unwillingness of non-government parties to publicly collaborate with debilitated presidents and their preference for clandestine agreements or ghost coalitions. Parties were reluctant to publicly cooperate with the president in the context of consistently low approval ratings; prior to 2007, one of the worst stigmas for an Ecuadorian politician was to be identified as “pro-government” (*gobiernista*), and as a result, parties worked hard to avoid the electoral liability of cooperating with unpopular governments. Nevertheless, non-government parties contributed to legislative agreements with the executive in exchange for other types of coalition currencies besides cabinet positions, including policy concessions, patronage, budgetary allocations, and particularistic payments. Coalition anonymity was preserved by the common practice of not recording individual voting records in legislative roll call votes. As a result, parties could support government policies and cash in on currencies, while publicly denying any cooperation (Mejía Acosta, 2009).

Ecuadorian presidents have mostly relied on unilateral strategies when forming their cabinets, regardless of their political strength or partisan support. During the first democratic period (1979–2007), most cabinet ministers were appointed due to their specific policy expertise and loyalty to the president; party affiliation was a less important—or not public—selection criteria. Although this tendency has not changed, the president has appointed a greater proportion of loyalists than policy experts during the second and third Correa administrations (2009–2017). We argue that the president did this to increase his own influence on policymaking, as well as a way to manage such a large, ideologically heterogeneous party.

PAD at government formation

In Ecuador, government coalitions have primarily been formed prior to the new president’s election. Since legislative elections coincided with the first round of presidential elections between 1979 and 2008, parties preferred to leverage their share of legislative seats and sought to reach agreements with the new president during the second round runoff.¹² Except in isolated cases, such as the 1984 government alliance between the ruling Democratic Left (*Izquierda Democrática*, ID) and Popular Democracy (*Democracia Popular*, DP) and the 2003 pre-electoral coalition between the Patriotic Society Party (*Partido Sociedad Patriótica*, PSP) and the indigenous Pachakutik, these agreements have generally been informal arrangements, with undisclosed terms of negotiation.

Exceptions follow predictable patterns. To begin, 37 of the 42 ministers who assumed their portfolios *after* presidents took office did so under interim presidents (Alarcón, Noboa, and Palacio). In these cases, the provisional presidents replaced democratically elected ones during crises of succession. In all three examples, the interim presidents were those who quickly and successfully negotiated with congress, military leaders, and others. Given the political context, they did not have the luxury of figuring out their cabinets until after assuming office. Likewise, 37 of the 40 ministers who controlled a portfolio *before* the president assumed office came from two administrations—the Hurtado government and second Correa government—where there was no break in the governing coalition. Hurtado, for instance, assumed office after the death of President Roldós in a tragic plane crash, and kept many of his predecessor’s ministers, while Correa, who was re-elected, kept on ministers he had appointed during his first term.

As previously mentioned, until recently, party system fragmentation in Ecuador was one of the highest in the world (Pachano, 2008).¹³ As a result, government coalitions were often composed of multiple political parties. However, as described above, non-government parties have been reluctant to publicly ally themselves with presidents for fear of electoral reprisal, resulting in so-called “ghost coalitions.” And since the core tools Ecuadorian presidents used to form coalitions were not ministerial portfolios but budget allocations and appointments in key supervisory bodies, embassies, courts, and public institutions (Mejía Acosta, 2009; Basabe-Serrano, 2011), *cabinet composition rarely reflects the partisan composition of the government coalition.*

Instead, as shown in Figure 9.2, the vast majority of initial cabinet appointments were composed of self-proclaimed “independent” deputies and technocrats. This is due in part to the fluidity of party identification and affiliation in Ecuador, as well as unwillingness by ministers to be identified with any one (potentially unpopular) party. Surprisingly, only the first two years of the Borja administration featured more partisan than independent ministers in the period between 1979 and 2009, partly due to the formalized government coalition between the ID and DP-UDC. The tendency to appoint experts instead of partisans is even more acute during the interim administrations, where provisional presidents either came from a minuscule party (e.g., Alarcón) or were independents themselves and therefore avoided the need to appoint partisans to their cabinets (e.g., Noboa, Palacio). In these cases, only two of 43 ministers named at the outset of these administrations were partisans.

Unaffiliated or independent ministers are so common that overall, only 38.39 percent of all ministers were affiliated with the president’s party—with 37 of the 60 coming during the first and second Correa administrations (Figure 9.2). Moreover, ministers affiliated to other parties are even rarer, accounting for just 12 of 194 ministers at the point of government formation. Members of this small group include Frank Vargas of the Ecuadorian Popular Revolutionary Action Party (*Acción Popular Revolucionaria Ecuatoriana*, APRE) under President Abdalá Bucaram (1996–1997), and Ramiro González (AVANZA) and Érika Silva

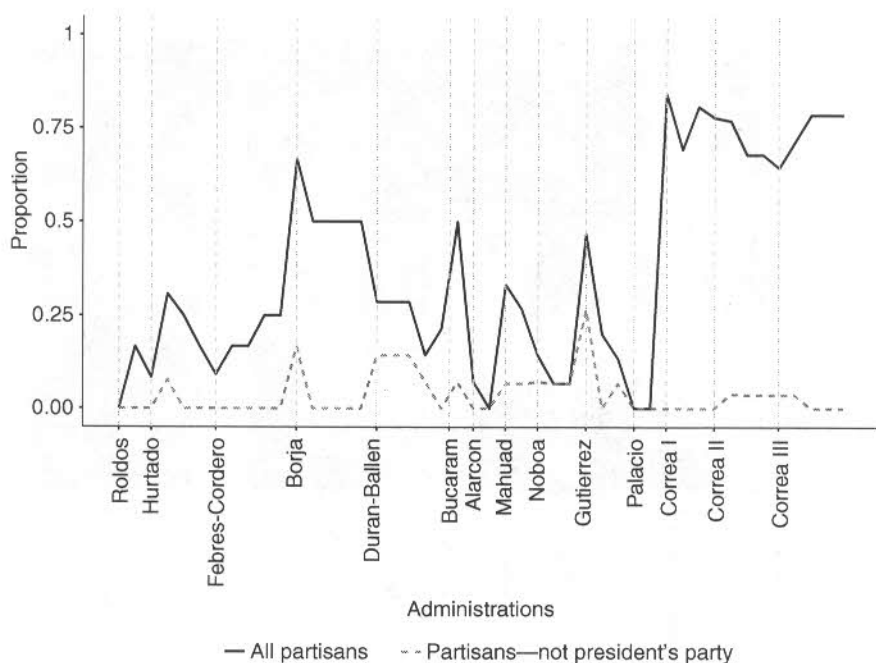


Figure 9.2 Cabinet membership by party (Ecuador 1979–2017).

(PS-FA) under Correa. These ministers tended to be ideological allies of the president in question, while their inclusion neither made nor broke the government coalition.

As a result of this peculiar form of coalition formation and management that rarely relied on cabinet appointments, an overwhelming majority of appointees can be classified as “strictly experts” or a diminished form of expert (e.g., “group-experts,” “partisan-experts”) instead of strict partisans or loyalists in terms of their thematic specialization. In fact, we find that 63.5 percent of all ministers held expertise in either the private or public sectors related to the primary policy domain of the ministry. This is clearest in fields such as economics, foreign affairs, and national defense. As Figure 9.3 captures, there are three exceptions to this general pattern across administrations: (1) the Borja government, with only three strict experts, and which as mentioned, relied on partisans to forge a public coalition with another center-left party; (2) the Gutiérrez administration, which entered office through an electoral coalition with the indigenous Pachakutik, and appointed three members of that party to its initial cabinet; and (3) the Correa government, which enjoyed majority legislative status and overcame the logic of ghost coalitions and non-partisan experts, relying nearly exclusively on strict partisans and their diminished subtypes. In short, given the fickle nature of coalition politics in Ecuador, ministers appointed

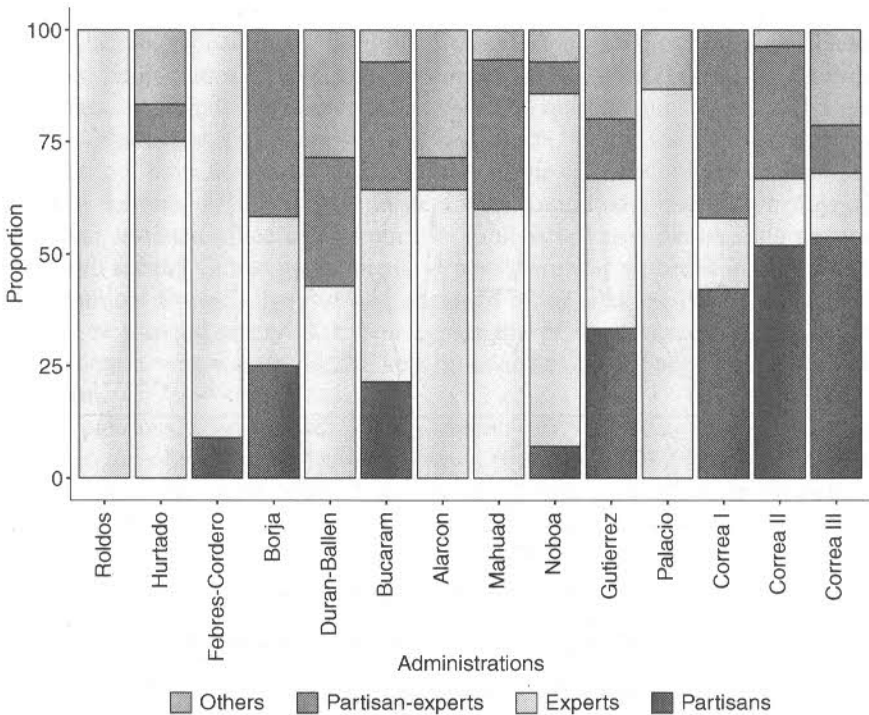


Figure 9.3 Minister profiles at inauguration (Ecuador 1979–2017).

prior to 2007 tended to be experts who were neither partisans nor loyalists. Under single-party government, however, loyalty and government stability became more valued.

In terms of portfolio design, the cabinet has grown precipitously since 2007 (see Table 9.2). From 1979 to 2007, the number of portfolios varied between 12 and 15. However, upon taking office in 2007, Correa nearly doubled the size of the cabinet, expanding it to 28—and at times 29—portfolios. Given the profound changes to the Ecuadorian political system since 2007, this increase does not reflect an attempt to create opportunities for government allies, but to pursue post-neoliberalism by expanding the role of the state and its involvement in different spheres of public life (Burbano de Lara, 2015; Conaghan, 2015; Sánchez and Polga-Hecimovich, 2015). To do this, the president created ministries from scratch (the coordinating ministries, the Ministry of Justice) and elevated other public agencies or undersecretariats to ministerial status (the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Sports). Although there is clear variation in the absolute size of the cabinet between the 1979–2007 and 2007–2015 periods, the (high) turnover rate of ministers has remained relatively unchanged throughout the democratic period (see above).

Table 9.2a Evolution of ministerial offices (Ecuador 1979-2000)

<i>Roldós</i> (1979-1981)	<i>Hurtado</i> (1981-1984)	<i>Febres-Cordero</i> (1984-1988)	<i>Borja</i> (1988-1992)	<i>Durán-Ballén</i> (1992-1996)	<i>Bucaram</i> (1996-1997)	<i>Alarcón</i> (1997-1998)	<i>Mahud</i> (1998-2000)
Agriculture and Livestock Social Welfare Defense Economy and Finance Education and Culture Energy and Mines Foreign Trade	Agriculture and Livestock Social Welfare Defense Economy and Finance Education and Culture Energy and Mines Foreign Trade	Agriculture and Livestock Social Welfare Defense Economy and Finance Education and Culture Energy and Mines Industry, Commerce, Integration, and Fishing	Agriculture and Livestock Social Welfare Defense Economy and Finance Education and Culture Energy and Mines Industry, Commerce, Integration, and Fishing	Agriculture and Livestock Social Welfare Defense Economy and Finance Education and Culture Energy and Mines Industry, Commerce, Integration, and Fishing	Agriculture and Livestock Social Welfare Defense Economy and Finance Education and Culture Energy and Mines Foreign Trade, Industrialization, and Fishing	Agriculture and Livestock Social Welfare Defense Economy and Finance Education and Culture Energy and Mines Foreign Trade, Industrialization, and Fishing	Agriculture and Livestock Social Welfare Defense Economy and Finance Education and Culture Energy and Mines Foreign Trade, Industrialization, Fishing, and Tourism Government Public Works Foreign Relations Health Labor and Human Resources Urban Development and Housing Tourism Environment
Government Public Works Foreign Relations Health Labor and Human Resources	Government Public Works Foreign Relations Health Labor and Human Resources	Government Public Works Foreign Relations Health Labor and Human Resources	Government Public Works Foreign Relations Health Labor and Human Resources	Government Public Works Foreign Relations Health Labor and Human Resources Urban Development and Housing Tourism	Government Public Works Foreign Relations Health Labor and Human Resources Urban Development and Housing Tourism	Government Public Works Foreign Relations Health Labor and Human Resources Urban Development and Housing Tourism Environment Communication	Government Public Works Foreign Relations Health Labor and Human Resources Urban Development and Housing Tourism Environment

Table 9.2b Evolution of ministerial offices (Ecuador 2000–2017)

<i>Noboa (2000–2003)</i>	<i>Gutiérrez (2003–2005)</i>	<i>Palacio (2005–2007)</i>	<i>Correa I (2007–2009)</i>	<i>Correa II (2009–2013)</i>	<i>Correa III (2013–2017)</i>	<i>Moreno (2017–)</i>
Agriculture and Livestock	Agriculture and Livestock	Agriculture and Livestock	Agriculture, Livestock, Aquaculture, and Fishing	Agriculture, Livestock, Aquaculture, and Fishing	Agriculture, Livestock, Aquaculture, and Fishing	Agriculture and Livestock
Social Welfare	Social Welfare	Social Welfare	Social Welfare	Economic and Social Inclusion	Economic and Social Inclusion	Aquaculture and Fishing Economic and Social Inclusion
Defense	Defense	Defense	Defense	Defense	Defense	Defense
Economy and Finance	Economy and Finance	Economy and Finance	Economy and Finance	Finance	Finance	Economy and Finance
Education, Culture, Sport, and Recreation	Education, Culture, Sport, and Recreation	Education, Culture, Sport, and Recreation	Education	Education	Education	Education
Energy and Mines	Energy and Mines	Energy and Mines	Culture Sport Mining and Petroleum (2007)	Culture Sport Non-Renewable Natural Resources	Culture and Patrimony Sport Hydrocarbons (2015)	Culture and Patrimony Sport Hydrocarbons
Foreign Trade, Industrialization, Fishing, and Competitiveness	Foreign Trade, Industrialization, Fishing, and Competitiveness	Industry and Competitiveness	Electricity and Renewable Energy (2007)	Electricity and Renewable Energy	Mining (2015) Electricity and Renewable Energy	Mining Electricity and Renewable Energy
Government Public Works	Government Public Works	Government Public Works	Industry and Productivity	Industry and Productivity	Industry and Productivity	Industry and Productivity
Foreign Relations	Foreign Relations	Foreign Relations	Government Transportation and Public Works	Interior (2010) Transportation and Public Works	Foreign Trade Interior Transportation and Public Works	Foreign Trade Interior Transportation and Public Works
Health Labor and Human Resources	Health Labor and Human Resources	Health Labor and Human Resources	Foreign Relations, Commerce, and Integration	Foreign Relations, Commerce, and Integration	Foreign Relations and Human Mobility (2015)	Foreign Relations
Urban Development and Housing Tourism	Urban Development and Housing Tourism	Urban Development and Housing Tourism	Public Health Labor Relations	Public Health Labor Relations	Public Health Labor (2015)	Public Health Labor
			Urban Development and Housing Tourism	Urban Development and Housing Tourism	Urban Development and Housing Tourism	Urban Development and Housing Tourism

Despite depending on coalitions to govern during the 1979–2007 period, Ecuadorian presidents relied overwhelmingly on “unilateral” cabinet management strategies. The proportion of ministers outside the president’s inner circle has remained quite low for the duration of the democratic period. The first four presidencies formed highly unilateral cabinets, with an overwhelming number of portfolios assigned to unaffiliated technocrats who were nonetheless close to the president. The strategy became more cooperative in 1992 at the beginning of the Durán-Ballén administration. The new president, who had founded the Social Christian Party (PSC) before later breaking off to create the small Republican Unity Party (PUR), co-governed with the PSC (Mejía Acosta, 2009; Mejía Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich, 2011). Still, since this coalition was largely hidden from public view, only three of Durán-Ballén’s 14 ministers came from outside his inner circle—marking an unusual instance of a coalition government defined by unilateral cabinet building. In fact, Ecuadorian cabinet management is particularly unusual since all presidents between 1992 and 2005 followed this strategy of coalition formation and cabinet building.

The most cooperative PAD at government formation during this period was Lucio Gutiérrez (PSP), who ran for office in a leftist electoral coalition with the indigenous Pachakutik party and the leftist MPD. Upon assuming office, Gutiérrez distributed cabinet portfolios to Luis Macas, Nina Pacari, and Doris Soliz (Pachakutik), Édgar Isch (MPD), and three additional politicians unaffiliated to

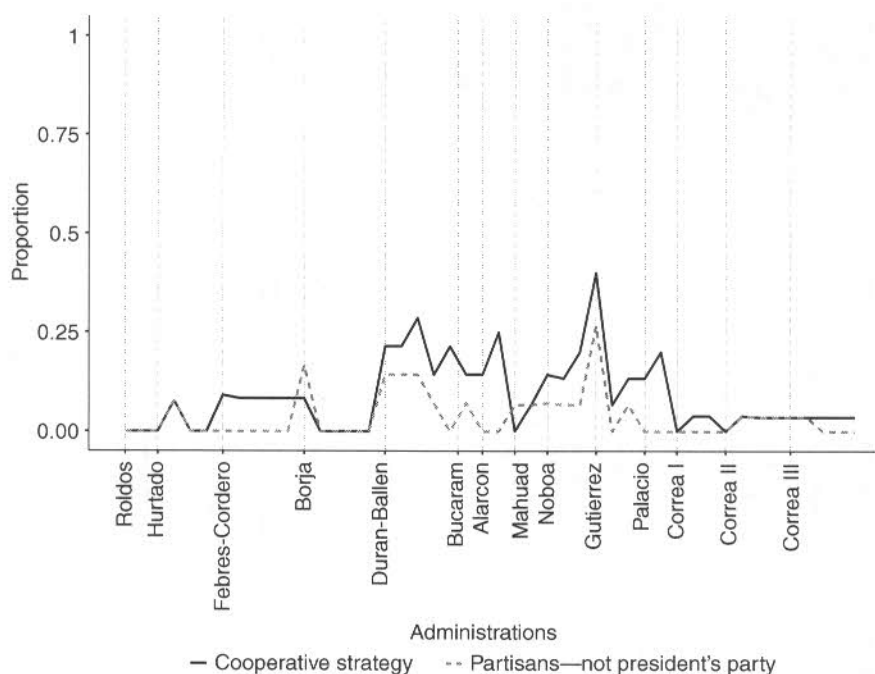


Figure 9.4 Portfolio allocation strategy (Ecuador 1979–2017).

the president. However, Gutiérrez immediately pursued neoliberal economic policies, and the pre-electoral arrangement lasted less than a year, after which point Gutiérrez's cabinet took on a unilateral veneer. On the other hand, unilateral cabinet management reached its apex under Rafael Correa, who did not have to rely on coalitions to govern in his second and third terms.

PAD during the government

Ecuador's rate of ministerial removal has long been, and continues to be, one of the highest in Latin America (Martínez Gallardo, 2010, 2012). As seen in Figure 9.5, the average minister's duration has varied little between 1979 and 2017, despite myriad political, economic, and social changes, and regardless of the background and political profile of the ministers. Instead, the most notable change in portfolio allocation and distribution concerns the mode of cabinet change, with President Correa relying on ministerial *rotation* rather than removal to an unprecedented degree since 2007.

Throughout the period of study there were no major differences in the mean duration of ministers when disaggregated into “partisans”—ministers with a party affiliation or militancy—or “experts”—those with prior expertise in the

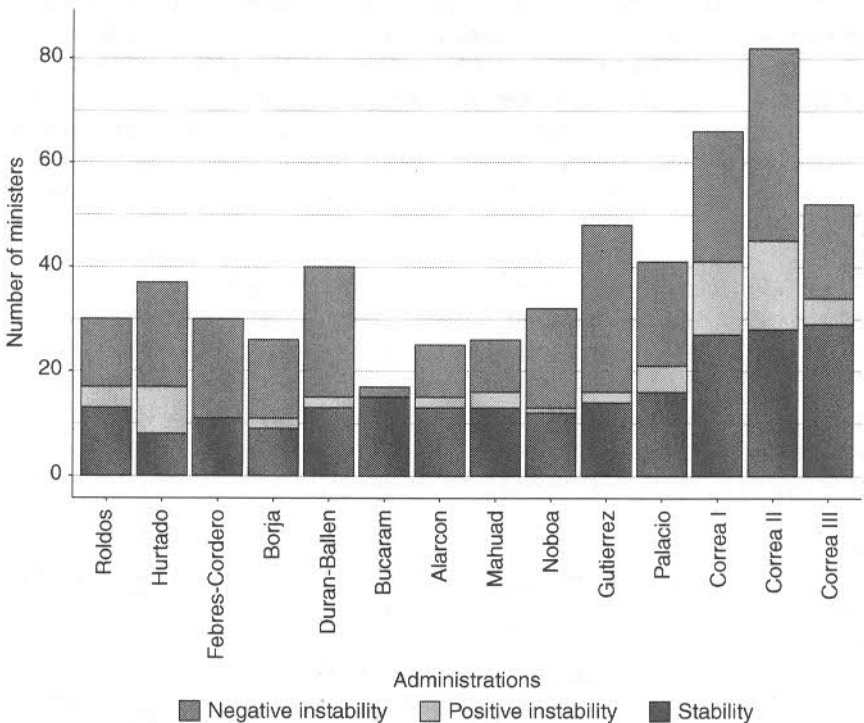


Figure 9.5 Minister turnover by type of exit (Ecuador 1979–2017).

area of his or her portfolio. As the boxplots in Figure 9.6 show, the average duration of “partisan-expert” ministers—those with party affiliation and policy expertise—is slightly higher than that of their strict partisan and strict expert counterparts, although these differences are not significant. More strikingly, mean duration slightly increased to become right skewed within the groups as the profiles move from “non-partisan” to “weak partisan” to “strict partisan” and from “no expertise” to “some expertise” to “expert.” In other words, the more a minister adopts a strict partisan or expert profile, instead of a weak one, the longer he or she is likely to endure.

The relative lack of variation in the duration of these types of ministers makes it difficult to identify political, economic, or social variables that would explain the slight differences between them. This is even more striking when noting the similarities in ministerial duration between the 1979–2007 and 2007–2015 periods, despite the substantial political differences between these two. One personal characteristic that appears to have a significant positive impact on increasing ministerial survival is having a military background (an average duration of around 550 days versus 400 for all other ministers). However, of the 541 ministers in the dataset, only 24 served in the armed forces, and of these, 18 served as Minister of Defense, meaning that their duration may reflect the comparative stability of the portfolio rather than unique personal characteristics.

Interestingly, the strategy of ministerial rotation—transferring ministers from one portfolio to another—has increased over time. The rate of ministerial reshuffling was generally low, but increased considerably during the first two Correa administrations. Before Correa, the maximum number of reshuffled ministers in any administration was two, but it climbed to eight under the first Correa administration and was five in the second. This is perhaps a function of the president’s

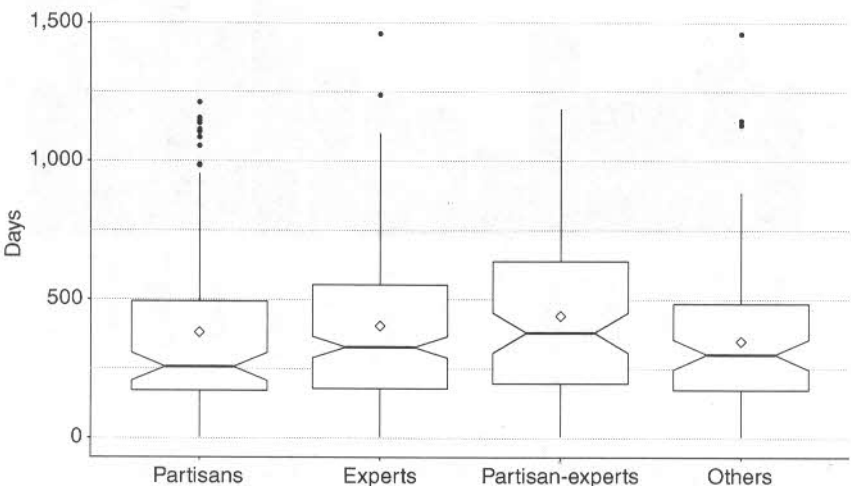


Figure 9.6 Ministerial duration by profile (Ecuador 1979–2017).

reliance on “own” ministers in such a large cabinet: given a finite number of trusted advisors and partisans among so many portfolios, transferring allies from one portfolio to another allowed the president to maintain loyalty in key positions while still changing the policies at the top of different ministries. Aside from these instances of rotation, once a minister leaves office, he or she tends to return to his or her previous professional activities in the private sector. The only exceptions to this trend are partisan ministers, who are more likely to continue their political career in another area of the public sector.

With the important exception of President Correa, Ecuadorian presidents appointed few partisan loyalists who were not experts.¹⁴ Until 2003, no administration featured more than three non-experts, and in no administration did the number of non-experts and semi-experts surpass the total of experts. By contrast, under Correa, 30 of the 65 ministers in the first presidential administration were non-experts or semi-experts, while semi-experts became the modal category during the second and third Correa governments and non-experts and semi-experts accounting for more than double the number of experts. This change probably reflects at least two differences between the Correa government and previous ones. First, given the doubling of cabinet portfolios, it might have become more difficult for the president to surround himself solely by loyalists who were also experts in their corresponding policy domains. Second, as Correa enjoyed strong political capital and unprecedented popular support during his time in office, his policies showed less willingness to compromise. Accordingly, he may have preferred delegating these policies to a loyalist unwilling to alter policy than an expert more prone to intervene with their own expertise and policy preferences.

Indeed, unilateralism remains the dominant feature of government PAD in Ecuador. As we mention above, although there were sometimes ministries allocated to parties involved in government coalitions or actors belonging to the president’s own party, the presence of such ministers was rare from the 1979–2007 period. In fact, during the interim administrations of Alarcón (1997–1998), Noboa (2000–2003), and Palacio (2005–2007)—all leaders who assumed office after the resignation or impeachment of the elected president—there were virtually no partisan ministers.¹⁵ This pattern changed slightly with the arrival of Rafael Correa and the rearrangement of the national political scene. Although the ministers belonging to the government party in Correa’s administrations increased to maintain internal cohesion, the quota of other political parties in the cabinet was low.

A lack of declared partisanship, however, does not imply that the ministers were apolitical technocrats. Instead, cabinets were often composed of formally unaffiliated individuals with expertise who were also loyal to the president. Referring back to the “cooperative index” in Figure 9.4, there is a consistently higher share of ministers close to the president compared to those outside of the president’s sphere of influence. Unilateral strategies employed at the beginning of administrations endured throughout. What is more, even the high point of cooperation in the democratic period, at the beginning of President Gutiérrez’s

term, was followed by the rapid dissolution of that public alliance between parties and the return of a highly unilateral PAD after the president's first nine months in office. In short, Ecuadorian presidents exercised high levels of discretion and control over their cabinets throughout their time in office, resulting in high levels of turnover and the near exclusive appointment of loyalists.

PAD at government termination

Since government coalitions in Ecuador were often clandestine “ghost” coalitions formed outside public scrutiny, termination followed a similar logic. In general, analysts were able to infer the beginning and end of alliances through civil service appointments (although not necessarily ministers) and journalistic reports.¹⁶ In general, these volatile (ghost) coalitions ended for a number of reasons. The first was the failure of governments to deliver monetary rewards like sequential budgetary items to provincial prefects or municipal authorities associated with the coalition's member parties, or when the delivery of funds to legislators themselves decreased (Mejía Acosta, 2009). Likewise, approaching elections and poor government performance, reflected in things like decreases in approval rating, increases in social protest, and rising economic inflation, all exercised a statistically significant effect on the likelihood of coalitions unraveling in Ecuador (Mejía Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich, 2011).

Consequently, no government coalition from 1979 to 2007 endured the entirety of a presidency or—if formed in the middle of the presidency—until elections, and new governments were created before the end of the administration. In fact, the construction and erosion of ghost coalitions was so common that Mejía Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich (2011) find that from 1988 to 1996, the average coalition lasted only 12 months, before decreasing to just 3.32 months from 1996 to 2007. Meanwhile, the average number of coalitions per year grew from 0.63 per year before 1996 to 1.73 per year after. However, Correa's arrival in 2007 radically changed these dynamics. Since the ruling bloc in the legislature grew significantly, ultimately giving the president a legislative majority, the need for agreements with other political parties became unnecessary.

Since ministerial appointments were not a prime coalition formation tool, ministerial departures and appointments rarely coincided with the formation and erosion of these governments. Instead, it was the arrival of new presidents—including interim presidents—that triggered an almost complete restructuring of the cabinet. It was exceptionally rare for ministers to remain in charge of a given portfolio when a new president took office. Two deviations from this rule include former Minister of Foreign Relations Galo Leoro, who was appointed under the Durán-Ballén administration and remained at the head of the portfolio under the arrival of Abdalá Bucaram, and Minister of Education Raúl Vallejo, who was appointed under the Palacio government and retained under Rafael Correa. The reason for near-complete cabinet turnover with the change of administrations is the high level of unilateralism enjoyed by presidents; each president surrounded himself with his “own” ministers when coming to office.

Yet, despite this practice and a generally high overall rate of ministerial turnover, once a president began his duties, cabinet changes were often staggered—occurring at different moments throughout the term—and not simultaneous, as would be the case with turnover in places depending on cabinet coalitions to govern. Despite the informal practice of ministers presenting their resignations to the president at the end of the year as a way to give the chief executive additional flexibility, changes are generally made on a case-by-case basis, rather than as part of a broader wave of administrative turnover. Further, beginning in 2007 pure ministerial exit has been replaced with a combination of both removal and rotation, with the president relocating many loyal ex-ministers to other ministries, embassies, and public institutions.

Explaining portfolio allocation and design (PAD) strategies

Contrary to established knowledge (e.g., Martínez-Gallardo, 2012), Ecuadorian presidents have nearly always pursued unilateral strategies in the design and formation of their cabinets regardless of their institutional strength and public standing. We argue that this is due in part to (1) the nature of legislative coalitions in Ecuador and the types of (non-portfolio allocation) exchange that presidents pursued to forge these coalitions, and (2) high levels of institutional power enjoyed by the president in the non-coalition era since 2007 (Basabe-Serrano, 2017). Additionally, we find no convincing evidence to support existing arguments that presidents' PAD or ministerial duration will vary by ministerial profile and presidential approval (e.g., Camerlo and Pérez-Liñán, 2015a) or the incidence of economic and political shocks (e.g., Camerlo and Pérez-Liñán, 2015b). Instead, with cabinet changes in over 40 percent of months under study, PAD in Ecuador reflects change in both tumultuous and uneventful times.

Presidents and their environments

The central contention of this book is that presidents with greater institutional political power have fewer incentives to promote collaborative strategies in the formation of their cabinet, while weaker presidents will tend to rely more heavily on collaborative strategies. Ecuador presents an interesting case with which to test this hypothesis, since presidents have possessed a great deal of variation in their institutional powers, partisan powers, and public approval ratings. On one hand, presidents in the 1979–2007 period were weaker in terms of both formal tools to govern, their partisan powers, and economic context, yet they mostly resorted to unilateral strategies to build their cabinets. Meanwhile, Rafael Correa accumulated much more institutional and partisan power—as well as a more favorable macroeconomic environment and higher public approval—in the 2007–2017 period, but continued to pursue a unilateral strategy in his cabinet appointments. In short, Ecuadorian presidents have prioritized unilateral strategies in their PAD regardless of their political and institutional strength, and regardless of the prevailing economic and political environment.

Both the 1998 and 2008 political constitutions increased Ecuadorian presidents' institutional powers, giving them more tools for generating and executing their government agenda (Basabe-Serrano, 2017). The 1998 Constitution gave greater discretion to the president to manage the budget, eliminated the ability of the National Congress to dismiss ministers after an impeachment, and eliminated other legislative powers perceived by the public to be corrupt (Basabe-Serrano *et al.*, 2010).¹⁷ However, government coalitions lasted less time than in the 1979–1996 period, the bill approval rate by the legislature remained low, and the cabinet turnover rate did not change (Mejía Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich, 2011).

Furthermore, the pervasive practice of legislators supporting the presidential agenda in exchange for positions in public institutions or embassies, or the direct allocation of financial resources, remained intact. As we have argued, although presidents did include a few select ministries in cabinet formation negotiations (essentially those with financial resources and the ability to generate patronage), agreements generally did not involve greater participation from coalition partners in deciding cabinet formation. In addition, governing parties held minority legislative blocs and, outside of the months they took office, positive presidential approval—the percentage of respondents who gave the president a favorable rating—was consistently between a middling 30 percent and 55 percent (see Carlin *et al.*, 2016). In sum, although Ecuadorian presidents from 1979 to 2007 were often politically weak, they nearly always utilized unilateral strategies for PAD.

This scenario changed dramatically with the arrival of President Correa in 2007. At an institutional level, the 2008 Constitution promulgated by Correa increased certain executive powers at the expense of some key powers of the legislature, such as the appointments of Supreme Court judges, the Federal Prosecutor, and the General Comptroller. Correa also had strong public support, enjoying a positive approval rating of 65–80 percent for much of his time in office, buttressed by a legislative majority in the National Assembly (and one that surpassed a supermajority in 2013). Additionally, between 2007 and 2013 the international price of oil—Ecuador's primary source of export earnings—reached unprecedented heights, creating a favorable economic situation for the president and giving him access to an influx of government revenue. In these ways, Correa's political, social, and economic context was diametrically opposed to that of his predecessors.

As a result, Correa did not have the need to promote political agreements with other actors. Consistent with Martínez-Gallardo (2012), the representation of other political parties or sectors in Correa's cabinets was inversely proportional to the size of the legislative government party. While Correa's cabinet during the first months of 2007 included individuals from smaller political parties, such quotas were reduced over time until there were no ministers who did not belong to the governing *Alianza PAIS* by mid-2015.

In addition to a reliance on a unilateral cabinet management and “own” ministers in both the 1979–2007 and 2007–2017 periods, presidents' PAD strategies do not appear to be driven by political or economic crisis—a notable deviation

from Camerlo and Pérez-Liñán's (2015b) findings. Instead, portfolio volatility has been nearly constant in the democratic period; to wit, there were cabinet changes in more than 40 percent of months (167 of 408) between 1979 and 2013. Of the months with turnover, the modal category of changes was a single portfolio, which occurred 55 percent of the time (92 of 167 months). What is more, with the exception of alternation in presidential administration, which always generated full or near-full cabinet replacement, monthly turnover involved less than half the number of total cabinet portfolios. In fact, between 1979 and 2003, the monthly total of ministerial changes never exceeded five, and it reached seven only in 2012, when the total number of portfolios had grown to 28.

The steady incidence of ministerial change combined with limited numbers of monthly changes make it difficult to ascertain whether PAD in Ecuador is related to changes in macroeconomic indicators or specific political crises and conflicts faced by each president. There are some anecdotal cases where political or economic crisis was followed by a change in four or five ministers (e.g., the dissolution of Lucio Gutiérrez's coalition with Pachakutik in 2003), but when viewed systematically, political-economic environment and cabinet turnover appear independent of one another. This may be partially due to the fact that cabinet portfolios were not a relevant coalition-building tool for the majority of the period studied, and therefore the cabinet was not the central arena of recalibration of political strengths and weaknesses to confront crisis. Instead, presidents tended to respond to political or economic difficulty by altering the conditions or composition of their (ghost) coalitions (Mejía Acosta and Polga-Hecimovich, 2011) or, as a result of pressures from the legislature, such as changes in the composition of the Supreme Court (Basabe-Serrano and Polga-Hecimovich, 2013).

Testing the PAD argument

This book argues that presidents who are institutionally stronger and enjoy favorable political, social, and economic contexts are able to avoid cooperative strategies and instead utilize unilateral ones to build their cabinets. Conversely, weak presidents or those governing during times of crisis should be more likely to engage in cooperative strategies with other parties. However, as we have argued throughout this chapter, the empirical data from Ecuador support this assertion only from 2007 onwards. What is more, these unilateral strategies involved naming formally independent or unaffiliated politicians close to the president to cabinet positions instead of ones with strong partisan affiliations. Figure 9.3 shows that the highest percentage of partisan ministers—those belonging to the ruling party who do not necessarily possess a high level of policy expertise—occurred during the three Correa administrations. On the other hand, the presence of expert ministers has been relatively constant throughout the democratic period. In this regard, Correa is the president that has employed the fewest ministers with specialized expertise in a given policy domain, preferring to prioritize both those who are members of his party as well as those loyal to his political project.

The second part of the argument states that presidents who are institutionally weak and govern in unfavorable political, social, and economic contexts tend to use cooperative strategies to construct their cabinets. However, this does not appear to be the case in Ecuador. The empirical findings place the country as an outlier, given that institutionally weak presidents before 2007 still tended towards unilateral appointment strategies even under unfavorable circumstances.

Moreover, despite the unstable political, economic, and social environment that plagued many Ecuadorian governments between 1979 and 2007, the duration of ministerial experts did not vary considerably in comparison to their partisan colleagues. Instead, rates of portfolio turnover between the 1979–2007 and 2007–2017 periods are roughly similar.

Concluding remarks

Ultimately, this book's approach as well as the conventional wisdom are insufficient to explain PAD in Ecuador. Contrary to what this book proposes, we show that Ecuadorian presidents resorted almost exclusively to strongly unilateral strategies in their cabinet management despite varying levels of institutional power, partisan power, and public approval. This is due in large part to the fact that the formation of government coalitions between the executive and legislature, known as "ghost coalitions," did not generally involve the formal exchange of ministerial portfolios, but other appointed positions, budgetary provisions, and other private exchanges. The import of this peculiarity to the theoretical arguments of this edited volume cannot be overstated. To the contrary, this mode of coalition building unfortunately undermines many of the contributions this book hopes to make, including proposing a more precise mode of counting coalitions.

Ecuador's PAD dynamics do, however, align with the book's main arguments with the arrival of President Correa in 2007. For the first time since democratization the ruling party enjoyed a legislative majority, economic bonanza aided by the rise in commodity prices, and unprecedented levels of popular approval. President Correa pursued a predictable cabinet formation strategy: he called upon very few actors from other political parties and prioritized individuals who were loyal to his government project and those affiliated to the governing party. In fact, the second and third Correa administrations exhibited a marked increase in the distribution of cabinet portfolios to strict partisan ministers at the expense of strict experts. Although this provides evidence of a unilateral appointment strategy under favorable political, economic, and social contexts, it may also be an indication of the cabinet's secondary role in political decision-making under the president.

Beyond PAD strategies, we have shown that Ecuadorian ministers have suffered a high rate of turnover since 1979. However, across the universe of cases, ministers' backgrounds (e.g., ex-military, ex-business, religious leader) were not correlated with significant differences in duration in office, nor were differences in being a strict partisan, strict expert, or partisan-expert. During the 1979–2007

period, it is possible that high volatility corresponded to changes in the political environment, leading presidents to make cabinet changes in order to obtain support from different political or social sectors. Given the decline in party system fragmentation and multipartyism in the 2007–2015 period we suggest that continued changes in the cabinet may be related to rearrangements of existing political factions within the ruling Alianza PAIS. In both scenarios, a detailed study of the ministerial volatility rate in Ecuador is a phenomenon that merits future investigation.

One of the most relevant aspects of the volume's theoretical framework to the Ecuadorian case is in the way it distinguishes cooperative from unilateral PAD strategies. The scholarly literature classifies this according to whether the president appoints partisans from other parties or not. By contrast, this book distinguishes cooperative from unilateral strategies according to whether the president appoints ministers who are personally or professionally close or not—regardless of formal political affiliation. This is quite useful in Ecuador, where technocrats' unwillingness to be affiliated to a political party for much of the democratic period meant that even cabinets that reflected presidents' use of "own" ministers—those in the president's inner circle—depended to a high degree on formally non-partisan individuals. This is a helpful approach to understand Ecuadorian unilateralism.

Finally, this work takes a first step towards helping determine ministers' real political influence on presidents and understanding the relationship between ministers' previous political careers and the institutional performance of ministries. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, although research on the president's distinct political roles in Latin America has advanced considerably, there is much to explore about how presidents structure policymaking within the executive branch in presidential regimes.

Notes

- 1 This in turn was facilitated by the lack of recorded roll call votes in the National Congress, affording coalition partners plausible deniability of collaborating with the president or the president's agenda when questioned by the press.
- 2 The justification for the removals of presidents Bucaram, Mahuad, and Gutierrez all relied, to some degree, on extra constitutional mechanisms.
- 3 In July 2007, when Presidente Correa lacked a legislative bloc, then Minister of Economy Ricardo Patiño faced impeachment proceedings.
- 4 The constitutions of 1998 and 2008 further show that in the temporary absence of the president and vice president, the president will appoint a minister to represent the executive branch.
- 5 Alberto Dahik was vice president during the Sixto Durán-Ballén government (1992–1996). For a detailed description, see Mejía Acosta (2006). Cornejo (1996) presents a valuable work of investigative journalism on the topic. From mid-2013, President Correa appointed Jorge Glas to coordinate the strategic sectors, basic industry, and productivity. For more details, see Executive Decree No. 15, June 2, 2013.
- 6 During the Correa government, one key official with decision-making capacity higher than even that of the ministers is the National Judicial Secretary of the presidency (*Secretario Jurídico de la Presidencia de la República*), Alexis Mera.

- 7 In the 2013–2017 governing period, there were six coordinating ministries: Social Development; Production, Employment, and Competivity; Human Knowledge and Talent; Political Economy; Energy; and Security. Until May 2013 there was also a coordinating Ministry of Patrimony.
- 8 In one of his first acts of government upon taking office on May 24, 2017, President Lenín Moreno eliminated these coordinating ministries.
- 9 This classification of ministries is based on the parameters of notoriety, resource management, and the importance of the issues addressed used by Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson (2005) and Krook and O'Brien (2012).
- 10 One exceptional case is that of Fausto Ortiz, former finance minister to President Correa, who after resigning acknowledged that the real reason for his departure was his refusal to sign records from the Deposit Guarantee Agency that contained previously undisclosed information. According to Ortiz, President Correa gave him an ultimatum to sign the records or resign; Ortiz opted to resign.
- 11 Legislative coalitions in Ecuador were essentially formed through the exchange of votes for budget allocations to the provinces, positions in institutions of control such as the Ecuadorian Institute of Electrification (*Instituto Ecuatoriano de Electrificación*) or the state oil company, Petroecuador, or through cash payments (Mejía Acosta, 2009).
- 12 The only instance in which legislative elections were held at the same time as the runoff presidential election was in 1979, when Jaime Roldós faced off against Sixto Durán-Ballén in the second round.
- 13 Our analysis here excludes Correa's 2013–2017 term, in which the president enjoyed a legislative majority and, therefore, did not require coalitions to govern. Although the Socialist-Broad Front Party (*Partido Socialista-Frente Amplio*, PS-FA) and AVANZA movement vote with the government bloc in the legislature, their support is not necessary for the president to pursue his political agenda.
- 14 We obtained background information and ministers' expertise through interviews with key political actors and the main print media in the country (*Diario Hoy*, *El Universo*, and *El Comercio*).
- 15 Neither Noboa nor Palacio was affiliated to any political party.
- 16 Basabe-Serrano and Polga-Hecimovich (2013) identify 15 different coalitions in Ecuador between 1999 and 2007.
- 17 One of these powers was that lawmakers could manage budget items for their respective provinces. This often resulted in negotiations that led to exchanges of budget items for votes.