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Discussion Paper

1 YASunidos: Multimodal Fights for Democracy

2 An Analysis of the *Sí al Yasuní* Campaign

3 *Judith Visser*

4 1. Introductory remarks

5 On August 20, 2023, the Ecuadorian people decided to leave large oil
6 reserves in the ground within the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve in the
7 Amazon rainforest. The campaign leading up to the referendum was
8 accompanied by the slogan *Sí al Yasuní* ‘YES to Yasuní’ but implicitly
9 hidden behind this positively worded call was a NO to previous
10 practices, since oil exploitation in Ecuador’s rainforest has been a
11 significant economic model for the country for decades.

12 The referendum and the accompanying media campaign were
13 organized by the collective YASunidos. It garnered worldwide
14 attention and received support from prominent figures. The
15 initiative was hailed as a historic example of democratic processes.
16 On August 3 of the same year, for example, DiCaprio posted on his
17 Instagram account: “With this first-of-its-kind referendum
18 worldwide, Ecuador could become an example in democratizing
19 climate politics.”¹

20 YASunidos activist Andrea Santillana described the initiative as
21 “democracia por abajo” ‘[literally] democracy from below’.² Against
22 this backdrop, the *Sí al Yasuní* campaign can be characterized as a
23 form of “grassroots movement” (Voss 2010), significantly benefiting
24 from the communication and mobilization opportunities offered by
25 social media. Particularly in light of Ecuador’s unstable and violence-
26 ridden political situation – classified as a threat to democracy
27 (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2023) and originating, in part, from the
28 government itself (United Nations 2025) – an analysis of this

1 https://www.instagram.com/p/CvfXUJzJhJG/?utm_source=ig_embed, 23/03/2026.

2 <https://entrepueblos.org/gana-si-en-la-consulta-yasuni/>, 23/03/2026.

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29 successful campaign offers valuable insights into the fight for
30 (alternative) democracy(ies).

31 Ecuador and Yasuní National Park are particularly interesting
32 subjects of analysis, as the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon live
33 according to social structures that resist integration with
34 European/Western conceptions of democracy. Given that Yasuní is
35 one of the world's most significant biodiversity hotspots (Lu et al.
36 2017: 15), the Ecuadorian people's decision carries transnational
37 implications, as the rainforest plays a crucial role in global climate
38 regulation. This likely explains why internationally renowned
39 climate activists such as DiCaprio and Greta Thunberg publicly
40 endorsed the YES vote (Rosero 2023).

41 While the campaign extended beyond media engagement, this
42 article focuses specifically on its media-related dimensions. Due to
43 the impossibility of conducting on-site field research, the analysis is
44 necessarily limited to a specific group of actors – a constraint that is
45 acknowledged and accounted for in the following discussion. Given
46 the media platforms utilized by the YASunidos collective, the 'fight
47 for biodiversity' is pursued through a diverse range of semiotic
48 modes. Text and images play central roles, each contributing
49 distinctively to the campaign's communicative strategy.

50 The aim of this study is to analyze key communications from the
51 *Sí al Yasuní* campaign in order to examine the interplay of semiotic
52 modes in the struggle for biodiversity. It seeks to integrate
53 approaches from political discourse analysis with those from
54 multimodal research.

55 Despite the international media attention garnered by the
56 referendum and earlier initiatives, it is essential first to situate the
57 campaign within its political, cultural, and ecological context before
58 turning to a detailed examination of four central aspects in the next
59 phase: the corporate design, the slogan *Sí al Yasuní*, the multimodal
60 representation of diversity, and the dichotomization of YES and NO,
61 a binary that is particularly evident in textual and visual discourse.

62 2. YASunidos as a Grassroots Movement in the Ecuadorian Context

63 2.1 Yasuní National Park and Its Inhabitants

64 Yasuní National Park covers an area of 10,300 km² and is located in
65 the Ecuadorian Amazon. It spans 10,300 km² and is part of the
66 larger Yasuní Biosphere Reserve (Reserva de Biósfera Yasuní),
67 which covers 27,567 km². The reserve is one of the most biodiverse
68 regions on Earth, hosting more than 1,100 tree and shrub species

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69 per hectare, over 100,000 insect species per hectare, approximately
70 500 fish species, 600 bird species, 200 mammal species, and 271
71 amphibian and reptile species (Reserva de Biósfera Yasuní 2024):

72 Ecuador’s largest protected area, YNP, created in November 1979
73 via inter-ministerial decree of the Ecuadorian government,
74 originally covered 6,797 square kilometers in a region of eastern
75 Ecuador that correspond to the ancestral territory of the Waorani
76 [...]. The park itself and portions of contemporary legally
77 demarcated Waorani territory [...] were declared a UNESCO Man
78 and Biosphere Reserve in 1989 (Lu et al. 2017: 16).

79 The Waorani lived in isolation for much of their history and were
80 only brought into contact with Western society during the second
81 half of the 20th century, through the efforts of evangelical
82 missionaries and members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics
83 (Lu et al. 2017: 20). The park also includes the *Zona Intangible*
84 *Tagaeri-Taromenane* (ZITT), a protected ‘untouchable’ zone named
85 after two indigenous groups culturally related to the Waorani (Lu et
86 al. 2017: 21). These groups continue to live in voluntary isolation
87 maintaining traditional, nomadic lifestyles.

88 Their self-imposed isolation is critical to understanding the
89 political and ethical dimensions of the referendum at the center of
90 this discussion, which can be interpreted as an instrument of direct
91 democracy (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung s.a.). Since the
92 Tagaeri and Taromenane do not recognize themselves as part of the
93 State of Ecuador, any state-level or referendum-based decision
94 affecting their territory constitutes an external imposition. People in
95 Voluntary Isolation (PVI, Lu et al. 2017) such as the Tagaeri and
96 Taromenane neither elect governments nor participate in bottom-
97 up political processes. Their autonomy and right to self-
98 determination remain fundamentally unacknowledged by national
99 decision-making mechanisms.

100 In contrast, the Waorani are formally integrated into Ecuadorian
101 society, though this integration has come at a significant cultural
102 cost. The colonial model of community organization introduced to
103 Latin America contradicts the Waorani’s historical social and
104 political structures. Over recent decades, as the Waorani have
105 undergone partial integration into the nation-state – gaining
106 citizenship and access to state services – they have been confronted
107 with a “radically different ontology of politics” one grounded in
108 concepts such as “contract, democracy, and hierarchical power,”
109 which are historically alien to their worldview (Lu et al. 2017: 49).
110 Within Waorani society, political decisions are typically made
111 through consensus rather than majority voting (Lu et al. 2017: 50),

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making participation in Western-style referendums or representative democratic processes particularly challenging.

Moreover, the issue of oil extraction in the Amazon directly impacts the Waorani's ancestral territory. While they have a deep spiritual and cultural connection to this land, they do not 'own' it in the Western legal sense (Lu et al. 2017:49). Their relationship with the land is rooted in ancestral knowledge and sustainable practices, rather than in property rights as defined by national or international law.

For decades, oil has been a cornerstone of Ecuador's economy (Hoffmann 2008). In the early 20th century, the Ecuadorian government began granting oil exploration and production concessions to foreign companies (Lu et al. 2017: 71). By the 1970s, the number of such concessions had risen to 30 (Lu et al. 2017: 71). Approximately 20% of the country's total oil reserves lie within the Amazon region (Forschungs- und Dokumentationszentrum Chile-Lateinamerika e.V. 2019), placing the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve at the heart of a major economic and environmental conflict. Oil extraction is often promoted as a means to alleviate poverty and fund social development (Lu et al. 2017: 72). While foreign currency generated from oil exports has contributed to improvements in public services, healthcare, and infrastructure, these benefits have been uneven and limited in scope (Hoffmann 2008). More critically, oil extraction has repeatedly led to severe environmental degradation in the rainforest, including deforestation and water contamination (Hoffmann 2008).

2.2 Oil Extraction in Yasuní: Rafael Correa's Policy

In 2007, the left-wing politician Rafael Correa assumed the presidency of Ecuador. His political approach is often described as populist (Maihold 2006). In his publications, Correa frequently criticizes neoliberal economic policies and foreign, particularly U.S., influence in Latin American countries (Lu et al. 2017: 9). His humble origins, deep Christian faith, and strong commitment to social justice have contributed significantly to his credibility, especially among marginalized communities (Lu et al. 2017: 10). A central political objective during his tenure was the expansion of citizen participation in governance (Lu et al. 2017: 10).

To understand Correa's ambivalent stance on oil extraction in Yasuní National Park, it is essential to examine two major initiatives launched during his first term: These include a referendum (Lu et al. 2017: 52) leading to a new constitution adopted in 2008. In this constitution, nature is granted constitutional status. The goal of

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154 communal life is defined as achieving a “good way of living,” guided
155 by the indigenous concept of *sumak kawsay* (see Visser 2026). The
156 constitution explicitly affirms Ecuador as a plurinational and
157 intercultural state:

158 We women and men, the sovereign people of Ecuador [...]

159 CELEBRATING nature, the Pacha Mama (Mother Earth), of which
160 we are a part and which is vital to our existence, [...]

161 Hereby decide to build

162 A new form of public coexistence, in diversity and in harmony with
163 nature, to achieve the good way of living, the *sumak kawsay*; [...]

164 Ecuador is a constitutional State of rights and justice, a social,
165 democratic, sovereign, independent, unitary, intercultural,
166 multinational and secular State [...]”³

167 This constitutional recognition of *sumak kawsay* implies, at least in
168 principle, a departure from profit-driven development models (Lu et
169 al. 2017: 72). However, a key contradiction lies in the fact that the
170 government continued to rely on oil revenues to fund social
171 programs and achieve the very goals of ‘good living’ (Lu et al. 2017:
172 70).

173 In 2007, the Correa administration introduced the *Yasuní-ITT*
174 *Initiative*, named after the Ishpingo, Tambococha, and Tiputini oil
175 fields located within Yasuní National Park. The initiative proposed
176 leaving the oil beneath the park untouched in exchange for
177 international compensation amounting to 50% of the projected
178 revenue from the oil reserves (Lu et al. 2017: 179). Despite
179 widespread international attention and initial support, the initiative
180 ultimately failed due to insufficient financial commitments from the
181 global community. It was officially terminated on August 15, 2013
182 (Lu et al. 2017: 180). Subsequently, the government authorized oil
183 extraction in the protected zone, attributing the failure to secure
184 international funding to the lack of global solidarity (Gálvez
185 Mancilla/Bonilla Martínez 2014: 86).

186 2.3 The Origins of YASunidos

187 The YASunidos collective, a coalition of environmental groups,
188 emerged in the context of the Yasuní-ITT Initiative (Lu et al.
189 2017:185, 203). According to Lu et al. the collective is characterized

³ Traduction: <https://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html>,
23/03/2026.

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as “urban-centered, primarily mestizo” (2017: 203), with strong ties to academic and civil society circles (Gálvez Mancilla/Bonilla Martínez 2014: 91). As such, its core members are largely non-indigenous and do not reside in the affected regions of the Amazon. One of YASunidos’ primary objectives was to organize a national referendum to halt oil extraction in Yasuní following the collapse of the ITT Initiative (Lu et al. 2017: 185). The Correa administration actively sought to obstruct this effort, employing both coercive measures and strategic media manipulation. The government undermined the legitimacy of the referendum process, including by questioning the validity of signature collection efforts. There is evidence that the campaign faced systematic sabotage – such as the distribution of counterfeit or misleading documents – intended to disrupt the collection of the required signatures (Lu et al. 2017: 189, 203, 207–217; Gálvez Mancilla/Bonilla Martínez 2014: 88–90). Under Article 104 of the Constitution, a referendum can be initiated with signatures from 5% of the eligible electorate (Lu et al. 2007: 207). In 2014, the National Electoral Council rejected the referendum on grounds of procedural irregularities (Lu et al. 2017: 215). It was not until a decade later – after sustained civil society mobilization – that the organizers succeeded in securing the right to hold a referendum. On August 23, 2023, approximately 60% of the population answered YES to the question, ¿Está usted de acuerdo en que el Gobierno ecuatoriano mantenga el crudo del ITT, conocido como bloque 43, indefinidamente en el subsuelo? ‘Do you agree that the Ecuadorian government should leave the crude oil in the ITT—known as Block 43 – underground indefinitely?’.

3. Fighting for Biodiversity in the Media

3.1 Press Freedom Under Threat in Ecuador

Supporters of the referendum have had limited access to mainstream media, which remains under significant political and economic pressure. As of 2026, Ecuador ranks 125th on the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index (Reporter ohne Grenzen 2026a). The erosion of press freedom during Rafael Correa’s presidency played a pivotal role in this decline. The Ley orgánica de comunicación of 2013 (Gobierno de Ecuador 2013) – a law enacted under his administration and subsequently amended by later governments – has been widely criticized for being deliberately weaponized against journalists (Reporter ohne Grenzen 2026b, also Fundamedios 2026). Additionally, the growing influence of the drug

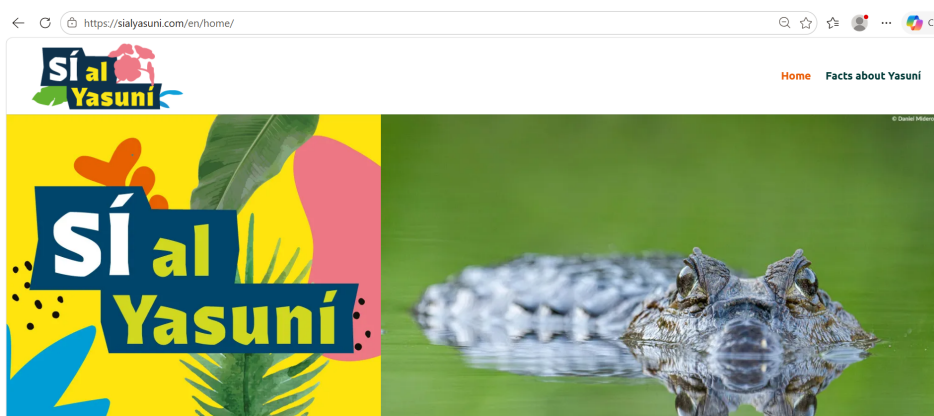
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trade has contributed to increasing violence against media professionals (Reporter ohne Grenzen 2026b). In this context, the internet and social media have become crucial platforms for political discourse and democratic engagement. They offer opportunities for broader public participation and alternative narratives (Runkehl 2017: 586). However, they also pose risks, including the spread of disinformation and the absence of ethical standards in digital communication (Friedrich Naumann Stiftung 2024). When analyzing the YASunidos online campaign, it is essential to consider these complex media dynamics – both the potential for inclusive civic participation and the challenges posed by digital manipulation and misinformation.

3.2 The ‘Sí al Yasuní’ Campaign on Social Media

As previously explained, the referendum campaign was by no means limited to social media. Moreover, it cannot be assumed that the campaign’s actors are representative of the broader Ecuadorian population or of the inhabitants of the Amazon region. Consequently, this analysis offers only a selective insight into the pro-YES campaign, focusing specifically on its digital manifestations.

The campaign alliance operates across multiple platforms. First, both YASunidos⁴ and the campaign itself maintain dedicated websites:



Figur 1: Website *Sí al Yasuní* (Screenshot, 28/05/2026; picture caiman ©Daniel Mideros)

In addition, the collective maintains a strong presence on various social media platforms, including:

1. YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/@YASunidosOficial>).

⁴ <https://www.yasunidos.org/>.

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- 258 2. Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/yasunidos/>,
259 [https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/178755691](https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17875569173861638/)
260 [73861638/](https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17875569173861638/)).
- 261 3. TikTok (<https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos>).
- 262 4. X (formerly Twitter, <https://x.com/Yasunidos>).
- 263 5. Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/YASunidos>).

264 It is highly likely that private or non-public platforms – such as
265 WhatsApp and similar messaging apps – were also used extensively
266 in the coordination and dissemination of campaign content.

267 Defining a corpus for this study and opting for a theoretical and
268 methodological approach proved challenging for several reasons:

- 269 • The campaign unfolded not only online but also in physical
270 spaces, as evidenced by photographs of public demonstrations
271 shared on social media. Furthermore, a wide range of
272 stakeholder groups were involved, including numerous local
273 initiatives such as *Sí al Yasuní Manabí*⁵, which operate
274 independent social media accounts.
- 275 • Content across platforms overlaps significantly, making it
276 difficult to distinguish between original and repurposed
277 material.
- 278 • The dynamic and fast-paced nature of social media means that
279 content is constantly updated, deleted, or archived.
- 280 • YASunidos has been advocating for a referendum for over a
281 decade, and the struggle to implement its outcome continues
282 even after the referendum's success. As a result, it is
283 impossible to establish a definitive beginning or end point for
284 the campaign's activities in support of the Yasuní Biosphere
285 Reserve and against oil extraction.
- 286 • Communication is multimodal, combining verbal elements
287 (written and spoken language) with a wide array of visual
288 materials – static and moving images, typography, layout, and
289 sound (e.g. music). Given that meaning is constructed through
290 the interplay of these semiotic resources (Jewitt et al. 2025:
291 44), a multimodal analytical approach is essential. This
292 approach acknowledges that communication is inherently
293 multimodal:

294 Während gesprochene Sprache sich zu einer komplexen Mischung
295 aus phonetisch modulierten Lauten, Intonation, Gestik und Mimik
296 entwickelt hat, für die eine jeweils separate Analyse nicht legitim

5 <https://www.instagram.com/sialyasunimanabi/>

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zu sein scheint, ist geschriebene Sprache notwendigerweise eine Kombination unterschiedlicher visueller Komponenten wie Buchstaben, Typographie, Layout. [‘While spoken language has evolved into a complex mixture of phonetically modulated sounds, intonation, gestures and facial expressions, for which separate analysis does not seem legitimate, written language is necessarily a combination of different visual components such as letters, typography, layout.’] (Wildfeuer et al. 2020: 62; see Visser 2026: 63–64)

Thus, even a study focusing on verbal and visual elements must account for intricate interactions between semiotic modes. The present analysis is therefore inherently exploratory in nature and is intended to serve as a foundation for more in-depth future research.

Theoretical frameworks from political linguistics are used for the study. In the field of multimodal research – which is itself interdisciplinary and diverse – Stöckl’s (2004) work provides a key methodological reference. With regard to the temporal scope, the referendum date serves as the primary endpoint. However, occasional references to developments occurring afterward are included to highlight the enduring persuasive power of the discursive and visual patterns examined. Only online multimodal content with a clear and explicit connection to the referendum was included in the analysis.

An inductive approach was combined with a deductive one: the campaign’s communication across platforms was first examined to identify recurring patterns. Based on this preliminary analysis, four key aspects were selected for deeper investigation:

6. The corporate design.
7. The campaign’s name.
8. Dichotomous structures in text and imagery.
9. The representation of diversity.

4. Analysis

4.1 The Corporate Design

As illustrated by the homepage of *Sí al Yasuní* (Figure 1), the image marking the referendum’s victory (Figure 2), a screenshot of an Instagram Story (Figure 3) and a TikTok video (Figure 4), the campaign makes use of striking colors, a consistent font and recurring visual motifs. The corporate design ensures visual cohesion (Stöckl 2004: 72, 97). At the same time, it supports the

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audience's ability to quickly identify the campaign's core messages
(Stöckl 2004: 3).



Figure 2: Announcement of the referendum result (screenshot
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CwQTjYku7ns/>, 12/05/2026)

The dominant colors are white, yellow, blue, pink, green and orange. The colorful design undoubtedly carries a rather positive connotation (Stöckl 2004: 14; van Leeuwen 2001) and may symbolically reference the rich biodiversity of the Amazon rainforest. The word *SÍ*, rendered in large, uppercase letters and in contrasting colors, functions as a visual focal point, emphasizing the adverb. Drawing on Pirat (2007: 142), this treatment resembles a logo in its symbolic and mnemonic power. According to Runkehl (2017: 558–589), social media platforms serve three primary functions: identity management, relationship management, and information management. The campaign's corporate design likely plays a significant role in identity management – shaping and communicating the movement's self-image and values.

Beyond stylized illustrations of flora such as plants, leaves, and flowers (e.g. strelitzia), the multimodal materials frequently incorporate photographs of Amazonian fauna. These include caimans (Figure 1), parrots (ara) and birds (e.g. hoatzin, orange-spotted barbet), jaguars or monkeys (e.g. howler monkeys, squirrel monkeys). These species are emblematic of the Amazon's ecological richness. Notably, the jaguar holds sacred significance for the Waorani people, thereby symbolically connecting the campaign to the cultural heritage of the Indigenous communities of Yasuní (Méndez Aedo/Sánchez Baño/Yépez 2022).

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Figure 3: Part of an Instagram Story promoting the YES vote (screenshot, <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17875569173861638/>, 12/05/2026)

The depicted plants and animals not only represent the extraordinary biodiversity of Yasuní National Park but also reflect key values of the collective: a commitment to diversity and a biocentric worldview (Acosta 2017: 2610).

Images are ‘directly linked to emotion’, ‘highly polysemic’ and ‘open to individual interpretation’ (Stöckl 2004: 247). While accurate species identification may not be essential for viewers, the abundance of colors and the diversity of depicted life forms collectively convey a world that is vibrant, valuable, and worth protecting. The visual language thus fosters a positive emotional response, reinforcing the campaign’s central message: the preservation of Yasuní as a sanctuary of life and culture.



Figure 4: Video of the campaign on TikTok (screenshot, <https://www.tiktok.com/tag/sialyasuni%F0%9F%A5%B0%F0%9F%92%9A>, 12/05/2026)

384 4.2 Campaign slogan

385 The very name of the YASunidos collective carries a strong
386 pragmatic dimension. Its evocative power arises from the blending
387 of the national park's name and the adjective *unidos* ('together'). The
388 name serves an integrative function (Grünert 1974) and implicitly
389 calls for collective action – uniting forces to protect the preserved
390 area.

391 In 2007, the campaign to keep the oil in the ground was launched
392 under the slogan *El Yasuní depende de ti* 'the Yasuní depends on you'
393 (OPSur 15: 2010). The subsequent slogan *Sí al Yasuní* encapsulates
394 the desired response to the referendum – Pirat refers to this as a
395 "mise en slogan des réponses référendaires" 'turning referendum
396 responses into slogans' (2007: 141) – and can be interpreted as an
397 elliptical form of the imperative *Vota sí al Yasuní* 'Say yes to Yasuní'.

398 This is the campaign's central slogan: „Par slogan, on entend ici
399 très classiquement 'une formule concise et frappante, facilement
400 répétable, polémique [...] et destinée à faire agir' (Reboul, 1975, p.
401 42)" 'By 'slogan', we mean here, in the very traditional sense, 'a
402 concise and striking phrase, easily repeatable, controversial [...] and
403 intended to spur action' (Pirat 2007: 141). Drawing on Donalies
404 (2017: 654), Moke (2003) and Radunski (1980), *Sí al Yasuní* can be
405 classified as a mobilization slogan.

406 The slogan's structure allows for flexible adaptation due to its
407 inherently affirmative nature. For instance, it can be expanded into a
408 full imperative sentence:

- 409 • *Vota Sí al Yasuní* 'Vote YES for Yasuní'
410 ([https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/726915247756](https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/7269152477566553350)
411 [6553350](https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/7269152477566553350), 26/05/2026).

412 At the same time, it can be rephrased to highlight those who affirm
413 the Yasuní – often through metonymy:

- 414 • *La Amazonía le dice Sí al Yasuní* 'The Amazon says YES to
415 Yasuní'
416 ([https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/726734170201](https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/7267341702015323397)
417 [5323397](https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/7267341702015323397), 26/05/2026).
- 418 • *Todas y todos le decimos Sí al Yasuní* 'We all say YES to Yasuní'
419 ([https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/726214244320](https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/7262142443200515334)
420 [0515334](https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/7262142443200515334), 26/05/2026).

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421 Furthermore, the object of affirmation – the thing to which one says
422 YES – can be modified:

- 423 • *Sí al agua, si a los bosques / este 20 de agosto nosotras le*
424 *decimos sí a la vida* ‘Yes to water, yes to forests / On 20
425 August, we say yes to life’
426 (<https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos>, 23/10/2025)

427 Thanks to its prominence and rhetorical structure⁶, the slogan is
428 highly memorable. It can be adapted while preserving its core
429 message in the audience’s mind: thus, *sí a la vida y sí al agua, sí a los*
430 *bosques* is likely to be mentally expanded to ‘If we say yes to Yasuní,
431 we are at the same time saying yes to life, water and forests’.

432 Furthermore, the slogan enables retrospective emphasis on the
433 referendum and its outcome:

- 434 • *6 meses desde que Ecuador votó SÍ por la naturaleza* ‘Six
435 months since Ecuador voted YES for nature’
436 ([https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/photo/73376978876](https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/photo/7337697887616273669)
437 [16273669](https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/photo/7337697887616273669), 26/05/2026).

438 As this example illustrates, it is not necessary to reproduce the full
439 slogan. Among recipients of the communicative messages, it has
440 become so widespread that it approaches the status of a ‘salient
441 political statement’ (*Salienter Satz*, Klein 2011, 2017, 2019).
442 According to Klein, such statements – due to their repeated citation
443 or reference – can develop into independent carriers of knowledge
444 and units of action (Klein 2017: 140). Salient statements are
445 characterized by visual and paraverbal emphasis, their use in
446 political campaigns, syntactic brevity, and rhetorical content (Klein
447 2017: 140). *Sí al Yasuní* clearly meets these criteria. Social media
448 platforms offer extensive opportunities to enhance its salience
449 through reactive behaviors – such as likes, shares, and comments –
450 that function analogously to traditional forms of applause (Klein
451 2017: 140). However, the key question remains: does the slogan
452 achieve a lasting pragmatic function only among supporters, or does
453 it also penetrate the collective consciousness of opposing groups?
454 This can only be answered through comprehensive corpus analyses.

455 The corporate design also enables reference to the campaign
456 (here referred to as *la consulta*; *¡El gobierno va a respetar la*

6 Not only is it highlighted visually, but it also stands out in audio clips because it is chanted by supporters (e.g. <https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/7250249732885400838>, 26/05/2026).

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457 *consulta!* ‘The government will respect the consultation’) and its
458 outcome without directly using the slogan’s linguistic elements:



459

460 **Figure 5:** Reference to the campaign without using the Slogan (Video on
461 TikTok, posted on May 2, 2024; Screenshot,
462 <https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/7364230555103218949>,
463 27/05/2026)

464 Since a YES implies the existence of a NO, even negative statements
465 build a conceptual link to the slogan:

- 466 • ¡No al fraude a la democracia! ‘No to the subversion of
467 democracy!’
468 [https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/745976968080](https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/7459769680803269894)
469 3269894, 26/05/2026).

470 4.3 Multimodal Representation of Diversity

471 As mentioned in the section on corporate design, YASunidos
472 employs images of animals typical of the Amazon throughout its
473 campaign. This visual strategy is consistently applied across all
474 materials. This is particularly evident on the organization’s website
475 (<https://sialyasuni.com>), especially within the ‘Galería’ tab, which
476 features are photographs of birds, mammals, insects and reptiles,
477 many of which are once again very typical of the Amazonian
478 ecosystem (see, for example, the harpy eagle).

479 In addition, the site includes a wide range of nature photographs
480 that likely symbolize the rich diversity of plant life in the region.
481 With the exception of one image depicting gas flaring, these visuals
482 portray the Amazon in its pristine, undisturbed state. As will be
483 discussed in section 4.4, this depiction stands in stark contrast to
484 images that illustrate the environmental degradation caused by oil
485 extraction in parts of Yasuní.

486 The imagery also reflects the indigenous population and
487 traditional ways of life. These representations can be interpreted as

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a reference to Ecuador's plurinational identity, formally recognized in the constitution since 2008. Similarly, the homepage videos – particularly those shared on platforms like TikTok – can be read in this light:



Figure 6: Videos on Youtube representing diversity (Screenshots (<https://www.tiktok/@yasunidos>, 21/10/2025))

The videos feature individuals of diverse ages, genders and skin tones. They show not only Indigenous people in traditional attire, but also mestizos, white, and Black individuals. The so-called Afro-Ecuadorians, whose ancestry traces back to sub-Saharan Africa, are officially recognized as a *pueblo* ('people') in Ecuador (Secretaría de Gestión y Desarrollo de Pueblos y Nacionalidades s.a.). On of the images on the right shows a man who describes himself as a German who has lived in Ecuador for many years. He speaks with a very noticeable German accent.

This diversity can be interpreted in multiple ways. On one hand, it underscores the fact that the YASunidos collective is not primarily composed of Amazonian residents. The inclusion of a person of European descent may signal the global significance of Yasuní for climate preservation. At the same time, broad representation of people from different backgrounds can be seen as powerful statement that 'the entire country of Ecuador' is united in its defense of the national park – and thus in its opposition to oil extraction. Selected excerpts from the videos further suggest that this visual representation of diversity functions as a form of self-empowerment

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515 for marginalized groups. For instance, in the video entitled *tu voz se*
516 *tienen que escuchar* 'your voice must be heard', a woman states:

517 • [transcription YouTube] yo como mujer tengo que luchar día a
518 día para que la gente entienda que mi voz vale lo mismo que
519 cualquier otra y si a eso le sumo que soy indígena la cosa se
520 complica aún más 'As a woman, I have to fight every day to
521 make people understand that my voice is just as valid as
522 anyone else's, and when you add to that the fact that I'm
523 Indigenous, things get even more complicated."
524 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjfOPCvAgtE>,
525 23/10/2026).

526 It is also noteworthy that YASunidos consciously employs gender-
527 neutral language in its communications. For example:

528 • 1 a 3 agosto 2023: Se realiza en Quito el I Encuentro
529 de comunicadorxs alternativxs y creadorxs de contenido por
530 el Yasuní, un espacio articulado para la formación y
531 capacitación de jóvenes en temas referentes a lucha contra el
532 cambio climático, alternativas antiextractivas y transición
533 social y ecológica justa. '1–3 August 2023: The First Meeting of
534 Alternative Journalists and Content Creators for Yasuní takes
535 place in Quito, providing a coordinated platform for the
536 education and training of young people on issues relating to
537 the fight against climate change, anti-extractive alternatives,
538 and a just social and ecological transition'
539 (<https://www.yasunidos.org/nuestra-historia/>, 26/05/2026).

540 4.4 The Dichotomy of YES and NO

541 By its very nature, a referendum is designed to create a dichotomy
542 between YES and NO. The slogan *SÍ al Yasuní* is strategically
543 employed to represent fundamental values: a biosphere reserve, the
544 country's plurinationality enshrined in the constitution (and thus
545 democracy and the nation's core values), diversity and biodiversity,
546 life, and sustainability. Against this backdrop, a NO vote is framed as
547 an irrational choice – further reinforced through visually and
548 verbally staged oppositions.

549 The screenshot below (*¿Por qué vas a votar?* 'Why will you vote?')
550 exemplifies a series of short videos that juxtapose a positive image,
551 idealized image of the national park – consistent with the official

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552 corporate design – with a sequence of images depicting oil spills,
553 environmental pollution, and deforested areas in the jungle:



554
555 **Figure 7:** Video on TikTok contrasting YES and NO (Screenshot,
556 <https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/7268465000900087045>,
557 26/05/2026)

558 A NO vote in the referendum is equated with the acceleration of
559 climate change and portrayed as descent into an abyss from which
560 there is no return.



561

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562 **Figure 8:** Video on TikTok showing consequences of NO (Screenshot,
563 <https://www.tiktok.com/@yasunidos/video/7255824119684451590>.
564 26/05/2026)

565 In some instances, text and image are deliberately contrasted. In a
566 short video (0:35) titled *No más derrames* ('No more oil spills')⁷, the
567 opening sequence presents a montage of audiovisual statements by
568 government officials and oil company executives emphasizing the
569 minimal environmental impact of oil drilling. In the second part,
570 these statements are condensed into written form and displayed
571 against a backdrop of images showing oil-contaminated landscapes.
572 The video concludes with the powerful statement *No les creemos*
573 *más* ('We no longer believe them').

574 This dichotomization is not limited to visual and multimodal
575 contrasts; it also manifests at the linguistic level. The following
576 analysis is based on transcriptions of official short films from the
577 YASunidos YouTube channel⁸.

578 The language used exhibits clear characteristics of populist
579 rhetoric. While populism is a vague and often negatively connotated
580 political label, it can refer to the ideological, structural, and
581 rhetorical characteristics of political groups (see Visser 2019). This
582 analysis focuses specifically on the core dichotomy inherent in
583 populism: the opposition between *the people* and *the elite* (cf. Mudde
584 2004):

585 Kern dieser Haltung ist die dichotomische Abgrenzung des
586 moralisch guten, tugendhaften Volkes von den als korrupt und
587 selbstsüchtig bezeichneten Vertretern des sogenannten
588 Establishments 'At the heart of this stance lies the dichotomous
589 distinction between the morally good, virtuous people and the
590 representatives of the so-called establishment, who are described
591 as corrupt and self-serving.' (Decker 2021).

592 This dichotomization is frequently reflected in linguistic contrasts
593 between *nosotros* 'we' and *ellos* 'they' – though in Spanish, as a pro-
594 drop language, such distinctions often appear only in possessive
595 pronouns, object pronouns, or verb conjugations. The in-group –
596 'we' – is clearly defined, while the out-group is less precisely
597 delineated, often vaguely referred to as *los políticos* 'the politicians'
598 or *la gente* 'the people':

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BR7ZAVLD0sc>, 28/05/2026.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/@YASunidosOficial/shorts>, 22/10/2025.

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- 599 • *nos hicieron fraude* ‘they cheated us’ (Video title: *¿Cómo nos*
600 *veremos en 10 años?* ‘What will we look like in 10 years?’);
- 601 • *los políticos se llenaron la boca* ‘the politicians talked a lot of
602 nonsense’ (Video title: *El mito del petróleo* ‘The oil myth’);
- 603 • *hay mucha gente de mucho dinero que simplemente no paga sus*
604 *impuesto* ‘there are plenty of wealthy people who simply don’t
605 pay their taxes’ (Video title: *Y ahora, ¿qué hacemos si gana el*
606 *SÍ?* ‘And now, what do we do if the ‘YES’ vote wins?’);
- 607 • *los intereses de unos cuantos petroleros y países que nos tienen*
608 *agarrados del cuello* ‘the interests of a handful of oil
609 companies and countries that have us by the throat’ (Video
610 title: *¿Cómo nos veremos en 10 años?* ‘What will we look like in
611 10 years?’);
- 612 • *ese pequeño grupo de personas políticas que solo piensan en si*
613 *mismos y en los intereses de sus amigos* ‘that small group of
614 politicians who only think of themselves and the interests of
615 their friends’ (Video title: *El futuro del Yasuní está en nuestras*
616 *manos?* ‘Is the future of Yasuní in our hands?’);
- 617 • *los que le dicen no a yasuni* ‘those who say no to Yasuní’ (Video
618 title: *Vota SÍ al Yasuní* ‘Vote YES to Yasuní’).

619 As these examples illustrate, language is frequently used to evoke
620 emotional responses. Metaphors are employed to convey deontic
621 (moral or ethical) imperatives (Niehr 2017: 182). The audience is
622 implicitly led to conclusions such as: ‘If a handful of people are
623 suffocating us, we must fight back; if politicians spout nonsense, the
624 people must be given a voice’. This emphasis on the moral
625 superiority of the people in contrast to corrupt elites is a hallmark of
626 populist discourse (Priester 2012).

627 The small elite (*unos cuantos petroleros*) is pitted against the will
628 of many Ecuadorians:

- 629 • *ahora podemos ser millones quienes nos unamos* ‘now there
630 could be millions of us coming together’ (Video title: *¿Cómo*
631 *nos veremos en 10 años?* ‘What will we look like in 10 years?’).

632 Conversely, the decision to vote YES is associated with positive,
633 aspirational language:

- 634 • *futuro digno bonito* ‘a dignified and beautiful future’ (Video
635 title: *El futuro de los wawas* ‘The future of the wawas
636 [indigenous word for ‘children’]’)

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637 In contrast, a NO vote is consistently linked to negative outcomes:
638 ‘destruction’, ‘exploitation’, ‘contamination’ or ‘poverty’.

639 Several videos emphasize that a YES victory could position
640 Ecuador as a global pioneer – a role model for sustainable
641 development:

- 642 • Ecuador le da un ejemplo al mundo ‘Ecuador sets an example
643 to the world’; las y los Ecuatorianos podemos ser los primeros
644 en algo ‘we Ecuadorians can be the first to do something’
645 (Video: En Ecuador luchamos contra el cambio climático ‘in
646 Ecuador we are fighting against climate change’)

647 Through this framing, a YES vote for Yasuní is presented not only as
648 an environmental imperative but also as a powerful opportunity to
649 foster national pride and collective identity.

650 5. Conclusion

651 An examination of the extensive media campaign surrounding the
652 referendum to halt oil extraction reveals a set of recurring
653 communicative patterns. These are defined by the strategic
654 orchestration – indeed, the mobilization – of multiple semiotic
655 modes, designed to persuade the public to vote Sí.

656 The focus of this study was to closely examine four prominent
657 patterns, with particular attention to the multimodal interplay
658 between (written) text and imagery. This exploratory approach
659 enables the formulation of preliminary hypotheses regarding how
660 linguistic and visual elements contributed to the campaign’s
661 strategic success.

662 First and foremost, the campaign was marked by a cohesive
663 corporate design. The consistent visual framing of photographs and
664 illustrations, combined with carefully crafted linguistic components
665 – especially the slogan – played a crucial role in establishing a
666 unified, highly recognizable communication style. This coherence
667 persisted across diverse digital platforms and decentralized local
668 initiatives, despite the fragmented nature of the campaign’s reach.
669 Although offline activities were not the focus of this analysis,
670 photographic evidence from public demonstrations confirms that
671 the same visual language was applied to banners, signs, and protest
672 materials.

673 A defining feature of the campaign was its deliberate emphasis on
674 diversity – not only of people, but also of flora and fauna. The
675 vibrant color palette, characterized by rich greens, blues, and earth

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tones, became a signature element, contributing significantly to the campaign's visual distinctiveness and memorability.

The slogan *Sí al Yasuní* stands out for its brevity, rhetorical force, and phonetic resonance. An analysis of short-form videos demonstrates that the imperative is deeply embedded within the campaign's corporate design. The consistent use of typography, color scheme, and compositional centering directs attention specifically to the word *Sí*, which functions almost as a visual logo – reinforcing its symbolic weight. Moreover, the slogan's rhythmic structure and repetition allow for creative adaptations without compromising the core message, enabling widespread appropriation across different media and contexts.

As established in chapter 2, Ecuador is a nation of profound diversity – ethnically, culturally, and ecologically. Biodiversity, therefore, holds more than environmental significance; it is a foundational value, enshrined in the 2008 Constitution and deeply rooted in the worldviews of Indigenous communities, particularly those in the Amazon region, who uphold biocentric cosmologies. By foregrounding this diversity, YASunidos not only legitimized its cause – presenting it as broadly supported – but also invoked a collective identity shaped by *sumak kawsay*. This principle, which emphasizes harmony between humans and nature, is not only constitutional but also historically embedded in Ecuadorian society. Thus, the campaign's visual and discursive strategies serve a dual function: they reinforce national identity while simultaneously constructing an idealized, almost utopian image of the Yasuní rainforest – a place so precious that saying *Sí* becomes not just a political act, but a moral imperative.

Referendums, by their very nature, operate on a binary logic. In the materials analyzed, the contrast between *Sí* and *NO* is not merely conveyed through affirmative and negative particles. Rather, oppositional structures – both verbal and visual – play a central role in shaping the audience's perception of choice and consequence.

6. Perspectives

The findings presented here open multiple avenues for future research: A comparative analysis of the four identified patterns with the earlier campaign, *El Yasuní depende de ti*, would be particularly insightful. That 2007 campaign employed a two-tone, text-dominant logo, with green serving as a potent metonym for nature⁹. At the

⁹ E.g. <https://x.com/SOSyasuni>, 03/06/2026.

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time, YASunidos faced significant challenges, including deliberate attempts by opponents to mimic its visual identity and spread disinformation. A comparative study – ideally incorporating interviews with key stakeholders – could illuminate the specific roles that logos and corporate design elements played in distinguishing the campaign from its adversaries in both 2007 and 2023. Such an analysis might also reveal how YASunidos evolved its communication strategy over time, adapting to new digital landscapes and strategic threats.

From a linguistic standpoint, the evolution of the slogan itself offers rich ground for exploration. Both *El Yasuní depende de ti* and *¡Sí al Yasuní* employ rhetorical repetition (Janich 2013: 205). However, the 2023 slogan goes further: it explicitly references the act of marking a cross – the literal purpose of the referendum – thereby embedding the voting gesture directly into the message. This not only enhances memorability but also strengthens the link between the slogan and the visual dichotomy of *¡Sí* vs. *NO*. The logo-like treatment of *¡Sí* further establishes a unique semiotic bridge between linguistic form and visual opposition – features that appear absent in the earlier campaign.

For the purposes of this study, and for heuristic clarity, the scope was limited to online communications, four recurring strategic patterns, and specific verbal and visual semiotic modes. Yet the materials suggest that a more comprehensive analysis – including the oral code (intonation), proxemics, gestures (see e.g., Figure 6), and facial expressions (see e.g., Figure 5) – could yield deeper insights into the affective and performative dimensions of the campaign.

Physical campaign activities – such as marches, rituals, or community gatherings – can only be partially reconstructed through digital records. Their inclusion would have required an on-site ethnographic study in 2023. Such an approach would of course have broadened the analytical lens, offering a more holistic understanding of the referendum’s social dynamics. As noted in the introduction, much of the online communication appears to be driven by urban, Mestizo actors of higher socioeconomic status. From an external perspective, it remains difficult to assess how well the voices of the directly affected Indigenous communities were heard or represented. Yet it is reasonable to assume – especially within the Yasuní region – that the campaign also included embodied, performative practices such as dances, songs, and collective actions. Integrating these dimensions would significantly expand the range of semiotic modes under investigation, thereby increasing the complexity and depth of the analysis.

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Regardless of the methodological path chosen, a fundamental tension persists: despite drawing on Indigenous cosmologies—particularly the biocentric worldview of *sumak kawsay* – the referendum remains a mechanism of state-based political decision-making. This institutional framework does not align with the communal, non-hierarchical modes of governance historically practiced by the Amazonian peoples. Thus, while the campaign successfully mobilized symbolic and aesthetic resources to advocate for environmental protection, it operates within a system that may ultimately undermine the very values it seeks to uphold.

Nevertheless, the study claims to have offered important insights into a multimodal campaign characterized as a role model of the democratization of climate policy.

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