

The Route Back Home? The Challenges of Migrant Reintegration Policies in Ecuador

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Abstract

The increasing number of Ecuadorian migrants forcibly deported from the United States presents a pressing challenge to Ecuador's social protection system. This article compares the current return plan called "Ecuador es tu Hogar" (Ecuador is your home) developed by Daniel Noboa's liberal government, with the past reintegration program "Bienvenid@s a Casa" (Welcome Home) designed during the regime of former left-wing president Rafael Correa. The objective of this study is to determine the characteristics that two distinct ideological regimes considered in their response to returnees and their reintegration. Through the Most Similar Systems Design methodology, the research sought to identify the variables that impacted the execution of these policies, as well as the influence that the ideological framework had on their construction. As such, the study demonstrates that the current reintegration policies are affected by independent variables like the profile of the returnees, the investment available, and the role of migrants in development that shaped each government. The main findings consider that reintegration policies focusing only on economic aid fall short under complex social environments and lack long-term political vision. Based on this, the study intends to contribute to the overall discourse surrounding the intersection of migration and social policy, particularly relevant through the current context of deportations and protection challenges, while arguing for a shift toward a rights-based, inclusive approach to reintegration, supported by evaluation mechanisms, intersectoral collaboration, and investment in social protection systems.

Keywords: Reintegration, Migration, Return migration, Social protection, Daniel Noboa, Rafael Correa, Deportations, Ecuador.

Introduction

The forced return of thousands of Ecuadorian migrants from the United States poses a major challenge to Ecuador's social protection system. With over 32,000 deportation orders this year (Primicias, 2025), the country faces an urgent need for reintegration strategies that prevent economic marginalization and social exclusion. The current situation presents both a puzzle and an opportunity—while reintegration requires significant state coordination, it also provides policymakers with an opportunity to test and refine mechanisms for registering, supporting, and economically integrating returnees. Yet, this is not the first time the country has implemented a reintegration response as part of its migration policy. In 2008, during Rafael Correa's left-wing regime, the "Bienvenid@s a Casa" (Welcome Home) was developed to encourage migrants abroad, particularly in Spain, Italy and the United States, to return to Ecuador.

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In this case, the migratory policy in Ecuador has seen past and current reintegration efforts in very different contexts. During the late 90s, migration increased as a response to the economic and social crisis that swept Ecuadorian families. As a result, more than one million people left the country and moved abroad between 1998 and 2003 (United Nations Fund for Population Activities, 2008). However, thousands of these Ecuadorians returned to the country with the direct help of the “Bienvenidos a Casa” Plan launched in 2008. The program had the primary mission of fostering a “voluntary, respectful and sustainable return” aiming for “ability recuperation” as seen in the National Plan of Human Development for Migration 2007- 2010.

Afterwards, the economic situation in the country saw another massive downturn following COVID-19, which led to the most recent exodus from the country. Data shows the impact to the Ecuadorian economy as poverty levels went from 25.5% to 33% nationwide (National Institute of Statistics and Census, 2025). Moreover, adequate employment decreased from 38.3% in 2019 to 32.5% in 2021, while unemployment increased to 5.2% in 2021 (National Institute of Statistics and Census, 2024). These changes have led to higher intentions to move abroad. According to a survey of the International Organization for Migration (2024), 1.2 million Ecuadorians aim to migrate to another country, with a higher preference for the US. These shifts in human mobility trends are also seen in the increase of entrances and encounters of nationals at the US border. Records from the Center for Engagement and Advocacy in the Americas (2024) show that from 2021 to 2023, the number of Ecuadorians attempting to cross the Darién Gap went from 387 to 57,250, while the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported 24,060 encounters with Ecuadorians at the U.S. Southwest Land Border in 2022, and eventually 122,072 in 2024. Additionally, the economic crisis is aggravated by the escalating violence in the country, where homicide rates have gone from 5.8 per 100,000 people in 2017 to 25.9 in 2022, setting a vulnerable context for returning while also increasing the desire to leave.

It's in this context that Trump's deportation policies pose a challenge to Ecuador's protection system, now managed by neoliberal president Daniel Noboa. Due to the return of vulnerable individuals, the plan “Ecuador es tu Hogar” (Ecuador is your Home) has been implemented to offer economic support to the deportees. Thus, considering these immigration waves, the study will have the objective of exploring the limitations of reintegration mechanisms in the country and in consequence, how different governments have not been able to create an ideal environment for settling back despite their efforts. The research will employ the Most Similar System Design (MSSD) to analyze the implemented responses. For this, three key explanatory variables are used: political ideology, the profile of returnees, and the social investment environment of the country during the reintegration programs. Therefore, the questions guiding this study will be: how different ideological governments have approached return migration, what implications has it had

for the interaction of social policy in migratory programs, and what are the factors limiting the sustainable wellbeing of the returnees. Additionally, this will lead to recommendations for the improvement of reintegration policies based on evaluation and evidence-based mechanisms.

Literature Review

In 1989, Gøsta Esping-Andersen highlighted T. H. Marshall's (1950) idea that one of the key elements for studying the welfare state is social citizenship, which in turn generates social rights. This aspect of welfarism will be particularly evident in universal or social democratic systems, as they attempt to address the well-being of their entire population through an “institutionalized commitment” to this goal (p. 20). Consequently, citizenship is linked with social welfare as an attribute that guarantees that a person can “participate fully and with dignity in the life of her or his society” due to the services acquired through social institutions (King & Waldron, 1988).

As society has advanced, the considerations of citizenship have shifted the debate over migration and social protection. In the 1970s, scholars conducted studies on the links between these two topics, focusing on the impact of migrant workers on welfarism, acknowledging that their arrival posed additional demands—such as housing, education, and healthcare—on the receiving countries' welfare systems (Castles, 1975; Jones, 1977). Due to the new debates, authors have also focused on how welfare states perceive and categorize migrants, leading to deservingness perspectives. Bommes & Geddes (2000) conceived welfare states as “political filters” that process migrants' status and legal rights, creating different results over social participation. Per this perspective, welfare states could implement an unequal view of migrants through their labeling, reliance on policy discourse and the interests of the receiving country.

Additionally, migration could not only be considered a consequence of the limits in social protection, but also a trigger of additional changes and demands affecting both the receiving and sending countries (Faist, Bilecen, et al., 2015). Through this lens, the variability of the needs is key to understanding the type of response. Sabates-Wheeler and Waite (2003) state that “social protection concerns can emerge at all stages of a migration process as different vulnerabilities characterize the ‘deciding migrant’, the ‘mobile migrant’, the ‘arrived migrant’, the ‘returned migrant’ and the migrant’s family that may remain at home”. This will impact the type of program, the period of durability, and due to the timing of implementation, will influence the impact of the response. Moreover, the nature of the issue could have different stakeholders participating in the policy design or implementation, such as governmental and non-governmental institutions (Federico, 1973).

Nonetheless, it would be logical to accept the idea that those who return to their countries after migrating will maintain what Gøsta Esping-Andersen referred to as social citizenship. Yet, their situation may still fall under means-tested, deservingness, a higher dependency on family nets, given their absence from their countries during their migratory process (Kuschminder, 2017). In this way, the nature of migration will impact the design and specificities of the response while challenging the effective applicability of the idea of social citizenship.

Pivoting to return migration, King (1986) points out that initial research projects on this topic originated from the return of migrant workers in the US to their homelands, British return from Australia and Canada, and migrants returning to the West Indies from Great Britain. King offers a base concept for this category of human mobility, defining it as the event when people “return to their country or region of origin after a significant period abroad or in another region” (1986). This shares similarities to the definition made by Gmelch (1980), who described it as “the movement of emigrants back to their homelands to resettle”. Interestingly, King decided to differentiate this from his concept of “repatriation,” as this is when the return is forced on them by authorities, or when it is a consequence of personal crises or natural disasters. This distinction is key to studying how the concept of return migration has transformed over the years.

Further evidence of the change in the study of return migration is the typologies initially considered. One of these was developed by Francesco Cerase (1967), who considers return as “a possibility” during the process of migration. The author would describe two initial types of returnees: the migrant who wishes to return home due to economic achievements, and the migrants who will return to their countries at a very old age. This typology would be extended in 1974 to: return of failure (due to barriers for integration and disappointment in the new environment), return of conservatism (when the migrant returns due to the successful plans to improve their economic conditions), return of retirement (given their aging, they plan to return to their home countries) and return of innovation (the immigrant sees return as an opportunity to improve their homeland due to their new gained skills and

values). Gmelch (1980) would transform this to: returnees who intended temporary migration, returnees who intended temporary migration but were forced to return, and returnees who intended permanent migration but chose to return. Consequently, typologies on their own would show a voluntary and forced dichotomy in return decisions that could eventually impact the design and implementation of policies.

For the specific case of return policies, at the beginning of the millennium, academics considered that their framework for development was “still at infancy” (Arowolo, 2000). As time has gone by, scholars have been prompted to approach return migration as a key component of development policies in a globalized world. One basic consideration in how to approach the development of return policies is the “ambiguity” that characterizes the returning process. Stefansson (2004) explained that this arises in the longing that diaspora communities experience in their desire to return, and their confrontation with new challenges upon their reintegration due to “social distance between returnees and stayees”, unemployment, and legal burdens to access their homeland. Batistella (2018) also aimed to depart from treating this as a “homogeneous phenomenon,” given the various types, temporalities, and reasons for return. Given the complexity, the study of return and its policies is now associated with a successful reintegration.

Currently, this is evidenced both in the research field and in international development policy. The United Nations Network on Migration defines return as the “various ways that non-nationals—whether independently, with assistance, or by force—return or are returned to their country of origin or another country to which they have previous ties” (2021). For them, it is intended that programs aim for the development of an environment where “personal safety, economic empowerment, inclusion and social cohesion” exist. This would eventually entail aspects like access to social protection, financial services, health care, and employment, among other elements. From migration scholars, return is also seen as a pathway to development and sustainability. Van Houte & Davids (2008) consider that any sustainable return will lead to a person having a sense of belonging in their return community through “an economic dimension, a social network, and a psychosocial dimension that are interrelated and reinforce each other”. Thus, for the authors, return, under voluntary conditions, is seen as a sign that the states have matured, considering pre and post-conflict circumstances and differences.

This introduces a special condition in successful returning and reintegration policies that Cassarino (2004) first approached as the structural approach to return migration. For him, returnees would consider investing their capacities, new knowledge, and experiences in their countries, impacting their homeland’s economy, power structures and traditions, sharing the innovative aspect of the last Cerase’s typology of return (1974). However, any positive outcome of the policies and overall reintegration process would depend on the context and environment in the return country, particularly in its political, social, and economic factors. Considering these requirements, Kuschminder’s (2017) definition of return is useful to the upcoming analysis. The author would first consider that return migration would consist of a two-way transformation that would cover both the migrant and their society of return, as these two elements are not the same as they were during the first migratory event. In this sense, reintegration has also been defined by the author as the process in which returnees receive the support of their community that is sustained by “equal civil, social, political, human, and cultural rights” (2017). Considering this, successful reintegration relies on the existence of a welcoming and empowering environment that exists in a stable and rights-based society.

Previous studies on reintegration plans in Ecuador have produced valuable insights on return migration. Firstly, research from Schurr & Stolz (2010) focused on the gender implications of coming back to the country during the implementation of the *Bienvenid@s a Casa* plan, while Boccagni & Lagomarsino (2011) conducted a comparative analysis of this plan and the Assisted Voluntary Return program implemented by Spain to aid unemployed migrants during the 2008 financial crisis. Both

papers considered that returning will create new challenges for migrants, considering the emotional, economic, and cultural shocks they may face during their re-assimilation. Additionally, the authors suggest that most migrants share a desire to return; however, this decision, made under voluntary circumstances, heavily depends on their perception of whether their homeland offers better conditions than the ones they departed from originally, as well as the ones they are leaving behind in their receiving countries.

Finally, integral frameworks have been developed to approach the complexity of return. Hagan and Wassink (2020) proposed two categories of analysis for this issue. The first being the economic sociology of return, which explores returns as a “voluntary response” to economic changes and shifts, either in the sending or receiving country. Here, Cassarino’s (2004) preparedness would also add valuable consideration that under voluntary conditions, the decision to return would come from the migrants’ feelings and readiness to return. On the other hand, the authors also describe their political sociology of return to complement this framework by acknowledging that return is also driven by legal systems rejecting and evicting migrants from their destination countries, forcing them to come back. Given the resemblance of this framework to the Ecuador cases, the present research aims to offer new insights into social policies developed under conditions where return was instigated by the sending country as well as what happens when return is forced due to deportations, in order to contribute to past literature.

Contrasting Returning and Reintegration Programs in Ecuador

Bienvenid@s a Casa (Welcome Home)

At the beginning of Ecuador’s previous government, led by Rafael Correa’s, the National Development Plan 2007–2010 was established, with the first objective being to “promote equality, cohesion and social and territorial integration.” To achieve this, the plan aimed to strengthen social protection systems, with one of the target groups being migrants and their families. Consequently, in 2008, the Plan “*Bienvenid@s a Casa*” was implemented with three main pillars as action plans. Firstly, the “*Vínculos*” Program tried to create spaces for “participation and communication” between emigrants and their families and communities as part of their goal to facilitate reinsertion and reconnection with the country.

In the economic pillar, the program implemented various productive and financial incentives such as the “*El Cucayo*” Productive Incentive Fund, which offered technical advice and the provision of seed capital, of up to \$50,000 for business start-ups. Additionally, they also reached agreements with public banks to facilitate credits for migrants and developed migrant banking services. Finally, as an incentive to ease the complications of moving back and finding job opportunities, the then government created a physical support program called “*Volver a Casa*” (Going back home). Through this program, Ecuadorians were able to access benefits and pathways to reduce their economic and legal burdens. Per this pillar, migrants would be exempt from taxes when bringing their goods back to Ecuador, receive bonuses to acquire or build their houses, and would be able to participate in competitive examinations to become teachers or doctors in the country. This wing of the program also aimed to provide attention to forced returnees by offering assistance that included financing travel costs to Ecuador, reception upon arrival, or monetary aid to cover basic needs during the initial months after return.

“Ecuador es tu Hogar” (Ecuador is your home)

The National Development Plan 2025 – 2029 developed by the Daniel Noboa’s government aims to guarantee the stability of public institutions. For this goal, one of the main policies is to implement and execute programs of integration, social inclusion, and capacity strengthening of

Ecuadorian migrants based on international cooperation. However, the program “*Ecuador es tu hogar*” was created and launched in January 2025, with the sole focus of supporting the deportees from the United States affected by Donald Trump’s government.

In this plan, the actions can be divided into economic support, social development, and legal aid. For those who were deported, the government established the delivery of a cash transfer of \$470 per person for three months. The monetary assistance plan set out in the eligibility requirements that the recipients must be 18 years of age or older, must have been forcibly returned from the United States, must have no serious criminal record, must be listed in the official registry of returnees, and must not qualify for regular cash transfer programs administered by the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion (MIES). This plan exists in the legal frame of Ecuador’s Organic Law of Human Mobility, which recognizes, in Article 25, the rights of returnees, including economic and social inclusion, recognition and validation of studies completed abroad, educational access, professional training, access to the financial system, and inclusion in entrepreneurship programs. However, two conditions must be met to qualify for these benefits: (1) having lived abroad for more than two years and returning either voluntarily or forcibly, or (2) being in a situation of vulnerability as determined by the human mobility authority or Ecuadorian diplomatic missions and consular offices, by the law and its regulations. This would pose a legal interference for those who left the country in recent years, which is possible based on the increase in migration in Ecuador during the most recent migratory wave.

Moreover, for social development, the plan aimed to deliver scholarships and traineeships for the returnees, while for legal aid, the offices of the Ministry of International Relations and Human Mobility would aid Ecuadorians. This strategy would consist of free consultations to obtain information to manage their revised migratory status, as well as for reintegration into the country. Finally, the government would open spaces for deportees to contact their families once they arrive in Ecuador.

Table 1 Typologies of Priorities in Return Plans

Priorities	“Bienvenid@s a Casa”	“Ecuador es tu Hogar”
Economic Support Offered to Returnees	Credits for start-ups (from \$15.000 up to \$50.000) and banking services. For forced returnees, financial support can be provided for return flights and after arrival.	\$470 to be provided for three months per returnee.
Aid for Reintegration	Housing aid, as well as tax, to bring back goods.	Legal aid is provided in offices abroad.
Communication and Integration	Community offices abroad. Recognition of studies for teachers and doctors.	Scholarships and traineeships for Ecuadorians. Communication centers at arrival points.

Source: SENAMI (2007), Primicias (2025).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a comparative qualitative research design, specifically applying the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) methodology. The MSSD approach will aim to select “objects of research systems that are as similar as possible” with the exception of the phenomena’s intended to be explored (Anckar, 2008). In this case, the control variables are shared within the objects of study, while the differences will be seen as “explanatory variables” (Przeworski & Teune, 1970). Generally, this methodology is mostly applied in the analysis between countries, policy overview can be done within a nation as seen in Li et al., (2019), and Hong & Zhou (2025). The design allows for the comparison of

two reintegration policies in Ecuador: The Plan “*Bienvenid@s a Casa*” under Rafael Correa’s past left-wing government and “*Ecuador es tu Hogar*” under Daniel Noboa’s current liberal administration. By analyzing policies developed under distinct ideological regimes, the study seeks to identify the independent variables that shaped their construction and implementation.

Data Sources

The research relies on secondary sources including official government documents, policy papers, program descriptions, academic literature, and reports from international organizations. Additional sources include media reports, civil society publications, and statistical data on deportation and reintegration trends in Ecuador. The timeframe considered covers the periods of policy design and execution from the Correa administration (2007–2017) to the Noboa government (2023–present).

Selection Criteria

Documents and materials were included if they directly addressed the reintegration of Ecuadorian returnees and were produced within the timeframe of each government’s policy’s implementation. Sources were excluded if they only broadly referred to migration without focusing on reintegration or lacked verifiable evidence. In total, two major reintegration programs were selected for comparison: (1) *Plan Bienvenid@s a Casa* and (2) *Ecuador es tu Hogar*. Supporting documents were further screened to capture details on policy objectives, target populations, funding mechanisms, and institutional actors involved.

Data Extraction & Analysis

The analysis focused on extracting information related to:

1. Policy objectives and framing.
2. Target groups and profiles of returnees.
3. Financial resources and investment mechanisms.
4. Institutional arrangements and intersectoral coordination.
5. Underlying ideological frameworks of each administration.

The extracted data were then comparatively analyzed using the MSSD approach to identify how differences in ideology and contextual variables influenced policy design and outcomes. Themes emerging from the analysis were organized under three dimensions seen in the independent variables: (1) the role of migrants in development, (2) the investment and support provided for reintegration, and (3) the rights-based versus instrumental approach to policy framing.

Comparative Analysis

Control Variables

Per the objectives determined by the research, three control variables have been determined for the study to set the similarities surrounding the policies:

1. Location: The policies were implemented in Ecuador under a democratically elected government.
2. Group targeted by policies: Ecuadorian migrants returning to the country.
3. Relation to the National Development Plan (NDP): Both programs are justified by an emphasis on protection for Ecuadorian migrants in the National Development Plans of each government.

Independent Variables

Social investment: State funds committed to migrants' social protection policies and programs based on national development plans.

Profile of returnees: Specific characteristics of the migrants targeted by the return programs.

Ideology of Government: Values and interests of the governments during the development and implementation of plans.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is the level of protection for the migrants returning to Ecuador given the independent conditions.

Finding and Discussion

Social investment

Ecuador in the early 2000s faced continuous moments of economic and political crises, which led to four different governments in less than eight years. Yet, in 2007, the country began a path toward political stability that would last for a decade. Rafael Correa and his project, *Revolución Ciudadana* (Citizen Revolution), proposed a set of institutional changes based on an inclusive social policy that could guarantee fundamental rights and opportunities, which would eventually be developed into the concept of *Buen Vivir*. The impact and investment made during this period also benefited from the favorable economic conditions produced by the commodities boom (Nabernegg, 2024). Consequently, from 2006 to 2016, social spending doubled, going from 4.3 percent of Ecuador's GDP to 8.6 percent (Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2017). Referred to as an "exceptional case" in the region, the improvement in indicators of poverty and investment are in response to policy choices and reforms that allowed the government to increase its spending in areas like education, health, and housing (Flechner and Middelani, 2024). For the case of investment in the migrant population, information available showcases that more than \$4 million was designated to the "Brienvénid@s a Casa" program per year. Both the return plan and the institution that oversaw its operationalization, the National Secretariat for Migrants (SENAMI), lasted until 2013 (Herrera, 2022).

On the other hand, Daniel Noboa's government has encountered economic complications. After completing his first two-year term, results indicated a decrease in investment in public services, such as health (down by 8% from 2023 to 2024) and education (down by 0.25%) (Luna, 2025). Yet, in May 2025, the president started a full-term government with a development plan that aimed to "strengthen and prioritize social protection policies". In this regard, the government presented its National Budget proposal with plans to expand its cash-based assistance funds from \$ 1,548.5 million in 2024 to \$ 1,909.6 million in 2025 for the implementation of social protection programs (Primicias, 2025). Two important considerations are established in the 2025 State budget proposal, where USD 6.77 million will be directed to implement and strengthen human mobility services, with \$642,805.82 specifically dedicated to migrants' social protection in the program "*Ecuador es tu Hogar*" (Ministry of Economy and Finances, 2025). Yet, this general increase is a result of the creation of multiple temporary programs that will deliver cash-based transfers to diverse groups and not to the development of integrated social protection systems. It's worth noting that many of these plans were created and announced during the presidential campaign period at the beginning of 2025. Additionally, the execution of the overall budget could face limitations due to an estimated deficit of USD 5.443 million, which could also limit the creation of social investment projects (Primicias, 2025). In this sense, the investment in return projects is widely different between the two plans.

Profile of the returnees

While the group targeted by the policies is returnees, each cohort is different. The “*Bienvenid@s a Casa*” aimed to foster the voluntary return of Ecuadorians through facilitation mechanisms as well as economic reintegration. In this sense, the targeted nationals were characterized and described by their contributory role to the Ecuadorian economy through their remittances, creating a desired profile of citizens who “had certain economic capacity” (Herrera, Moncayo & Escobar, 2012). Yet, for the population facing forced return or vulnerability conditions like health problems, the assistance provided was not a priority as such for the program, considering its principal actions. Based on this, the plan was part of a migratory policy that aimed to build support nets based on political and economic links as part of their social protection (Herrera, 2021). Considering the focus of the plan, it would be more aligned with the economic sociology of return as posed in the theoretical framework, and not necessarily an integral plan as initially proposed. Nevertheless, official information points out that until 2011, 14.623 Ecuadorians returned to the country through direct help of the program (Herrera, Moncayo & Escobar, 2012). It is worth noting that the plan was launched during the 2008 global crisis. As this crisis began to impact migrants, the number of applicants for the program began to increase (Schurr & Stolz, 2010). This could also signal that while the aimed profile was leaning more towards Ecuadorians with a certain economic sustainability, the program could have benefited those facing employment hardships during the economic downturn.

Regarding plan evaluation, the structure of the program did not offer a quantitative target for how many Ecuadorians they planned to reach with the activities, thus limiting the analysis of whether the plan achieved its initial goals. Nonetheless, when considering the migration balance of nationals over the years after the program launch, the overall rate began to move towards increasingly positive values in comparison to the years prior. As seen in the table, from 2009 until 2013, the number of Ecuadorians returning to the country exceeded those leaving. Yet, this could also be in consequence of the idea that the beneficiaries of the plan were also facing critical conditions after the 2008 shock and eventually opted to return to their homes. Overall, this opens the consideration that the moderate success of Correa’s plan also relied on the internal economic conditions of the country, while being boosted by the global context.

Table 2 Migration Balance of Ecuadorians After 2006

Year	Entries	Exits	Migration Balance
2003	485,971	613,106	-0.96
2004	528,912	603,319	-0.55
2005	597,038	663,601	-0.49
2006	674,267	733,459	-0.42
2007	757,892	800,869	-0.30
2008	767,469	817,981	-0.35
2009	820,292	813,637	0.05
2010	893,408	898,885	-0.04
2011	1,027,543	1,022,451	0.03
2012	1,025,310	1,022,205	0.02
2013	1,143,116	1,137,875	0.03
2014	1,269,675	1,278,336	-0.05
2015	1,374,893	1,398,167	-0.14
2016	1,493,768	1,550,898	-0.35

Year	Entries	Exits	Migration Balance
2017	1,506,290	1,547,312	-0.25
2018	1,475,655	1,497,680	-0.13
2019	1,513,513	1,544,708	-0.18
2020	509,599	508,095	0.01
2021	786,215	867,973	-0.46
2022	1,243,713	1,357,644	-0.63
2023	1,591,448	1,712,731	-0.66

Note. The calculation of the migratory balance is a result of (Ecuadorian Entries – Ecuadorian Exits) / Total Ecuadorian Population of that year * 100.

Source: National Institute of Statistic and Census (2025).

On the contrary, the “*Ecuador es tu Hogar*” plan seeks to assist Ecuadorians older than 18 years old who have been forcibly returned from the United States, have no serious criminal record, are listed in the official registry of returnees, and must not qualify for regular cash transfer programs administered by the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion (MIES). As a result, the profile being targeted points to a vulnerable population who will eventually face uncertainties due to the time coverage (three months) set for the program. Additionally, this profile signals regulatory fragmentation, and could trigger conflict between programs. Since the MIES administers multiple cash-based assistance programs based on socioeconomic parameters determined by Ecuador’s National Social Registry, several Ecuadorians could face exclusion where the existing programs and the new one would enter into competition and prevent integration into the protection system. Here, returnees may face a difficult decision: opting out of long-term social protection schemes to qualify for temporary, higher-value aid. In addition, since the program is only focused on those who have returned from the USA, it leaves ambiguity for general plans to aid forced returnees from other countries. For the time being, 620 people are registered as beneficiaries (Primicias, 2025). Considering the data in Table 2 and the encounters in the U.S border mentioned in the Introduction, this number could increase given the amount of Ecuadorians that migrated after COVID-19.

Ideology of Government

Finally, the implications of ideology in the development of each plan need to be analyzed. During his first presidential campaign, Correa focused many of his proposals on the recognition of the migrant community, one of these being the creation of the National Secretary of the Migrant (SENAMI). This signaled his emphasis on building an agenda of “collective action” where migrants were now part of the National Development Plan 2007 – 2011. Even more evident, the recognition of the migrant community was also a pathway to creating the narrative of migration “as a consequence of neoliberalism,” according to his possession speech in 2007. After his decade in power, many studies have recognized the “*Revolución Ciudadana*” (Citizen Revolution) as an example of left-wing populism (De la Torre, 2014; Mazzolini, 2021; Ellner, 2012). Based on this variable, the investment in social protection and projects like “*Bienvenid@s a Casa*” will also be determined by its role in reshaping the Ecuadorian society, looking into vulnerable groups and attending to their needs while blaming their issues on actors like the United States and the “elites” as seen in the speech. Additionally, nationalistic goals have also been pointed out through the development of this plan. Boccagni & Lagomarsino (2011) have signaled that under the discursive rhetoric on national improvement and pride, the government intends to enhance its credibility and loyalty from migrants who were eventually named “the fifth region” of Ecuador.

On the contrary, Daniel Noboa represents a shift to right-wing presidencies in the country after more than a decade under the “*Revolución Ciudadana*”. Characterized by reductions in their public spending, opening markets, looking for international investment, elimination of subsidies, and reduction of public offices, the government has turned into more conservative management of the State (Rosas, 2024). As a candidate, the president offered proposals for future returnees, like “programs of voluntary assisted return, and labor and social reinsertion”. However, other than the plan established for deportees coming from the US, there has been little progress in the development of the once-proposed policies. Importantly, recent negotiations made by the government of the United States have been successful in leaving Ecuadorians out of the priority list for deportations for the time being. Per this perspective, the current policies are responding to the political sociology of return and will be more of a reactionary policy rather than a structured and sustainable plan overall.

Through the variables selected, it is observed that migration policies for returnees in Ecuador have been shaped by the government plans, economic context, and political ideology, which in turn would also affect the level of involvement that migrants would have in national development or their level of protection in return plans. As seen, the plans were built towards different goals, one being economic reintegration, while the second was characterized by an emergency response. Yet, both can be studied through the lens of returning policies, given their non-homogeneous nature.

Therefore, the dependent variable of the level of protection has been different in both plans. While the “*Bienvenid@s a Casa*” aimed for a higher level of protection and was able to moderately achieve it through higher investment and better-structured actions, the “Ecuador es tu Hogar” would eventually offer temporary protection in a highly volatile environment due to the economic and social crisis. However, the policies fall short in their coverage for the targeted groups. Per the profiles of the returnees, deservingness and means-tested traits will determine the approach of the policies and the government's investment in them. Whether by their economic capacities or vulnerabilities, resulting in exclusionary criteria, each program will eventually weigh other aspects over social citizenship. In this sense, the political filters mentioned in the literature review will not only affect migrants in the receiving country, but also citizens returning to their origin point.

The two programs offer the opportunity to briefly explore the typology of different types of aid that returnees could need based on the context and profile. Whether by economic support, communication, legal assistance, and reinsertion mechanisms, the policies could fall into more than one, as seen by the analysis. Yet, even as the typologies can be applied to both, their execution can drastically change depending on whether the return was a voluntary decision or a forced one, and in turn, they will also influence their economic or institutional approach, seen in the sociology of return. As a final result, the dimensions of analysis obtained serve as an integrated framework for the study of return plans, as seen in Table 2. This comparison highlights important differences shaped by ideological orientation, target groups, available resources, and institutional arrangements.

Consequently, Correa's *Plan Bienvenid@s a Casa* reflected a rights-based and developmental approach, positioning the migrant community as a fifth region of the country who could actively contribute to the national development and nationalistic sentiment. The program offered tax exemptions, credit opportunities, and housing support, led by significant state investment and coordination through institutions like SENAMI. As such, its interest was largely on voluntary returnees from Europe and the US, many of whom had savings or skills to reinvest in Ecuador. However, sustainability weakened over time due to the eventual economic downturn and institutional restructuring in the following government term.

By contrast, Noboa's *Ecuador es tu Hogar* responds primarily to the increasing deportations from the United States, with a more limited support model developed as a response to the crisis. Resources are narrower, with emphasis on economic temporary aid and information services rather than material or sustainable reintegration assistance. The target group consists mainly of forced returnees, who face greater vulnerability and lack of financial stability. Institutional coordination is weaker compared to the Correa era, and mechanisms for long-term evaluation or sustainability are not yet well developed.

Table 3 Comparative Matrix of Reintegration Policies in Ecuador

Dimension	Plan Bienvenid@s a Casa (Rafael Correa, 2007–2017)	Ecuador es tu Hogar (Daniel Noboa, 2023–present)
Policy Objectives	Promote voluntary return and reintegration of Ecuadorians abroad, framed within national development goals.	Address increasing forced deportations, manage return flows, and facilitate short-term reintegration.
Target Group	Voluntary returnees from Spain, US, Italy, etc. (migrant population from the 2000's with economic capacities); migrants facing economic hardships due to 2008 crisis.	Primarily deportees from the United States (forced return).
Ideological Framework	Left-wing, rights-based, developmental state; migrants seen as contributors to national development and identity.	Created under neoliberal, market-oriented conditions, with a lack of policies concerning and including migrants.
Financial Resources & Incentives	Significant state investment; tax exemptions for goods, access to credit, training, and housing support.	Limited budget allocation; focused on information services, limited social protection, and reintegration aid.
Institutional Arrangements	Strong role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, SENAMI (National Secretariat for Migrants), and intersectoral collaboration.	Managed by the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion and Ministry of International Relations and Human Mobility; weaker inter-agency coordination.
Returnee Profile	Mostly voluntary returnees, middle-income, with skills and remittances; some chose to invest in Ecuador.	Forced returnees, often with precarious conditions, lack of savings, and vulnerable social status.
Approach to Migrants in Development	Migrants are framed as “the fifth region,” central to national development.	Migrants are considered as individuals needing reintegration, with less emphasis on development linkages.
Evaluation & Sustainability	Initial strong institutional support, but limited long-term sustainability, led to SENAMI's closure.	Program still emerging; lack of robust evaluation mechanisms; sustainability uncertain.

Source: Author's elaboration

Overall, the table demonstrates that while both programs aimed to facilitate reintegration, they diverged significantly in objectives, ideological framing, investment, and inclusiveness, with current policies offering a more limited safety net compared to earlier efforts.

Conclusion

To summarize, Ecuador's response to the return of thousands of migrants has represented a significant policy milestone, and challenge. The transition from a more structured and seemingly long-term plan now contrasts with a temporary relief response to forced returnees. Yet, both the "*Bienvenid@s a Casa*" and the "*Ecuador es tu Hogar*" offer valuable learnings on how to approach reintegration strategies and what aspects will impact their development and sustainable success. As social protection mechanisms, both plans filtered their responses through an economic sustainability lens. Whether as economic credits and financial support to return, or in limited monetary transfers, both plans explored policy actions that would eventually provide economic relief, or even economic agency, to the returnees. However, the long-term vision of both plans were limited in demonstrating additional measures for sustainability regarding employment, psychological support, family reunification, social inclusion, and a bigger focus on housing.

Additionally, independent variables shed some light on what might determine the weight of social protection on reintegration and returning mechanisms. The funds available for investment, the overall ideology and objectives of the government, and the profile of the returnees will shape how the "non-homogeneity" aspect of returning is regarded during the creation and execution of the plans. Here, a valuable recommendation will focus on aiming for effective reintegration, in the same way that social policy does, through the consideration of the diverse needs that could arise in the targeted groups.

In the current Ecuadorian context, the national deficit and loss of humanitarian aid resources will also pose constraints that could weaken the state's response. This could support the idea that in unstable societies, the addition of needs from returnees could put more pressure on an already weak social system. However, this situation should also be recognized as an opportunity to improve existing legislation and social protection mechanisms in an adverse context. As the security and economic crisis constitute key challenges for Ecuador, the response provided to returnees must be developed through a lens of no-harm policy, vulnerability studies, and recognition of strengths. Given this reality, reintegration policies must acknowledge that the structural conditions necessary to improve returnees' quality of life may be lacking, potentially pushing them to remigrate despite the risks involved.

Overall, the protection of returnees has not been properly achieved by either government considering that, while development plans did mention Ecuadorian migrants as development participants, the policies fell short in complementary services. Moreover, at a base level, positive impacts should be strived for through improving existing social protection mechanisms and non-discriminatory measures, leveraging data for better program design, and ensuring continuous evaluation. As such, implementing any reintegration model should truly support returnees in rebuilding their lives while fostering opportunities and safety nationally as part of an integrated strategy, and not as an isolated one or one solely focused on economic opportunities. Finally, any policy regarding returnees should be built through the recognition of the social issues that led to human mobility and be intentional towards creating opportunities, agency and reducing inequalities, while also acknowledging social protection as a right. Further research could consider whether the success of reintegration policies could represent a final phase of the migration process due to a permanent settlement in the original countries, or explore how existing social protection mechanisms like cash grants can be better adapted to target returnees, particularly those in vulnerable conditions.

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