Cleavages without Parties:
Populism and Its Voters in Peru

Rodrigo Barrenechea and *Daniel Encinas*

Abstract

Peru is widely regarded as a polity without parties, where political and electoral volatility is the norm. Yet, the country is not unpredictable. Although the protagonists change, Peru has a predictable pattern of voting structured around socioeconomic, ethnic, and territorial cleavages that favor populist leaders who, on many occasions, have won office. This paper examines the electoral coalitions of populist leaders in Peru and shows that they are primarily based on voters from the country's periphery. Populism appeals to those voters through narratives that vindicate the periphery as the place where the country's identity resides, while portraying elites from core regions as their victimizers. Even in the absence of political parties that structure electoral competition, this cleavage has been repeatedly activated by different populist leaders, lending a degree of predictability to Peruvian politics. This article makes two contributions, one to the literature on political representation and another to the study of populism in Peru. First, it shows that politicized social cleavages can exist despite the absence of stable political parties representing them. Latent cleavages can be activated by different parties that share similar appeals, in this case populist appeals. Second, it examines the characteristics that populism and "the people" have in Peru: the phenomenon is grounded in the country's periphery and its antagonism with the center.

Keywords: Populism, cleavages, elections, Peru.

Introduction

Peru is a notoriously unstable country. Particularly in recent years, when seven presidents governed in as many years, scholarship has pointed to the lack of

Rodrigo Barrenechea is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social and Political Sciences and a member of the Research Center of the Universidad del Pacifico. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from Northwestern University. <r.barrenecheac@up.edu.pe>
Daniel Encinas is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science, Instructor, and member of the Data Science Team, Northwestern University.
<danielencinas2021@u.northwestern.edu>

parties and professional politicians as the root cause of this instability.[1] This is not new, however. Peru has been labeled more than once as a "democracy without parties".[2] Since the 1990s, Peru has been identified as one of the countries with the most volatile voters in the region.[3] The most voted party in one election often struggles to win any seats in Congress in the next election. The roots of the country's political instability can be found in voters' equally unstable behavior.

However, instability does not equal unpredictability. Even when it is true that parties lack solid linkages to voters and hence voters change parties from one election to the next, this paper argues that Peru exhibits a predictable pattern of voting structured around socioeconomic, ethnic, and territorial cleavages. Voters from lower socioeconomic strata, of indigenous descent, and the highlands vote in relatively predictable ways, supporting populist candidates running from the left. This was the case with Fujimori in 1990, Humala in 2006 and 2011, and Pedro Castillo in 2021. The coast, particularly the capital city where whiter and more affluent voters reside, tends to vote for more conservative, pro-status quo alternatives. Although the candidates themselves tend to change, these voting patterns persist, structuring politics and making them more predictable. Peru shows that stable political cleavages can exist even in the absence of stable political parties.

Peru has not seen the rise and consolidation of a populist party as in Venezuela, Bolivia, or Ecuador, where leaders and their platforms stabilized political competition for several electoral cycles.[4] Nevertheless, this article suggests that there is a stable populist constituency that different populists

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[1] Rodrigo Barrenechea and Alberto Vergara, "Peru: The Danger of Powerless Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 2 (2023): 77-89, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2023.0015 (accessed January 30, 2025).

[2] John Crabtree, "Democracy without Parties? Some Lessons from Peru," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 42, no. 2 (2010): 357-382, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X10000477 (accessed January 30, 2025); Steven Levitsky and Maxwell A. Cameron, "Democracy without Parties? Political Parties and Regime Change in Fujimori's Peru," *Latin American Politics and Society* 45, no. 3 (2003): 1-33, https://doi.org/10.2307/3177157 (accessed January 30, 2025); Martín Tanaka, *Democracia sin partidos, Perú, 2000-2005: Los problemas de representación y las propuestas de reforma política* [Democracy without parties, Peru, 2000-2005: Problems of representation and proposals for political reform] (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2005).

[3] Scott Mainwaring, ed., *Party Systems in Latin America: Institutionalization, Decay, and Collapse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Scott Mainwaring and Timothy Scully, eds., *Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[4] Santiago Anria, *When Movements Become Parties: The Bolivian MAS in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Julio F. Carrión, *A Dynamic Theory of Populism in Power: The Andes in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Javier Corrales and Michael Penfold-Becerra, *Dragon in the Tropics: Hugo Chavez and the Political Economy of Revolution in Venezuela* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011).

have appealed to over time. These appeals are centered around material redistribution, but they also include a symbolic vindication of the periphery provinces vis-à-vis the center provinces, and particularly the capital city. Who "the people" are in populist discourse changes from country to country and over time as well. In Peru, it is argued that "the people" are in the periphery, and hence successful populists in the past have had it as a key component of their electoral coalitions.

This paper has two goals. First, it provides evidence to show that a stable voting pattern exists across elections and that such a pattern is structured around enduring social and territorial cleavages that oppose Lima and the coast to the country's highlands. This can be conceptualized as a center-periphery cleavage, which overlaps long-term socioeconomic and ethnic divides in Peruvian society. This cleavage is what structures the populist-antipopulist electoral alternatives in several electoral cycles, and it shows that cleavages can exist even in the absence of stable parties that represent them. Using voting statistics since 1990, we show this reliable pattern of voting behavior that makes electoral outcomes in time T correlated with those in T+1, despite changes in parties and candidates.

Second, it shows that populism in Peru tends to manifest along the center-periphery lines, such that peripheries vote for populists and the center rejects them. The rhetoric and symbolic appeals of these populists are distinctively grounded in that cleavage, constructing a "Peruvian people" that is associated with the country's periphery, the *Perú Profundo*, and opposing it to the Lima-centered, white, and coastal elite. At a time when the literature on populism is building knowledge about who votes for populism and who "the people" are, this provides answers to those questions for the Peruvian case: populism's voters are in the country's periphery and the "people" in Peruvian populism are in "Perú profundo" respectively.

The rest of the article continues as follows. The first section discusses the literature on populism, representation, and social cleavages. This paper articulates how stable cleavages structuring politics could lead to stable representation patterns and discusses the puzzling Peruvian situation, where such cleavages exist without stable representation. Populists have appealed to these stable cleavages during elections activating them to garner support. The second section describes the story of three populist presidents, Alberto Fujimori, Ollanta Humala, and Pedro Castillo, who won with the support of the periphery and against the country's core regions. The third section presents statistical evidence of the similarities between these three populists' electoral bases. Although there are differences between them, the measures employed to assess their socioeconomic and territorial electoral base—highlighting their peripheralness—consistently correlate with votes for these populists. The final section is dedicated to conclusions.

Social Cleavages, Representation, and Populism

This article deals with the intersection of literature on social cleavages, representation, and populism. The current section describes how these strands of literature intersect and lays out the puzzle around Peruvian populism in recent decades: one that presents itself with regularity during elections and around the same cleavages despite changes in parties and candidates representing it.

Populism can be understood as a "thin-centered ideology" or a form of discourse according to which politics is about a conflict between a corrupt elite and a victimized people. According to this view, politicians are expected to embody "the will of the people".[5] By this definition, populism has a long history in Peru, dating back to Haya de la Torre's Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana (APRA) in 1931, one of the first populist parties in history.[6] Populism tends to be a polarizing force, as it has polarization built into its very definition. Its "us vs them" political framing tends to draw rigid boundaries between the "pure people" and those who represent them on the one hand, and the establishment and those who follow it on the other.[7]

The connection between the literature on populism and that on social cleavages can be made by thinking about how populism represents and mobilizes support. The division presented by populism, that between the people and the establishment, usually combines with others. Populist representation can overlap with pre-existing cleavages of different kinds (e.g., class, ethnicity, religion, territory), such that supporters and detractors of populism are on one side of these pre-existing cleavages.[8]

Political science has a long tradition of literature focused on the importance of social cleavages for structuring political representation. A cleavage can be defined as a political divide grounded on the socio-structural characteristics

[5] Paris Aslanidis, "Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective," *Political Studies* 64, no. 1_suppl (2016): 88-104, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12224 (accessed January 30, 2025); Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541-563, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x (accessed January 30, 2025); Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[6] John Crabtree, "Populismo y neopopulismo: La experiencia peruana" [Populism and Neopopulism: the Peruvian experience], *Apuntes. Revista de ciencias sociales*, no. 40 (1997): 97-109, https://doi.org/10.21678/apuntes.40.457 (accessed January 30, 2025); Robert S. Jansen, *Revolutionizing Repertoires: The Rise of Populist Mobilization in Peru* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[7] Note that populism is generally polarizing and can polarize along various dimensions; See Kenneth M. Roberts, "Populism and Polarization in Comparative Perspective: Constitutive, Spatial and Institutional Dimensions," *Government and Opposition* 57, no. 4 (2022): 680-702, https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.14 (accessed January 30, 2025).

[8] Rodrigo Barrenechea, *Populist Coalitions in Latin America: Polarization, Organization and Identity* (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2019).

of a polity.[9] A political cleavage has three characteristics: 1) It is based on a structural difference between groups in society; 2) these groups share some form of collective identity around that divide; and 3) this divide has to be reflected in voting behavior, such that groups vote for parties that represent those divides.[10] Dating back to the classic text by Lipset and Rokkan on the subject, social cleavages are considered central in shaping political representation, and as having the potential to be extraordinarily enduring.[11] Recent scholarship on Latin American parties has shown how stark divisions around political cleavages can be part of the building blocks of enduring political parties.[12]

Although the literature on cleavages often equates the existence of a regular pattern of voting behavior with the regular presence of parties receiving those votes, this is not necessarily the case. Socio-structural divides can manifest themselves regularly even in the absence of established political parties representing them election after election. Arguably, cleavages that regularly structure voting behavior in the absence of established and stable political parties are particularly strong. This seems to be the case in Peru, where latent cleavages are activated by different actors over several different elections, particularly populist candidates.

Historically, populism has mobilized voters along many cleavage lines, including territorial cleavages among them. As Taggart has pointed out, the notion of "Heartland" in populist discourses is usually associated with a space where the "virtuous people" reside.[13] Populism in the United States, for example, portrays the virtuous people as being located in "Middle America".[14] But these territorial cleavages are often not just about location but are shortcuts to refer to a myriad of other socioeconomic and cultural characteristics correlated with territory. In other words, territorial cleavages are not necessarily about where people live, but about what they do and what they look like.

The existence of a territorial cleavage dividing Peru socially and politically has been present in Peruvian scholarship for a long time. In 1947, the historian Jorge Basadre spoke of a division between *Perú Oficial* ("Official Peru"), the

[9] Stefano Bartolini and Peter Mair, *Identity, Competition and Electoral Availability: The Stabilisation of European Electorates 1885-1985* (Colchester: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan, eds., *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-national Perspectives* (New York: Free Press, 1967).

[12] Adrienne LeBas, *From Protest to Parties: Party-Building and Democratization in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Steven Levitsky, James Loxton, and Brandon Van Dyck, "Introduction: Challenges of Party-Building in Latin America," in *Challenges of Party-Building in Latin America*, eds. Steven Levitsky, James Loxton, Brandon Van Dyck, and Jorge I. Domínguez (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 10-12.

[13] Paul Taggart, "Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics," in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, eds. Yves Mény and Yves Surel (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2002), 62-80, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403920072_4 (accessed January 30, 2025).

[14] Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 16.

coastal capital where state institutions are situated, and *Perú Profundo* ("Deep Peru"), where the national identity resided.[15] This concept, which resonates with Taggart's "Heartland," has been used by populists in Peru to refer to the highlands—the most rural, indigenous, and impoverished parts of the country. Again, a territorial division synthesizes socioeconomic and cultural differences.

The depth and endurance of this division are reflected in the nation-building process by the Peruvian state. In the first half of the twentieth century, the official brand of nationalism sponsored by the government from Lima was anchored on liberal and European-centered values. This project was met by a "popular nationalism," a form of nationalism that emerged from anti-oligarchic political projects, like those advanced by the Aprista Party or the Communist Party, and pushed a national identity anchored in pre-Hispanic legacies, practices, and cultures.[16] This form of nationalism was embraced and advanced by many teachers as the state expanded education onto the country's periphery. This nationalism, critical of elites at the center of power and placing lower classes and the Indigenous past as the locus of national identity, shaped public education for the rest of the twentieth century.[17]

The contemporary political relevance of this divide has been highlighted by previous scholarship. Different forms of political behavior in the country, like voting or protesting, seem to be structured around this cleavage.[18] So much so that scholars speak of the existence of "two Perus" or a dualist logic governing Peruvian politics.[19] The profound and enduring inequalities separating the country's core located on the coast (particularly in its capital, Lima) from the periphery are reflected in all sorts of social development and deprivation indicators. Unsurprisingly, many radical political projects in the country's history originated in the indigenous highlands and had their

[15] Jorge Basadre, *La multitud, la ciudad y el campo en la historia del Perú* [The multitude, the city and the countryside in the history of Peru] (Lima: Editorial Huascarán, 1947), 267.

[16] Martin vom Hau and Valeria Biffi, "Mann in the Andes: Infrastructural Power and Nationalism in Peru," in *Peru in Theory*, ed. Paulo Drinot (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 100.

[17] Gonzalo Portocarrero and Patricia Oliart, "La 'Idea Crítica': Una Visión del Perú Desde Abajo" [The 'critical idea': A vision of Peru from below], in *El Perú Desde la Escuela* (Lima: Instituto de Apoyo Agrario, 1989), 103-120.

[18] Daniel Encinas and Alejandro Zúñiga, "Divisiones sin Sendero: Identidades nacionales y degradación institucional en el Perú contemporáneo" [Divisions without a path: National identities and institutional degradation in contemporary Peru], in *Legados de un pasado irresuelto. El Informe Final de la CVR y la crisis de la democracia veinte años después*, eds. Salomón Lerner and Elizabeth Salmón (Lima: IDEHPUCP, 2023), 231-254, https://repositorio.pucp.edu.pe/index/handle/123456789/196470 (accessed January 30, 2025).

[19] Moisés Arce, "The Persistence of the Two Perus," *Current History* 113, no. 760 (2014): 70-75, https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2014.113.760.70 (accessed January 30, 2025); Martín Tanaka and Sofía Vera, "La dinámica 'neodualista' de una democracia sin sistema de partidos: La situación de la democracia en el Perú" [The 'Neodualist' dynamics of a democracy without a party system: The situation of democracy in Peru], *Revista de Ciencia Política (Santiago)* 30, no. 1 (2010): 87-114, https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-090X2010000100006 (accessed January 30, 2025).

vindication through revolutionary change as their goal.[20] It is no surprise either that populism's anti-pluralist radical discourse has found fertile ground in this periphery. At the same time, the country's core elites had formulated radical agendas and discourses of their own centered around vertical assimilation, discipline, or violent suppression of the peripheral population, purportedly in the name of advancing Peru's progress.[21]

As the following sections show, populists have appealed to these cleavages and sought to polarize voters, particularly in electoral times. These sections describe this constant re-emergence of populism around the same cleavages and test their consistency using decades of data from presidential elections.

One Cleavage, Three Candidates

As stated before, Peru has a long tradition of populism in politics. The first instance of a populist movement and candidate dates back to the origins of the *Partido Aprista Peruano* and its leader, Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre.[22] This early phase of populism in Peru took place in the context of a local political conflict along the oligarchic/anti-oligarchic political divide and is part of a broader Latin American wave of incorporation of lower and middle classes into the political process, much of which happened via populist parties.[23] That populist tradition continued, albeit combined with different appeals, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, starting with Alberto Fujimori, continuing with Ollanta Humala, and then Pedro Castillo.[24]

Building on the literature on populism, this article will consider populist leaders as those who share an outsider status, an anti-establishment discourse that challenges parties in power, and appeal to a 'people' who are victimized by political (and sometimes economic) elites.[25] These three attributes are common to the cases of interest examined here, and they exclude other Peruvian

[20] José Luis Rénique, *La nación radical: De la utopía indigenista a la tragedia senderista* [The radical nation: From the indigenous utopia to the shining path tragedy] (Lima: La Siniestra Ensayos, 2022).

[21] Paulo Drinot, "Foucault in the Land of the Incas: Sovereignty and Governmentality in Neoliberal Peru," in *Peru in Theory*, ed. Paulo Drinot (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 167-189; Encinas and Zúñiga, "Divisiones sin Sendero."

[22] Crabtree, "Populismo y neopopulismo"; Jansen, *Revolutionizing Repertoires*.

[23] Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002).

[24] Cynthia McClintock, "Populism in Peru: From APRA to Ollanta Humala," in *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Carlos De la Torre and Cynthia J. Arnson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 203-239; Paula Muñoz, "Latin America Erupts: Peru Goes Populist," *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 3 (2021): 48-62, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2021.0033 (accessed January 30, 2025).

[25] Kurt Weyland, "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics," *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1-22; Steven Levitsky and James Loxton, "Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism in the Andes," *Democratization* 20, no. 1 (2013): 107-136; Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

presidents in this same period of time, like Toledo, García, and Kuczynski. Toledo was certainly an outsider, but he did not use anti-establishment appeals. Instead, his discourse centered around democratization in the context of an authoritarian incumbent, Alberto Fujimori.[26] García, while belonging to what the literature has labeled as a "populist machine",[27] was neither an outsider nor anti-establishment either. Finally, Kuczynski was closer to the embodiment of the Peruvian elites than to a populist.

In this section, the cases of Fujimori, Humala, and Castillo are described, including their political origins, the appeals they used, and their relationship with the periphery during electoral times. In line with the criteria for case selection, all of these candidates used appeals to "the people," which is symbolically located in the country's periphery. As previously noted, the term "periphery" does not refer merely to a geographical location distant from the capital but also to a more indigenous, mestizo, and impoverished social sector of the country.

Alberto Fujimori

Alberto Fujimori, an academic of Japanese descent, was the first successful populist outsider of contemporary Peru. His electoral win in 1990 established the territorial voting pattern that we analyzed here. He was also the first successful populist candidate since the incorporation of illiterate voters (most of them rural and indigenous) into the democratic process.[28] Although left-wing parties had advanced their position in these rural, peripheral areas of the country leading up to this electoral incorporation, their electoral ties with the left were not consolidated, as only two general elections took place between their incorporation and the incursion of Fujimori into the Peruvian electoral arena.

Numerous studies on the subject have established Fujimori's status as a populist. His presidency was considered part of a "new wave" of populist presidents in Latin America labeled "neopopulists," who demonstrated not only that populism was not a phenomenon of the past but also that it could coexist with market-oriented economic policies.[29]

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[26] Alejandro Toledo, for instance, employed Inka symbology and made references to the "Perú Profundo" during his campaign and administration, a constituency he often claimed to represent. His inauguration ceremony exemplified this strategy; for an account of its symbolism, see Francesc Relea, "Hurricane Toledo Takes Office as Peru's President with a Millennia-old Ceremony," *El País* (July 30, 2001), https://elpais.com/internacional/2001/07/30/actualidad/996444001_850215.html (accessed June 18, 2025). It is important to note, however, that while populists in Peru frequently appeal to "Perú Profundo" as "the people," not every candidate who utilizes such appeals is necessarily a populist.

[27] Steven Levitsky and Kenneth M. Roberts, eds., *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

[28] The literacy requirement had been removed with the enactment of the 1979 constitution.

[29] Crabtree, "Populismo y neopopulismo"; Kenneth M. Roberts, "Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin America: The Peruvian Case," *World Politics* 48, no. 1 (1995): 82-116; Weyland, "Neopopulism and Neoliberalism."

Fujimori was a complete outsider to Peru's inchoate party system and barely known throughout the country, but conditions were ripe for some form of anti-establishment candidacy. The transition to democracy in 1980 had coincided with the onset of Sendero Luminoso's war declaration against the Peruvian state, which by 1990, had claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Peruvians. At the same time, hyperinflation skyrocketed in the late 1980s, pushing the country into poverty and economic uncertainty. Finally, corruption scandals amid the economic crisis made angry voters more prone to seek an anti-establishment option that Fujimori embodied.[30]

It was fortunate for Fujimori that he made it to the runoff with Mario Vargas Llosa and the coalition of parties surrounding his candidacy. These were mainly Lima-centered politicians who represented the wealthiest and whitest sectors of the country. This turned Fujimori's election not only into a referendum on the state of the country and the continuity of the party system but also into a trial of the Peruvian elites, wealthier and whiter than the average Peruvian. As a result, Fujimori ended up concentrating the votes of the country's periphery, where the most indigenous and the poorest were located.[31] Populism overlapped, for the first time, with the territorial center-periphery cleavage that would structure votes for the coming decades.[32]

Throughout his presidency, Fujimori continued to use anti-establishment appeals and claimed to represent "the people" in opposition to political parties and their partidocracia. Furthermore, symbolic appeals to indigenous culture and a constant presence in the poorest provinces of the country, those in the periphery among them, were characteristic of his administration. He sought to position himself, personally, as the savior of the excluded.[33]

His electoral linkages to the periphery remained strong and arguably grew stronger after his initial victory. Statistical representation of his support coalition, presented below, shows that his electoral support in those parts of the country increased significantly in relation to 1990. At the same time, however,

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[30] Jason Seawright, *Party-System Collapse: The Roots of Crisis in Peru and Venezuela* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

[31] Carlos Iván Degregori, "El aprendiz de brujo y el curandero chino" [The sorcerer's apprentice and the Chinese healer], in *Demonios y redentores en el nuevo Perú. Una tragedia en dos vueltas*, eds. Carlos Iván Degregori and Romeo Grompone (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1991), 71-132; David Sulmont, "Líneas de frontera y comportamiento electoral en el Perú: Diferencias sociales y tendencias del voto en las elecciones presidenciales peruanas, 1980-2006" [Boundary lines and electoral behavior in Peru: Social differences and voting trends in the Peruvian presidential elections, 1980-2006], in *Cambios sociales en el Perú, 1968-2008: Homenaje a Denis Sulmont*, ed. Orlando Plaza (Lima: Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, 2012), 107-134.

[32] Up until that point, that kind of vote had been the base of leftist parties, particularly Izquierda Unida; a coalition of left-wing parties that became one of the most important electoral players during the 1980s; Sulmont, "Líneas de frontera y comportamiento electoral en el Perú."

[33] Yusuke Murakami, *Perú en la era del Chino: la política no institucionalizada y el pueblo en busca de un salvador* [Peru in the age of the chino: Non-institutionalized politics and the people in search of a savior] (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 2007).

the correlation between a voter's peripheral status and support for Fujimori weakened. This is explained by the broadening of his appeal in subsequent elections. Key political successes granted him a broad coalition that included center and periphery voters alike: dramatically reduced inflation and capturing the leader of Sendero Luminoso, Abimael Guzman Reynoso. These two crises eroded voters' trust in political parties. However, Fujimori's success in overcoming them cemented his reputation as a charismatic leader and granted him a broad electoral coalition in the 1995 elections.[34]

From then on, Fujimori's administration grew increasingly authoritarian, yet remained widely popular. By the time of his political demise in 2000, opposition forces had made inroads into his support coalition and new challengers sought to galvanize the support of the country's periphery. A new populist, however, would not come until 2006.

Ollanta Humala
Former president Ollanta Humala rose to prominence as a radical anti-establishment challenger who used populist appeals in his 2006 run for the presidency and somewhat moderated them in his 2011 successful attempt. In both cases, he received votes from the country's periphery.

Ollanta Humala first appeared in the political landscape in the aftermath of the corruption scandal that preceded Fujimori's downfall. As a commander in the army, he led a group of soldiers in an uprising that demanded the president's resignation. He did so from a military base in one of the country's peripheral regions. His actions seemed to mimic those of other military officers, rising against unpopular incumbents in the Andean region and establishing a radical opposition brand as a result. Hugo Chávez had done so in his failed coup attempt against Carlos Andrés Pérez in 1992 Venezuela. The same went with Lucio Gutierrez, an Ecuadorian Colonel who launched a successful coup against Jamil Mahuad. In both cases, they were middle-ranking officers whose actions helped them pave their way to the presidency.

Although Humala's actions were not comparable in scale to those of Chávez or Gutierrez and were not critical for the breakdown of Fujimori's regime, they served to establish a reputation for himself as a radical anti-establishment opposer. He further cemented that brand by supporting his brother Antauro's armed uprising against Alejandro Toledo's administration in 2005, at a moment of the former president's widespread unpopularity.

Humala not only sought to imitate Chávez's path to power but also actively sought his endorsement during the 2006 election campaign. This seemed to cement his anti-establishment and populist brands.[35] That year, Humala

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[34] Kurt Weyland, "¿La paradoja del éxito? Los determinantes del apoyo político al presidente Fujimori" [The paradox of success? The determinants of political support for president Fujimori], *Debates en Sociología*, nos. 25-26 (2001): 213-244.

traveled to Venezuela to meet Chávez, received his endorsement publicly, and on the campaign trail, he even wore the distinctive color red that Chávez wore at the time. As a wave of left-wing populist candidates and presidents shook the Andean region, he seemed to fit right in.

On the campaign trail, Humala clearly used populist rhetoric to make his way into the second round. In a typical populist fashion, he portrayed other competing parties as part of the same establishment elite who did not represent the interests of the real Peruvian people. Keeping on brand with Andean populism at the time, he claimed he would push for a constituent assembly if elected president and radically rewrite the "neoliberal constitution" enacted during Fujimori's administration.

Moreover, Humala's populist discourse coexisted not only with anti-neoliberal or leftist rhetoric but also with a messianic discourse that exalted the legacies of the Incas and decried the country's Spaniard colonial past. The Humala family had "*etnocacerismo*," an ideology that revered Peruvian military caudillo Andrés Avelino Cáceres and advocated for returning to the Inca Empire's principles.[36] With this, Humala tapped on elements of Peru's "popular nationalism," a form of nationalism that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century in opposition to a liberal nationalist project pushed by oligarchic elites.[37] It highlighted the precolonial and indigenous roots of the country, and it became central to state-sponsored nationalism during General Velasco's dictatorship (1968-1975).

Although Humala lost the election to Alan García in the second round, he managed to garner the support of 47% of voters. More critically for the argument advanced in this article, Humala managed landslide victories in the first round in rural, peripheral areas of the country and won decisive majorities in most of the provinces of the southern highlands. His vote was highly correlated with lower integration into the market economy and higher indigenous population.[38] His vote was the most indigenous one for a candidate in the first round since 1980, the first election with a fully enfranchised electorate.

After losing the 2006 election, Humala won in 2011. His victory followed a moderation of his discourse and a continued use of anti-establishment appeals. Furthermore, to win the second round, Humala sought the support of Toledo, the same politician against whom Antauro Humala organized an armed uprising in 2005. The runoff with Keiko Fujimori favored Humala, who won with 51% of the votes.

Still, despite his moderation, he won an election propelled by votes from

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[35] Later investigations suggest Humala also received campaign money from Chávez during those years.

[36] Miguel Alvarado Chávez, *Populismo radical en el Perú: La invención del etnocacerismo* [Radical Populism in Peru: The invention of Ethnocacerism] (Lima: Fondo Editorial de la PUCP, 2023).

[37] vom Hau and Biffi, "Mann in the Andes."

[38] Sulmont, "Líneas de frontera y comportamiento electoral en el Perú."

the periphery, which motivated the opposition of Lima and the coast. The pattern of 2006 repeated.

Pedro Castillo

Pedro Castillo, the winner of the 2021 presidential election, is the most recent representative of the populist periphery in Peru. He won the first round with merely 15% of the votes cast, in the most fragmented election since Peru's return to democracy in 2000. He made it to the runoff along with Keiko Fujimori, who accumulated 10% of the votes cast.

If every populist president in Peru had been a political outsider, Castillo was the most prototypical and multidimensional outsider.[39] From a political perspective, his only experience was a failed mayoral race in 2002 in the district of Anguia, one of the poorest in the country. On that occasion, he obtained 104 of the 1,330 votes cast. However, he also lacked ties to the country's economic, social, or cultural power circles. He was a candidate coming from the country's periphery but also from the periphery of power.

Pedro Castillo entered the national lens in 2017 as the leader of a strike by a faction of public school teachers, the National Committee for Reorientation and Reconstitution of SUTEP (CONARE). Although this march had a national impact, CONARE is not a union with notable strength or reach. Nevertheless, the strike was notable enough to be invited to run for the presidency with Perú Libre, a party of Marxist-Leninist inspiration with minimal territorial reach until that election.

Castillo's campaign rhetoric was unmistakably populist. The Peruvian political elites, corrupt and disinterested in the country, were the main adversary of the "people", represented by Castillo. To these antagonisms, Castillo added others. After he made it to the second round, he announced that the election would be a "competition between the rich and the poor, a fight between the boss and the worker, between the master and the slave." In that sense, Castillo combined left-wing appeals with classic elements of a populist discourse.

As weeks passed, Castillo's vote intention, according to the polls, remained remarkably stable, even after poor debate performances and his virtual absence in the mass media. His electorate remained firm, as if Castillo belonged to an established political party or was a candidate with a captive electorate firmly grounded in rural, lower-class votes from the highlands. This highlights the underlying pattern this article articulates: populist challengers change over time, but the voting patterns that propel them to power remain stable and predictable. In the end, despite being a practically unknown candidate making radical appeals for change, he won the second round against Keiko Fujimori by 44,058 votes, who lost a second round for the third time in a row.

Like no other populist candidate before, Castillo was able to represent the

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[39] Rodrigo Barrenechea and Daniel Encinas, "Perú 2021: Democracia por defecto" [Peru 2021: Democracy by default], *Revista de Ciencia Política (Santiago)* 42, no. 2 (2022): 407-438.

cleavage dividing the coast from *Perú Profundo*. Not only was he appealing to that part of the country through his rhetoric, but he also belonged to that part of the country. The myth of populist representation worked better for him than for anyone else. The hat that characterized his first seven months in office and accompanied him in all his public appearances sought to evoke this *Perú Profundo* symbolically.

In sum, these three populists differed significantly in their backgrounds. Fujimori was an academic of Japanese descent, Humala was a retired army commander who espoused an ideology that vindicated the Incas, and Castillo was a teacher and union leader from one of the poorest regions in Perú. There are also nuances in their political appeals. However, despite all their differences, they galvanized an electoral coalition with the country's peripheries as its most important component.

Stable Voting Patterns, Unstable Political Parties

This section describes the characteristics of voting patterns associated with populist candidates in Peru. The statistical analysis that follows demonstrates the stability of vote patterns in Peru despite the absence of stable political parties. This analysis provides evidence that populist candidates share an electoral base situated on the socioeconomic, ethnic, and territorial periphery of the country, leading to correlated electoral outcomes over time.

Vote Stability

The following statistical analysis relies primarily on an updated version of Sulmont's database,[40] containing electoral results (first round) and socioeconomic indicators at the provincial level from 1980 to 2006, which is the lowest level of disaggregation that allows a temporal comparison across Peruvian elections.[41] Given the complexities of changes in the Peruvian electoral system and data management issues, compiling electoral data at a lower level than the department level poses significant challenges. Therefore, Sulmont's dataset stands as a crucial contribution.

Both the electoral and non-electoral variables in the dataset have been updated. First, variables from the following three elections (first round 2011, 2016, and 2021) were incorporated using ONPE as a source. The data was accessed after submitting a formal "information request."[42] In addition,

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[40] David Sulmont, "Elecciones presidenciales e indicadores sociales del Perú, 1980-2006" database and supportive documentation. The version used in this study was subsequently updated by the author of this paper and all analysis and conclusions drawn from it are solely their responsibility.

[41] While the first populist we study competed in 1990, we use 1980s data to see voting patterns since Peruvian democracy began.

[42] Alexander Benites provided generous support with data and Luis Valverde and Diego Jesus provided outstanding research assistance.

socioeconomic indicators were updated using INEI as a source. To simplify provincial aggregation, data from the Censo 2017 webpage was scraped.[43] As a result, the database now spans from 1980 to 2021.

To assess the degree of voter similarity across populist candidates, two variables were employed as proxies of Peru's enduring cleavages. Building on Sulmont's (2015) analysis, the economically active population in wage jobs, as indicated in Census data, serves as a proxy of the level of market integration. Voters less integrated into the market tend to exhibit more peripheralization than more integrated voters.[44] Alternative measures using other socioeconomic variables, including per capita family income, access to electric lighting, connection to public sewage networks, access to public piped water, and the Human Development Index (HDI).[45] Findings with these data align with those using our proxy of market integration, reinforcing the validity of this measurement. While these alternative indicators provide useful insights, they have only been available for more recent years. Furthermore, their correlation with market integration and the consistency of results further validate this approach. Given that our measurement spans a longer period, it remains the best option for analyzing trends over time.[46]

In addition to the economic dimension, attention was given to the ethnicity of the Peruvian electorate. In particular, the percentage of respondents in a province that reports an indigenous language (Quechua, Aymara, or Amazonian languages) as their mother tongue was considered in the analysis.[47] These citizens are more marginalized relative to their non-indigenous counterparts in ways that are not entirely mediated by economic exclusion. In the Peruvian context, both ethnicity and the level of market integration underscore patterns of territorial exclusion and other socioeconomic variables associated with peripheralization.[48]

Pearson correlation coefficients are calculated between the percentage share of valid votes for top candidates and the proxy variables. The analysis advanced here focuses exclusively on first-round elections, as the literature on Peruvian and other electoral contexts suggests that runoffs follow a distinct dynamic. In the second round, voters often seek the "lesser evil" (mal menor), and candidates broaden their appeal beyond their core electorate, which can

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[43] Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática (INEI), "Censos Nacionales 2017: XII de Población, VII de Vivienda y III de Comunidades Indígenas—REDATAM," INEI (2017), https://censos2017.inei.gob.pe/redatam/ (accessed May 2, 2024).

[44] The economically active population in wage jobs (PEA asalariada) was calculated using Census 2017 data (question P5a+), identifying individuals responding as employees (empleado) or laborers (obrero).

[45] To ensure comparability, values closest to the election year were selected from available data.

[46] Data available upon request.

[47] The indigenous population was calculated using Census 2017 question P3a+.

[48] As detailed below, alternative socioeconomic indicators, available only for more recent years, yield similar results, supporting our findings' robustness.

obscure the relevance of underlying factors. If statistically significant, these coefficients range from -1 to +1, indicating a strong negative and a strong positive correlation, respectively.[49]

Figure 1 displays these two sets of correlation coefficients simultaneously. The vertical axis corresponds to the correlation of electoral results with the socioeconomic level, while the horizontal axis represents the correlation with the percentage of the indigenous population. Taken together, these variables facilitate the identification of two prototypical quadrants representing the Peruvian cleavage. Although populist candidates are of particular interest here, all the top five presidential candidates in every election since 1980 have been included. This way, the non-populist parties can be a point of reference to evaluate the position that populist candidates have along these axes.

On the one hand, candidates in the upper-left corner demonstrate electoral results that positively correlate with the socioeconomic level and negatively correlate with the percentage of the indigenous population. The social base of these candidates exhibits the lowest levels of peripheralization; that is, they are the privileged side of the cleavage. More conservative, pro-status quo candidates are in this corner. Notably, candidacies that either defeated populists (García in 2006) or competed against them in the runoff (Vargas Llosa in 1990 and Keiko Fujimori in 2021)—populated this quadrant.

On the other hand, the lower-right corner represents candidates with the most marginalized electoral base—the excluded side of the cleavage. The

Figure 1. Location of Top Candidates in the Socioeconomic and Ethnic Axes (1980-2021)
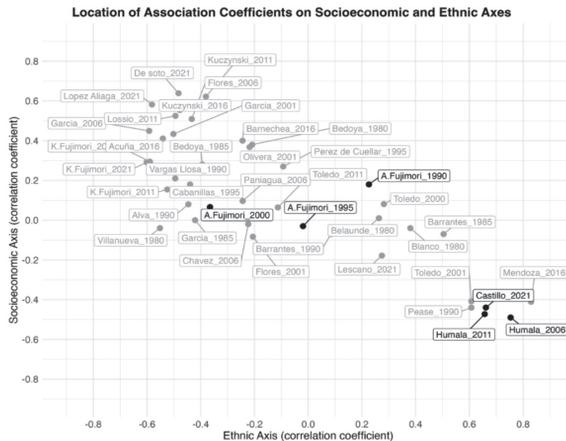
Source: Authors.

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[49] Only results where $p < 0.05$ were collected – a conventional, if somewhat arbitrary, threshold, are summarized.

electoral outcome of these candidates is simultaneously negatively correlated with the socioeconomic level and positively correlated with the percentage of the indigenous population.

As anticipated, all populist candidates from 2006 onwards (Ollanta Humala in 2006 and 2011, and Castillo in 2021) are in this quadrant. It is also notable that left-wing political projects aiming to unify diverse actors within this side of the ideological spectrum in 1990 and 2016 (Izquierda Unida and Frente Amplio, respectively), as well as a non-populist outsider like Toledo in 2000, share this voter base. In the case of the Peruvian left, peripheral provinces were always part of their electoral strongholds, and were home to some of the organizations that served as left-wing parties' grassroots organizations, like peasant unions. Toledo, on the other hand, lacked a strong party with roots in these provinces, but his personal history of poverty and his indigenous descent gave him the opportunity to make constant appeals to voters from the periphery to vote for "one of them." In other words, successful populists tend to position themselves as the representatives of this side of the Peruvian cleavage, but it can be (and it has been) represented by non-populist alternatives as well.

Fujimori stands out among the successful populists for his more heterogeneous electoral base in the three elections he participated in (1990, 1995, and 2000). Of all the cases considered he is the one with the weakest correlation with socioeconomic and ethnicity measures, hovering around zero on both axes in every election, with the partial exception of 2000, when he correlated negatively with indigeneity. Alberto Fujimori represented the cleavage successfully in 1990—to a lesser extent in the first round and strongly in the runoff, as previously mentioned.[50] His more heterogeneous electoral coalition is explained by several factors. In 1990 he had to compete with *Izquierda Unida* in the first round, a party coalition that had the periphery as a key component in its electoral coalition. Later, in 1995 and 2000, Fujimori was quite strong among peripheral voters, and he also enjoyed strong popularity throughout the country. This point will be clearly made in Figure 3, which shows Fujimori performing strongly in every part of the country. As mentioned before, this is due to key political successes that made him popular across the board, especially in 1995.

The overlapping voter base among populist candidates in different elections suggested that these citizens expect to find similar electoral promises of political incorporation in a new populist candidate. Peripheral voters might become disillusioned with a specific populist's performance once they are elected, yet these voters keep seeking out a populist alternative in the subsequent electoral cycle.

Statistically significant and positively correlated coefficients are also observed between the share of valid votes obtained by populist candidates and

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[50] For further analysis of Fujimori's 1990 second-round election participation, see Appendixes 2 and 3.

the electoral results of populists in the next election. Figure 2 shows the resulting matrix of correlation coefficients, and this discernible trend in the correlation coefficients. The only exception is Fujimori in 2000. This candidacy shows a negative correlation with Humala in 2006 because of his more heterogeneous electoral base since 1995, as already explained.

There was also a clear change from 2006 onwards. While Some of Fujimori's electoral results exhibit nonsignificant or negative associations with elections that are temporally more distant from each other, Humala (2006 and 2011) and Castillo (2021) showed strong positive correlations among their electoral results.

Finally, a separate dataset was constructed to specifically analyze the territorial component of the cleavage.[51] Following Nureña et.al, provinces in different geographical regions were classified based on their altitude in meters above sea level.[52] The cutoff points to classify these regions into five categories (*Costa Centro/Sur, Costa Norte, Selva, Sierra Centro/Norte, and Sierra Sur*) adhered to INEI's common criteria. Additionally, the average vote percentage that populist candidates received in each of these regions was also calculated. The results are presented in Figure 3.

Consistent with the theoretical expectations presented above, the four populist candidacies exhibit stronger performance in the highlands, particularly in the Southern region (*Sierra Centro/Norte and Sierra Sur*). Conversely, their

Figure 2. Correlation among Populist Candidates
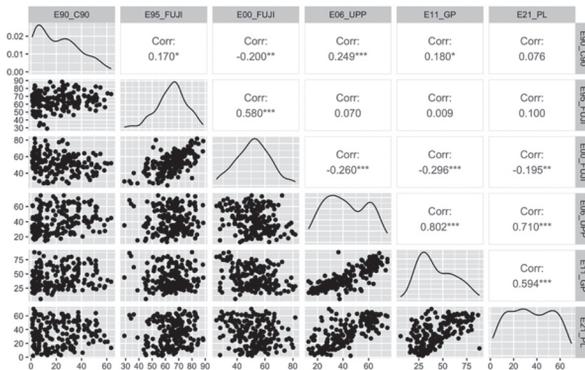
Source: Authors.

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[51] Choropleth maps in Appendix 1 display the distribution of their electoral results across provinces.

[52] César R. Nureña, Carla L. Toche, and Junior Pérez-Pachas, "El comportamiento electoral en el sur andino peruano frente a candidaturas de la elite criolla de Lima, 1980-2021" [Electoral behavior in the southern andes of Peru against candidates from Lima's creole elite, 1980-2021], *Discursos del Sur*, no. 10 (July-December 2022): 31-66, https://doi.org/10.15381/dds.n10.24406 (accessed January 30, 2025).

Figure 3. Boxplots of Populist Candidates' Vote Percentage by Geographical Region
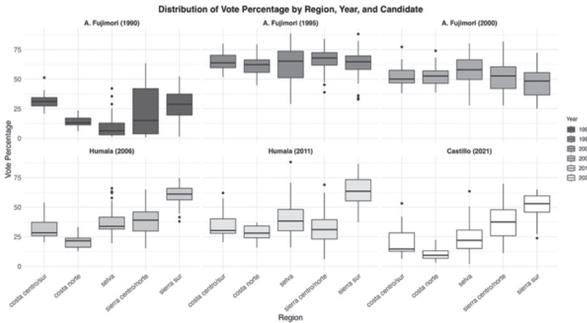
Source: Authors.

performance was weaker on the coast (*Costa Centro/Sur and Costa Norte*), which serves as the quintessential anti-populist base. The only partial exception was Fujimori in 1990, who shows a more heterogeneous electoral base, with a strong performance across regions.[53]

To sum up, while populist candidates change from one election to the next, the provinces that support them tend to remain the same. Moreover, populist candidates consistently drew support from voters on the most marginalized side of Peru's social and territorial cleavage. Populists may change, but voter behavior toward populist candidacies remains remarkably stable.

Conclusion

This article has shown that Peru exhibits a relatively predictable pattern of voting behavior, where the most peripheral sectors of society tend to support populist candidates with radical institutional change agendas. Despite the absence of institutionalized parties that compete over different election cycles, voters give consistency to a center-periphery cleavage. The Peruvian case shows precisely that such cleavages can exist even in the absence of stable parties organizing competition and activating these cleavages during electoral times. Instead, in Peru those are activated by different populist candidates in each election. These populists appeal to peripheral voters through narratives that vindicate the periphery as the place where the country's identity resides, while portraying elites from core regions as their victimizers. Statistical evidence shows that provinces with the most indigenous population and more disconnected from the market economy are more receptive to these kinds of candidates.

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[53] See Appendix 2.

This article leaves several important questions unanswered. One concerns the non-populist alternatives—left-wing projects and non-populist outsiders—that compete for the peripheral vote against populist candidates in Peru. The conditions under which populist candidacies prevail over these alternatives remain an open question.
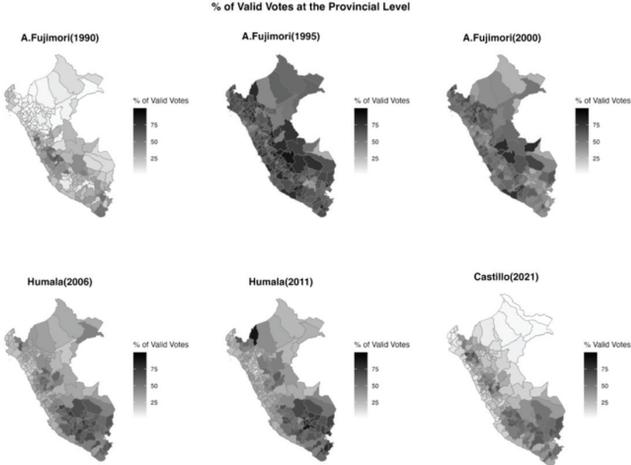
Another question relates to the heterogeneity within the periphery. While the analysis presented in this paper highlights the periphery's general tendency to support populist candidates—as well as left-wing electoral vehicles and non-populist outsiders—this does not imply uniformity. As recent research suggests, some variation exists within the territorial cleavage identified here.[54]

Finally, a broader comparative question emerges. Despite the structuring influence of the center-periphery cleavage, no stable political linkages have formed around these populist politicians in Peru. This presents a puzzle for future research, particularly given that similar candidates in the Andean region have managed to extend their initial victories into long-term political structures that shaped national politics for decades.

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[54] Daniel Encinas and Alejandra Fuentes, "La geografía política de las elecciones presidenciales de 2021 en Perú" [The political geography of the 2021 presidential elections in Peru], *Revista Elecciones* 20, no. 22 (2021): 231-264, https://doi.org/10.53557/Elecciones.2021.v20n22.07 (accessed January 30, 2025).

Appendixes

Appendix 1. Choropleth Maps Showing Electoral Results of Populist Candidates

% of Valid Votes at the Provincial Level

A.Fujimori(1990)   A.Fujimori(1995)   A.Fujimori(2000)

Humala(2006)   Humala(2011)   Castillo(2021)
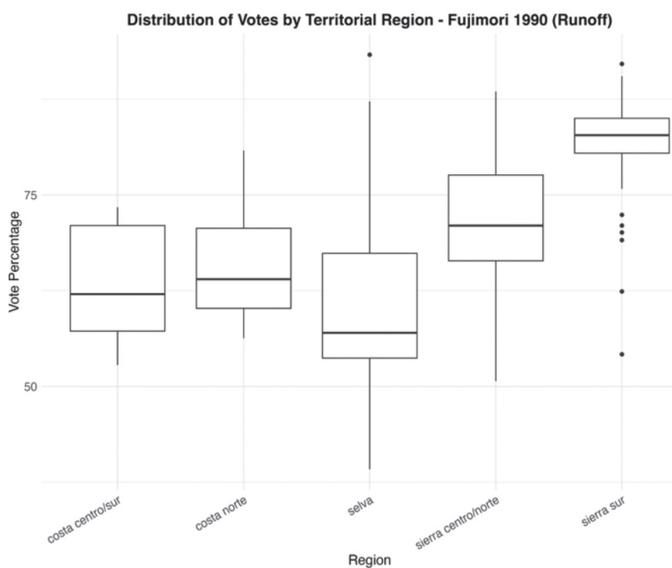
Source: Authors.

Appendix 2. Analysis of Alberto Fujimori's Runoff Performance in the 1990 election

% of Valid Votes at the Provincial Level - runoff election - Fujimori 1990
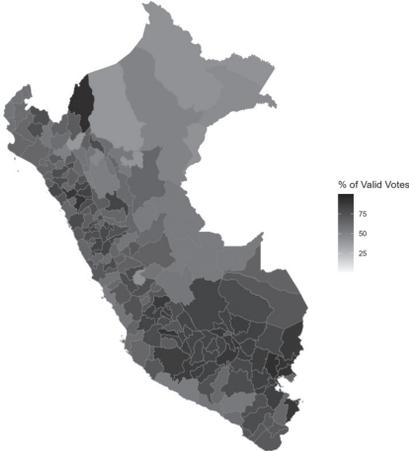
Source: Authors.

Appendix 3. Distribution of Votes by Territorial Region in the Second Round
—Fujimori 1990

Distribution of Votes by Territorial Region - Fujimori 1990 (Runoff)

Source: Authors.