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Social movement and electoral politics: The 2021 Peruvian presidential election and the rise of Pedro Castillo

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Abstract

The 2021 Peruvian presidential election stands as one of the most fiercely contested electoral processes in the nation's recent history. Occurring in the aftermath of significant political upheaval precipitated by widespread corruption scandals and economic mismanagement, the election exposed profound public disillusionment with the country's political establishment. Pedro Castillo, a relatively obscure political figure, emerged victorious over Keiko Fujimori by an exceptionally narrow margin. A former schoolteacher and self-identified Marxist who had only recently aligned with the Free Peru party, Castillo campaigned on a platform centered on two principal pillars: the equitable redistribution of national resources and the establishment of a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution. This paper examines the central issues that shaped the electoral contest, analyses the policies and programs articulated by the two leading presidential candidates, and traces the trajectory of Pedro Castillo's ascent to national political prominence. Through this analysis, the study illuminates the broader socio-political dynamics that characterised this watershed moment in Peruvian democracy.

Keywords: Peru, presidential election 2021, Pedro Castillo, political transformation, constitutional reform, redistribution, populism

Introduction

The 2021 Peruvian presidential election stands as a watershed moment in Latin American democratic politics, encapsulating the region's enduring tensions between entrenched inequality, institutional decay, and popular demands for substantive political transformation. The election of Pedro Castillo, a rural schoolteacher and union leader with no prior experience in elected office, over Keiko Fujimori by a margin of merely 44,263 votes represents what scholars have characterised as the quintessential "populist-outsider" triumph in contexts of profound representation crisis (Barr 2009; Carrión and Korman 2023) ^[2, 13]. This extremely narrow victory emerged from what Freeman and Perelló (2021) ^[27] describe as the convergence of political instability, mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, and deep-seated frustrations with endemic corruption, creating conditions ripe for anti-establishment mobilisation. The election thus provides crucial insights into the dynamics through which political outsiders successfully challenge established elites in contexts of party-system collapse and democratic malaise.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis draws upon three intersecting theoretical frameworks that illuminate the conditions enabling outsider candidacies in Latin America. First, the literature on party-system collapse emphasises how the decomposition of traditional party structures creates vacuums that facilitate outsider mobilisation (Levitsky and Zavaleta 2016; Seawright 2012) ^[37, 48]. When conventional parties fail to provide adequate representation or aggregate diverse interests, voters become susceptible to candidates who position themselves as authentic alternatives to discredited political establishments. Second, the ideational approach to populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017) ^[45] conceptualises populism as discourse that constructs politics as moral struggle between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," enabling leaders to transcend traditional left-right ideological boundaries through direct

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appeals to popular sovereignty. Third, scholarship on representation crises in Latin America demonstrates how sustained periods of economic liberalisation combined with persistent inequality generate demands for fundamental restructuring of state-society relations, particularly when compounded by governance failures like the COVID-19 pandemic (Roberts 2019) ^[49].

These theoretical perspectives converge in understanding Castillo's victory as emerging not merely from individual charisma but from structural conditions - party decomposition, endemic corruption, profound socioeconomic inequality, and pandemic-induced crisis - that enabled an outsider candidate to successfully channel historically marginalised constituencies' demands for systemic transformation.

Research Questions

This article addresses three central questions. *First*, what were the fundamental issues that shaped the 2021 electoral contest, and how did these issues reflect deeper structural crises in Peruvian democracy? This requires examining the intersection of corruption scandals, constitutional legitimacy, pandemic governance failures, and historical marginalisation of rural and indigenous populations. *Second*, how did the campaign platforms and policy proposals articulated by Castillo and Fujimori reflect competing visions for addressing Peru's multiple crises? Understanding their divergent approaches to constitutional reform, economic policy, and state-society relations illuminates the stark choices confronting Peruvian voters. *Third*, through what mechanisms did Pedro Castillo, a political unknown as recently as early 2021, achieve national prominence and secure electoral victory despite facing unprecedented opposition from media conglomerates, economic elites, and established political actors?

Article Structure

This article proceeds in four sections. Following this introduction, *Section two* provides critical analysis of the central issues shaping the election, examining corruption and institutional decay, socioeconomic inequality, constitutional legitimacy, the COVID-19 pandemic's differential impacts, and historical marginalisation of indigenous communities. *Section three* compares the policy platforms and programmatic proposals of both candidates, analysing their divergent approaches to economic policy, constitutional reform, and governance structures. *Section Four* traces Castillo's trajectory from rural obscurity to national political prominence, examining the 2017 teachers' strike, his campaign strategy, coalition-building with left parties, and mobilisation of rural and indigenous voters. The conclusion synthesises findings to illuminate broader implications for democratic representation, party-system reconstruction, and prospects for transformative governance in contemporary Peru.

Central Issues that Shaped the 2021 Peruvian Elections

The 2021 Peruvian presidential election crystallised around multiple intersecting crises that exposed fundamental fault lines in Peru's political economy and democratic institutions. These central issues - systematic corruption and institutional collapse, profound socioeconomic inequality rooted in historical marginalisation, constitutional legitimacy, and the catastrophic impact of the COVID-19

pandemic - converged to create conditions in which an outsider candidate could successfully challenge Peru's entrenched political establishment. This section critically examines each of these issues, drawing upon scholarly analyses of Peru's contemporary political crisis.

Corruption, Party System Collapse, and Institutional Decay

The most immediate catalyst for electoral upheaval was the corruption crisis associated with Operation *Lava Jato* (Car Wash), which thoroughly delegitimised Peru's political class. Costa (2022) ^[17] demonstrates how the corrupt connection between former President Alejandro Toledo and the Brazilian construction conglomerate Odebrecht exemplified sophisticated transnational bribery networks that systematically undermined democratic governance. Between 2001 and 2016, Odebrecht paid approximately \$29 million in bribes to Peruvian officials to secure lucrative infrastructure contracts, with the company admitting to \$788 million in bribes across twelve countries (Campos *et al.*, 2021) ^[8]. The scandal implicated nearly all of Peru's recent presidents: Toledo fled to the United States, Pedro Pablo Kuczynski resigned in 2018, Ollanta Humala faced preventive detention, and Alan García committed suicide in 2019 to avoid arrest.

This corruption crisis unfolded within the context of what Levitsky and Zavaleta (2016) ^[37] characterise as "the most extreme case of party collapse in Latin America." Peru's party system had suffered near-complete decomposition during Alberto Fujimori's authoritarian rule in the 1990s and never recovered its capacity to aggregate interests or provide stable governance (Levitsky and Cameron 2003) ^[35]. Seawright (2012 p.4) ^[48] argues that party-system collapse was fundamentally "motivated by voter anger at traditional political parties, produced both by pervasive corruption scandals and by these parties' systematic failure to provide adequate representation to growing sectors of society". By 2021, political parties functioned merely as personalistic vehicles serving individual ambitions rather than representing coherent programmatic agendas, creating conditions conducive to outsider candidacies that could channel popular discontent against discredited elites. Dargent and Muñoz (2016 p.240) ^[19] emphasise that Peru's institutional weakness extended beyond party decomposition to encompass broader state incapacity, noting that "Peru has weak political institutions, characterised by low levels of party system institutionalization, weak programmatic linkages between parties and voters, and low levels of vertical and horizontal accountability". This institutional vacuum was exacerbated by Peru's failed state capacity building, whereby successive governments proved unable to construct effective bureaucratic structures capable of implementing policy or restraining elite predation.

Socioeconomic Inequality and Indigenous Marginalisation

Profound and persistent socioeconomic inequality constituted a second critical issue shaping the election. Peru's indigenous populations have suffered centuries of dispossession and exploitation which is reflected in significantly higher poverty rates in provinces with larger

indigenous populations (Thorp and Paredes 2010) ^[51]. Despite macroeconomic growth during the 2000s commodity boom, these gains were distributed unevenly, perpetuating historical patterns of exclusion. By 2015, while national poverty rates had declined, 45.18 percent of rural Peruvians remained in poverty (INEI 2015) ^[30], and informal employment stood at 72.8 percent nationally (INEI 2015) ^[30].

The historical roots of this inequality run deep. Van den Berghe and Primov (1977) ^[52] documented how racial hierarchies in the Peruvian Andes systematically disadvantaged indigenous populations, while De la Cadena (2000) ^[24] analyzed how racialized categories of “Indian” and “mestizo” functioned to maintain social stratification even as individuals moved between categories. More recently, scholars have emphasised how these inequalities map onto persistent regional divisions. Indigenous and *mestizo* communities in Peru ‘have traditionally faced social and economic discrimination and political marginalisation’ (Minority Rights Group International 2024) ^[43], with indigenous groups suffering ‘disproportionately from poverty’ (Morales 2024) ^[44]. They face discrimination in the judicial system, where they are frequently not provided with interpreters when taken into custody despite constitutional guarantees (De Pedro Ricoy 2018) ^[25], a deficiency that prompted Peru’s 2011 Languages Act to mandate state training of indigenous interpreters (Howard *et al.* 2018) ^[26]. Educational inequality further reinforced these disparities. Inequality of education affected the impoverished communities in Peru, with rural and indigenous students facing discrimination and marginalisation of aboriginal languages, centralised education, and lack of culturally appropriate methods to educate minorities (D’Andrea 2009) ^[22]. These systemic inequalities within Peru’s education system reflect deep-rooted historical and structural barriers, including the longstanding marginalisation of indigenous languages and cultures and the centralised design of academic curricula that often overlooks the sociocultural realities of indigenous populations (Huaman and Valdiviezo 2014) ^[29]. These educational deficits translate into limited economic opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion. The armed conflict of the 1980s and 1990s demonstrated the deadly consequences of this marginalisation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (*Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación* 2003) ^[16] documented that 75 percent of the conflict’s victims came from families whose mother tongue was Quechua or another indigenous language, revealing how violence disproportionately impacted already-marginalised populations. The discourses portraying the indigenous population as inherently inferior provided justification for extreme violence, with one leader admitting to using indigenous people as cannon fodder during the conflict (Thorp and Paredes 2010) ^[51].

Constitutional Legitimacy and the 1993 Charter

The legitimacy of Peru’s 1993 Constitution emerged as a central campaign issue, particularly for Castillo’s platform, as it was promulgated following Fujimori’s April 1992 *autogolpe* (self-coup) and suspension of the 1979 constitution (Landa 2024) ^[33]. The 1993 charter institutionalised neoliberal economic principles favored by the Fujimori administration while expanding presidential powers and enabling immediate reelection while

disregarding the emphasis on social rights and state duties outlined in the 1979 document (Landa 2024) ^[33]. Levitsky (1999) ^[34] analyses how systematic undermining of democratic accountability during Fujimori’s tenure transformed Congress into a virtual rubber stamp that has not only failed to check abuses of power by the executive; but has been an accomplice to such abuses, approving measures of dubious constitutionality aimed at weakening other independent bodies (p. 79). The constitution’s association with authoritarianism was reinforced by Fujimori’s subsequent manipulation of constitutional provisions to secure an unconstitutional third term in 2000. For many voters, particularly in marginalised rural regions, the 1993 Constitution symbolised both authoritarian legacy and economic policies that had failed to address structural inequality. Carrión (2006) ^[10] notes that neoliberal reforms under Fujimori, while producing macroeconomic stabilisation, generated “increased misery for poor Peruvians” as the prescribed “Fujishock” caused dramatic price increases with little change to poverty rates. The 1993 constitution reflected Fujimori’s project of “reengineering Peru” through neoliberal policies combined with authoritarian governance, creating a constitutional order that privileged economic liberalisation over social protection or democratic accountability. (Cameron and Levitsky 2003) ^[6].

The COVID-19 Pandemic’s Catastrophic Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted perhaps the most immediate crisis shaping electoral dynamics. Peru experienced catastrophic outcomes, suffering the highest per capita COVID-19 death rate in the world and the highest reported excess mortality during the pandemic (Loewenson *et al.*, 2023) ^[40]. This paradox, macroeconomic success combined with devastating pandemic outcomes, reflected what scholars identify as fundamental failures in Peru’s political economy and state-society relations. demonstrate that the pandemic laid bare Peru’s institutional deficiencies despite response measures that were ambitious and thorough, at least on paper, revealing the disconnect between formal policy and effective implementation that reflected deeper governance failures (Sarmiento *et al.* 2022) ^[47]. But the pandemic’s impact was profoundly unequal. Loewenson *et al.* (2023) ^[40] documents how risk and vulnerability concentrated in low income, urban households, associated with differentials in social conditions, and deficits in primary care, community systems and social protection.

The economically vulnerable sectors were more likely to oppose the quarantine and more likely to defy stay-at-home recommendations out of economic necessity rather than political opposition, as informal workers could not afford to comply with lockdown measures without income support (Carreras *et al.* 2021) ^[9]. The pandemic wiped out a decade of poverty reduction in a single year, with poverty rising from 20 percent to 30 percent of the population, intensifying frustrations with governing institutions that had catastrophically mismanaged the health crisis (Sanchez-Paramo *et al.* 2021) ^[46]. Peru’s pandemic failure reveals how macroeconomic success can coexist with profound failures in building functional, legitimate state capacity and transforming unequal social and economic relations (Loewenson *et al.* 2023) ^[40]. The pandemic exposed structural vulnerabilities rooted in informal employment, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, and weak state capacity

to deliver services to marginalised populations. These failures reinforced perceptions that Peru's political and economic model served elite interests while abandoning vast segments of the population to preventable suffering.

Synthesis: Converging Crises and Electoral Rupture

The 2021 election thus encapsulated Peru's converging crises: institutional collapse manifested in party system decomposition and endemic corruption; profound socioeconomic inequalities rooted in centuries of indigenous marginalisation and exacerbated by neoliberal economic policies; constitutional structures associated with authoritarian legacy and economic liberalisation; and catastrophic pandemic governance failures that exposed state incapacity. These factors combined to enable Castillo's narrow victory by mobilising historically marginalised constituencies against an entrenched but thoroughly discredited political establishment. It also demonstrated both the depth of popular discontent and the profound polarisation dividing Peruvian society between those demanding systemic transformation and those defending the existing constitutional and economic order.

Policy Platforms and Programmatic Proposals: Divergent Visions of Economic Governance and Constitutional Reform

Peru's 2021 presidential runoff represented a fundamental clash between two antithetical economic models and competing visions of state governance. The election between Pedro Castillo of *Perú Libre* and Keiko Fujimori of *Fuerza Popular* crystallized nearly three decades of ideological contestation over the character of the Peruvian state apparatus and the proper role of market mechanisms in economic life. Beyond the personalities of the candidates themselves lay substantively different programmatic commitments regarding economic redistribution, constitutional legitimacy, and the relationship between the state and market actors. (Mitrovic 2021; Levitsky 2023) ^[42, 39].

Castillo's Campaign Platform

Castillo through his election agendas fundamentally challenged the neoliberal economic model that had dominated Peruvian governance since the 1990s. As a union leader and peasant-origin schoolteacher, Castillo positioned his candidacy as a repudiation of market-oriented reforms initiated under Alberto Fujimori's dictatorship (Levitsky 2023; Mitrovic 2021) ^[39, 42]. His central campaign message, "No poor people in a rich country," encapsulated his claim that Peru's substantial mineral wealth and natural resources had been systematically extracted and distributed to corporate interests and foreign capital while rural and Andean populations remained impoverished (Mitrovic 2021; De Echave 2013) ^[42, 21]. This programmatic positioning resonated powerfully among historically marginalised constituencies, particularly in the southern and central Andean regions, where poverty rates exceeded fifty percent and economic infrastructure remained severely underdeveloped (Levitsky 2023) ^[39].

Regarding economic policy specifically, Castillo's platform proposed fundamental interventions in the mining sector, Peru's principal source of export revenues (De Echave 2013; Dargent 2022) ^[21, 20]. While clarifications emerged that nationalisation was not the immediate objective,

Castillo's platform called for renegotiating mining contracts to capture substantially larger shares of corporate profits for the Peruvian state (Levitsky 2023) ^[39]. These mining policy proposals represented a philosophical reorientation toward state control of strategic resources and direct state participation in major mining operations, a position consistent with *Perú Libre*'s officially Marxist-Leninist party ideology (Mitrovic 2021) ^[42]. Such proposals constituted a direct challenge to the institutional arrangements established during the Fujimori era, when long-term mining concessions had been granted to multinational corporations under terms highly favorable to foreign capital (De Echave 2013) ^[21].

Beyond resource extraction, Castillo's economic agenda included transforming Peru's privatised pension system. The *Sistema Privado de Pensiones* (SPP), established in 1992 as an alternative to the public pension system, had accumulated over forty billion dollars in assets controlled by five competing private pension fund management companies (AFPs) (Arce 2001; Dargent 2022) ^[1, 20]. By 2021, approximately 7.44 million workers contributed to the private pension system, creating an invested constituency with financial interests in the system's continuation (Dargent 2022) ^[20]. However, Castillo's proposals aimed at restructuring this system and returning pension administration to greater state control, a policy position that directly threatened accumulated financial interests and represented a challenge to what scholars have characterised as institutional path dependence around privatisation in Peru (Dargent 2022) ^[20]. This constituted one of the most politically contentious elements of his economic platform, as the private pension administrators possessed significant structural power within Peru's political economy.

The constitutional dimension of Castillo's programmatic vision proved equally consequential. Castillo's central commitment involved convening a constituent assembly to draft an entirely new constitution replacing the 1993 Constitution enacted by Alberto Fujimori following the autogolpe of 1992 (Mitrovic 2021) ^[42]. Castillo argued that the existing constitutional framework lacked democratic legitimacy, having been promulgated through authoritarian procedures, and that it systematised a neoliberal economic order incompatible with social inclusion and material redistribution (Dargent 2022) ^[20]. Constitutional reform through a constituent assembly rather than through ordinary legislative amendment procedures would theoretically facilitate expanded state authority and economic intervention beyond what the existing constitutional text permitted (Dargent 2022; Mitrovic 2021) ^[20, 42]. Castillo's platform proposed enlarging state functions across education, healthcare, and resource management while potentially incorporating indigenous rights protections and measures addressing structural inequality.

Fujimori's Campaign Platform

In sharp contrast, Fujimori's programmatic commitments emphasised continuity with established institutional frameworks and market-oriented governance structures. Running her third presidential campaign, Fujimori explicitly campaigned on maintaining the neoliberal economic model that her father, former President Alberto Fujimori, had established in the 1990s (Dargent 2022; Mitrovic 2021) ^[20, 42]. The choice presented to Peruvian voters was conceptualised by Fujimori's campaign as one between

markets and Marxism, positioning her candidacy as the defender of market principles against leftist redistribution and state intervention (Levitsky 2023) ^[39]. Her economic proposals included broadening the taxpayer base to fund pension system expansion while maintaining the basic structure of Peru's privatised pension system (Dargent 2022; Arce 2001) ^[20, 1]. Fujimori also advocated for substantial government stimulus programs, such as direct cash transfers to families affected by COVID-19 deaths and support for small businesses, intended to be financed through increased taxation and temporary relief, but avoided proposals for structural transformation of Peru's market institutions (Levitsky 2023) ^[39].

On the mining question specifically, Fujimori's platform represented continuation of existing concessionary arrangements with multinational corporations, entrenching the favorable conditions established in the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s (Dargent 2022) ^[20]. Acknowledging regional grievances and environmental impacts, Fujimori proposed improvements in corporate social responsibility and more effective regulation within the established framework, rather than contract renegotiation or increased state control, a position that aligned with the interests of foreign capital and the legacy of her father's era (De Echave 2013) ^[21].

Governance structures further illuminated these programmatic divergences. Castillo's platform embraced mechanisms of popular participation and decentralisation to subnational authorities and community organisations, consistent with Perú Libre's ideological commitments to grassroots democracy and expanded rights for marginalised groups (Vergara and Watanabe 2016) ^[56]. Fujimori, by contrast, emphasised executive strength and law enforcement capacity, promoting a governance philosophy oriented toward strong presidential authority and "*mano dura*" approaches historically present in Peru's political institutions (Levitsky 2023; Vergara and Watanabe 2016) ^[39, 56]. Scholarly analyses have emphasised that while Castillo asserted the constitutional framework lacked democratic legitimacy and perpetuated neoliberal exclusion, Fujimori's defense of institutional continuity reflected commitment to market rationality and skepticism of redistributive reforms (Dargent 2022) ^[20].

However, the institutional constraints facing either candidate significantly complicated prospects for implementing these divergent agendas. Peru's Congress following the 2021 elections remained highly fragmented, with no party controlling more than thirty seats in the 130-member chamber (Levitsky 2023) ^[39]. Amending the Constitution would require supermajorities of sixty-seven votes, making Castillo's constitutional reform agenda dependent upon building broad legislative coalitions encompassing center and center-right parties fundamentally opposed to his redistributive agenda (Vergara 2016) ^[56]. This institutional fragmentation reflected what scholars have identified as Peru's long-standing structural weakness in party system organisation and capacity for sustained legislative representation (Levitsky 2023) ^[39].

Both candidates approached the election amid conditions of institutional delegitimacy and severe material crisis. Peru had experienced the most severe economic contraction in the Latin American region during the pandemic, with the official COVID-19 death toll revealed to be substantially higher than initially reported, creating unprecedented

mortality crises particularly in rural and indigenous communities. (Mitrovic 2021) ^[42] These material conditions created electoral volatility and receptivity to programmatic alternatives among voters who had experienced decades of limited gains from market-oriented development models. The 2021 runoff thus presented voters with a genuine choice between competing programmatic visions: Castillo's proposed constitutional reconstitution of state authority aimed at redistributing natural resource wealth toward historically excluded populations, versus Fujimori's commitment to maintaining market mechanisms and institutional continuity. This contest was not merely symbolic or personality-driven but rather reflected fundamental disagreements about Peru's development path, the legitimate scope of state economic intervention, and the proper constitutional arrangements for governance.

The 2021 Peruvian Presidential Election and the Rise of Pedro Castillo

The trajectory of Castillo's political ascendancy cannot be understood apart from the profound institutional fragility and systemic delegitimation that pervaded Peru's political landscape by 2021. The country had witnessed the succession of twelve presidents across two decades, accompanied by recurrent cycles of institutional crisis, corruption scandals, and periodic waves of mass mobilisation that exposed the bankruptcy of successive governments' reformist pretensions (del Aguila 2023) ^[23]. Within this context of cascading institutional collapse and pervasive disaffection, Castillo emerged as the embodiment of popular repudiation of the political establishment, his campaign rhetorical formula of "no more poor in a rich country" resonating with constituencies whose experiences of marginalisation had been systematically ignored by parties claiming to represent either progressive or conservative alternatives (Gamarra and Encinas 2022) ^[28]. This analysis examines the mechanisms through which Castillo, operating from the periphery of Peru's formal political institutions, successfully mobilised rural and indigenous voters through his leadership of the 2017 teachers' strike, his coalition-building with leftist parties, and his strategic articulation of populist and indigenista appeals that reframed Peru's regional divide as the fundamental axis of political competition.

The 2017 Teachers' Strike and the Constitution of Castillo as Political Subject

The genealogy of Castillo's political emergence must be traced to the tumultuous teachers' strike of 2017, which constituted a watershed moment in Peru's labor politics and established the conditions for his subsequent ascent to national prominence. The strike, which commenced in June 2017 and persisted for seventy-five days, mobilised unprecedented numbers of pedagogical workers, with participation rates reaching 63 percent of the teaching force at its peak, encompassing approximately 250,000 of Peru's 340,000 teachers (Bruns *et al.* 2023) ^[3]. The fundamental demands articulated by striking teachers centered on wage increases, postponement of performance evaluation mechanisms, and resistance to the neoliberal Education Reform Law (*Ley de Reforma Magisterial*), a policy instrument that threatened to fragment the teaching

profession through the imposition of an eight-tiered wage system ostensibly based on meritocratic criteria but operating functionally as a mechanism for workforce rationalisation and precariousness (Bruns *et al.* 2023) ^[3].

Castillo emerged at the scene as a rank-and-file insurgent who mobilised regional activists to circumvent union officialdom and initiate a strike against the explicit opposition of established union leadership (Bruns *et al.* 2023) ^[3]. The Government's response to the strike was characterised by criminalising rhetoric that demonstrated the degree to which rural mobilisation continued to be subject to stigmatisation and discursive containment by metropolitan political elites (Calderon 2017). Castillo's capacity to maintain strike cohesion despite these governmental delegitimisation strategies and to articulate demands in explicitly democratic and developmentalist language grounded in rural constituencies' material deprivation established him as a legitimate interlocutor for subordinated populations whose claims had been systematically marginalized through official political channels (Bruns *et al.* 2023) ^[3]. The strike thus represented not merely an economic struggle for material improvements but fundamentally a rejection of the corporatist structures through which Peru's labor movement had been subdued and incorporated into the institutional framework established during the neoliberal transition of the 1990s.

Coalition-Building, the Left, and Strategic Political Positioning

The transition from Castillo's role as a strike leader to his emergence as a presidential candidate proceeded through a calculated coalition-building process that intersected with Peru's fragmented and volatile left-wing political field. The Free Peru party (*Perú Libre*), a Marxist-Leninist organisation of minimal institutional reach with intellectual roots in the work of José Carlos Mariátegui, extended the invitation for Castillo to serve as its 2021 presidential standard-bearer (Gamarra and Encinas 2022) ^[28]. The party's programmatic orientation toward constituent assemblies and explicit socialism positioned Castillo within Peru's marginal communist tradition, yet his nomination proceeded from a recognition that the accumulated delegitimisation of Peru's mainstream left required the articulation of an authentically extrainstitutional political subject.

The campaign strategy developed by Castillo and his Free Peru strategists demonstrated sophisticated deployment of what may be characterised as a "*populist-indigenista*" appeal that transcended the sectarian communism for which Free Peru had historically been known. Rather than insisting upon dialectical materialism or the vanguardist conception of the communist organisations, Castillo's campaign rhetoric mobilised two interrelated discursive registers: a populist antagonism between "the people" (conceived as the poor, rural, and laboring masses) and a corrupt metropolitan elite indifferent to the material deprivation experienced by the vast majority, and an incipient *indigenista* framing that elevated indigenous languages, symbolic resources, and territorial claims to the status of fundamental political stakes (Gamarra and Encinas 2022) ^[28].

This dual-register appeal proved instrumental in constructing a politically viable coalition when, following

the first round of voting in which Castillo secured first place with 18.92 percent of the vote, his campaign reached an explicit electoral alliance with Verónica Mendoza and the Together for Peru coalition, positioning itself as the sole viable anti-Fujimori alternative in the second round (Jaquette and Lowenthal 2021) ^[32]. The coalition between Castillo and Mendoza represented a crucial juncture at which the fragmented left succeeded in achieving minimum programmatic coherence sufficient to contest the second round (Levitsky 1999) ^[34]. Mendoza, a Quechua-speaking anthropologist and former member of the Nationalist Party of Ollanta Humala, brought organisational capacity and metropolitan legitimacy to the Castillo campaign while lending credibility to appeals emphasising indigenous rights and cultural recognition (Lozada 2016) ^[41].

Rural and Indigenous Mobilisation: The Geography of Political Transformation

The most analytically salient dimension of the 2021 election involved the unprecedented mobilisation of rural and indigenous voters as a cohesive electoral force. The correlation between indigenous language speakers and support for Castillo proved extraordinarily robust: the statistical relationship between the percentage of a district's population speaking indigenous languages and vote share for Castillo demonstrated that indigenous-majority constituencies provided the institutional foundation for his electoral coalition (CEPR 2021). The departments of the southern Andes, including Cusco, Apurímac, Huancavelica, and Ayacucho, delivered overwhelming support for Castillo, with voting patterns revealing a stark urban-rural divide that inverted the long-established metropolitan dominance of Peru's political system whereby capital-based elites had successfully articulated their interests as embodying "national" concerns (CEPR 2021).

The structural foundations for this unprecedented rural-indigenous mobilisation must be comprehended within the framework of Peru's distinctive integration into global commodity circuits and the specific consequences of neoliberal extractivism for rural populations. The neoliberal development paradigm inaugurated during Alberto Fujimori's presidency and perpetuated across successive administrations had generated a dual economy in which metropolitan Lima and the principal coastal urban centers accumulated capital through service provision and trade while the Andean highlands and Amazonian regions were systematically incorporated as sites of resource extraction for transnational mining corporations (COHA 2013) ^[18]. The consequences of this development trajectory proved catastrophic for rural populations: mining concessions overlapped with 47.8 percent of peasant community territories, while 75 percent of the Peruvian Amazon was subject to hydrocarbon extraction concessions, creating conditions of systematic territorial dispossession and environmental degradation that positioned indigenous communities in direct antagonism to the institutional frameworks perpetuating their marginalization (Indigenous World 2022).

Castillo's strategic invocation of the concept of "Deep Peru" (*el Perú Profundo*) in his electoral victory speech

crystallised the mobilisation of this geographically and ethnically constituted counter-elite coalition. The invocation of this geographical imaginary appealed directly to the accumulated grievances of rural and indigenous constituencies whose material conditions had deteriorated despite Peru's celebrated macroeconomic performance, a paradox that the "Deep Peru" formulation resolved by asserting that conventional metrics of national development masked systematic subordination and resource extraction from the periphery (COHA 2013)^[18].

Conclusion and Findings

The 2021 Peruvian presidential election encapsulates fundamental tensions within contemporary Latin American democracy regarding representation, institutional capacity, and prospects for substantive political transformation. Pedro Castillo's narrow victory exposed Peru's profound crisis of democratic representation while simultaneously demonstrating the structural impediments to constructing viable alternatives to the discredited political order. The 2021 election demonstrated that this fundamental representational deficit persists, with traditional political parties continuing to fail in aggregating interests and providing meaningful linkages between citizens and state institutions (Levitsky 1999)^[34]. Vergara and Watanabe (2016 p.32)^[56] characterize this as a failure of "vertical accountability" that "drives Peruvians' deep dissatisfaction with politics".

The prospects for party-system reconstruction confront formidable structural impediments. Levitsky and Zavaleta (2016)^[37] characterized Peru as the most extreme case of party collapse in Latin America, where parties function merely as "superficial labels that serve personal ambitions rather than embody substantive ideologies." This collapse stems from sustained "voter anger at traditional political parties, produced both by pervasive corruption scandals and by these parties' systematic failure to provide adequate representation" (Seawright 2012 p. 4)^[48]. Multiple institutional factors perpetuate this dysfunction: electoral rules provide perverse incentives that weaken political parties and favor fragmentation, while decentralization reforms paradoxically weaken national parties (Vergara 2011)^[53].

Castillo's presidency, ending in his failed December 2022 self-coup and imprisonment, illuminates fundamental paradoxes confronting transformative governance in contexts of institutional weakness. Carrión (2022)^[11, 12] emphasizes that Castillo represented "another example of a minority president" facing an aggressive Congress, lacking the legislative capacity to implement constitutional reform or redistributive policies. Moreover, Castillo confronted what characterizes as Peru's persistent failure to construct effective bureaucratic structures (Vergara 2020)^[55]. The analysis thus suggests that Peru's democratic prospects depend fundamentally on addressing interconnected deficits in representation, state capacity, and institutional legitimacy. As Levitsky and Zavaleta (2016)^[37] document, successful party-building requires deliberate political entrepreneurship oriented toward durable organisations, precisely what Peru's institutional incentives discourage.

The 2021 election crystallised Peru's fundamental dilemma: widespread demand for transformative change coexists with

profound institutional incapacity to implement such transformation. As Tanaka (2005)^[50] emphasizes, "democracy without parties" do not generate renewal but dysfunction, as personalistic leaders lacking organisational support prove unable to coordinate policy or maintain governing coalitions. The path forward requires what Levitsky (1999 p. 92)^[34] terms broadening "the base of republican institutions so that more than a small circle of Peruvians has a stake in their survival", fundamental reconstruction of state-society relations through viable party organizations, strengthened civil society, and enhanced state capacity. Whether Peru can achieve such reconstruction remains deeply uncertain, as the country continues cycling through political crises that further weaken already-fragile institutions. The 2021 election, rather than resolving Peru's democratic deficits, exposed their intractability, a cautionary tale for democracies worldwide confronting persistent challenges of representation, accountability, and effective governance.

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