

## PSYCHOPOLITICAL EXPLANATION OF A PRESIDENTIAL IMPEACHMENT IN PERU. THE ROLE OF POPULIST ATTITUDES AND POLITICAL MORAL LAXITY IN PRESIDENT CASTILLO'S REMOVAL

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### Abstract

The study analyses the role of populist attitudes and political moral laxity as psycho-political predictors explaining the support for the impeachment of former President Castillo in Peru. Using a questionnaire administered to a sample of Peruvian citizens (N = 293), we find that a negative evaluation of the performance of the Castillo government, together with disapproval of the attempted closure of the Congress, explains greater support for his removal from office. Furthermore, it was found that a tendency toward less populist attitudes, disapproval of illiberal democratic practices and higher political moral laxity explain greater support for impeaching the former President. Specifically, we identified the mediating role of appreciation of illiberal practices in the relationship between the independent variables, populist attitudes and political moral laxity and the support for the impeachment of Castillo as a dependent variable. These results allow us to discuss the phenomenon of political support by predictors for a government ideologically linked to the left and socially opposed to the power structures of Lima, the recurrent centre of political power in Peru.

### Keywords

*Populist attitudes, political moral laxity, illiberal democracy, political emotions.*

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### 1. Introduction

Peru has struggled to keep the democratic project alive at different moments in its history, from the process of independence in 1821 to the present day. It has had both civilian and military governments, with the last military government ending in 1980 and the last dictatorship in 2001 (Quiroz, 2013). At all times, the country has faced various moments of political crisis due to corruption, racism against the indigenous peoples and the growing political clientelism of recent decades (Crabtree & Durand, 2017; Dargent, 2021; Espinosa *et al.*, 2023b; Quiroz, 2013).

The latest period of political crisis began after the election of the president Kuczynski in 2016. He resigned in 2018 after being investigated by the Congress of the Republic. It was discovered that he had negotiated with legislators in exchange for political favours after some cases of government corruption became public (Dargent, 2021; Espinosa *et al.*, 2023b). His successor, the vice-president Martín Vizcarra, then dissolved the Congress in 2019 considering a *de facto* denial of multiple Vote of

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Confidence for his cabinet and called new elections for 2020 (Benites & Valverde, 2023; Lynch, 2023).

The political crisis in Peru has come to a head after the last democratically elected president of the republic, Pedro Castillo, announced his intention to close the Congress on December 2022 (BBC, 2022). While internal disputes in the political sphere have been notorious since 2016 and were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Benites & Valverde, 2023; Espinosa *et al.*, 2019; Lynch, 2023), the political power struggle between the Congress, supported by the country's economic elite and the executive has led to increased social instability. As a result, Peru has had six presidents in less than seven years and an unprecedented frequency of cabinet changes (Barrenechea & Vergara, 2023; Benites & Valverde, 2023; Ilizarbe, 2023).

During this period, various conservative forces disputed for access to power, as was the case in November 2020, when the president of the Congress, a representative of the country's economic elite, briefly took power and then failed in a weeklong usurpation of executive power (Barrenechea & Vergara, 2023; Benites & Valverde, 2023; Ilizarbe, 2023). On the other hand, the left-wing former president Castillo, elected in 2021, was questioned from the beginning of his mandate. After facing a series of accusations of illicit favours, embezzlement, among others, he tried to break the balance of institutional power and carried out the attempted unconstitutional closure of Congress (BBC, 2022; Vergara, 2023). Currently, like most former Peruvian presidents in recent years, Castillo is under arrest and being investigated in prison. This study was designed hours after the former president announced the unconstitutional closure of Congress followed by his destitution and imprisoned.

Both institutional fragility and democratic stagnation have led to the rise of a new government with right-wing conservative tendencies and a violent and disproportionate response to civil demonstrations, with more than sixty deaths, mostly among indigenous people and more than 1,500 injured in the first months after Castillo's fall (Benites & Valverde, 2023; Ilizarbe, 2023; Lynch, 2023). The socio-political phenomenon in question presents many unknowns for the study of political psychology and this research will address some of them. In this article, we will focus on measuring people's perception of the political crisis during the administration of former President Castillo and the support of his impeachment. The political scenario in question will be analysed from two main axes: (1) an assessment of the Castillo government and its attempt to close Congress, and (2) a psychopolitical perspective, where indicators as populist attitudes and political moral laxity were measured as characteristics of political socialization outcomes that has been prevalent in Peru in recent years.

The first analysis deals with people's opinions on the crisis generated by the failed unconstitutional attempt closure of Congress; this part consists of evaluations of the performance of the Castillo government, the scandals and the inefficiency attributed to his administration (Vergara, 2023). It also explores the level of popular approval/disapproval of Castillo's decision to close the Congress of the Republic, based on arguments about obstructionism and the scandals surrounding the Congress and its attempt to seize power in an irregular manner (Barrenechea & Vergara, 2023; Crabtree & Durand, 2017).

The second analysis measures populist attitudes and political moral laxity, taking into account the degree of political polarisation in Peruvian discourse (Vergara, 2023). Regarding populist attitudes, these allow us to understand the moral representation of politicians and citizens (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020), contrasting features

such as the idealisation of the people against a corrupt elite that, for its own convenience, affects the welfare of people in society (Espinosa *et al.*, 2022b; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Van Hauwaert *et al.*, 2020). In contrast to the assessment of populism, Political Moral Laxity is measured as the way in which people can align themselves with a socio-political system that does not necessarily guarantee conditions of justice for its citizens (Costa-Lopes *et al.*, 2013; Espinosa *et al.*, 2022a). This variable is understood as the political beliefs and attitudes of people who tolerate and support corrupt actions by politicians that benefit them at the expense of other citizens (Espinosa, 2022a; Janos *et al.*, 2018).

Consistent with what has been found in different reports (Alonso & Brussino, 2021; Brussino & Alonso, 2021; Latinobarómetro, 2018; Schmitz & Espinosa, 2015), people's distrust of institutions is accompanied by a lack of interest in political and public affairs, which increases the scope for political operators to concentrate political power and corruption (Barrenechea & Vergara, 2023; Dunwoody *et al.*, 2022; Ilizarbe, 2023). This gives way to an evaluation of the concept of illiberal democracy, which becomes a form of political clientelism of state capitalism (Alonso & Brussino, 2021; Kramer, 2022). Illiberal democracy allows us to represent how democratic principles can be abused to achieve political ends, usually within an authoritarian agenda (Dunwoody *et al.*, 2022; Kramer, 2022). In this study, it is measured by the justification for an authority, such as the president or congress representatives, to implement solutions despite breaking the law.

Based on the above, this research seeks to identify the different types of predictors of support for the impeachment of former President Castillo following the failed attempt to close Congress, which led to a constitutional breakdown in the country.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Participants**

The participants were 293 Peruvians, 76.1% of whom lived in the metropolitan area of Lima, 23.9% in the regions of Ancash, Arequipa, Cajamarca, Cusco, Huancavelica, Ica, Junín, La Libertad, Lambayeque, Lima province, Loreto, Madre de Dios, San Martín, Puno and Tacna. The average age ranged from 18 to 65 years old ( $M = 35.4$ ,  $SD = 15.1$ ), with 166 men (56.7%) and 127 women (43.3%). In terms of self-perceived socio-economic status, the majority belong to the typical middle-class sector (49.8%), followed by the upper middle class (25.3%) and the lower middle class (14.7%) and finally the extremes of the upper (6.5%) and lower (3.8%) classes. Regarding their political orientation, 23.9% were left wing, 36.5% were centrist and 39.6% were right wing.

### **2.2. Procedure**

Participants were selected through convenience sampling and an open call via the social network Facebook. Regarding the variables for inclusion in the study, three variables were specifically considered: (a) participants had to be Peruvian citizens, (b) they had to be over 18 years old (legal age). All participants were told that survey completion was voluntary, would take ~15–20 min and the survey was completed through Qualtrics. Data collection was carried out from the day of the announcement of the unconstitutional closure of the Congress, from 7 to 12 December.

### 2.3. Measures

The Populist Attitudes scale presented in Rovira & Van Hauwaert (2020) and adapted to Spanish by Espinosa *et al.* (2022b) was used. It measures the degree to which citizens believe that "the people" are a virtuous and homogeneous entity, disagree with "the elites" and defend popular sovereignty against elitist government and also addresses how populist proposals are perceived. The scale consists of 8 items on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree". Reliability was high ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $s = 0.70$ ,  $\alpha = .808$ ,  $\omega = .814$ ).

To measure the Political Moral Laxity, an adaptation of the Political Moral Laxity subscale of the Political Cynicism Scale (Espinosa *et al.*, 2022a; Janos *et al.*, 2018) was used. The instrument is composed of three items, which show favourable attitudes towards maintaining a corrupt and inefficient political system but oriented towards satisfying the needs of certain groups, regardless of the harm or damage to other sectors or society. It has a 5-point Likert-type response scale, where 1 = "Strongly disagree" and 5 = "Strongly agree". Reliability was adequate ( $M = 1.66$ ,  $s = 0.77$ ,  $\alpha = .716$ ,  $\omega = .722$ ).

Participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements we viewed as part of the political crisis on a five-point scale anchored by strongly disagree and strongly agree. These items include statements about people's disapproval of the former president's government performance and approval of the former president's attempt to close the Congress. We calculated averages for each one (Presidential performance disapproval  $M = 3.45$ ,  $s = 1.10$ ,  $\alpha = .746$ ,  $\omega = 0.751$ ; Closure of the Congress approval  $M = 2.79$ ,  $s = 1.30$ ,  $\alpha = .647$ ,  $\omega = 0.647$ ).

A single-item measure was used for illiberal democracy (*Would you prefer a presidential candidate to always follow the law or to be able to go beyond the law to show results?*) and the support with the former president impeachment (*How much do you agree with the impeachment of Pedro Castillo?*). The measure uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree". A higher score for each measure indicates a greater preference for a candidate who can go beyond the law, or more support for leaving power, respectively.

### 3. Results

In order to identify significant factors that explain the level of agreement with former president departure from power, the distributions of psychopolitical indicators and political crisis statements are presented in Table 1. It shows that PML has low scores while populist attitudes, presidential performance disapproval and support with the former president impeachment have high scores, above the theoretical mean (2.5).

Results at the correlation level between support for the impeachment of the former president and the general values of the variables show an expected association of medium and high negative magnitudes for populist attitudes, approval of the former attempt to close Congress, and presidential performance disapproval, with a positive relationship for the latter. It is also observed that illiberal democracy has a small negative magnitude, while Political Moral Laxity has a positive one.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of psychopolitical indicators and political crisis statements

| Variables  | M    | SE    | 95% C.I. |       | Skewness | Kurtosis |
|------------|------|-------|----------|-------|----------|----------|
|            |      |       | Lower    | Upper |          |          |
| Populism   | 3.62 | 0.695 | 3.54     | 3.70  | -0.436   | 0.700    |
| PML        | 1.66 | 0.769 | 1.58     | 1.75  | 1.370    | 2.040    |
| closure    | 2.79 | 1.300 | 2.64     | 2.94  | 0.206    | -1.110   |
| disapprove | 3.45 | 1.100 | 3.32     | 3.57  | -0.463   | -0.665   |
| illiberal  | 2.14 | 1.453 | 1.97     | 2.30  | 0.913    | -0.659   |
| leavepower | 3.98 | 1.340 | 3.82     | 4.13  | -1.090   | -0.128   |

**Note.** Populism = Populist Attitudes, PML = Political Moral Laxity, closure = approval of former president's closure of the Congress, disapprove = presidential performance disapproval, illiberal = Illiberal Democracy, leave power = support with the former president impeachment.

Although, Table 2 shows expected associations, it should be noted that political crisis statements (*closure* and *disapprove*) have a stronger relationship than psychosocial factors. To avoid overlapping the explanatory power of each type of variable, different regression models were run with each type of predictor.

**Table 2.** Correlations between psychopolitical indicators and political crisis statements

|               | 1        | 2       | 3        | 4       | 5        |
|---------------|----------|---------|----------|---------|----------|
| 1. Populism   | -        |         |          |         |          |
| 2. PML        | -.120*   | -       |          |         |          |
| 3. Closure    | .450***  | -.084   | -        |         |          |
| 4. Disapprove | -.319*** | .294*** | -.422*** | -       |          |
| 5. Illiberal  | .219***  | .134*   | .317***  | -.172** | -        |
| 6. Leavepower | -.425*** | .159**  | -.502*** | .667*** | -.248*** |

**Note.** Populism = Populist Attitudes, PML = Political Moral Laxity, closure = approval of former president's closure of the Congress, disapprove = presidential performance disapproval, illiberal = Illiberal Democracy, leavepower = support with the former president impeachment.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Consistent with what was observed in the correlations, the regression analyses show significant effects on the support with the former president impeachment. Table 3 shows that presidential performance disapproval together with a negative assessment of attempt to close Congress, explains greater support for his impeachment.

**Table 3.** Regression analysis predicting Support with former president impeachment

| Variable   | Unstandardized Coefficients |       | Standardized Coefficients | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | 95% C.I. |        |
|------------|-----------------------------|-------|---------------------------|----------|----------|----------|--------|
|            | B                           | SE    | Beta ( $\beta$ )          |          |          | Lower    | Upper  |
| Constant   | 2.418                       | 0.280 |                           | 8.65***  | .000     |          |        |
| closure    | -0.276                      | 0.047 | -0.268                    | -5.88*** | .000     | -0.358   | -0.179 |
| disapprove | 0.676                       | 0.056 | 0.554                     | 12.14*** | .000     | 0.464    | 0.644  |

**Note.** Closure = approval of former president's closure of the Congress, disapprove = presidential performance disapproval.  $F(2,290) = 147.5***$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .50$

With regard to the psychosocial indicators (Table 4), it was found that a negative attitude for populist expressions, disapproval of illiberal democratic practices, accompanied by a tendency towards a normalization of the perverse political socialization of Political Moral Laxity explain greater support for former president impeachment. Furthermore, rejection of a populist narrative is the most important variable in the regression model.

**Table 4.** Regression analysis predicting Support with the former president impeachment

| Variable  | Unstandardized Coefficients |       | Standardized Coefficients | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> | 95% C.I. |        |
|-----------|-----------------------------|-------|---------------------------|----------|----------|----------|--------|
|           | B                           | SE    | Beta ( $\beta$ )          |          |          | Lower    | Upper  |
| Constant  | 9.301                       | 0.903 |                           | 10.30*** | .000     |          |        |
| populism  | -0.709                      | 0.104 | -0.368                    | -6.84*** | .000     | -0.913   | -0.505 |
| PML       | 0.244                       | 0.092 | 0.140                     | 2.65**   | .009     | 0.063    | 0.426  |
| illiberal | -0.106                      | 0.031 | -0.186                    | -3.45*** | .000     | -0.167   | -0.046 |

**Note.** Populism = Populist Attitudes, PML = Political Moral Laxity, illiberal = Illiberal Democracy.  
 $F(3,289) = 27.93***$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .23$

After examining the linear relationships between the variables, a multiple mediation analysis was conducted with Illiberal Democracy as the mediating variable. The Bias corrected bootstrap method was used on 5,000 random samples. Table 5. shows that Illiberal Democracy partially mediates both the relationships between Political Moral Laxity and Populist Attitudes with the level of support with the former president impeachment.

**Table 5.** Indirect and Total effects with illiberal democracy as mediating variable

| Type     | Effect                                                    | B      | SE    | 95% C.I.* |        | $\beta$ | <i>z</i> | <i>p</i> |
|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------|-------|-----------|--------|---------|----------|----------|
|          |                                                           |        |       | Lower     | Upper  |         |          |          |
| Indirect | PML $\Rightarrow$ illiberal $\Rightarrow$ leavepower      | -0.050 | 0.023 | -0.115    | -0.011 | -0.029  | -2.16    | 0.031    |
|          | populism $\Rightarrow$ illiberal $\Rightarrow$ leavepower | -0.084 | 0.032 | -0.179    | -0.028 | -0.044  | -2.66    | 0.008    |
| Direct   | PML $\Rightarrow$ leavepower                              | 0.242  | 0.092 | 0.071     | 0.399  | 0.139   | 2.64     | 0.008    |
|          | populism $\Rightarrow$ leavepower                         | -0.711 | 0.103 | -0.940    | -0.494 | -0.368  | -6.90    | < .001   |
| Total    | PML $\Rightarrow$ leavepower                              | 0.192  | 0.092 | 0.016     | 0.343  | 0.110   | 2.07     | 0.038    |
|          | populism $\Rightarrow$ leavepower                         | -0.795 | 0.102 | -1.015    | -0.569 | -0.412  | -7.78    | < .001   |

**Note.** PML = Political Moral Laxity, illiberal = Illiberal Democracy, leavepower = support with the former president impeachment. Betas are completely standardized effect sizes. \*Confidence intervals computed with method Bias corrected bootstrap on 5,000 random samples.

Specifically, it can be observed that the assessment of the practices of Illiberal Democracy has a suppressive significant effect on the PML. In other words, while in the case of Populist Attitudes, Illiberal Democracy helps explain the regression coefficient of the total effect, in the case of PML, Illiberal Democracy reduces the total effect relative to the regression coefficient of the direct effect of PML. Importantly, the relationship between the components was found to be statistically significant for each pair of

variables: PML-illiberal  $B = 0.298$ ,  $SE = 0.107$ ,  $p = .005$ ; populism-illiberal  $B = 0.500$ ,  $SE = 0.118$ ,  $p = .000$ ; illiberal-leavepower  $B = -0.169$ ,  $SE = 0.049$ ,  $p = .000$ .

#### 4. Discussion

A superficial reading of the results could lead to a biased interpretation and an incomplete understanding of the loss of political support to former President Castillo government. For this reason, the discussion will focus on the predictors of the support of the presidential impeachment. Both statements about the political crisis, the attempt to close Congress and the presidential performance disapproval, as well as psychopolitical indicators, proved to be adequate predictors of the former president impeachment.

From a general point of view, it could be argued that Castillo's fall was an expected situation from the moment when he weakened his populist support (Espinosa *et al.*, 2023b). The questioning of his administration and his rapprochement with conservative power groups cost him much of his popular support (Lynch, 2023; Vergara, 2023), which explains why the majority of the sample, mostly from Lima, were in favour of Castillo's removal from power (Espinosa *et al.*, 2023a; Meléndez, 2022). However, the explanatory contribution of the psychopolitical indicators must be closely monitored in order to observe the attitudes that accompany support of the president impeachment.

In this particular case, it seems to be true that populist attitudes, which have been overexploited by the leftist former president (Meléndez, 2022), emerge in contexts of distrust in the system and express an ambivalent relationship with democracy (Espinosa *et al.*, 2022b; Van Hauwaert *et al.*, 2020). This is an aspect that would be strengthened by the presence of political moral laxity and positives attitudes towards illiberal democracy in the regression model. This means that people with more populist attitudes have a more critical view of public affairs (Brussino & Alonso, 2021; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). In this case, the position against the closure of the Congress of the Republic and therefore in favour of the impeachment of the former president would be accompanied by an orientation towards political moral laxity.

On the other hand, a number of studies have shown that people with a political moral laxity orientation tend to support more conservative political projects (Espinosa *et al.*, 2022a; 2022b; Janos *et al.*, 2018) and in Peru they often take a stand against the executive branch by favoring a highly delegitimized Congress (Espinosa *et al.*, 2023a). In other words, there is a tendency for people to prioritise private and individual interests that would lead them to defend the interests of the country's economic elites in the face of the danger posed by the Castillo government (Benites & Valverde, 2023; Dargent, 2021; Espinosa *et al.*, 2022a; 2023a; Meléndez, 2022).

Both populist attitudes and political moral laxity could be conceived as problems of political socialization in Peru, which has produced a detachment from public affairs and the generalized belief that corruption is inevitable (Espinosa *et al.*, 2022a; 2022b; 2023a; Janos *et al.*, 2018). When these are related to illiberal democracy, two ideas about the removal of the former president emerge support for Castillo through populism and rejection through political moral laxity. Moreover, illiberal positions often lead to the advocacy of authoritarian and conservative policy changes that are seen as necessary, undermining the consolidation of the democratic project (Barrenechea & Vergara, 2023; Kramer, 2022; Meléndez, 2022; Quiroz, 2013; Schmitz & Espinosa, 2015; Vergara, 2023).

The analysis of direct relationships may mask the contribution of variables such as political moral laxity and the level of agreement with illiberal practices to people's

support for the former president's removal from office, given that these variables had minor contributions in the regression model. Being able to identify the suppressive effect of the Illiberal Democracy variable on the relationship between political moral laxity and Castillo's impeachment makes it clear that part of the motivation to support this outcome would be due to the unrepresentative and institutional dysfunction of a degraded socio-political system (Espinosa *et al.*, 2022a; 2023a; Janos *et al.*, 2018). The latter is identified in other works that point out that the precarious situation of democracy is due to the inadequate political behaviour of its elites and political authorities in general (Alonso & Brussino, 2021; Benites & Valverde, 2023; Crabtree & Durand, 2017; Costa-Lopes *et al.*, 2013; Dunwoody *et al.*, 2022; Kramer, 2022).

Castillo's unpopularity, his questionable administration and the unconstitutional attempted closure of the congress translate for the sample into a high support of the former president impeachment as an adequate response to take place (Barrenechea & Vergara, 2023; Kramer, 2022). From all of this, we can partially rescue the popular rejection of authoritarian practices that lead to an imbalance of power, in other words, the rejection of the failed closure of congress, which was expressed by the participants in the study. This has also been observed in other recent moments in Peruvian political history, causing the massive demonstrations and the Peruvian social outburst (Barrenechea & Vergara, 2023; Benites & Valverde, 2023; Dargent, 2021; Ilizarbe, 2023), which is a hope for Peruvian society, currently facing serious problems at the institutional political level (Lynch, 2023; Meléndez, 2022; Schmitz & Espinosa, 2015; Vergara, 2023).

A limitation of the study is that most of the sample belonged to the recurrent centre of political power in Peru, Lima. In addition, given that the electoral base that led to Pedro Castillo's political victory came from rural areas with little access to the Internet and that the information was collected through social networks. It is necessary to verify whether the results of this research are maintained in groups from different regions that currently support or are in favour of the former President Castillo.

A recommendation for future research is that, although the literature supports an interpretation of the influence of elites in the political crisis in Peru, it is necessary to control for the role of elites within the study to obtain a more valid interpretation.

## 5. Conclusion

In the light of the results of this study, it has been possible to identify psychopolitical predictors of the support with former President Castillo's impeachment. On the one hand, statements about the crisis show a majority presidential performance disapproval and a rejection of the unconstitutional closure of the congress that led to his removal from power. On the other hand, there are the psychopolitical indicators, which allow us to deepen the analysis of the level of agreement with the fall from power of the former president, discussing the effects of populist attitudes and the symptoms of degradation of the democratic system demonstrated by political moral laxity. Thus, it can be concluded that in Peru, to some extent, people tend to normalise expressions of political moral laxity and populism that reinforce illiberal positions, representing direct risks to democracy. Finally, it also points to the need to include other contextual factors, such as assessing the influence of economic elites in the country's political crisis and the perspective of people living in rural areas.

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