

## *Preface*

The question of political practice is, or at least should be, central to the study of politics. The things that politicians, and collective political actors like parties and social movements, *do* in the course of pursuing and maintaining political power are just as important as their social origins, identities, motives, ideologies, or organizational characteristics. But while political practice matters a great deal, the scope of what political actors are likely to find themselves doing at any given time and place tends to be quite limited. When political actors act, they usually do so in fairly habitual ways. They follow routine procedures, recycle tried-and-true strategies and tactics, draw on models from the past, and mimic others in the present. Contemporary social movements in the United States boycott companies, march on Washington, and engage in acts of nonviolent civil disobedience; contemporary U.S. political parties hold voter registration drives, produce television ads, and host expensive fundraising dinners. In rare and surprising moments, however, something new comes along. Indeed, none of the practices just noted were common a hundred years ago. If the landscape of political practice at any given time and place tends to be relatively stable, where do new practices come from? Under what conditions, and by what processes, do political actors make a break with their old habits and develop new lines of action? When new practices are elaborated, what shapes their characteristics? And what does it take for new practices to get assimilated into the toolkit of routine go-to options? This book—which is, in the end, a sociological study of the sources of political innovation—seeks answers to these questions.

I argue that explaining the rise of novel political practices requires three analytical steps. First, it is necessary to attend to changes in the terrain of social-structural realities, as these can afford opportunities to political actors

who are seeking new practical alternatives. This terrain constitutes the *social* context of action in which political actors are situated. Second, it is necessary to understand the characteristics and unfolding dynamics of the *political* context of action—the local political field in which actors are vying for position—because these contribute to the formation of collective actors with specific endowments, set in relation to one another in particular ways, facing unique sets of opportunities and constraints. Third, it is necessary to attend to the political actors' experimental engagement with new practices as this unfolds over time, with a clear comprehension of the social experience and perspectives available to them as they evaluate practices and judge how they match up with the changing social and political context. I will develop this argument in the introductory chapter and return to it in the conclusion. But for now, suffice it to say that this approach implies the need for attention to macro-historical social and political contexts, but also to meso- and micro-level relationships, interactions, and processes; that it suggests we attend to institutional structures and material realities, but also to cultural resources and situated perception; and that it asks us to consider not only actors' social locations and organizational positions, but also their experiential trajectories and personal habits of thought and action. Most of all, explaining political innovation demands a serious engagement with the problem of human creativity.

I develop this argument through the sustained consideration of a particular historical case—Peru's 1931 presidential election—in which the candidates of two opposing parties, along with their party leadership, elaborated a new modality of political practice that I identify as a distinctively Latin American style of *populist mobilization*. Prior to 1931, nothing like populist mobilization had been practiced in Peru. Indeed, this case represents the first example of large-scale, election-oriented populist mobilization in Latin American history, predating Perón's and Vargas's reliance on the practice by nearly a decade and a half. Over the course of this critical election, outsider political actors—facing a unique political situation, set against a backdrop of changing social conditions—developed and implemented a new set of political ideas, strategies, and tactics. And once populist mobilization had been enacted, its example revolutionized the set of practices that future politicians would have on hand as they attempted to secure or maintain legitimacy and power. Explaining this historical shift is the substantive agenda of this book.

I did not set out initially, however, to study political innovation. When I began this project, I believed that I was embarking on an investigation into the thorny but fascinating topic of populism. Populism has long been a prominent feature of the Latin American political landscape, and a renewal of pop-

ulist activity in the 1990s underlined its continued importance. Neo-populism became a topic of fierce debate amongst scholars, journalists, and members of the interested public. In the early 2000s, the talk in Latin Americanist circles was of Peru's Alberto Fujimori and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, among others. With their charismatic personalities, flamboyant styles, heated rhetoric, and controversial policies, figures like Fujimori and Chávez had engendered strong loyalties and catalyzed intense opposition. In many respects, they bore a striking resemblance to the populist figures of an earlier generation—people like Argentina's Juan Domingo Perón and Brazil's Getúlio Vargas—whose images have come to define a romanticized stereotype of Latin American political culture. To this young student of contentious politics, the topic seemed both endlessly puzzling and imminently pressing—an impression that rings even more true today than it did then.

It was my engagement with the interdisciplinary populism literature that led me to Peru. As I began to review this literature, I found that much of the recent scholarship was having a hard time making sense of the contemporary Latin American cases. Previous generations of populism scholars, who had focused on the cases of the 1940s and 1950s, had associated populism with a historically specific developmental stage. Accordingly, many observers—having largely relegated populism to the dustbin of history—were caught off guard by its resurgence in the wake of democratization. To me, the difficulties posed by the new cases suggested a need to reassess the existing populism theories, and even to reconsider some of the classic cases on which these were largely based. My search for the most puzzling of the earlier cases led me to the events of Peru's 1931 election. The stark differences between the two populist candidates competing head-to-head in this election—in terms of their social origins, institutional positions, and ideological orientations—seemed to throw a monkey wrench into standard definitions, conceptualizations, and typologies of populism. At the same time, for reasons that will be discussed in chapter 2, the case appeared anomalous *vis-à-vis* what were otherwise compelling explanatory theories. I found that the solution to the conceptual problem was to take a practice-oriented view to the phenomenon, shifting the focus from populism to "populist mobilization," and understanding this as a versatile mode of practice that could be undertaken by actors of various stripes—in power or seeking it—in pursuit of a wide range of social, political, and economic agendas. The solution to the explanatory problem followed from this practical reorientation, in conjunction with an appreciation of the fact that this was a *new* practice for the Latin American context. As has already been noted, Peru's populist mobilization was precocious; and it was precisely for reasons deriving from this preciousness that the existing

populism theories had such a hard time accounting for it. Explaining the rise of populist mobilization in Peru would thus mean explaining an instance of political innovation—hence my ultimate theoretical orientation and explanatory agenda.

The realization that this would be a book about political innovation, not populism (at least not directly), shaped its writing in a few notable respects. I have focused the discussion in the introductory chapter on sociological theories of contentious politics and creative social action, rather than on theories of populism. In an effort to avoid distraction, I have located my brief comments on what scholars of populism might take away from this study in the concluding chapter. And to underscore the fact that I am not here making claims about populism qua populism—especially given the fact that my definition of “populist mobilization” does not overlap neatly with reigning folk or scholarly conceptions of “populism”—I have made every effort to be precise in my language. Except when discussing the literature, I refer to “populist mobilization,” to “populist rhetoric,” and to “popular mobilization” (all of which I define in chapter 1), but never, generically, to “populism.”

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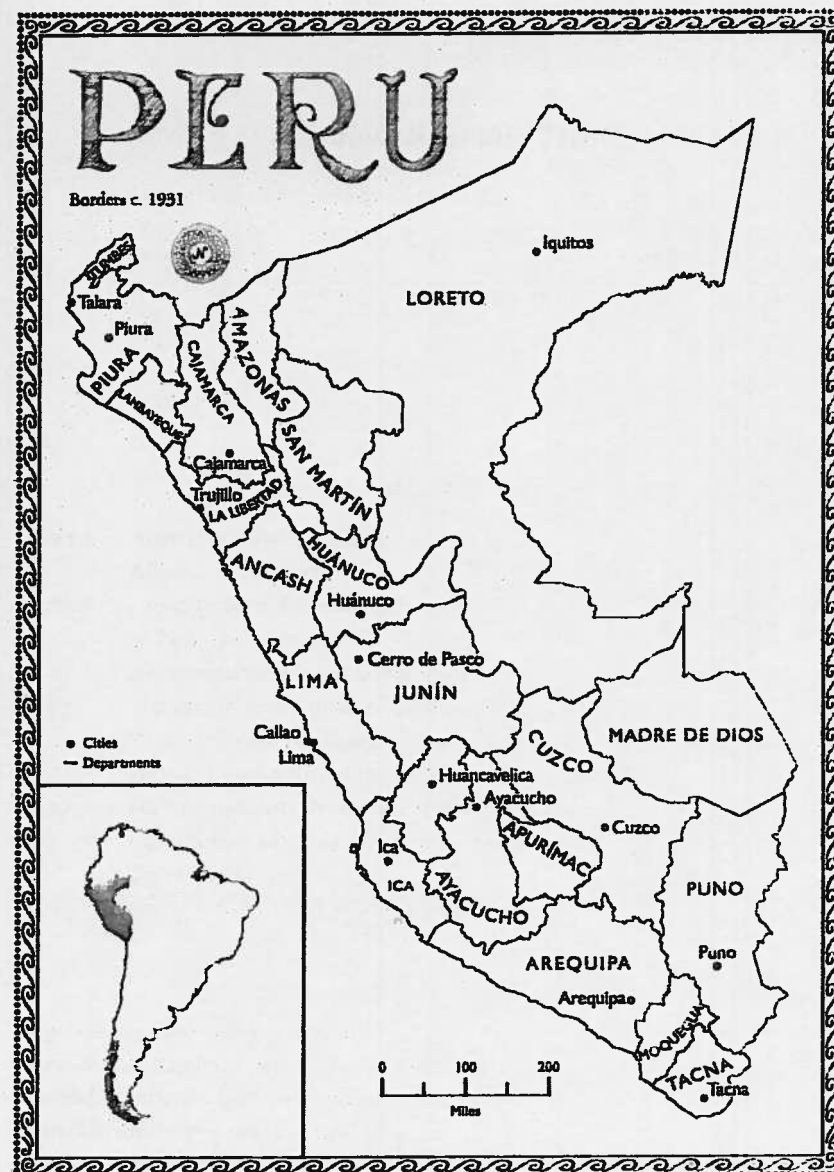
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MAP 1