



Dead dogs don't bite? Change and continuity in Peruvian recall referendums

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[Abstract] In this study, I aim to describe the main changes and continuities in the dynamics of recall referendums towards Peruvian mayors as well as local councilors, known as *consultas populares de revocatoria* (CPR). I argue that although the frequency of referendums has dropped dramatically since the last legislative reform in 2015, the dynamics that explain their initiation, activation, and outcomes have not changed significantly. I arrive at this conclusion by analyzing the influence of three established determinants of CPRs— municipal budget, budget execution, and political competition—across the three stages of the recall process. This article makes a twofold contribution. First, it offers an updated and characterization of referendum through 2025. Second, these new patterns suggest that the recent legislative reform has rendered the instrumentalization of recalls as a 'political weapon' more difficult, it has also constrained a key mechanism of citizen accountability at a municipal level.

[Keywords] Subnational politics, recall referenda, political reform, local democracy.

[Título] ¿Muerto el perro, muerta la rabia?: Cambios y continuidades de las consultas populares de revocatoria en el Perú

[Resumen] Este análisis tiene como objetivo describir los principales cambios y continuidades en las dinámicas que sustentan las consultas populares de revocatoria (CPR) de alcaldes y regidores distritales en el Perú. Se sostiene que, aunque después de la última reforma de 2015 se han convocado menos revocatorias, las dinámicas que explican la petición, la activación y los resultados de la consulta no han variado de manera significativa. Esta conclusión se alcanza tras analizar el efecto de tres variables ampliamente utilizadas en la literatura: el ingreso municipal, la ejecución presupuestal y la competitividad política en las tres fases del proceso de CPR. De esta manera, el estudio contribuye al entendimiento de las CPR en el Perú de dos maneras. Primero, actualiza la observación y descripción de las tendencias generales del proceso de revocatoria hasta las últimas celebradas en 2025. Segundo, la información actualizada permite sostener que, si bien la última reforma de 2015 endureció una herramienta de "revanchismo político", al mismo tiempo limitó un mecanismo de control ciudadano sobre la gestión municipal en el país.

[Palabras clave] Revocatorias, política subnacional, reforma política, democracia local.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Peru, recall referendums (*consulta popular de revocatoria* – CPR) are conducted during the third year of a governmental term¹ and are designed to submit to popular vote the continuity of elected subnational authorities, specifically district and provincial mayors and councilors, as well as regional governors, vice-governors, and councilors.² Once among the most frequently employed mechanisms of direct democracy in Latin America, their usage has been characterized as having been utilized “perversely,” serving primarily as a tool for political retaliation. Following the regulatory reform of 2015, which modified the structural incentives previously available to political competitors, a marked decline in the activation of recall processes has been observed. Since the reform, these types of referendum have been convened in only 44 districts over three electoral cycles, in contrast to the 904 districts that experienced recall votes during the three cycles preceding 2015.

Previous scholarship suggests that the prospect of early elections following the recall of municipal authorities contributed significantly to the high frequency of such referendums in Peru (TUESTA SOLDEVILLA 2014; WELP 2013; WIENER BRAVO 2004). Nevertheless, it is equally important to recognize that opposition political elites may also instrumentalize recall mechanisms to channel citizen discontent, as noted by Alva Mendoza (2019). In light of these dynamics, and following three electoral cycles since the 2015 reform, the present study aims to analyze the principal changes and continuities across three distinct phases of the recall process targeting district-level authorities: (1) petition, (2) activation, and (3) electoral outcome.

To conduct this analysis, I employ three variables extensively examined in the specialized literature as determinants of recall referendums: municipal revenue, budget execution, and political competitiveness. Through the application of logistic regression models, this study assesses the probabilities associated with petition submission, referendum activation, and electoral outcomes in periods before and after the 2015 reform.

1 Municipal and regional authorities serve four-year terms.

2 The Peruvian State is a unitary and decentralized system, divided into four levels of government: districts, provinces, regions, and the central government.

Consistent with recent findings, this study concludes that recall referenda have fallen into practical disuse, largely because political actors no longer perceive sufficient incentives for their initiation. However, while recall requests and outcomes remain partially responsive to assessments of municipal administrative performance, such evaluations no longer appear to be channeled through the party competition system following the regulatory change.

The analysis is organized into three additional sections. The first section provides an overview of the background of recall referenda in Peru, examining the rationale behind their institutionalization and the principal modifications introduced in 2015. The second section describes the most significant changes and continuities in recall dynamics, drawing on logistic regression models to illustrate these patterns. The final section presents conclusions and offers recommendations for future research and potential regulatory refinements.

2. BACKGROUND

Recall referenda represent a mechanism of direct democracy designed to empower citizens with the authority to determine the continuity of their elected officials (LISSIDINI 2007). As such, they are conceptualized as an instrument of citizen oversight and accountability (EBERHARDT 2013). In Peru, the mechanisms of direct democracy are regulated by the Law on the Rights of Citizen Participation and Control (Ley de los Derechos de Participación y Control Ciudadanos – LDPCC).³

Regarding the specific provisions for recall referenda, the LDPCC establishes it as the citizenry's right to remove from office: (1) municipal mayors and councilors; (2) regional governors, vice-governors, and councilors; and (3) justices of the peace elected by popular vote. The recall process is structured into three general stages:⁴

- 1) Petition: Citizens formally request the recall of their authorities by collecting signatures. The initiative is deemed admissible upon gathering the support of at least 25 percent of the signatures from the

3 Perú. Ley del Control de los Derechos Ciudadanos, Ley no. 26300. May 3, 1994. <https://bit.ly/4jISfv6>

4 These general rules do not apply to justices of the peace, as they are governed by a specific law.

constituency's electoral roll. The promoters are required to publicly disclose the grounds upon which the recall request is based.

- 2) Voting: Upon successful completion of the petition phase, a recall election is convened, wherein citizens decide by universal suffrage on the continuity of the targeted authorities. Removal of an authority requires a simple majority vote (half plus one). For the process to be considered valid, a minimum voter turnout of 50 percent of eligible voters is mandatory.
- 3) Results: Authorities who are successfully recalled are replaced by their designated successors.⁵ Promoters of the recall initiative are subsequently obligated to render a public account of the financial resources and expenditures associated with their campaign.

In 2015,⁶ a series of significant regulatory reforms were enacted, which have shaped the dynamics of the subsequent three electoral cycles (2017, 2021, and 2025). First, the reform restricted the timing of recall referenda exclusively to the third year of the governmental term, whereas prior regulations permitted such processes in either the second or third year. This modification implies that, in the event authorities are recalled, their successors assume office for only the remaining portion of the final year of the term.

Second, prior to the reform, the recall of more than one-third of the Municipal Council or the Regional Council triggered new elections within the respective constituency. Scholarly analyses have contended that this provision functioned as a “perverse incentive,” encouraging political competitors to utilize recalls as a tool for electoral retaliation (TUESTA SOLDEVILLA 2014; WELP 2013; WIENER BRAVO 2004; 2009).

Although the 2015 reform successfully mitigated these strategic dynamics, a practical consequence has been that the recall now penalizes individual officials rather than their political organizations, as replacements are drawn from the same political grouping that suffered the sanction. Third, the reformed legislation stipulates that recalled authorities are ineligible to run for any office within the entity from which they were removed, nor may they hold any public office

5 This provision presents a particular feature in cases involving the recall of regional presidents and vice presidents, since in certain instances the replacement must be elected by a simple majority vote of the Regional Council.

6 Perú. Ley no. 30315, Ley que modifica diversos artículos de la Ley no. 26300, Ley de los Derechos de Participación y Control Ciudadanos. April 7, 2015. <https://bit.ly/3EQKCUE>

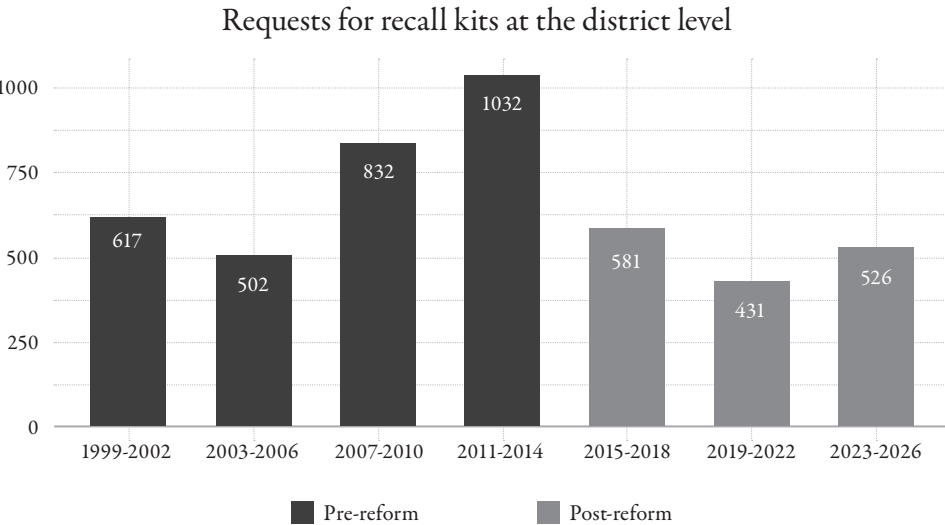
within that entity until the conclusion of the original municipal term. Finally, the reform imposed new transparency requirements, mandating that both the promoters of a recall initiative and the authorities subject to recall must render a public account of all campaign-related income and expenditures.

3. RESULTS

This section analyzes the most significant changes in recall referenda following the regulatory reforms of 2015. The analysis concentrates on recall processes targeting mayors and municipal councilors, as these positions are the most frequently subjected to such mechanisms in Peru. The examination is organized into three distinct phases: (1) the request phase, (2) the approval of the recall referendum, and (3) the electoral outcomes.

The initial phase corresponds to the procurement of official recall kits, a procedural prerequisite for formally initiating a recall request. This phase is analytically significant because it provides an accurate measure of the number of constituencies where efforts to activate the mechanism are undertaken. As illustrated in Figure 1, the volume of recall kit requests has not varied substantially following the regulatory change.

FIGURE 1



Source: Own elaboration based on Alva-Mendoza (2025)

Although during the 2007–2010 and 2011–2014 municipal terms, recall requests were considerably more numerous—exceeding 750 districts involved—the data indicate that, in general, recall kits are typically procured in approximately five hundred districts both before and after the 2015 regulatory reform (ALVA-MENDOZA 2025).

Subsequently, this study examines the correlates of economic and political conditions at the district level to estimate their association with the likelihood of recall requests. The dependent variable is dichotomous, taking the value of 1 when a recall was formally requested in a district and 0 otherwise. The independent variables are specified as follows: (i) the percentage of budget execution in municipal projects during the first year of the term (Expenditure);⁷ (ii) the Modified Institutional Budget (*presupuesto institucional modificado*, PIM) allocated to projects in the same period (Income),⁸ serving as a proxy for municipal fiscal capacity; and (iii) an indicator of political competitiveness, defined as the percentage difference in votes between the first- and second-place candidates in the most recent municipal election (Competitiveness).⁹ Higher values on this latter indicator reflect a larger margin of electoral support and, consequently, a mayoral incumbent facing fewer viable political challengers. To enable comparability of effect sizes and to determine which variable possesses greater explanatory power, all independent variables have been standardized to a mean of zero.

As shown in Table 1, the dynamics governing recall requests before and after the 2015 electoral reform exhibit modest but notable differences. In the “pre-reform” period, the probability of requesting a recall referendum was significantly higher in districts characterized by greater municipal income and elevated levels of political competitiveness. Consistent with the thesis of “perverse incentives,” wealthier municipalities marked by robust political competition demonstrated a systematically higher likelihood of purchasing recall kits.

7 Data obtained through Consulta Amigable, a platform of the Ministry of Economy and Finance – MEF (2025).

8 Data obtained through Consulta Amigable platform (MEF 2025).

9 Data obtained through Infogob, a platform of Jurado Nacional de Elecciones – JNE (2025).

TABLE 1

Binary logistic regressions for the sale of recall kits at the district level

	Dependent variable:	
	Purchase of kits	
	Pre-reform	Post-reform
	(1)	(2)
Expenditure	-0.048 (0.053)	-0.084** (0.033)
Income	1.001*** (0.195)	0.132*** (0.045)
Competitiveness	-0.342*** (0.050)	-0.277*** (0.039)
Constant	-0.012 (0.228)	-2.280*** (0.235)
Department	✓	✓
Observations	2184	5015
AIC	2752.789	5854.081
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Source: Own elaboration based on Alva-Mendoza (2025)

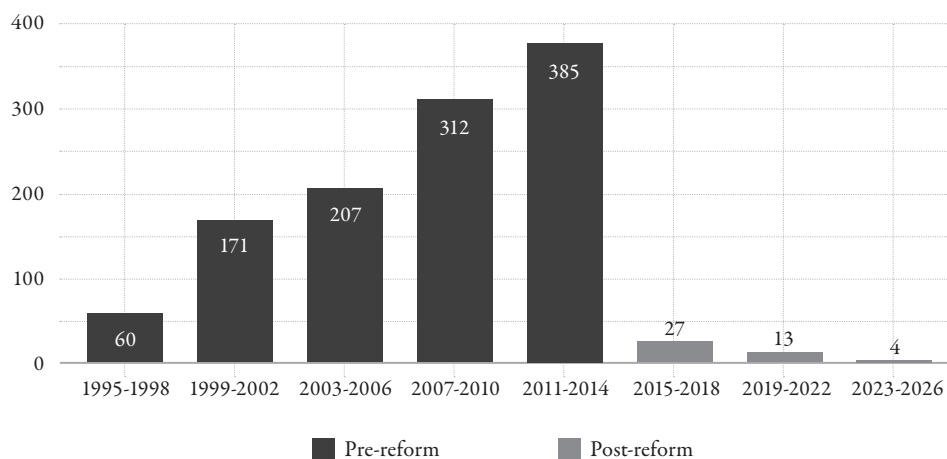
In the “post-reform” period, the configuration of factors associated with recall requests has shifted slightly. While recall referendums continue to be initiated in districts characterized by strong political competition and greater fiscal capacity, the quality of municipal management has emerged as a factor of increasing relevance. Specifically, in municipalities where mayors demonstrate lower levels of budget execution in investment projects, the probability of a recall request increases, although the influence of this variable remains comparatively weaker than that of political competitiveness and municipal income. In other words, following the 2015 reform, the recall mechanism appears to have partially assumed a function of sanctioning deficient municipal administrative performance; however, the presence of robust political competition remains a

necessary condition for its activation.¹⁰ Recent qualitative research corroborates these findings, indicating that while political competition persists as a significant determinant of recall requests in the post-reform context; however, it is frequently accompanied by expressions of social dissatisfaction with municipal governance (PONTE TORREL *ET AL.* 2025a).

The second phase of this analysis examines the correlates associated with municipalities where recall referendums were successfully activated. Undoubtedly, the capacity to start recall processes following the 2015 regulatory reform has been notably constrained. In the 2017 recall referendums (corresponding to the 2015–2018 municipal term), the process was activated in twenty-seven districts; in 2021 (2019–2022 municipal term), in thirteen districts; and in the most recent 2025 cycle, in only four districts.

FIGURE 2

Activated recall referendums at the district level



Source: Own elaboration based on Alva-Mendoza (2025)

¹⁰ These findings partially contradict the results of Holland & Incio (2019), who did not identify a statistically significant effect of budget execution. It is plausible that the present analysis, by incorporating additional subsequent electoral periods, enables the identification of emerging trends in citizen recall petitions.

As in the preceding phase, this analysis employs logistic regression models with recall activation as the dependent variable. This variable takes the value of 1 when a recall request successfully gathered the requisite number of signatures, and 0 when this threshold was not met. In this phase, the universe of analyzed districts is restricted to those where recall kits were procured.

Table 2 reveals two pertinent patterns. First, municipal wealth exhibits a negative association with the probability of recall activation and constitutes the variable with the most substantial effect among those analyzed. This finding can be interpreted as evidence of municipal authorities' capacity to preempt the activation of recall processes. In more prosperous districts, mayors are expected to possess greater resources to undertake short-term investments that mitigate citizen dissatisfaction and, consequently, secure their tenure. This strategic dynamic has persisted unchanged following the regulatory reform. The strategies employed by incumbents to avert recall activation can assume various forms. In some instances, they consist of overt campaigns emphasizing the necessity of governmental continuity, as occurred during the recall attempt against former mayor Susana Villarán (VÁSQUEZ ORUNA 2014). In other cases, more discreet strategies are employed, wherein authorities subject to recall refrain from direct participation. An illustrative example is documented by Ponte Torrel *et al.* (2025b), who describe social media dissemination campaigns designed to discourage signature gathering and recall activation.

TABLE 2

Binary logistic regressions for the activation of recall referendums at the district level

	Dependent Variable:	
	Approval of recall	
	Pre-reform	Post-reform
	(1)	(2)
Expenditure	0.239*** (0.071)	-0.127 (0.158)
Income	-1.453*** (0.296)	-3.201*** (1.052)
Competitiveness	-0.422*** (0.086)	-0.078 (0.196)
Constant	-0.419 (0.352)	-3.265*** (0.842)
Department	✓	✓
Observations	1315	1537
AIC	1576.249	407.900
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Source: Own elaboration based on Alva-Mendoza (2025)

Second, political competitiveness constituted a decisive factor for activating referendums prior to the regulatory change. Since political organizations opposing the incumbent could derive direct electoral benefit from a successful recall, these competitors invested greater resources to promote the referendum process. However, following the elimination of early elections as a consequence of successful recalls, political parties now lack sufficient incentives to invest in achieving recall activation. Within this transformed context, the non-significance of the competitiveness coefficient in the second model stands to reason.

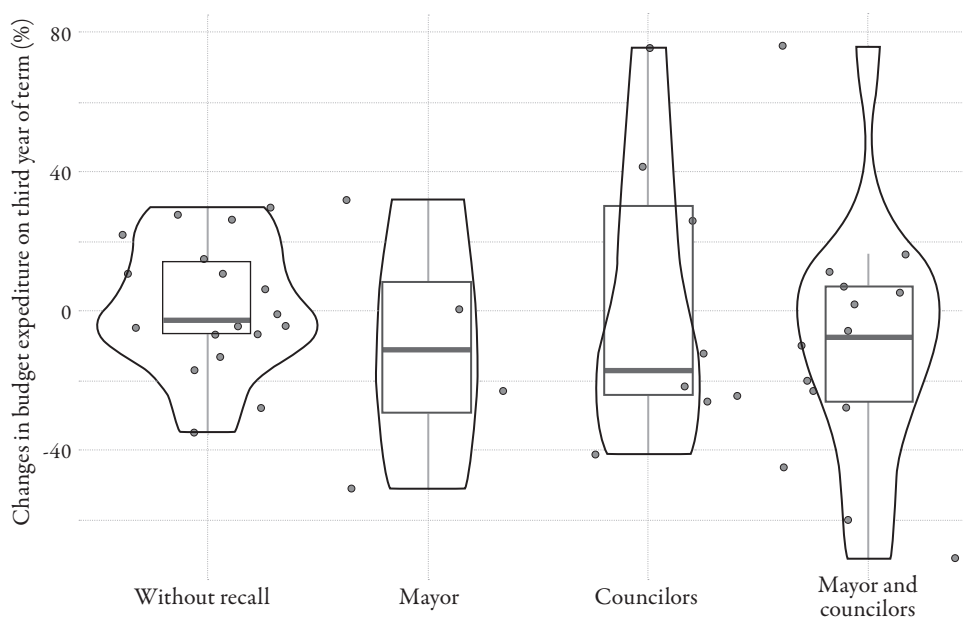
The third phase of the referendum process concerns whether authorities subject to recall are ultimately removed from office. Previous studies have indicated that, prior to the regulatory change, the electorate tended to

sanction authorities demonstrating low levels of budget execution, thereby increasing their probability of being recalled (HOLLAND & INCIO 2019). The limited number of districts where referenda were activated following the 2015 reform (forty-four in total) renders estimation through regression models statistically inefficient.

Accordingly, Figure 3 presents the distribution of changes in budget expenditure from the third year relative to the first year of the municipal term in constituencies subjected to a recall vote. In districts where the recall effort did not succeed, incumbent authorities tended to maintain or increase budget execution, exhibiting an average increase of 1.5%. The violin plot reveals a pronounced concentration of observations around zero. By contrast, in municipalities where the mayor—or the mayor together with councilors—were successfully recalled, budget execution was markedly more deficient, with an average variation of -10%. Moreover, cases are observed in which investment levels diminished by more than 40%.

FIGURE 3

Trends in recall results



Source: Own elaboration based on ONPE (2025) and MEF (2025)

4. CONCLUSIONS

This brief analysis of the changes and continuities in the dynamics of recall referenda targeting municipal authorities in Peru reveals several significant trends. First, the motivations underlying the initiation of recall processes—operationalized through the procurement of recall kits—indicate that political competitiveness and budgetary income remain determining factors. However, following the regulatory reform, the level of investment undertaken by authorities has gained analytical relevance: in municipalities characterized by lower expenditure, the probability of requesting recall kits increases. This finding suggests that recall requests are now conceived not exclusively as mechanisms of “political retaliation” but also as instruments for sanctioning authorities who fail to meet voter expectations.

Second, during the activation phase of the recall process, a confrontation emerges between the capacity of municipal authorities to avoid being subjected to a referendum and the capacity of recall proponents to meet the signatures threshold. In this regard, municipal resources continue to constitute a key factor in preventing referendum activation. The aforementioned qualitative studies have documented that incumbent authorities employ these resources to discourage signature gathering through campaign. The most visible change in this phase pertains to the diminished role of political competitiveness. With the elimination of early elections as a possible outcome of successful recalls, political competitors lack sufficient incentives to invest resources in promoting intensive recall campaigns.

Viewed from another perspective, recall referendums have lost their character as mechanisms for penalizing political organizations and have acquired a predominantly personalized character. A successful recall does not alter the fundamental trajectory of municipal management, as the political organization remains in power. From the standpoint of party competition theory, political parties make strategic decisions based on the existence of clearly articulated demands from the electorate (DOWNS 1957). Political parties are thus essential intermediaries for channeling citizen discontent and proposing alternative models of municipal governance. Given that the institutional

incentives to access power through recall-induced vacancies no longer exist, the capacity of recalls to succeed has been substantially diminished.

Third, the success of recall referendums is contingent upon the capacity of incumbent authorities to manage or rectify the municipality's developmental trajectory. Notwithstanding the institutional incentives that previously propelled the activation of recall referenda in Peruvian municipalities, both pre-reform evidence and post-reform trends suggest that voters ultimately decide on the continuity of their authorities based on assessments of managerial competence. Consequently, the 2015 regulatory reform appears to contravene popular will, as the outcomes of successful recall processes sanction, at most, individual officials rather than the political organizations to which they belong.

It is accurate to observe that at the subnational level, Peruvian politics maintains a highly personalistic character (DOSEK & ALVA MENDOZA 2023). However, this type of reform reinforces this tendency by enabling political organizations, in the aftermath of a recall crisis, to disassociate themselves from the authorities subjected to recall and to compete in subsequent elections without any attribution of responsibility for managerial failures. Furthermore, the persistently low levels of citizen trust in local governments¹¹ underscore the urgent need for reforms that strengthen the institutional linkage between municipal administrations and their electorates.

On the other hand, it is worth noting the absence of a legislative formula that can comprehensively resolve the multifaceted problems of local governance. In this respect, future research and regulatory proposals should delve more deeply into the effects of recall referendums on municipal governance. Understanding the consequences of both successful and unsuccessful recall processes is of vital importance for voters and for the design of more effective accountability mechanisms. Given that the possibility of removing and replacing the political organization in power no longer exists under the current regulatory framework, it becomes necessary to examine how incumbent authorities respond to electorates that sought to recall them. Analyzing how public investment patterns are altered following a recall attempt, or what discursive

11 See, for example, the public opinion surveys of the AmericasBarometer (LAPOP).

and policy positions these organizations subsequently adopt, is essential for improving current legislation. Likewise, studying in greater detail the evolution of municipal management following a change in authorities—whether through recall or ordinary succession—would enable a more comprehensive understanding of the consequences of recall mechanisms in Peru.

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Conflicts of interest:

The author declare no conflicts of interest.

Author contribution:

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