Missing Voters: An Analysis of the Effects on Turnout of the Election Administration Delays in the 2026 Peru First Round Presidential Elections

Democracy Action Lab, CDDRL, Stanford University

May 18, 2026

Stanford
Democracy
Action Lab
Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law

The first round of the 2026 Peruvian election produced a razor thin margin between the second and third placed presidential candidates. Unfortunately, extraordinary delays in the installation of polling sites (*mesas de sufragio*) across Lima has generated suspicion of the electoral results. We causally identify the effect of polling-station opening delays on turnout in affected *mesas*, and estimate a reduction of 3 to 5 percentage points on turnout. Even though this effect is large, it did not impact enough voters to change which candidates will compete in the runoff election on June 7.

Democracy in Action brief series. This brief is part of the Democracy in Action series, which seeks to apply the most cutting edge social scientific methods to problems of democratic practice. For more information on Democracy Action Lab activities, visit `https://cddrl.fsi.stanford.edu/dal`.

Background

Peruvians went to the polls for the first round of general elections on April 12, 2026. However, major logistical failures delayed the opening of polling stations (*mesas*) across Lima, in some cases by more than eight hours. Using 29,229 polling-station records (*actas*) in PDF form to recover opening times, we estimate that at least 817,765 eligible voters were assigned to *mesas* that opened more than three hours late, 69,139 to *mesas* that opened more than eight hours late, and 54,362 to *mesas* that did not open until the following day.[1]

Peruvian democracy now finds itself at an inflection point: the margin between second and third place, with only one advancing to the runoff, is approximately 21,209 votes (0.09%), the narrowest since Peru's return to democracy in 2000. The third-place candidate, Rafael López Aliaga, has contested the results through what we term the **missing voters theory**: the claim that hundreds of thousands of would-be voters showed up at their assigned polling stations, waited for hours as *mesas* failed to open on time, and ultimately left without voting. López Aliaga argues that these missing voters cost him a place in the runoff, estimating that "roughly 600,000 people . . . were prevented from voting through deliberate malice," and has called for the annulment of the election and the imprisonment of the head of National Office of Electoral Processes (ONPE).

Although these delays to polling site installations should never have occurred, our analysis suggests the winners of the first round of the presidential election, based on current ballot counts, are still legitimate. **The electoral errors, albeit leading to a significant decline in turnout and an impact on vote margins between the second and third place candidates, were not enough to overturn electoral results**.

[1] See accompanying technical working paper for full details of the analysis: *Missing Voters? Evidence from Polling Station Delays in the 2026 Peruvian Elections*.

Methods

Estimating the effect of delays in opening polling stations on turnout is not straightforward because stations that open late are not necessarily random events. Our core statistical analysis thus leverages two complementary sources of variation to better approximate "apples-to-apples" comparisons: comparing neighboring polling tables within the same district, and then comparing each voting site against itself across four consecutive elections (2011 to 2026).

We define a polling station as "late" if a *mesa* opened more than three hours after its scheduled opening time of 7am, while also varying this threshold hourly until 2pm. In the previous three elections, almost no *mesa* opened more than three hours late, making it a reasonable cutoff for lateness. We additionally rely on the National Jury of Elections' (JNE) official report identifying *mesas* confirmed to have opened after 2pm as a "ground truth" measure of delayed installations and separately examine *mesas* that opened the following day.

Results

As per Table 1, our core result suggests that those *mesas* that opened after 10am on Sunday experienced a decline in turnout by 3 percentage points. Among those *mesas* where we can confirm an opening time after 2pm, this effect increases to a 5.3 percentage point decline in turnout. Moreover, for those *mesas* that opened a full day late on Monday, we estimate a 5 percentage point decline in turnout.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Panel A: OLS	Dependent variable is Turnout Rate (*Mesa*-Level)							
Late Opening	-0.030***	-0.029***	-0.016**	-0.023**	-0.034***	-0.044***	-0.053*	
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.011)	(0.016)	(0.030)	
ln(Opening Hour)								-0.076***
								(0.012)
Observations	28,796	28,796	28,796	28,796	28,796	28,796	26,217	28,661
Panel B: Fractional Logit								
Late Opening	-0.029***	-0.028***	-0.016**	-0.022***	-0.032***	-0.041***	-0.052*	
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.010)	(0.014)	(0.027)	
ln(Opening Hour)								-0.074***
								(0.012)
Observations	28,800	28,800	28,800	28,800	28,800	28,800	26,221	28,665
Distrito Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Treated Sample	10am+	11am+	12pm+	1pm+	2pm+	JNE	Monday	Non-JNE
Treated *Mesas*	2,750	1,572	657	423	233	135	171	–

Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$. Robust standard errors clustered by voting site in parentheses. Treated sample refers to the definition of the treatment variable. JNE refers to *mesas* observed opening after 2pm by the Jurado Nacional de Elecciones report. Panel A reports OLS estimates. Panel B reports average marginal effects from fractional logit models. Column 7 only uses *mesas* that opened before 10am on Sunday as the control group. Column 8 drops all *mesas* flagged in the Jurado Nacional de Elecciones report given installation times cannot be confirmed before 2pm.

When we "bin" the installation times of *mesas* by hour, we also see an increasing pattern of turnout decline, as shown in Figure 2. However, this is not monotonic: there is a clear rebound for those *mesas* that opened around noon, as lunchtime gave voters a chance to return to the polls, although turnout continues to decline thereafter.

The Dataset Because no official 2026 election database was available during our analysis, we construct our own dataset by scraping the near-universe of available polling-station records (*actas*) across *mesas* in Lima. To compare turnout over time, we additionally collect voting site-level electoral data from presidential elections since 2011.

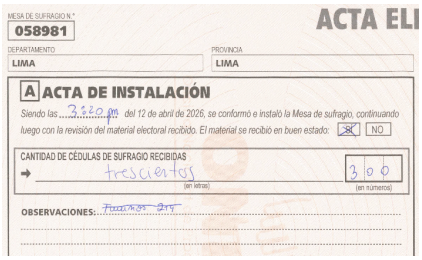

Figure 1: Example of Scanned *Acta*

Methodology We processed over 87,000 scanned *actas* using a state-of-the-art multimodal large language model (Gemini 2.5 Pro via Google Vertex) to recover polling station opening times from both digital and handwritten records, which were then manually verified. We additionally incorporated the JNE's April 16 report identifying *mesas* confirmed to have opened after 2pm. Figure 1 (above) provides an example of the scan.

Table 1: Effect of Late Opening on Turnout

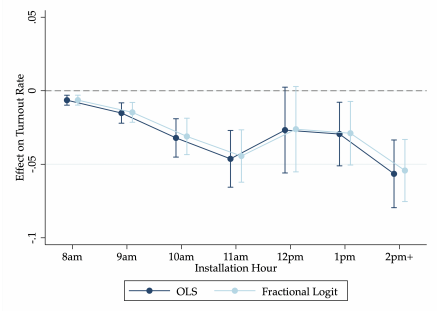

Figure 2: Binned Estimates of *Mesa* Opening Hour on Turnout. These estimated effects are relative to a "base" opening time of 7:00-7:59am.

To show the impact of the delays relative to historical turnout rates, Figure 3 plots the results from an "event study," focusing on those voting sites that comprise any *mesa* that opened after 10am on Sunday. There is an evident drop in turnout for the delayed *mesas* of 2026, with no differential trends in turnout over the last three prior elections.

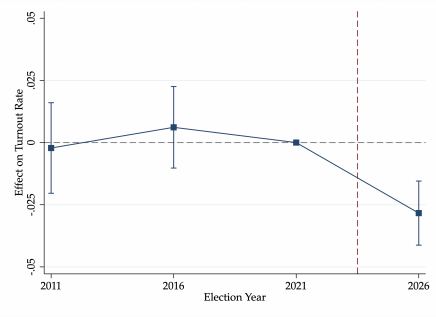

Figure 3: Event Study Results for 10am+ Openers. Analysis is at the voting site level.

Estimating the "Missing Voters"

The key question emerging from the analysis is: exactly how many foregone votes resulted from the installation delays at voting stations? Using our estimates of turnout loss, we perform back-of-the-envelope calculations to quantify these "missing voters." In Table 2, we estimate an overall loss of votes approximating 27,000 voters. This estimate combines the effects from voting stations opening after 10am on Sunday, in addition to the loss in turnout for Monday-openers.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A: OLS (Dummy)	$\widehat{\beta}$	Exposure-Weighted Registered Voters	$\Delta\widehat{\text{Votes}}$	95% Confidence Interval for $\Delta\widehat{\text{Votes}}$
10am+	-0.030	817,765	-24,161	[-34,609, -13,714]
2pm+ (JNE)	-0.044	40,010	-1,746	[-2,999, -493]
Voted Monday	-0.053	50,776	-2,710	[-5,689, 268]
10am+ and Voted Monday	–	868,541	-26,872	[-39,506, -16,774]
Panel B: TWFE (Fraction)				
10am+	-0.030	818,174	-24,329	[-37,724, -10,934]
2pm+ (JNE)	-0.065	40,608	-2,630	[-3,964, -1,297]
Voted Monday	-0.069	51,376	-3,566	[-5,591, -1,541]
10am+ and Voted Monday	–	869,550	-27,895	[-41,929, -12,855]

Note: exposure-weighted registered voters refers to total registered voters among delayed polling tables or voting sites. Panel A reports OLS estimates. Panel B reports TWFE estimates using the continuous fraction of *mesas* that opened late within a site (Voted Monday is included here as it is effectively a 100% fraction). Combined 10am+ and Voted Monday sum the predicted foregone votes cast from the two constituent estimates, with uncertainty computed using a site-cluster bootstrap.

Table 2: Estimates of Missing Voters from Delayed Openings

We then estimate how these foregone votes would have been distributed between the second- and third-place candidates. Because the observed López Aliaga–Sanchez margin was itself affected by the delays, we construct a *counterfactual* using vote shares from untreated *mesas* within the same district, or the nearest untreated district when necessary. In Figure 4, combining turnout losses from both 10am+ Sunday-openers and Monday-openers, we estimate that López Aliaga lost approximately 5,691 votes relative to Sanchez – comfortably below the roughly 21,209-vote gap separating the candidates.

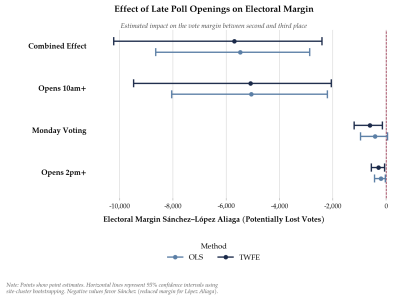

Figure 4: Estimated Potential Change in Electoral Margin from Delayed Openings

Conclusion

By tracking the first round of the Peruvian 2026 presidential election in real time through state-of-the-art LLMs combined with techniques in causal inference, our analysis reveals a strong decline in turnout, albeit not large enough to overturn electoral results.

Acknowledgments: This brief was prepared collaboratively by the Democracy Action Lab team, with special contributions by Christopher Dann and Marcelo Peña.