I am a second-generation Mexican American. People like me are not usually expected to write books. The fact that I have is less a manifestation of personal ability and more a testament to numerous individuals who have bothered enough to invest in me and my manuscript. This is public acknowledgment of those debts.

The book in your hands is the borne fruit of a kernel of an idea that was my dissertation at Duke University. During that time, I was fortunate enough to fall under the steady hand of Paula McClain, my thesis advisor. To this day, I still do not know why Paula deemed me or my ideas worthy of her time. But she did. And she furnished me with the intellectual space and self-confidence that I needed to complete my work. Complementing Paula’s efforts were those of John Aldrich, Kerry Haynie, and Vince Hutchings, who also served on my dissertation committee. John played a vital role, enabling me to test my ideas by funding subject payment for the experiment that formed my project’s core. Kerry helped me to lay the theoretical groundwork for my project by leading a directed readings course early in my graduate career. And Vince, he furnished me with candid and constructive feedback that allowed me to eventually build on my dissertation once I started my first job. I am deeply grateful for each of these acts of kindness.

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Vanderbilt political science has increasingly gained a reputation for having a collegial and vibrant department culture, of which this book is a prime beneficiary. This reputation is a function of the department’s people, individuals who ask penetrating questions, encourage novel thinking, and hold their colleagues to a higher standard. During the time I was writing this book, those specific people were Larry Bartels, Joshua Clinton, Dave Lewis, Kristin Michelitch, Cecilia Mo, Emily Nacol, Bruce Oppenheimer, Zeynep Somer-Topcu, and Alan Wiseman. My book has profited an incalculable amount from the intellectual examples these individuals have set for me.

As a first-time author, the path from esoteric dissertation to audience-friendly book has been, at times, quite rough and bumpy. For helping me get through some of this turbulence, I thank Jane Junn, Don Kinder, Taeku Lee, and Nick Valentino, who generously gave of their time and expertise as participants in a book colloquium that Vanderbilt hosted on my behalf. Besides raising trenchant objections about some of the book’s argument and evidence, they also provided guidance and injected nuance into my thinking about the book’s main ideas. It is up to them to judge how well I integrated their feedback. But I can say with certainty that the book before you is orders better than it would have been without their help. I also thank my editors at Cambridge University Press – Lew Bateman, Dennis Chong, and Jim Kuklinski – for giving my book a shot and for pushing me to improve its content with each round of revisions.

Outside the halls of academia, I have also had the fortune of having good people to provide me with solace when the writing took an unexpected turn, and to help me celebrate when it actually went as hoped for. My wife, Tammy, and my sons, Efrén III and Emiliano, have done the most here. Writing a book while raising two boys and nurturing a marriage is no easy feat. But without their presence in my life, I don’t know that this book would have as much meaning for me. So I thank each of them for being a part of my life and for filling me with joy each day. I also thank Samuel, Nancy, Isabel, and Samantha...
Nieves – all friends who have treated my family like their own. Living in the South has not been easy for us Californians, but the Nieves family has taught me to let slide some of those challenges, while appreciating some of the benefits about being here, including the opportunity to write a book. I also thank Amada Armenta and Natalie Masuoka for being such generous colleagues and wonderful friends to Tammy.

I am also grateful for my sisters, Jennifer and Gabriela P´erez, and my cousins, Carlos Covarrubias and Gustavo P´erez. The former two have been, since my youth, unfaltering cheerleaders of any and all of my endeavors. They have also taught me what it means to have unconditional love for someone. I often thought of them during the lowest points in writing this book. As for the latter two, they have been my best of friends, regularly checking up on me and this project from afar. More importantly, they always made sure that when I was back home in L.A., I created enough distance from the book so that I could better appreciate what it was really all about. When frustration with the book would set in, I often fell back on the great times we shared.

My deepest thanks, however, I reserve for my parents, Efr´en and Maricela P´erez. My folks were children of the earth, both from families who lived from what they could sow in lands near El Grullo, Jalisco, M´exico. Theirs was a typical but precarious existence. They grew up poor and without any expectation that they would live more comfortably than those before them. But my mom and dad took the risk to change things for themselves by immigrating to the United States. It is never lost on me that my parents’ kind of life could have easily been mine, too: back-breaking work, minimal education, and only the bare minimum to eat. But for reasons that I still don’t understand, they chose to break that cycle by sheltering my sisters and me from hard labor, sending us to Catholic school and expecting nothing less than a college education from each of us. And most of this, I hasten to add, against the criticisms of many of their peers, who thought that finishing high school was more than enough for children like us; that a teenage son should focus more on paid work, rather than his studies; and that going to college was something that only wealthy Americans do.

I am the product of my parent’s courage. This book would have been impossible without their inspiration. Indeed, there were many days when I would have rather quit this undertaking, but their memory helped me not to. I hope they are as proud of this book as I am proud of them. I also wish to say that I regret very much not living as close to them as I would have liked these last few years – similar to them, work has taken me far from those I love. But despite this distance, they should know that I take comfort each day in three lessons they taught me as good immigrants: that there is dignity in a hard day’s work; that one should never forget where one comes from; and that sometimes a good job is not where home is. For these and so many other reasons, I dedicate this book to both of them.