
Migrants, Remittances, and Politics: Loyalty and Voice after Exit¹

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Eager to be politically engaged in their country of origin, a group of Mexican migrant leaders from Chicago traveled to Mexico City in April 2010 for two sets of meetings. On the first day, they met with federal legislators to lobby for institutional and policy changes that would result in more effective outreach by the Mexican government to Mexicans living in the United States. Over the next two days, they participated in a workshop with Mexican government officials and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to discuss how they might better manage and monitor hometown projects they co-finance with the Mexican government.

The migrant leaders had very different experiences at these two events. In their congressional meetings, they found legislators to be largely uninterested in or resistant to their concerns—a stance they attributed to the disappointing turn-out by migrant voters in Mexico's hotly contested 2006 elections and the migrants' refusal to adhere to Mexico's norm of deference to authority. At the workshop, by contrast, they were warmly received by officials from the Ministry of Public Oversight (SFP) and the Institute of Access to Public Information (IFAI), institutions tasked with setting and

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enforcing new standards of governance in Mexico's public administration. Eager to learn more about how the country's freedom of information laws might enhance their capacity to hold local officials accountable, they organized a follow-up session with IFAI officials in Chicago.²

This anecdote offers a glimpse into a phenomenon that is only beginning to receive systematic attention in the scholarly literature: the growing—and exceedingly complex—influence that migrants from the developing world are exerting, intentionally or not, on politics in their home countries. Such influence is not new, but it has arguably become broader and deeper in the wake of a convergence between out-migration and democratization in many developing countries. With ten percent of its population living in the United States,³ Mexico is at the forefront of this trend, but it is by no means alone. Migrants from new democracies as diverse as the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Philippines, Lebanon, Cape Verde, and Mali are influencing electoral politics, non-electoral civic engagement, or patterns of governance back home. This article discusses how this trend has been reinforced by a fundamental restructuring of the global political economy and suggests an analytical framework for understanding the nature and mechanisms of migrant influence on the quality of democracy back home.

MIGRATION AND DEMOCRACY IN THE NEW GLOBAL ECONOMY

Between 1970 and 2010, the estimated number of international migrants more than doubled from 81 million to 215 million.⁴ Although this increase has not altered the share of people living outside their countries of origin, which has remained relatively stable at about three percent since 1960,⁵ it has profoundly affected the relationship between developed and developing countries. In contrast to earlier periods of high migration, the vast majority of today's migrants are from the global South, and the fastest-growing flow is from South to North (although South-South flows are also significant).⁶ Between 1960 and 2010, the share of international migrants living in OECD countries increased from 37 percent to 56 percent.⁷ By 2009, about 80 percent of all migrants were from developing countries, and their remittances totaled over \$300 billion, dwarfing both official development assistance (\$120 billion)

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and portfolio investment (\$85 billion) and nearly overtaking foreign direct investment (\$359 billion).⁸

During this same period, many developing countries joined the “third wave” of democratization,⁹ which began in southern Europe in the mid-1970s and spread to Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe over the next few decades. From 1975 to 2010, over one-third of the 144 countries classified by the World Bank as lower- or middle-income had experienced transitions from authoritarian to democratic rule.¹⁰ Although a few of these transitions did not last, most new democracies survived—even in the face of economic dislocation and/or political crises. Nonetheless, they continue to struggle with democratic deepening, which requires moving beyond formal guarantees of contestation and participation¹¹ to establish effective and equitable mechanisms of representation, accountability, and rule of law.¹²

Reinforcing both of these shifts was a fundamental restructuring of the global political economy, particularly the unraveling of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates and capital controls (which contributed to high capital mobility and volatile financial markets), the emergence of more heterogeneous and flexible labor markets, and the adoption by many governments of more market-driven, outward-oriented policies. Millions of people from developing countries migrated North to fill jobs created, at least in part, by the expansion in subcontracting, non-union employment, and the service sector.¹³ At the same time, the remittances generated by these migrants became a key source of foreign exchange for governments that now relied more heavily on external sources of development financing. Increased integration into global markets also exposed a broader segment of developing societies to Western consumerism and popular culture, which may have increased their inclination to migrate in search of a higher standard of living.¹⁴ Finally, heightened dependence on global trade and finance raised the costs of maintaining authoritarian rule, particularly in countries lacking huge markets or abundant natural resources, while integration into global markets enabled authoritarian elites to diversify away from repressive agriculture¹⁵ and contributed to the diffusion of global norms in favor of democracy.¹⁶

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Global economic restructuring also exposed developing countries to recurrent economic dislocation, which spurred increased out-migration.¹⁷ For example, in Mexico, out-migration accelerated and diversified in the 1990s as living standards there declined, the state ceased providing credit and subsidies to small farmers, and regional income and growth shifted away from Mexico City toward the country's northern border.¹⁸ Likewise, in Ecuador, a deep economic crisis in the late 1990s sparked a sudden and significant increase in international migration across gender, region, and social class.¹⁹ Similar shifts are evident across Latin America and other regions of the global South. Although such dislocation can pose a serious challenge to new democracies—in some cases prompting authoritarian reversals—it has also contributed to democratic transitions by discrediting authoritarian leaders and/or encouraging military rulers to return to the barracks.

Heterogeneity, volatility, and informality of labor markets also increased as a result of global economic restructuring, particularly in developing nations. Although these countries always had relatively large informal sectors, the share of “black market” workers grew significantly after 1980.²⁰ Meanwhile, the job opportunities and social safety nets once available to workers in the formal sector shrank even further. In addition, urban labor markets became increasingly incapable of absorbing displaced rural workers.²¹ In response, international migration became a survival strategy for growing numbers of households, with remittances helping to smooth income and provide social insurance.²² At the same time, the fragmentation of labor markets and declining power of unions created additional obstacles to class-based collective action, which, paradoxically, made democratic politics less threatening to economic elites.²³

These global shifts are by no means the only drivers of South-North migration or democratization since the mid-1970s, nor have they affected all developing countries to the same degree or in the same ways. Nonetheless, the convergence of out-migration and democratization in many developing countries is shaping politics in ways that scholars are just starting to explore. The remainder of this article examines the mechanisms by which migrants may be affecting the quality of democracy in high-migration countries faced with the dual challenge of establishing democratic institutions and overcoming economic under-development.

LOYALTY AND VOICE AFTER EXIT

In a 1978 article, Hirschman posits a relationship between migration and democracy based on the idea of a political safety-valve: “With exit

available as an outlet for the disaffected, they were less likely to resort to voice,²⁴ thereby making it safer for elites to open up the political system to those who stayed behind.²⁵ His metaphors of exit and voice come from an earlier work in which he conceptualizes them as alternative responses by customers of a brand or members of an organization to a decline in the quality of the goods or services they are receiving. Exit occurs when they abandon their relationship with the brand or organization altogether. Voice occurs when they make “any attempt to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs.”²⁶ A third option, which Hirschman does not specify, is “silent non-exit.”²⁷ Loyalty increases an individual’s propensity to choose voice (or silence) over exit because of stronger affective ties to and/or trust in the brand or organization.²⁸ In the absence of loyalty, exit is the default option because it is less costly than voice, which may require collective action, have longer time horizons, and/or invite retribution. In addition, exit and voice are viewed as mutually exclusive options, which means that voice will be dampened in a collectivity with high levels of exit.²⁹

When applied to relations between citizens and the state, exit can be defined as “disengagement or retreat from the state by disaffected segments of the citizenry.”³⁰ Although emigration is the most dramatic form of exit from the state, it can also take the form of participation in black markets, voluntary self-help organizations, alternative judicial systems, or other parallel institutions that carry out functions usually performed and/or regulated by the state.³¹ As Hirschman points out, a state’s inability or unwillingness to supply public goods, including social justice and political liberty, is likely to decrease loyalty and thereby encourage exit,³² particularly when exercising voice is difficult.³³ In the case of emigration, however, the cost of exit may rival the cost of voice, not only because of the social dislocation associated with leaving one’s family and community but also because the sending and/or receiving states place legal restrictions on labor mobility. If both emigration and voice are prohibitively costly, disaffected citizens are likely to choose either internal forms of exit from the state or silence.³⁴

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Since Hirschman first proposed his safety-valve thesis, he and others have modified their understanding of the relationship between exit, voice, and loyalty as applied to migration and democracy. First, exit does not always make countries safe for democracy. To the contrary, authoritarian

rulers in countries such as Cuba, Mexico, Morocco, the Philippines, and Zimbabwe have encouraged or at least tolerated exit as a way to relieve pressure on their regimes,³⁵ thereby postponing rather than facilitating democratization. Second, the assumption that voice and exit are mutually exclusive does not appear to hold under conditions of mass exodus from highly repressive regimes. After the fall of the Berlin Wall helped topple East Germany's Communist regime, Hirschman acknowledged that out-migration might unleash voice rather than undermine it.³⁶

Finally, there is ample evidence that migrants remain loyal to their communities of origin and sometimes exercise voice *after* exit,³⁷ a possibility that Hirschman did not consider. Beyond posing an additional challenge to the assumption that exit and voice are mutually exclusive, this outcome suggests the need to rethink the nature and role of loyalty when applying Hirschman's framework to international migration. In contrast to exit from a brand or an organization, exit in the form of migration takes place across multiple scales ranging from the household to the state. While the choice to emigrate instead of staying home may reflect a loss of faith in the state, it does not necessarily connote a lack of loyalty toward the migrant's relatives or place of origin.

The clearest expression of loyalty after exit is the billions of dollars that migrants remit back to their families. Migrants also send "collective remittances" in the form of emergency assistance and investment in public goods in their communities of origin. These bonds of loyalty, which

..... are often complemented by regular communication with family members and other local residents, are likely to give migrants a vested interest in local conditions and thereby increase their propensity to exercise voice after exit. Moreover, the financial, human, and social capital they accrue as a result of exit "may well enhance their voice in the country of origin,"³⁸ thereby creating additional incentives to complement loyalty with voice. Thus, once a migrant has chosen exit, loyalty's positive effect on voice is likely to be restored through the migrant's continued stake in conditions back home and greater leverage to change them.

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There are several channels through which migrants can exercise voice after exit.³⁹ First, they can lobby family members, community leaders, or

public officials to support particular candidates, political parties, initiatives, or policies. Second, they can make financial contributions to political campaigns or causes. Third, they can mobilize for and/or exercise diaspora political rights, most commonly in the form of expatriate voting and migrant representation in local legislatures. Finally, they can use collective remittances as leverage to induce local governments to invest in public goods and/or alter their styles of governance.

Particularly given the convergence of increased South-North migration and democratization, migrants from the global South are likely to be reshaping politics back home through their exercise of post-exit loyalty and voice. But are they acting as agents of democratic deepening in their countries of origin? If so, by what mechanisms and under which conditions? If not, are they having a negative impact or are they merely irrelevant?

ARE MIGRANTS AGENTS OF DEMOCRATIC DEEPENING?

The first step toward answering these questions is to specify the countries in which migrants are likely to have any meaningful impact, positive or negative, on the practice of politics. Some new democracies are likely to be more susceptible to migrant influence than others. Among the key determinants are (1) the absolute and relative importance of emigration and remittances for the country's political economy; (2) the propensity of migrants to remain connected to their homeland; and (3) the points of access available to them to exercise voice after exit. All three factors are partially determined by the socio-economic profile of the migrants. Although beyond the scope of this article, I argue elsewhere that male migrants who are partially but not fully integrated into their host countries are the most likely to remain engaged with their countries of origin, particularly if their remittances are sufficiently large to increase their prestige and bargaining power back home.⁴⁰ At the same time, well-educated migrants are more likely to have access to policymakers, particularly if they represent a significant share of the country's university-educated population and/or their home government has created institutions dedicated to migrant outreach.

Based on aggregate data across forty-one new democracies, I find that the new democracies most likely to be influenced by post-exit loyalty and/or voice are Mexico and the Dominican Republic, followed by El Salvador and Lebanon. Other high-scoring countries are Albania, Cape Verde, Ecuador, Guatemala, Guyana, Kenya, Liberia, Macedonia, Mali, the Philippines, and Senegal. Even among these countries, however, the nature and scope

of migrant influence varies considerably. For example, in countries such as Albania, Guatemala, and Macedonia—which have high migration intensity but poorly integrated migrants and weak migrant outreach—migrant influence tends to be diffuse, indirect (through remittances), and difficult to measure. Moreover, the impact of migrant outreach depends not only on the type of institutions and policies adopted by the home government but also on whether migrants gain influence at the subnational level back home, particularly if they are working-class migrants from larger countries such as Mexico.

Just because migrants influence politics back home does not mean that they have a positive impact on democracy, which brings us to the second step in the analysis. To assess the implications of migrant engagement for democratic deepening, we need to unpack the mechanisms by which they exercise post-exit loyalty and voice. These mechanisms can

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..... Indirect mechanisms are triggered by loyalty in the form of economic and social remittances, which Levitt defines as “the ideas, behaviors, and social capital that flow from receiving

to sending communities.”⁴¹ Both kinds of remittances have the potential to reshape non-migrant attitudes and behavior, with ambiguous implications for democratic deepening. In the case of economic remittances, recipients may become less inclined to exercise voice because they no longer rely on local politicians to provide basic necessities or public goods. In other words, remittances may dampen voice by facilitating internal exit from the state. By the same token, recipients may become less dependent on clientelist exchanges with local powerbrokers, which would lower the costs of voice and thereby encourage them to demand more democratic leaders and practices. In the case of social remittances, their impact is likely to depend not only on the content, durability, and transmission mechanisms of the newly acquired values, but also on the receptivity of non-migrants and the local opportunity structures in which they are embedded.⁴² Even if migrants are communicating democratic values or expectations, their family and friends may react with cynicism and resignation rather than voice if they do not feel sufficiently empowered to change political practices or punish corrupt leaders.

Emerging literature examines the impact of economic and social remit-

tances on voter turnout, attitudes about democracy, non-electoral political activities, membership in civic organizations, partisanship, and accountability.⁴³ While several studies find that being part of a migrant household or high-migration community weakens voter turn-out and increases political cynicism among non-migrants, as well as having mixed effects on accountability, the results are more encouraging with regard to non-electoral forms of participation, particularly membership in civic associations.

These indirect mechanisms of influence do not constitute voice after exit unless migrants intentionally use financial or social remittances to influence politics back home.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, sustained loyalty to migrants' communities of origin increases their propensity and opportunity to complement loyalty with voice by engaging in direct mechanisms of influence from abroad. As mentioned above, these mechanisms can include participation in electoral politics (through party activism or absentee voting) or in non-electoral forms of engagement (such as issue-based lobbying or public-private partnerships to finance public goods). As with indirect mechanisms of influence, voice after exit can have varied consequences for the quality of democracy. Migrants may weaken democracy by crowding out domestic claims to representation, supporting leaders or policies that perpetuate corrupt and/or exclusionary practices, or exacerbating ethnic, religious, or partisan cleavages. Alternatively, they may strengthen democracy by encouraging electoral competition, expanding the political franchise, empowering local residents to demand their rights, and holding politicians accountable in their

communities of origin. Which mechanisms they choose—and the implications for democratic deepening—will depend on the interaction between the socio-economic profile of the migrants and the institutional terrain in their home countries, particularly the political party system, the nature and prevalence of social cleavages, and legacies of state-society relations.

Migration is not the most important determinant of the quality of democracy in developing countries.

Most migrants never become actively engaged in politics back home. Moreover, the extent and nature of their involvement are profoundly shaped by the contexts of both exit and reception. Thus, the statement that

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“all politics is local” still holds in many ways. Nonetheless, the convergence of South-North migration and democratization has increased the incentives and opportunities for migrants to exercise loyalty and voice after exit. Given their vast numbers—and the billions of dollars they send back to their communities of origin—even a small increase in migrant engagement in politics back home is likely to make a difference, particularly at the local level. It is therefore imperative for scholars and policymakers to understand the implications of this phenomenon for democratic governance in developing countries. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 This article is an adaptation of the first chapter of a forthcoming book manuscript entitled *Loyalty and Voice after Exit: Migration and Politics in New Democracies*. I am grateful for the excellent comments I received on an earlier draft from Joy Langston and the other participants in the workshop on Politics and Migration in Out-Migration Countries held at CIDE in Mexico City, 23 September 2011.
- 2 This narrative is based on the author's conversations with several of the migrant leaders, as well as participation in the workshop. Mexico City, 13-14 April 2010.
- 3 Clarisa Pérez-Armendáriz and David Crow, “Do Migrants Remit Democracy? International Migration, Political Beliefs, and Behavior in Mexico,” *Comparative Political Studies* 43(1) (2010): 119 -148.
- 4 Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 4th ed. (New York: Palgrave USA, 2009), 5; World Bank, *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2011* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2011).
- 5 United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2009: Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 2.
- 6 Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 4th ed. (New York: Palgrave USA, 2009), 50; Devesh Kapur, *Diaspora, Development, and Democracy: The Domestic Impact of International Migration from India*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Ronald Skeldon, “International Migration as a Tool in Development Policy: A Passing Phase?” *Population and Development Review* 34(1) (2008): 1-18. In the World Bank's classification, “South” refers to low- and middle-income countries (including a few located in northern latitudes) and “North” includes both OECD and non-OECD high-income countries (including a few located in southern latitudes).
- 7 United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2009: Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development*, 30.
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- 18 Katrina Burgess, "Neoliberal Reform and Migrant Remittances: Symptom or Solution?," in John Burdick, Philip Oxhorn, and Kenneth M. Roberts, eds., *Beyond Neoliberalism in Latin America?: Societies and Politics at the Crossroads* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
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- 23 Kenneth M. Roberts, *Deepening Democracy? The Modern Left and Social Movements in Chile and Peru* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Kurt Gerhard Weyland, "Neoliberalism and Democracy in Latin America: A Mixed Record," *Latin American Politics & Society* 46 (1) (2004): 135-157.
- 24 Albert O. Hirschman, "Exit, Voice, and the Fate of the German Democratic Republic: An Essay in Conceptual History," *World Politics* 45 (2) (1993): 102.

- 25 Elsewhere, Hirschman acknowledges the influence of the so-called “Turner thesis” that attributed the lack of a radical left in the United States to the possibility of moving to the western frontier. See Bert Hoffman, “Bringing Hirschman Back In: ‘Exit’, ‘Voice’, and ‘Loyalty’ in the Politics of Transnational Migration,” *The Latin Americanist* 54 (2) (2010): 63.
- 26 Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice And Loyalty: Responses To Decline In Firms, Organizations, And States*, (Cambridge: Harvard College, 1970), 30.
- 27 Brian Barry, “Review Article: Exit, Voice, and Loyalty,” *British Journal of Political Science* 4 (01) (1974): 79-107.
- 28 Loyalty is often misconstrued as an alternative to voice and exit, rather than an intervening variable that affects the threshold between them. Silence can be the result of either loyalty or intimidation.
- 29 Although Hirschman considers voice and exit to be mutually exclusive under most circumstances, he recognizes one exception: in the case of public goods, “the alternative is ... not so much between voice and exit as between voice from within and voice from without (after exit)” because the only way to exit is “to leave the community by which they are provided.” Hirschman *Exit, Voice And Loyalty: Responses To Decline In Firms, Organizations, And States*, 104, 101.
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- 31 Robert H. Bates, *Markets and States in Tropical Africa: the Political Basis of Agricultural Policies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Osaghae, 1999.
- 32 Albert O. Hirschman, “Exit, Voice, and the State.” *World Politics* 31(1): 90-107, 105-106.
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- 36 Hirschman, “Exit, Voice, and the Fate of the German Democratic Republic: An Essay in Conceptual History;” and Kapur, *Diaspora, Development, and Democracy: The Domestic Impact of International Migration from India*. Pfaff and Kim make a similar argument about East Germany, but they find that the “signaling effects” of exit, whereby high levels of out-migration undermine regime legitimacy, are overwhelmed by the “network erosion effects” when exit exceeds a certain threshold. Steven Pfaff and Hyojoung Kim, “Exit-Voice Dynamics in Collective Action: An Analysis of Emigration and Protest in the East German Revolution,” *American Journal of Sociology* 109 (2) (2003): 294.
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- DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2010, <www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/diasporas-advocacy.pdf>; and Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow, "Do Migrants Remit Democracy? International Migration, Political Beliefs, and Behavior in Mexico."
- 38 Kapur, *Diaspora, Development, and Democracy: The Domestic Impact of International Migration from India*, 32; and Jürgen Rüländ, Christl Kessler and Stefan Rother, "Democratisation Through International Migration? Explorative Thoughts on a Novel Research Agenda," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 8 (2) (2009): 161-179.
- 39 Newland, *Voice After Exit: Diaspora Advocacy*.
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- 44 For an intriguing, cross-national study of the use of remittances to shape electoral outcomes back home, see Angela O'Mahoney, "Political Investment: Remittances and Elections" (paper presented at the American Political Science Association meeting, Toronto, Ontario, September 3-6, 2009).