

ST5 Sociologie du vote à distance

Anastasia Bermudez

Université de Liège, Centre d'Etudes de l'Ethnicité et des Migration

abermudez@ulg.ac.be

Jean-Michel Lafleur

Université de Liège, Centre d'Etudes de l'Ethnicité et des Migrations

jm.lafleur@ulg.ac.be

Diaspora Contributions to Democratic Processes at Home: The External Vote of Andean Migrants

Introduction

This paper focuses on the external vote and wider transnational political participation of Andean migrants from Colombia and Bolivia. Its main aim is to discuss the contributions of these diasporas to democratic and wider political processes in the home countries. The two cases considered offer a good opportunity to do so, since in the last few decades they have put forward new mechanisms for the political inclusion of their nationals abroad, but in different historical, socioeconomic and political contexts. Key amongst these initiatives has been the extension of voting rights to nationals abroad. One of the objectives is thus to compare the different reasons and mechanisms used by states to implement external voting policies, as well as migrant participation in elections.

Migrants from the three countries have participated to a lesser or greater degree in the development of such policies and the practice of voting from abroad. A comparison of their participation rates in each case and the reasons for voting or not might allow us to find out more about the success or failure of such processes. Equally, different governments, parties and other state and political institutions in the home countries have related differently to the diasporas, often based on the supposed political allegiances or ideological inclinations of these groups. Based on all this, the two national communities abroad studied have played different roles in key recent political processes in their home countries, such as the emergence of an ethno-nationalist-left government in Bolivia, and efforts for greater democracy and the end of the armed conflict in Colombia.

This paper is based on quantitative and qualitative data, as well as secondary information, obtained by the authors through different research projects carried out over the last few years with migrants from the two countries studied. The text looks next at the theoretical framework for the research, before analysing in detail the two cases considered. The last develops a comparative discussion and presents concluding perspectives.

Diasporic policies, external voting and migrant contributions to homeland democratic processes

For several decades, a large body of historical and political science literature has looked at the role of citizens residing abroad in homeland political processes. In Europe and North America, scholars have however looked at this research object from different angles (Martiniello and Lafleur, 2008). In the United States in particular, the literature on ethnic lobbying has looked at how diasporas use destination country institutions to support or oppose the regime in place in their homeland (Shain, 1994, Shain, 1999, Smith, 2000). Research on diasporas more generally has also focused on the political connections dispersed national or ethnic groups maintain among themselves and with the home countries (Sheffer 2003, 1986). In Europe, scholars paid historically more attention to the political participation of immigrants in the destination country political arena. With the introduction of the concept of immigrant transnationalism, European scholars however have increasingly looked at the political connections of immigrants with the countries of origin (Waterbury, 2006, Østergaard-Nielsen, 2001, Lacroix, 2005, Escriva *et al.*, 2009).

Such work has helped focus greater attention on the transnational politics of migrants, as well as the diasporic policies developed by home states. Although as Gamlen (2009, 2008) argues traditionally the emphasis has been on immigration, with time there has been growing awareness of the importance of emigration policies and the 'emigration state' (see also De Haas and Vezzoli 2011; Moraes et al. 2009). It is within this framework that the extension of formal political rights, such as the right to vote in home country elections, to nationals abroad has to be understood (Bauböck 2007).

As a result, more recently, a new line of research has developed both in Europe and North America on the right of citizens residing abroad to vote in home country elections (i.e. external voting). Much of the literature on the topic so far has focused on two research questions. First, researchers have looked at the processes that lead sending states to enfranchise citizens abroad and why an increasing number of states have taken this path in the past two decades (IDEA and IFE, 2007, Bauböck, 2007, Rhodes and Harutyunyan, 2010, Lafleur, 2011, Lafleur, 2013, Collyer, 2014, Turcu, forthcoming). Doing so they identified a set of variables that explain state behaviour and in particular the dependence on emigrant remittances, the anticipation of electoral benefits by some political parties, democratization processes and the influence of neighbouring state policies. Second, more research has even been conducted to understand the meaning of electoral participation for emigrant voters and their impact on home country electoral processes (Smith, 2008, Battiston and Mascitelli, 2008, Itzigsohn and Villacrés, 2008, Boccagni, 2011, Lafleur and Sánchez-Domínguez, 2014; McIlwaine and Bermudez 2015).

As the literature on external voting is growing, we find that an essential question related to the extension of political rights to nationals abroad has surprisingly been left aside by researchers: What is the contribution of emigrant voters to processes of democratisation at home? Indeed, beyond the mere additional votes that can be gained abroad (which can sometimes prove of crucial importance, as shown in Romania and Italy in recent years; this is especially the case at the regional or local levels), the consequences of external voting on homeland democratic regimes remains unclear. A

key argument for supporters of external voting is to present their inclusion in the electorate as an indispensable step in their homeland's greater democratisation. In this paper, we therefore wish to question this assumption by looking at sending states' diasporic policies and external voting laws, as well as the transnational politics of migrants abroad. Do high or low levels of external voter turnout affect homeland democratic systems? Do migrant transnational politics contribute in this or other ways to processes of democratisation? And if not, what would be the arguments for pursuing such a policy as the external vote, given its large costs? In the following sections, we will find elements of responses to these questions by examining through two case studies the contribution of Andean diasporas to homeland political processes after external voting laws have been implemented.

The two cases chosen offer an interesting comparison because they provide different contexts in terms of when and why the external vote was approved, the mechanisms put forward to exercise it, as well as rates of voter turnout. In addition, the historic political contexts differ greatly. The Colombian case, as explained below, is mostly a case of top-down diasporic policies, as explained below, partly related to processes of strengthening democracy but also of overcoming high levels of political and other types of violence. In Bolivia, a more bottom process took place: demands for diaspora policies were born among transnational social movements and were only answered when the leader of this movement —Evo Morales— gained power. The development of international migration flows, and the activism of migrants abroad, in these two cases also show differences, as well as some similarities. In conclusion of the paper, we conclude by stressing the difference between Colombia's top-down and Bolivia's bottom-up approach in emigrant enfranchisement as well as the diversity of meaning associated to the act of voting from abroad in both cases.

Colombia: an unsuccessful top-down approach?

The origins of political conflict, international outflows and migration policies

Colombia was the first Latin American country to grant their citizens abroad formal political rights with Law 39 in 1961, which allowed the external vote in presidential elections. The law was part of a larger package of electoral reforms signed after the demise of the Rojas dictatorship as part of the National Front (1958-1978). This was a political system created to end the extreme inter-party violence (*La Violencia*) that had led to the military takeover by dividing power equally between Conservatives and Liberals (Berquist et al. 1992; Sánchez and Peñaranda 1986). Since leaders from both parties had to go into exile during the previous troubles (the accords negotiating the end of the conflict were signed in Spain), the external vote was not a response to the demands of a large diaspora, but rather an attempt to protect “elite refugees” in case they had to seek refuge abroad again (Guarnizo 2001; Restrepo de Acosta 2007; Serrano Carrasco 2003).

The National Front initially brought some peace and stability. However, this closed democratic system, together with growing problems over land ownership, the development of capitalism, socioeconomic and political exclusions, and so on, as well as international influences (the communist movement), eventually led to the emergence and consolidation of the later guerrilla groups (Grupo de Memoria Histórica 2013; Morales 1978; Pizarro Leongómez 1989).

The 1960s and 70s also saw the first large migration outflows towards neighbouring countries (mainly Venezuela) and the US. Up until then migration policy in Colombia, like in most of Latin America, was about attracting immigrants. However, during this period there were attempts at creating systematic policies englobing internal population movements, as well as immigration and emigration (Mármora 1979). If initially emigration abroad was seen as a means to reduce internal tensions, later, concerns about 'brain drain' and the local impacts of migration intensified. This gave way to the first 'policies of repatriation and circulation' (different from 'diasporic policies'), such as the *Programa de repatriación de cerebros fugados* (1970). Other programmes also emerged seeking to help migrants and their families (Díaz 2006; Guarnizo 2006; Meyer et al. 1997; Smith 1999).

During the next decades, as migration flows increased and diversified, broader diasporic policies started to emerge benefiting a wider cross-section of emigrants. This coincides with the aggravation of the armed conflict between left wing guerrillas, the State and right-wing paramilitaries, as well as the violence and corruption brought by the illegal drugs trade, which needed new efforts to reinforce democracy (Pecaut and González 1997; Richani 2013).

Mass migration and the extension of political rights to the diaspora

Starting in the 1990s and especially since the beginnings of the 21st century, migration abroad has increased exponentially, making Colombia one of the main sources of emigrants in Latin America. Currently, as well as hosting close to 6 million internally displaced people, Colombia has an estimated 2,5 (UN data mid-2013)-4,7 (Colombian Foreign Ministry 2012) million nationals residing abroad, including over 400,000 refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR mid-2014). This means between 5-8% of the country's total population (48 million, DANE 2015)¹. These flows are the result of the complex intersection of push (armed conflict, other violence(s), economic crisis, unemployment and underemployment) and pull (demand for labour and migration policies in host countries, globalisation forces) factors, as well as personal motivations and migration networks.

In response, Colombia started progressing more firmly towards the institutionalization of its diaspora links. New initiatives emerged seeking to increase the rights of nationals abroad vis-à-vis the home country, but also to improve their living conditions in the host society and strengthen their economic, social, cultural and political links with Colombia. According to Ardila (2009) this was the result of several factors: the growing importance of economic remittances, renewed concerns about brain drain, attempts to improve the image of the country abroad, the conflagration of migration and security issues internationally and the role played by non-governmental actors.

Key in this process is the new constitution approved in 1991 in an attempt to strengthen the democratic system and overcome the problems of violence, corruption and exclusion affecting the country (Hernández 2013; Hurtado 2006). Migrants

¹ There are wide discrepancies in national and international statistics on the number of Colombian migrants abroad (see Mejía Ochoa 2012; Ramirez and Mendoza 2013; international data sources).

abroad voted in the 1990 plebiscite for constitutional reform, and the most active communities in the US (mainly in New York) organised themselves to take the opportunity to demand the approval of dual nationality laws and the creation of a special electoral district for the diaspora. As a result of these pressures ‘from below’ and attempts ‘from above’ to boost the legitimacy of Colombian democracy, migrants saw their political rights relating to the home country expand further. Changes included the right to double nationality, to vote in legislative elections as well and to choose a diaspora representative (Jones-Correa 1998; Serrano Carrasco 2003). In this way, Colombian migrants acquired the possibility to become ‘transnational political citizens’, at least formally with respect to the country of origin. But has this translated into the effective participation of migrants in democratic processes?

The reality of the external vote in Colombia (1,079)

To date, Colombian migrants have been able to vote from abroad 13 times in presidential elections, five times for the Senate and in three occasions for their own representative in the lower chamber. However, since detailed records are available for the presidential poll, participation has declined to very low levels. Not only the number of registered voters abroad is small compared to the size of the diaspora, but also turnout during the last election in 2014 was so low as to call into question the cost effectiveness of such a measure (participation in the legislative elections tends to be lower)(see table 1).

Table 1: Voter turnout in the Colombian presidential elections from abroad and at the national level 2002-2014

Year	External voters		National count	
	Registered voters	Turnout	Registered voters	Turnout
2002	165,631	64,6%	24.2m	46,5%
2006	319,045	37,8%	6.7m	45,1%
2010(1 st round)	415,118	25,4%	30m	49,3%
2010(2 nd round)	415,118	22,6%	30m	44,3%
2014(1 st round)	559,952	18,0%	33m	40,1%
2014(2 nd round)	559,952	19,9%	33m	48,0%

Source: Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, República de Colombia [<http://www.registraduria.gov.co/-Historico-de-Resultados-.html>] (15 05 15).

Nevertheless, this data has to be put into context. First, voting is not compulsory in Colombia, as it is in other Latin American countries. Second, as table 1 shows, voter turnouts at the national level are not very high; indeed, in 2002, participation from abroad was higher than at the national level. Thirdly, voter turnouts from abroad tend to be lower than at the national level, given geographical distance and the greater barriers faced. And fourth, there are sometimes wide variations amongst host countries.

In the case of Colombia, the external vote is conducted in person in polling stations generally set at consulates and embassies. During the 2014 elections, 1,890 voting tables were set up covering countries in all continents (an improvement from the 948 tables in 2010). However, given how dispersed the Colombian diaspora is, this might not be enough to reach all. In addition, to be able to vote, migrants must have an id card (*cédula*) and register beforehand. These regulations can explain in part the low

external voter turnouts, as the interviews conducted at the time of the 2006, 2010 and 2014 Colombian elections in Spain (Madrid and Barcelona), the UK (London) and Belgium (Brussels)² show:

“Remember that people here work hard... from Monday to Sunday. First they would have to take a day off, sacrifice work, second they have to pay transport, which is expensive, not only within London, but some live in Oxford or Cambridge and have to come all the way here, and this costs them 40 or 50 pounds... so the effort and costs are enormous” (male, London, 2010).

“it’s super complicated... three months before, you have to go in person to register at the Consulate... but to register you have to have a *cédula*, and the *cédula* takes six months... in my campaign there was people super motivated, but they couldn’t vote... Afterwards you don’t have any information about candidates, this is not disseminated. There is no institutional channel for this... so how do I inform myself?, looking on internet, but this is the case of a citizen fully interested in voting” (female, Brussels, 2014).

Lack of information is also a common complaint amongst migrants. The survey run in 2010 amongst voters and non-voters in Madrid and London³ show that bureaucratic problems and insufficient information (about the right to vote, procedures, parties and candidates) are amongst the main causes migrants gave for not voting from abroad. But the principal reason (26% of the sample) was related to lack of interest (this was also the most common explanation for not voting while living in Colombia; see similar findings in the Mexican case, Lafleur and Calderón Chelius 2011). Such disinterest emerged from perceptions about the political system in the home country (corruption, violence, always the same):

“I never liked politics, nor in Colombia, when I was there, and even less now that I’m here... In Colombia I voted once... but also, if one votes and gets it wrong, I don’t know, because they are all such liars, so no, we don’t vote. And here in Spain, even less” (woman, Madrid, 2006).

“I don’t feel like it, I’m not tempted, because there is so much corruption among politicians. So one is not going to vote and give them the power, because they promise us the sky and the stars and when they are there, then they don’t remember anything” (man, Brussels, 2014).

Such data suggests that the contribution of Colombian migrants to homeland democratic processes has been limited. Despite its wide formal political rights, participation in elections from abroad has declined to extremely low levels, the result in part of apathy and rejection of the political system. However, is important to

² These were qualitative, in-depth interviews conducted with a non-representative sample: 29 in Madrid and London in 2010 (these were fully focused on electoral participation); 48 in Madrid, London and Brussels in 2014 (including non-Colombian key informants; these are part of an ongoing project looking at the impact of the crisis but also touching upon the subject of transnational politics); around 100 interviews in London, Madrid and Barcelona around the time of the 2006 elections (including non-Colombians; considering wider aspects of transnational political participation).

³ These included 829 questionnaires conducted amongst a non-representative sample, which is part of a larger project carried out in other countries with large Colombian communities (the US and France) as well as in Colombia (Escobar, Arana and McCann 2014; McIlwaine and Bermudez 2015).

consider that amongst those who vote, there are strong feelings of fulfilling a civic right, supporting a specific programme, party or politician, and helping their home country (according to the surveys and interviews in 2010; Bermudez and McIlwaine 2015). In addition, there are other ways in which the diaspora has sought to participate and influence Colombia's democracy, as analysed below. Interestingly, while in 2010 the diaspora voted similar to the rest of the country, supporting the more conservative candidate, Santos, in 2014, Santos was re-elected with a majority of national votes, but 58% of migrants voted for his opponent, Zuluaga (placed more to the right). However, candidate preferences vary significantly amongst the external electorate. It seems that the communities in North America, Spain and other Andean countries tend to vote for the most right-wing candidates, while those in other European and Latin American destinations do the opposite (in Venezuela there is less of a pattern).

The wider political contributions of Colombians abroad

There are at least three other main forms of participation by Colombian migrants that can be analysed in the context of State efforts to improve democracy in its widest sense (not just related to formal electoral politics). One would be through the development of other diasporic policies aimed at strengthening links with the home country and promote its contributions (not only economic, but also social, political, cultural). Since the 1990s, several programmes have been launched, this time not just around the issue of brain drain. The most recent include Colombia Nos Une (public, 2003) and Conexión Colombia (private/public, 2003). These have been successful in involving the participation of mostly students and professionals abroad in initiatives partly aimed at improving the situation of Colombian migrants, but more focused on awakening patriotic feelings, boosting diaspora philanthropy or using migrants as symbolic ambassadors to better the image of the country (Bermudez 2010; Clavijo Padilla 2013). As such, they have tended to be seen with suspicion and sometimes criticised as elitist and not responding to the real needs of migrants.

Another example would be the Colombian migrant organisations set up in the main destination countries. In the case of the ones researched in the UK and Spain, although these work mostly on migrant conditions in the host society, their lobbying often extends to claim greater inclusion and attention on the part of the Colombian state and its institutions. They have also sometimes promoted the external vote amongst migrants, and become involved in campaigns for bilateral agreements to improve migrant access to social security (in the home and host countries) and against human rights abuses and in favour of peace in Colombia. The third example would be actions of a small but active number of Colombians abroad around the issues of the conflict, human rights and peace (Bermudez 2011). Such work, whether done through political and civic society organisations with links to the home and/or host countries or more informally (through personal networks), has culminated in the *Foro Internacional de Víctimas* (International Victims' Forum) created to participate in the current peace process between the Colombian government and the remaining left wing guerrillas to end the armed conflict, and thus strengthen democracy:

“From abroad, we consider that peace has no frontiers and because of this, many migrants and exiles, as victims of all the armed actors in the conflict, created the Forum as a mechanism of communication, organisation and active participation. Our

objective is to collect the thinkings and proposals of civil society abroad around the issue of peace, and call all Colombian men and women who might want to participate as active subjects in the current negotiations between the National Government and the FARC-EP, and the planned ones with the ELN”.⁴

Bolivia: Emigrants as tools for the legitimization of home country regime

Bolivian emigration and politics

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Bolivia has gone through a series of political and institutional transformations that have strengthened its democratic system. Bolivia is a relatively young democracy affected by a series of military coups during the 20th century. Together with the strong economic difficulties faced by the country during this period, political instability strongly encouraged emigration of low-skilled Bolivian workers from rural areas mostly to neighbouring countries such as Argentina and Brazil (Hinojosa Gordonava *et al.*, 2012).

Bolivian politics only began to stabilize in 1982 when the military officially recognized the legitimacy of President Siles Zuazo designated by Congress. Between 1982 and the early 2000s, Bolivian politics were characterized by a multi-party system in which five major political parties alternated in power. This period was also marked by the adoption of neo-liberal reforms that profoundly modified the socio-economic model of the country. During this period, Bolivian authorities tried to attract foreign labour while preventing the emigration of the native labour force. Nonetheless massive emigration occurred (and diversified to new destination countries such as the United States and Spain) throughout the following decade as the socio-economic context deteriorated.

Estimating the size of the Bolivian population residing abroad is however no easy task as Bolivian authorities and most destination countries do not hold reliable data on this population of which a good share are circular and/or undocumented migrants. Various estimates of Bolivian expatriate population conducted by the Bolivian consular network, the International Organization for Migration and Bolivian Presidency during the first decade of the 21st century determined that this population varies between 1.5 and 2 million Bolivian. Independently of the accuracy of this data, it is generally accepted that at least 15% of Bolivia’s population is residing abroad (Domenech and Hinojosa Gordonava, 2009).

The multi-party system put in place during the late 20th century however found its limit in the early 2000 when multiple social movements started to question political elites with a strong anti-neoliberal discourse. A key characteristics of these protests is that they were transnational since Bolivians residing in other South American countries also took the streets and demonstrated in front of Bolivian consulates to support regime change back home. Protesters at home and abroad demanded profound institutional reforms that would allow new political elites to arise. They reached their goal with the election of Evo Morales as President in January 2006. Morales brought to power sectors of the Bolivian society —mainly social movements and indigenous

⁴ Foro Internacional de Víctimas/¿Quiénes somos?:
[<http://www.forointernacionalvictimas.com/presentacion/>] (20/05/2015).

movements— that had traditionally been denied a say in Bolivian politics. Most importantly, with the adoption of a new Constitution in February 2009, Morales' party (MAS) officially transformed the Republic of Bolivia into the Plurinational and Autonomous State of Bolivia and altered significantly the range and content of political rights in the country. Important democratic reforms brought about by Morales include the explicit recognition of gender equality in terms of political rights and the right of 34 Indigenous people to adopt their own norms, establish their own judicial processes and have specific representation in Parliament.

External voting and the inclusion of the diaspora in regime change

In spite of the increasing emigration of the 1980s and 1990s, Bolivian authorities long neglected migration issues and the 1991 electoral reform that explicitly allowed external voting was never followed with the indispensable implementation law to make it a reality. With the coming to power of Evo Morales in 2006, the Bolivian's government discourses and policies on citizens abroad changed radically. On the discursive level, Bolivians abroad moved from being 'forgotten citizens' to being acknowledged as central actors in the new government's process of state transformation. On the policy level, the government integrated the issue of emigration into its National Development Plan, reformed the consular services and promised to pass quickly a new external voting law. Also, many Bolivian migrant organizations (especially those in located in Argentina) had expressed clear support to Morales before his election. They expected thus that —after his election— the diaspora would finally be allowed to vote from abroad.

The right to vote from abroad was once again recognized in the new constitution adopted by a 2009 referendum but the Senate continued to block the adoption of the necessary implementation law to make it a reality. For, the right-wing opposition party 'Social and Democratic Power' (Poder Democrático y Social in Spanish, hereafter referred to as 'PODEMOS'), the clear support of emigrant for Morales before his elections was indicative of the fact that the diaspora could decisively support Morales in future elections if it were allowed to vote. Evo Morales' response to the legislative deadlock consisted in hunger strike to force the adoption of the new transitional electoral law (of which external voting was not the only important feature). This strategy was designed to lead the opposition to compromise. Simultaneously, emigrant associations throughout Europe and Latin America started to copy the strike in front of embassies and consulates and on 14 April 2009 the new electoral Law 4021 was approved. For first time, it provided for the registration of citizens abroad through a biometric registry and the creation of polling stations abroad for presidential elections.

The external voting has three main features. First, only Bolivians residing in Argentina, Brazil, Spain, and the United States (i.e. the four largest receiving countries) can register as external voters. Second, emigrant voters cannot represent more than 6 per cent of the total electoral roll. This entails that once this limit is reached, no other voter can theoretically be registered abroad. Similarly, none of the four above-mentioned countries may concentrate more than half of the total population of external voters. To limit the weight of the largest receiving country (Argentina), each country is thus granted a target registration figure according to the estimated size of the Bolivian community. In 2009, the limit was set to 211,093

emigrant voters who could only register during the 30-day registration period Third, the organizer of the electoral process abroad is the National Electoral Court of Bolivia (CNE) was put in charge of the registration process abroad but was given limited time and resources to register voters abroad.

Diaspora responses and impact on home country democratic processes

Considering the limitation of the external voting law as approved in 2009, it is not surprising that only 169,096 voters residing abroad were added to the biometric electoral roll on time for the 2009 presidential election. Comparing this figure to the above-mentioned estimates at least 1.5 million Bolivian citizens abroad, this figure seems rather limited. In 2014, 272,058 Bolivian citizens managed to register as voters from abroad for the second Presidential election in which they could take part. 160,040 of them eventually cast a ballot in the polling stations set up abroad.

Two important technical modifications were brought to the external voting system between 2009 and 2014 to increase participation. First, the number of destination countries from which citizens could register and vote moved from 4 to 33. Second, voters who had registered for the 2009 elections were registered for the 2014 election without having to formally renew their registration. Looking at the overall number of registered voters, emigrant participation increased by 44.7% between 2009 and 2014 but important variations were still observed between countries: emigrant voters concentrated in traditional South American destination countries (e.g. Argentina and Brazil) while more recent countries of emigration in Europe and Asia only registered a few hundred voters (e.g. Belgium and South Korea).

Similarly, important differences in electoral preferences can be observed between destination countries. For instance, voters in destination countries like Argentina that have traditionally attracted massive low-skilled Bolivian emigration overwhelmingly supported Evo Morales. On the contrary, a more diverse electoral behaviour can be observed in newer destination countries such as Spain and the United States.

Table 1. 2009 and 2014 Bolivian presidential election results among resident and external voters

	2009	2014*
N registered external voters	169,096	272,058
N registered external voters who cast a ballot	125,101	160,040
% Bolivian emigrants voters who supported MAS in Argentina	92.13	92.25
% Bolivian emigrants voters who supported MAS in Brazil	94.95	87.26
% Bolivian emigrants voters who supported MAS in the USA	31.05	34.59
% Bolivian emigrants voters who supported MAS in Spain	48.21	44.26
% Bolivian of the total emigrant	75.77	72.29

* In 2014, emigrants were allowed to take part in the election in 33 countries of residence.

voters population who supported MAS		
% Bolivian of resident voters who supported MAS	63.91	61.36

Three important lessons on the role of diaspora in processes of democratic transition can be drawn from external voting and the electoral experiences of 2009 and 2014.

First and most obviously, electoral support abroad can be gained to strengthen the legitimacy of the process of democratic transition. The strong emigrant support for MAS is not only relevant because of the extra voters that can be gained, it is relevant because external voters are those who left the country under previous governments. The clear approval of external voters can therefore be interpreted as a sign of reconciliation between the government and those who previously expressed their dissatisfaction with their homeland.

Second, the exact weight of external voting needs to be reconsidered as its symbolic value may be equally important as the actual votes that can be gained through it. It is not indispensable for emigrants to have external voting rights to be able to participate in home country processes of regime transformation. Documented examples of diasporic participation in home country politics —through financial support or lobbying— could already be found in 19th century Irish or Italian politics. Similarly, Bolivians in Brazil and Argentina did not wait to be enfranchised to support Evo Morales. As a matter of fact, citizens abroad took an active part in raising the international profile of Morales when he was still a union leader opposing neo-liberal policies of the government. For this reason, the adoption of external voting laws should not only be understood as an instrumental manoeuvre to gain electoral support but also as a sign of gratitude to acknowledge the continuing stake of emigrants in their homeland political arena.

Third, in spite of the clear victory of MAS among citizens abroad, the analysis of electoral results according to destination countries shows a more complex picture as the party registered much weaker level of support in some country than others. This data shows that voters abroad are not a monolithic block and that different profiles of voters co-exist abroad. Indeed, specific socio-economic or ethnic profiles of emigrants may be attracted to specific destination countries which is subsequently visible in different electoral behaviour. As shown in previous work, ethnic origins of voters and pre-departure political socialization of voters residing abroad (e.g. experience of discrimination from the White elites) plays a key role in the electoral preferences of Bolivian external voters (Lafleur and Sánchez-Domínguez, 2014). For this reason, it is not surprising, for instance, that the mostly indigenous Bolivian population in Argentina who for the largest heavily supported MAS; a party that explicitly that explicitly aims to represent the interest of this population.

Discussion and conclusions

The two cases examined show important differences, but also commonalities that merit to be analysed in a bit more detail. In these Andean countries, the extension of political rights to the diaspora has been linked, to a large degree, to processes of democratisation and of seeking to strengthen and legitimise a democratic system.

However, in the Colombian case, at least initially, this has been done more from the point of view of the elites, or with the intention of reinforcing the status quo rather than bringing in real change. The reforms included in the 1991 Constitution represented some effort in terms of strengthening democracy, but the continuation of the conflict and violence, together with the relatively low levels of electoral participation seem to suggest that success was limited. In Bolivia, on the other hand, this has had to do more with the inclusion of previously excluded sectors of the population. In this country, the grassroots dimension of diaspora policies is much more visible because Evo Morales was first a social movement leader with strong connections with the indigenous communities both at home and abroad (especially in Argentina). It is only when he became president that emigrants started to be included in policies, both as a reward for their support but most importantly because for a slightly populist leader the explicit demonstration of support by popular sectors of the population is key for his legitimacy and project of regime transformation.

The ways the external vote is regulated and conducted also has a large impact on participation levels, with often rules and bureaucratic barriers (as well as other problems) preventing (or not) larger voter registration and/or turnouts (see Lafleur and Calderón Chelius 2011). Regarding this, Bolivia implemented a very strict system in 2009 in which voters had only 30 days to register abroad and could only do so in a very limited number of temporary registration desks located in just four destination countries. To register, people had sometimes to wait several hours in line. Logically, the few citizens who managed to register after such effort made a point of casting a ballot on election day, and accordingly turnout level among Bolivians was high even though the number of registered voters in relation to the total emigrant population entitled to vote is very low. In the case of Colombia, would-be voters also have a limited time period to register beforehand which migrants criticised for been too short and not very well advertised, but despite this both the number of registered voters and actual turnouts remain low. Other examples from outside the region, in Europe, for instance, show ambivalent results in this respect. Italians abroad automatically receive a ballot at home if they are registered at a consulate, and their voter turnouts tend to be very low. In Spain, the system similar to Italy was recently changed to a more bureaucratic one whereby migrants have to register in the electoral census abroad first (through consulates) and then ask for the ballots to be able to vote ('voto rogado'), and since then turnouts have declined (Machuca 2014; Ruiz González 2013).

However, bureaucratic hurdles are not sufficient to explain voters' apathy. In the Colombian case there seems to be significant levels of disinterest linked to Colombia's democracy lacking enough legitimacy due to high levels of violence, corruption, socioeconomic inequality and so on. A similar phenomenon can be observed in Bolivia. In addition, in this country, external voters who do not belong to Indigenous communities, for instance in the communities settled in the US, voting from abroad tends to be perceived primarily as a civic duty and a form of expressing their attachment to their home country. Conversely, for voters of indigenous ethnic origins (especially those in Argentina), voting from abroad is clearly an opportunity to express support towards Evo Morales' process of regime transformation. In the case of Colombia, among those who voted, feelings of civic duty and patriotism were also very strong, somehow independently of social origins.

This means that in the two cases examined here, at least for some migrants, the external vote remains a hard-won political right, as well as a powerful symbol of inclusion and identification with the homeland. Equally, even when migrants do not participate in the elections, they remain interested in the political situation at home and become involved in other ways. Finally, while —in the Colombian case— transnational political participation from abroad can be both in support or very critical of the current regime (i.e. the work of political refugees), for large sectors of the Bolivian emigrant population, the coming to power of MAS has marked a turning point from which transnational activities of opposition and pressure toward the home country government have mostly turned into activities of support and legitimization.

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