

The Political Consequences of International Migration on Sending Countries

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In today's world of ever increasing cross-border mobility, there seems to be no lack of interest in the political consequences of international migration. In the United States, pundits are busy trying to predict the effect of a larger Hispanic vote on future elections; and observers of many European countries are wondering how today's ethnically homogeneous societies will be changed by an ever larger proportion of children with immigrant parents. Yet, with all the attention focused on host countries, the impact of international migration on the politics in sending countries has, until recently, received relatively little attention.

Given the relative novelty of this research agenda, the aim of this short piece is not so much to present any clear cut solutions, but rather to give the reader a general idea of the different theories that are currently being proposed. It will also point to the difficulties in empirically testing the different causal mechanisms suggested by these theories.

I will illustrate this discussion by focusing on the particular case of Mexico, which for good reasons is the probably most studied country in migration literature. Mexico is not only the sending country in the world's biggest migration corridor, but it also offers a large amount of high quality data which one would not be able to find in most other middle income countries. More to the point, Mexico's recent (and by many accounts still unfinished) democratic transition and the persistence of autocratic practices at the state and local levels make it an ideal setting to study the effects of emigration on political institutions.

Most of the academic literature on the subject has traditionally focused on particular case studies, such as the financial support of the emigrant community for certain political actors (e.g. the Kosovo Liberation Army), without the attempt to construct a broader theoretical framework. For the case of Mexico, this literature has mostly dealt with the role of home town associations (HTAs). As the name suggests, HTAs are (mostly informal) clubs formed by migrants who hail from the same town in Mexico. Their primary aim is to pool donations from their members in order to finance public goods back home (everything from town fairs to sewage systems). In the process they gain a lot of clout, as their collective remittances often surpass the official budget, which converts them into important political players (de la Garza and Hazan (2003), Smith (2001), Smith (2005)). But, while most researchers agree that HTA members themselves become politically more involved, there is no consistent evidence as to the direction in which they influence politics, nor whether as a result local politics becomes more participatory for non-migrants as well.

Only recently have political scientists started to chart these waters in a more systematic fashion. Generally speaking, one can distinguish between three different lines of thought. The first one, which could be called the "alienation hypothesis", conceives that international migration is largely detrimental to the functioning of democratic institutions. It makes the argument that citizens in high migration communities become increasingly estranged from the political process for two reasons. Firstly, as they

will always have the option to migrate themselves with relative ease at some point, they are holding less of a stake in their home polity's future. Secondly, and partly pertaining to the literature discussed above, as migrant organizations such as HTAs step in to provide most of the goods and services traditionally supplied by the public sector, citizens will disengage from the state and switch their allegiance to the migrant community. The empirical evidence presented in favor of this hypothesis shows that high levels of migration are systematically associated with lower voter turnout at elections (after adjusting for the number of migrants who left), as well as lower levels of political engagement, such as participation in political events (Bravo (2007), Goodman and Hiskey (2008)). The principal drawback of this analysis is that as it relies only on cross-sectional data (no longitudinal data is available), clear causal channels are not identified. It could, for example, perfectly be the case that communities with lower levels of political participation are more prone to sending migrants. Furthermore, in the Mexican political context it is also possible that lower levels of political participation point to a weakening of the formerly dominant state party PRI, and that a higher level of migration is associated with a lower degree of autocratic control.

Next is what could be termed the "positive spillovers hypothesis", which contends that as international migrants over time adapt to the civic and political culture of their host countries, these values will also be transmitted back to their place of origin. As many destination countries are mature democracies, while most sending countries are not, this will largely have a positive effect on attitudes towards democracy in the latter. The transmission can take place by return migration or simply through regular communication of migrants with their family and friends back home. The focus on civic values in explaining political outcomes has a long tradition in political sciences, and it is therefore not surprising that this approach to the analysis of the political effects of migration has garnered great prominence. The empirical evidence presented in favor of this theory is usually based on survey data in which respondents are asked about their contact with migrants, as well as on a battery of questions related to their political views and practices. A recent paper (Perez-Armendariz and Crow (2009)) presents evidence that Mexican citizens who have personal ties to a migrant abroad or simply live in a high migration community show higher levels of civic and political engagement. For the case of the Philippines, it has been shown that the political attitudes of temporal migrants differ systematically from non-migrants (Rother (2009)), even though these results are not always statistically significant. The downside with the evidence presented is, again, that it largely draws a causal interpretation from a simple correlation. It remains unclear to what extent migrants, and by extension members of migrant households, systematically differ in their political attitudes from non-migrants. As most researchers in this camp conduct their own data collection, results are usually based on a small sample of observation at a single point in time. Panel data sets on political attitudes and practices are mostly non-existent.

Lastly, one has what should be called the "political economy hypothesis", which maintains that migration changes the incentives faced by political actors, and that as a result, political outcomes will change as well. Especially the receipt of remittances by a household is likely to significantly alter the economic and political incentives faced by its members. It has, for example, been argued that higher income due to remittances will probably change a recipient's ideal policy outcome and thus party preference (Merino (2005)). With respect to the effects of remittances on democratic institutions, this line of thought is closely related to the broader literature on clientelism. It argues that remittances make

a household more independent from clientelistic transfers, such as vote buying, and other forms of patronage. As a result, its members will be able to vote according to their true political preferences.

It has to be pointed out that the positive spillovers and political economy hypotheses are not inherently incompatible, so that both effects might well be at work simultaneously. The principal challenge at the moment lies in empirically disentangling the two competing effects. Using data on electoral results at the municipal level in Mexico during the period 2000-2002, I showed in a recent paper (Pfütze (2009)) that high levels of migration have a causal effect on the probability that the former state party PRI loses a local election for the first time. No effect on electoral results could be found in places where the PRI had already been out of power at some point in time. Taken together, these results provide strong evidence for migration to have a positive impact on democratization at the local level, but they are equally compatible with either hypothesis. While it might appear at first sight that this problem could simply be solved by separating the respective effects of remittances and migration, it turns out that the two are too highly correlated to make this approach possible. One way to move the research agenda forward is to test for additional implications of either theory. In a follow-up paper (Pfütze (2010)), I showed that the observed negative effect of higher levels of migration on electoral participation is almost entirely due to a lower turnout for the PRI, and that this effect is most pronounced in municipalities where it has consistently been in power. This result gives more support to the notion that migration reduces clientelistic practices than to the idea of knowledge spillovers.

In any case, a proper understanding of the likely effects that an ever increasing number of international migrants will have on political outcomes in their places of origin is not only a fascinating research question in its own right, but should also be a crucial consideration in the formulation of immigration policies. If the effects are indeed favoring democratic practices, as a large part of the current research indicates, it has the potential to sway the immigration debate in unexpected ways. That said, more research on this topic is definitely needed. As always, more and improved data is on top of the wish list. Survey data with a large sample size and a longitudinal design would definitely be ideal, but might not be a realistic option given money and time constraints. Most the results discussed here refer to the case of Mexico with its particular characteristics. That is, migration is mostly permanent, migrants tend to come from the poorer segments of society (albeit not the poorest), and remittances are large and sent frequently. Results might well be different for countries where migrants are relatively better off or tend to return after a stint abroad. Given countries' important idiosyncrasies in their migration patterns, as well as political settings, I do not believe analysis at the cross-country level to be a very promising approach. Therefore, more work on other individual countries should be on the forefront of research at this point.

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