

Migrant Social Clubs' Political Power in Mexico

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It has recently come to light that one of the effects in Mexico of migration to the United States is the political influence of migrants from agricultural communities and their organizations in their states and municipalities of origin.

During the long migration experience, leaders of different emigrant organizations have managed to create transna-

tional relationships not only with their communities of origin, but also with their local power structure.

In transnational migrant community organizations, we see a new kind of political action with a particular kind of representation, a form of mediation of interests and the reinforcement of a new collective identity, a transnational identity, present in the political sphere of many of Mexico's rural and urban communities.

These Mexican emigrants traditionally come from particular states, specif-

ically Zacatecas, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, Puebla and Oaxaca. Those states' governments, as well as those of several others, have begun to note emigrants' greater willingness and interest in participating politically.

Through their organizations, migrants from approximately one-fifth of the country's municipalities have had an impact on the social, economic and sometimes political processes of their places of origin. This article aims to explain how migrants are politically represented through social clubs by place of origin and how

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we can begin to classify their organizations and leaders in a typology of political influence in their place of origin.

MIGRANTS AND POLITICAL POWER

Approximately 9 million people born in Mexico live in the United States.¹ This large group includes emigrants who have been naturalized, temporary residents, documented and undocumented residents and circular migrants.

In the last decade, the government finally recognized the importance of

tic product, it is a significant amount for the states those migrants come from. We should not be surprised, then, that in 96.2 percent of the country's 2,443 municipalities, "to a greater or lesser degree, some kind of contact with the United States can be noted, whether through migration to the U.S. and/or the return to Mexico, or monetary transfers made from there."³

The migrants come from communities, towns and cities in almost all regions of the country, but intense migration is concentrated in about 492 municipalities in central, western and northern Mexico.⁴ According to the

a specific social unit, as a transnational community space.

In early studies about international migration to the United States, different nationalities' migrant organizations were a simple piece of data added to the classic period of migration (1880 to 1930). Some characteristics are common to those immigrants and current Mexican immigrants to the United States, among them, the long time it took them to learn English and the even longer time it took them to become U.S. citizens. Most lived and worked in ethnic enclaves and belonged to associations from their hometowns. Politicians from their hometowns came to court their favor; for instance, Irish nationalists traveled to New York to raise money for their campaigns, just as politicians do from almost all the communities today, among them the Mexicans.

The big wave of migration was interrupted in 1929 for 36 years when the U.S. Congress passed severe restrictions on immigration. When immigrant quotas were eliminated in 1965, large groups of Latin Americans, Caribbeans and Asians established themselves in the U.S., but in contrast to prior waves, they arrived at a time when there was an atmosphere of struggle for civil rights and the exaltation of ethnic and racial pride that different U.S. groups were demanding for the first time.

Two decades later, the 1986 reform of the immigration law (IRCA) was a kind of amnesty that made it possible to legalize the situation of millions of emigrants, among them hundreds of thousands of Mexicans. This was a catalyst for the establishment of potentially stable emigrant communities. Under these circumstances, migrant community organizations were able to

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the number of migrants: if we add to it the number of U.S. citizens of Mexican origin (14.4 million), we find that, today, almost one fourth (23 million) of Mexico's 102 million inhabitants live across our northern border. Authorities have also recognized the importance of the remittances emigrant workers send to Mexico as a significant contribution to the family economy, particularly in rural areas and low-income urban sectors.

In 1998, the Bank of Mexico estimated that U.S.\$5.627 billion were sent each year in family remittances, a sum similar to the country's net income for tourism, for example. Three years later, the figure was approximately U.S.\$9 billion.² And, although it is not an important percentage of the gross domes-

records of the Foreign Relations Ministry's Program for Mexican Communities Abroad (PCNE), founded in 1990, about 580 Mexican emigrant social clubs by place of origin (SCPO) operate in different states of the U.S., maintaining links between their members and their communities of origin.

This is nothing new. In the different Mexican emigrant communities in the United States, transnational organizations have existed since the beginning of the last century. No one paid attention to them conceptually, however, because they were seen as simple providers of monetary remittances and not as a social space formed by migrants' activities both in the sending and receiving communities. That is, they had not been conceived of as

develop an increasingly transnational relationship with their hometowns.

Emigrant communities become transnational when traditional lifestyles are transformed into something different wherein individuals and families depend on employment in the United States for their survival, thus causing a change in signifiers, values, social structures and behavior. Some Mexican migrant organizations began to have influence on their hometowns through their social practices as well as in a more organic way through the clubs and committees by place of origin that operate in both hometowns and the communities in the U.S.

After these organizations were conceived of in this way and their advantages and effects understood—not only economic but also political because of the influence they have in their hometowns—the federal government and several local governments from states with migrants have responded in different ways. Of particular importance was the reaffirmation of their reincorporation into the nation-state, as put forward in the 1995-2000 National Development Plan.

This kind of answer by the state leads to a re-conceptualization of citizenship and belonging to a political community since it means the incorporation of a transborder population into the nation-state. This issue is important in Mexico's current political situation because in addition to contributing to the subsistence and sometimes to the development of a considerable portion of the country's small and medium-sized communities, these migrant groups constitute an external factor that can have weight in local political matters.

These groups' political participation is clearer today in Mexico; their influ-

ence has been shown in different communities and the governments of states like Zacatecas, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, Oaxaca and Puebla, to cite the foremost examples.⁵

A widely known 2001 case is that of Andrés Bermúdez Viramontes, known as "the Tomato King," who ran for mayor of Jerez, Zacatecas. He lost because the electoral rules were unclear, preventing him from being the first Mexican-American to head up a Mexican municipality. In his electoral campaign, he said, "Little by little, immigrants are going to take power to change Mexico." Since his defeat, he

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has continued to lobby the Zacatecas Congress to guarantee civil rights to Zacatecas residents abroad.⁶

Political participation of migrants organized in social clubs takes two forms:

1. Transnational organization in the form of a club or social committee that has an impact or participates with donations in local elections.
2. Transnational community leaders who participate in local politics on their return.

Throughout their working lives, several of these leaders have managed to build a space and political position in their hometowns and, on their return, they may play a modernizing

role through their experience in community work.⁷

According to research by the Mexico-United States Binational Study on Migration, approximately half of Mexican emigrants reestablish residence in Mexico after a stay of 10 or more years in the United States,⁸ and although some of them have taken out U.S. citizenship, the 1997 amendments to legislation on nationality restores their Mexican citizenship to them and their children.

In these migrants' social organizations, the members and family members of the clubs and social committees of "the absent sons," as they like to call

themselves, have become more mentally competent. They have processed some U.S. community values and practices and when they return to Mexico, they bring back ideas linked to modernity and religious and political tolerance; this does not necessarily mean they practice them, but at least they have discovered the possibility of their existence.

On their own initiative, many of the SCPO have mobilized significant resources for different projects in their hometowns. In many villages, neighborhoods and hamlets, people's living standards have risen without governmental assistance, thus breaking with the paternalist tradition in relations between the government and the governed in Mexico.

In other cases, when club federations have been formed, they have established dialogue and cooperation agreements with state governments to carry out projects for the collective good and invest in production.

What should be emphasized is that emigrants' influence has spread from town to municipality to state government. The most outstanding and most studied example is Zacatecas, since that is where the program for attention to migrants began and because this is the most successful Mexican emigrant community in the United States. In the case of migrants organized in SCPO,

ples of migrants who have been elected mayor or gotten involved in state-wide politics because of their political connections and the social status they have achieved.⁹

In some cases, it would not be precise to speak of political power, but rather of emigrant community leaders' credibility and prestige, understood as the ability to have an influence derived from merit or a good reputation. This is the most frequent case in transnational migrant communities.

The existence and level of migrant organizations' political influence in their hometowns will depend on the kind

ing the projects they sponsor or that are jointly carried out. In the political sphere, their support is sought by sounding out possible candidates for mayor, and they may be considered for posts in the municipal government. A "medium degree of influence" means that they are given recognition, as are their projects, but that they do not play a role in municipal decision making. A "low degree of influence" means that the community and authorities sometimes hear about them and their wish to be recognized for the public projects they occasionally carry out.

SCPOs are not the only kind of migrant organizations that exist in the communities of emigrants born in Mexico who maintain links with their hometowns: in fact, sports clubs are the most numerous.¹⁰ The clubs and social committees, however, are the ones that generally have access to political activity.¹¹

Despite the fact that many of these organizations disappear or split, their transformation is linked to the solution of problems and political innovation, and their ability to negotiate may lead to changes in their goals, structures and links when facing new challenges and meeting new opportunities that the Mexican political transition brings.

For all of these reasons, we can conclude that these transnational migrant organizations' overall activities have a democratizing effect. That is why it is important to emphasize their aggregate impact in the municipalities where they operate, even though we should underline that we cannot assume a priori that they have a specific influence on Mexico's democratic process since it is difficult to distinguish theoretically when these groups support

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by political power we mean the ability to influence civic authorities' decision making based on pressure and bargaining ability of leaders and their organizations. Political and social influence in their communities turns around two central questions: the use and control of donations, on the one hand, and access to public posts, on the other.

If a club or social committee gains a certain amount of power, most probably its members will attempt to maintain certain privileges and will not sidestep the dominant authoritarian political culture. But at the same time, it is also possible that they will introduce part of the knowledge they have acquired in their migratory experience in whatever work they carry out in their communities. There are some exam-

of migrants they are, the type of community they come from and the sort of organization they have formed.

Generally the SCPOs correspond to communities or neighborhoods of origin with strong cultural roots and traditions and they evolve uniquely over time. They are different from clubs formed by the political manoeuvring of people interested in being recognized by consulates or emigrants' offices in their home states, since those fly-by-night clubs tend to fade because of lack of community support.

In the typology presented in this article (see box, p. 78) "a high degree of influence" means that, based on economic power, prestige and social recognition, they have influence on city government decision making regard-

democratic processes and when they do not.

In light of the coming 2003 federal congressional elections, political parties and, above all, migrants themselves have taken a renewed interest in the issue of voting abroad. Now that real multi-partisanship exists, more migrants will probably travel to Mexico to vote in their hometowns, and we may even see increasing numbers of returned emigrants elected, as well as the recognition of the right to vote abroad. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Consejo Nacional de Población, *Información sociodemográfica de México 2002* (Mexico City: Imagen y Arte Gráfica, S.A. de C.V., 2002).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In 1982, the government of Zacatecas was the first to take note of emigrants, who currently have influence in the state. It designed a program and set up an office to deal with economic and social matters pertaining to Zacatecans in California. Today, 26 states have opened similar offices that work jointly with consulates promoting emigrants' organization and the defence of their human rights (the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad).

⁶ *Reforma* (Mexico City), 27 January 2002.

⁷ Although conditions and cultural elements differ, a review of European and Asian immigration to the United States in the 1920s reveals a high rate of return and circular migration. Between approximately one-fourth and one-third of European immigrants returned permanently between 1880 and 1930, and among them were many examples of

transnational migration (Nina Glick Schiller, "Transmigrants and Nation-States. Something Old and Something New in US Immigrant Experiences," John Dewind et al. eds., *America Becoming, Becoming American* (n.p.: Russel Saye Publications, 1999).

⁸ *Informe del Estudio Binacional México-Estados Unidos sobre Migración* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1997), p. 19.

⁹ Cecilia Imaz B., *Importancia política en las comunidades de origen de las organizaciones comunitarias transnacionales de migrantes mexicanos en E.U. Estudio comparativo de casos en Nayarit-California y Puebla-Nueva York* (Ph.D. diss., School of Political and Social Sciences, UNAM, 1999).

¹⁰ Cecilia Imaz B. "Las organizaciones deportivas mexicanas en Estados Unidos" (internal document of the PCME:SRE, 1994).

¹¹ Trade and business associations of Mexicans in the United States correspond for the most part to a very different social sector than the one dealt with in this article.

TYPOLOGY OF POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF MIGRANTS ORGANIZED IN SOCIAL CLUBS BY PLACE OF ORIGIN

DEGREE OF POLITICAL INFLUENCE	TYPE OF MIGRANT	TYPE OF COMMUNITY
1. High	permanent residents organized in social clubs	transnational
Medium	permanent residents	with strong cultural roots
Low	organized in social clubs	without strong cultural roots
2. High	returned, member of club	transnational
Medium	returned, member of club	with cultural roots
Low	returned, non-organized	without cultural roots
3. High	U.S. residents who invest in hometown	transnational
Medium	U.S. residents who invest in hometown	with strong cultural roots
Low	U.S. residents who invest in hometown	without cultural roots
4. None	circular, temporary	with or without cultural roots

1. Emigrants will have a **high level** of political influence if permanent residents organized in social clubs or committees are members of transnational communities. They will have a **medium level** of influence if the community of origin has cultural roots and the club or committee is active and appreciated. Political authorities such as the mayor, priests, local party leaders call or visit to ask them for money in exchange for favors or influence. They will have a **low level** of influence if residents organized in a social club have not become important or received recognition in their hometowns.
2. Returning migrants will have a **high degree** of political influence if they were leaders or members of social clubs or committees if the community is transnational, and a **medium level** of political influence if the community of origin has strong cultural roots and traditions.
3. Emigrants residing in the United States who invest in their hometowns as capitalist partners will have a **high degree** of influence in decision making if the community is transnational. The level of influence will depend on the size of their investment. In this category of investor migrants, they may or may not belong to a social or business organization, as long as they establish links to local authorities. There are several examples of small transnational companies, some derived from the North American Free Trade Agreement, such as maquila plants in Guanajuato, hotel chains in Zacatecas, canning plants in Puebla and textile factories and foreign exchange houses in Guanajuato and other states. Their degree of influence will be low if the community of origin does not have strong cultural roots and traditions.
4. Temporary migrants who work in agriculture and agribusiness and in services in the United States have no influence. Their cyclical stays in the U.S. do not create the conditions that allow them to organize to aid their hometowns, regardless of whether they come from communities with cultural roots or not.