

## Chapter 4

### **Migrant transnational political engagement<sup>1</sup>**

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#### Section 2: Politics and Economics

##### Abstract:

Migrant transnational political engagement is a long-standing phenomenon linking politics and policies in different locations. This chapter focuses on three main ongoing epistemological and methodological challenges related to how we frame and seek to understand migrant transnational political engagement. First, what is transnational about migrant political engagement and what forms of engagement are prevalent? This includes how to map a field of migrant transnational engagement, which covers both transnational collective engagement and electoral mobilization in homeland elections. Second, what are the main drivers of migrant transnational engagement? Here one of the recent developments is the sending country emigrant engagement strategies at the party-level as well as analysis drawing on political opportunity structures which also encompass both the local/urban and global context for transnational migrant politics. Third, what is the relationship between migrant transnational political engagement and political change in the country of origin? This covers the more recent

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focus on the role of social and political remittances in processes of democratic diffusion and democratization in countries of origin.

## Introduction

Migrant transnational political mobilization, participation and representation are by no means new phenomena. Indeed, over the past decades a sprawling research field has focused on its many manifestations. Diasporas such as the Polish, Irish and Slovak are considered to have played a critical role in nation-state formation in their homelands during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kapur, 2014, Adamson, 2016). Later, the transnational turn in migration studies fuelled research of the long-distance political mobilization of migrant and refugee associations related to political developments in their countries of origin. More recently, the worldwide rapid increase in emigrant enfranchisement has been accompanied by studies of the migrant vote in elections in their homeland.

The growing complexity of the research field of migrant transnational political engagement has been accompanied by a set of broader empirical, theoretical, and methodological developments and academic debates. This chapter focuses on three main challenges. First, what is transnational about migrant political engagement and what forms of engagement are prevalent? This includes how to map a field of migrant transnational engagement which leaves room for the recent stronger focus on individual level engagement in the context of emigrant transnational electoral mobilization. Second, what are the main drivers of migrant transnational engagement? Here one of the recent developments is the further unpacking of sending country

emigrant engagement strategies, the analysis of migrant transnational politics in social movement frameworks of political opportunity structures, which also encompass both the local/urban and global context for transnational migrant politics. Third, what is the relationship between migrant transnational political engagement and political change in the country of origin? This includes the more recent focus on the role of social and political remittances in processes of democratization in countries of origin.

Across these dimensions the chapter addresses some of the epistemological and methodological challenges in the study of migrant transnational political engagement. Among these challenges is the extent to which the national lense in the study of migrant transnational politics conditions our understanding of what issues and which forms of mobilization migrants engage in. Closely related to this is the critical evaluation of the synergies between qualitative studies of processes of migrant transnational mobilization and the more systematic studies at the individual level that help unpack the destination and origin effects on processes of political socialization. Finally, the chapter comments on the need for a stronger dialogue with broader theoretical debates across the social sciences such as those on mechanisms of political socialization, transnational social movements, and the transnational dimension of processes of political and social transformation.

It should be noted that the geographical reach of this chapter predominantly focuses on the political engagement of diasporas residing in the global north, notably North America and Europe. Yet, it is important to note that a wealth of other studies highlight migrant transnational political mobilization in countries of residence across other parts of the world (see among many others, Han, 2019, Finn, 2020). Indeed, one of the challenges of the field is a stronger global integration of and cross-citation within this research field.

### **What is transnational about migrant transnational politics?**

Not all transnational political engagement involves migrants and not all migrant political engagement is transnational. As a point of departure, this chapter suggests that what defines migrant political engagement as transnational is its cross-border dimension resulting in complex configurations of mobilizations and engagements which link politics and policies in different locations. Consequently, the field of migrant transnational political engagement encompasses a multitude of issues of mobilization and representation, types and configuration of actors and channels of engagement.

Interestingly, in terms of *issues of political mobilization* of migrants, the question about the national in the transnational stands strong. Studies of diaspora politics have tended to focus on mobilization directly tied in with homeland politics such as a domestic or international conflict in the country of origin over territorial claims, minority rights or general dissatisfaction with the homeland political elite and processes of democratic back-sliding. The Kurdish (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003) or Palestinian (Koinova, 2014) diaspora political mobilization as well as the mobilization around the Arab Spring (Moss, 2020) or Gezi Park protests in Istanbul (Burgess, 2020) are but a few examples of the many instances of this.

Moreover, the notion of the national vs. the 'non-national' is central to the longstanding debate on the extent to which migrants and diaspora tend to lean towards a more nationalist or cosmopolitan outlook compared to similar segments of their homeland population (Tarrow, 2005). This debate often references the critical depiction of the 'long distance' or arm-chair nationalist whose homeland engagement centres on nationalist agendas of minorities or states (Anderson, 1992) vs. the cosmopolitan outlook of diasporas and migrants related to their

transnational connectedness and multiple sense of belonging (Horst and Olsen, 2021; Glick Schiller, Darieva and Gruner-Domic, 2011). The latter category moves beyond focusing on migrants as only mobilizing around their own situation as immigrants or emigrants or the politics of their homeland (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003), and may allow for a better understanding of the extent to which their engagement with broader topics such as gender, climate change or social justice also has a transnational dimension.

In this vein, the long-standing question of how methodological nationalism renders the transnational less visible (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002) continues to be relevant to the study of migrant political engagement. The national lense remains central to migrant transnational political engagement in so far that it continues to tie in with issues of the defence and contestation of territorial and nationalist disputes among diasporas. It is therefore important to carefully evaluate how to balance the national in the transnational without losing sight of historical and emerging trends. That said, the question of essentializing the national dimension is arguably also related to the methodological choice of using migrant national collectives as the unit of analysis in the study of their transnational engagement (Glick Schiller, 2007). We might make better sense of the interplay between mobility and transnational political mobilization by also understanding when migrants choose to act transnationally alongside non-migrants in their countries of residence.

### **Forms of migrant transnational political engagement**

In terms of the *types of engagement*, the literature is packed with different types of classifications, but a very broad distinction could be along two axes: a) between non-electoral and electoral mobilization and participation and b) on transnational political engagement directly back in the homeland or indirectly via local, national or international venues abroad.

Non-electoral transnational engagement refers to the many types of transnational political activities trying to influence politics in the homeland directly via liaising with actors in the homeland or indirectly through political actors and institutions abroad. In terms of direct engagement, this includes lobbying the homeland government, financing political parties or civil society organizations in the homeland and engage in local development processes. Migrants may also mobilize around more confrontational activities such as co-organizing protests in the country of origin, as in the case of the large anti-corruption demonstrations in Romania in 2018.<sup>2</sup> Indirect non-electoral migrant transnational engagement in homeland politics can also take place via the country of residence as migrant or diaspora groups lobby the national or at times even local government of their host country or via international organizations (Koinova, 2017). In so doing they may forge alliances with major political parties or civil society organizations or organize other types of activities highlighting some issue related to their homeland in more or less confrontational ways (Yalaz, Aydin and Østergaard-Nielsen, 2021). It is worth remembering that research on this dimension of migrant political engagement predates the ‘transnational turn’ in migration studies (Glick Schiller et al. 1999; Faist, 2004, Vertovec, 2009) in the form of diaspora studies (Sheffer, 1986) and governments in exile (Shain, 1991).

Electoral transnational engagement mainly refers to the direct influence of migrants in homeland politics through the vote in homeland elections from afar. The fact that migrants often can also vote in homeland elections has become the focus of a more recent but rapidly growing scholarship (Lafleur, 2012). Whereas the study of migrant associations usually focusses on a smaller mobilized elite, then studies of emigrant voting highlight the individual

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Ciobanu, Claudia (2018) Migrants left for a better life. Now they fight for a better Romani, *Guardian*, 22/8.

participation of the broader migrant collective as in the case of the Polish and Ukrainian emigrant vote (Ahmadov and Sasse, 2015). More recent studies uncover levels of mobilization/turnout across migrant groups per country of origin (Burgess and Tyburski, 2020) and per country of origin and residence (Ciornei and Østergaard-Nielsen, 2020), as well as the direction of the vote (Turcu and Urbatsch, 2020, 2022). The indirect version of this transnational migrant engagement would be when migrants to some extent base their vote choice according to the political stance of political parties towards their country of origin such as the Turkish vote in Germany and the Netherlands (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2009) or the Cuban vote in Florida (Castro Marino, 2002).

Figure x.x. Modes of migrant transnational engagement:

	Non-electoral	Electoral
Direct	Lobbying in country of origin, support for CSOs, political parties	Voting in country of origin elections
Indirect	Mobilizing for homeland issues abroad at the local, national or international level, such as lobbying, protest.	Voting on homeland issues in country of residence.

In this fourfold mapping of migrant transnational political engagement, the distinction between direct and indirect is perhaps less obvious in the case of the non-electoral field. As mentioned, the same migrant actors may engage in countries of origin and residence and there can be strong synergies between these processes. Moreover, both dimensions are also cross border in the

sense of including transnational network among migrants across many countries of residence which may be a significant resource in the processes of mobilization. For instance, the worldwide network of branches of the Catalan National Assembly have coordinated their activities in relation to the Catalan quest for independence across cities in Europe and beyond (Yalaz, Aydin and Østergaard-Nielsen, 2021). A related dimension is that more or less all forms of non-electoral migrant transnational political mobilization also exist online, and that social media plays a key role in migrant transnational political engagement (Brinkerhoff, 2009). Moreover, although we still lack research on the impact of this phenomenon, electoral mobilization from parties in the homeland may also draw on social media to reach overseas voters (Østergaard-Nielsen and Ciornei, 2019). Importantly, the use and impact of social media on political engagement can be assumed to be quite different across generations of migrants.

Finally, the term ‘indirect’ has here referred to the transnational political engagement of migrants in their homeland via host-land based or international activities and institutions. However, the term ‘indirect influence’ is also being used to refer to the ways in which migrants may influence politics in their country of origin indirectly through the political agency of their families and friends at home who receive financial and social remittances from them (Kapur, 2014; Meseguer and Burgess, 2014). In terms of financial remittances, a rapidly growing field of study is demonstrating how there is a systematic difference in political behaviour among migrant and non-migrant households related to the reception of remittances (Escribà-Folch, Meseguer and Wright, 2018). The impact of social remittances, understood as ‘the ideas, behaviours, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving to sending country communities’ (Levitt, 1998), are similarly seen as relevant for understanding political behaviour among recipients in countries of origin (Lacroix, Levitt and Vari-Lavoisier, 2016).



There is to some extent a division of labour in terms of the methodologies and research techniques used to study migrant collective vs. migrant individual transnational political engagement. Studies of migrant associations are dominated by single case or focused comparative studies of migrant political transnationalism drawing on qualitative methods. Such studies have uncovered the processes, motivations and perceptions of the key actors involved. However, as pointed out early on by Portes (1999), these studies tended to ‘sample on the dependent variable’, that is, they studied the phenomenon where it was manifest, which does not give a sense of how widespread this engagement within each migrant group is (Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt, 1999). More recently, survey data has uncovered broader patterns of the transnational political or homeland political outlook of migrants (Portes, Haller and Guarnizo, 2003; Chaudhary, 2018). Similarly, studies based on aggregate data have shown the extent to which migrant collectives mobilize in homeland elections. Levels of participation among emigrants are usually much lower than in the homeland, which may be explained by the relative high cost of emigrant voting, mobilization of political parties (Burgess and Tyburski, 2020) and whether emigrants have moved to a more or less advanced democracy compared to their origin context (Ciornei and Østergaard-Nielsen, 2020).

### **What are the main drivers of migrant transnational political engagement?**

One of the longstanding debates on migrant political transnationalism is how we may explain that the intensity and type of political engagement vary across migrant collectives and localities. A range of studies have highlighted how migrant individual and group-specific resources such as origin, type of migration, length of stay abroad, generations, socio-economic status, influence their transnational political engagement (Portes Escobar and Arana 2008). The other main set of explanations centre on the political opportunity structures in the broadest sense of the rights, policies, actors, and discursive contexts, influencing migrant political

mobilization across countries of residence and origin. The first set of individual and resource specific factors have been identified in comparative studies of different groups of migrants in one political context such as the study of Turkish migrants across several European countries of residence (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003). The second has been the point of comparing the same group in different political contexts such as the study of Latin American groups in North America (e.g. Portes, Haller and Guarnizo, 2003).

Drawing on social movement literature, studies of migrant non-electoral political engagement of migrant associations and diaspora movements have shown how the inclusiveness and openness of host-country political institutions are a crucial part of the understanding of the scope and forms of their local and transnational mobilization. Access to citizenship, electoral rights, and consultative platforms for voicing concern influence also transnational political engagement (Koopmans and Statham, 2003; Kyei, Koomson-Yalley and Dwumah, 2020). An important development here is that such dynamics are not just reserved for national level politics, as migrant transnational political engagement can operate at different scales such as the local and international level. For instance, local government policies of co-development as in Spain in the 00s invited migrant associations to use public funds for development projects in their localities of origin (Fauser, 2014; Østergaard-Nielsen and Acebillo-Baqué, 2016). Also, the role of the city as a venue for transnational migrant politics has been highlighted as having opportunities or constraints for such activities (Fauser, 2014; Adamson and Koinova, 2013; Yalaz, Aydin and Østergaard-Nielsen, 2021).

Moreover, one of the key drivers of migrant transnational political engagement is the foreign policy of the host-country and the bilateral and multilateral ties between the country of residence and origin (Shain, 1999; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2009; Koinova, 2014; Hill, 2017).

Diasporas or migrant collectives can be mobilized in favour or against the foreign policy of their country of residence towards their homeland and at times succeed in influencing these policies, as in the case of the Somalian diaspora in Norway (Tellander and Horst, 2019).

While the country of origin has been marginal in studies of the political incorporation of migrants in countries of residence, then it has been central to the study of migrant transnational political engagement. In particular over the past two decades, studies have uncovered a strong convergence among the outreach policies of sending countries towards their citizens or former citizens residing abroad (Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003; Gamlen, 2008; Collyer, 2013; Délano and Gamlen, 2014; Pedroza and Palop-García, 2016). Such policies tend to be largely concentrated on sending a message of support and encouragement to continued investment in the homeland but may also veer towards seeking to mobilize the emigrants in support of the homeland.

A rapidly growing subfield which relates to the transnational electoral engagement of migrants has been the study of why countries of origin grant non-resident citizens the right to vote in from afar (Lafleur, 2012; Fliess and Østergaard-Nielsen, 2021). This accompanies a stark increase in the phenomenon. More than three quarter of all countries in the world allow expatriate voting and most of these countries have adopted such legislations only during the last 20 years. Like the literature on sending countries, these studies have compared which states enfranchise expatriates and why they do so (Calderón Chelius, 2003; Collyer and Vathi, 2007; Ellis *et al.*, 2007; Lafleur, 2012). Further studies have unpacked the nuances in enfranchisement modalities and investigated how and why states tend to facilitate the exercise of voting rights in practice (Hutcheson and Arrighi, 2015; Palop-García and Pedroza, 2019; Wellman, 2020).

The extent to which enfranchisement of emigrants drive migrant transnational political engagement in terms of voting from afar is quite varied. For instance, in the case of Mexico, the long awaited election in 2006, where migrants could vote for the first time, saw a desperately low turnout (Calderón Chelius, 2017). Comparative studies have analysed the difference in turnout, finding that this relates not just to the extent to which it is easy or difficult to cast the vote from abroad but also to the level of democracy in the country of residence (Ciornei and Østergaard-Nielsen, 2020) and the outreach of political parties in the country of origin (Burgess and Tyburski, 2020). Indeed, in terms of the analysis of emigrant policies there is an increased attempt to move away from the ‘black box’ understanding of countries of origin and highlight the role of other actors in the relationship between homelands and diaspora. A key actor that has come to the fore in that respect are homeland political parties, their motive for promoting or hindering outreach policies (Burgess, 2020) and the extension of voting rights (Østergaard-Nielsen, Ciornei and Lafleur, 2019). Moreover, the so-called ‘parties abroad’ literature has highlighted why parties prioritize – or not – spending resources on mobilizing the emigrant vote through setting up office and campaigning abroad (Østergaard-Nielsen and Ciornei, 2019; Kernalegenn and van Haute, 2020) and sometimes teaming up with migrant associations in this endeavour (Fliess, 2021).

### **Migrant transnational political engagement and processes of democratization**

A long-standing debate in studies of migrant transnational engagement pertains to what type of political development migrants are supporting in their country of origin. Several sub-debates stand out here:

First, the literature on diaspora and conflicts, peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction has demonstrated how diasporas might be part of the problem or part of the solution (Vertovec,

2005; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2006; Koinova, 2014). Diasporas can be brokers leading to more successful peace negotiations (Lyons, 2004), support homeland actors working to strengthen democratic institution building and raise funds for post-conflict reconstruction (Orjuela, 2007). However, studies have also flagged the potential harmful impact of diaspora involvement, radicalization abroad, fund-raising for radical actors in the homeland, or even taking arms or returning to participate in armed conflicts (Koinova, 2018).

In a less binary way, the literature on migration and democracy has tended to look at migrant associations engaging in activities which strengthen political development in countries or localities at home (Itzigsohn, 2014), challenging local power hierarchies in processes of social transformation (Fauser and Nijenhuis, 2016). However, it may also be the case that emigrant associations skewer local processes of representation as authorities give more attention to the demands and priorities of HTAs (Bada, 2016).

Interestingly, studies on transnational electoral engagement also bring a mixed picture regarding the kind of political agenda and change which migrants support from afar. For instance, the notion of illiberal remittances has been coined to describe instances where the emigrant vote supports parties representing a turn towards less liberal democratic regimes such as in the case of emigrants from Poland and Hungary (Szuleski, 2020). Similarly, the Turkish vote from afar cast from major destination countries such as Germany has been more supportive of the incumbent regime of Erdogan and the AKP (Arkilic, 2021). In contrast, the Romanian vote tends to support the opposition and favour political reforms against corruption. Yet, other studies point to the cosmopolitan outlook of the diaspora vote in favour of green parties and less favour of populist parties (Turcu and Urbach, 2020; 2022). That said, one of the key interesting aspects of the emigrant vote, is not about the impact of the vote – often

miniscule – but about the drivers and what we can learn about how political orientation and practices change in migration.

Similarly, studies which focus on individual level transnational practices and their impact has highlighted how financial remittances may contribute to receiving households being more likely to vote for the opposition, participate in protest and in general have an outlook more supportive of democracy (Rother, 2009) . The issue of social remittances has similarly mostly been evaluated as having a positive effect on democratic outlook given that the transnational migrants participating in political discussions from afar usually have moved to a ‘more’ democratic country (Perez-Armendariz and Crow, 2010). However, this literature does suffer from an endogeneity problem in so far that it is not clear if the emigrants are remitting pro-democracy values because they live abroad in more democratic contexts or they decided to live in more democratic contexts because of a more pro-democratic outlook prior to migration.

An issue here is to what extent certain migration flows have tended to dominate our empirical understanding of which migrants mobilize under what conditions. Many studies of migrant transnational political engagement deal with migrants moving from less to more democratic contexts. However, diaspora politics is not just about brokering newly found, more democratic, surroundings with political processes in countries of origin. Migrants may also move to less democratic contexts. Rother (2009) showed that the attitude towards democracy among return Philippine migrants were markedly different depending on whether they had worked in the West or the Gulf (Rother, 2009). The rapidly growing research field that seeks to understand how processes of political socialization translate into social remittances could do with more comparative analysis of destination effects related to different countries of residence (see, among others, Chauvet and Mercier, 2014). Indeed, more comparative analysis of all types of

migrant political engagement across the global north and south, would give us a better understanding of the drivers of migrant transnational political engagement, its impact on countries of residence and origin and the power hierarchies within more globally spread diaspora political networks.

## **Conclusion**

The study of the scope and forms of migrant transnational political engagement has from the outset encouraged a debate on how best to understand and capture the ‘what’, ‘how’, and ‘why’ of these phenomena. The many different parts of the puzzle encompassing both non-electoral and electoral transnational political engagement render the field more complex. Yet it also provides opportunities for understanding the synergies between this broader palette of migrant cross-border politics. More dialogue between the more qualitative understanding of non-electoral transnational political mobilization and the more quantitative analysis of the electoral transnational political engagement might help further the understanding of processes of mobilization and engagement. For instance, focusing on the transnational electoral field supports our understanding of the levels and direction of the transnational political engagement of a broader segment of migrant collectives through their voting patterns. In turn this can indicate the extent to which diaspora lobbies are in sync with the political outlook of their co-citizens abroad. This again may facilitate a strengthening of the dialogue with broader theories of political socialization, social movements and the transnational dimension of processes of political and social transformation.

The phenomena of migrant transnational political engagement are not new. Indeed, this point was an oft-repeated criticism during the first wave of studies of migrant transnationalism

(Portes, 2001). In terms of a less/more perspective, transnational mobilization today is certainly facilitated by means of communication not available in earlier times. However, it might be fruitful to examine further the temporality of migrant transnational political engagement. That is, focusing not just on the political geography of countries of origin and destinations but also compare the temporal dimensions of different historical critical junctures related also to the political context of migrant transnational political engagement. Comparing for instance diaspora political mobilization during the Cold War with contemporary phenomena would allow us to highlight the way in which diaspora politics intersects with the foreign policy and migrant political agendas of countries of origin and residence and the positioning of these countries in the broader international system.

This chapter started out by asking what is transnational about migrant transnational political engagement and proceeded to outline some of the major trends, debates, and epistemological and methodological challenges. Clearly this is an ongoing journey. On the overall, the study of migrant transnational political engagement is the endeavour to understand the transnational perspective on bounded processes of politics by taking the mobility of citizens as a point of departure. As such, the study of migrant political transnational engagement continues to make a contribution to our understanding of both the resilience and impact of transnational ties and networks.

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