



The Perpetual Migration Machine and Political Power

Michele Wucker

The historian and diplomat George Bancroft declared in 1849 that a nation should “as soon tolerate a man with two wives as a man with two countries.” This is no longer so—if, indeed, it ever was. In 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down most laws forbidding dual citizenship. However, the State Department did not formally acknowledge the court’s decision until 1990, when it sent a memorandum to U.S. consulates around the world effectively directing them to make it easier for dual nationals to retain U.S. citizenship. Since then, many nations have begun to promote dual citizenship, absentee balloting, and even homeland legislative seats for their citizens settled abroad.

Today, more than a hundred countries, including India, Israel, and South Africa, allow dual citizenship. The Philippines and the Dominican Republic this year joined the growing roster of nations that permit absentee balloting. Hoping to lure tourism, trade, and talent, Ireland and Italy encourage not only the children but the grandchildren of émigrés to become dual citizens.

Dual citizenship and absentee voting rights have not only turned the idea of national loyalty upside down, they have become a key element in a global perpetual migration machine fueled by wealthy countries’ need for migrant workers and poor countries’ need for the money those workers send home (see Michele Wucker, “Remittances: The Perpetual Migration Machine,” *World Policy Journal*, summer 2004). Remittances now amount to more than \$100 billion annually, giving developing nations a strong incentive to encourage their citizens

living abroad to stay connected back “home” and thus keep the cash flowing. So far, it seems, these efforts are succeeding, with the result that émigrés are pouring money into homeland development projects and contributing to the growth of civil society in the countries of their birth. Homeland political candidates now aggressively court the émigré vote and look to compatriots abroad for campaign funds.

Even as sending countries try to lure skilled workers into returning home, countries that host large, semi-permanent expatriate populations recognize that they must do better in convincing newcomers to participate more fully in their adopted communities. In a trend that began in the 1960s and accelerated through the 1980s, more than 20 nations worldwide have extended the right to vote in local elections to noncitizen residents.

These dramatic changes in traditional approaches to citizenship and political participation raise questions about the nature of democracy and national loyalty. Must one be a citizen of a nation in order to be a citizen of one’s community, that is, a good neighbor? And, conversely, how much say should citizens living abroad have in their native country’s affairs? How these questions are answered will reshape civil society around the world, determine who future generations of leaders will be, and influence policymaking.

Immigrants and Homeland Politics

Historically, émigrés have often had an impact on the politics of their native countries. Some of the greatest heroes of the world’s

independence movements carried out their work from exile. The United States harbored many of the rebels who led the 1798 Irish uprising and many of those who fought throughout the nineteenth century for Irish independence.¹ Eamon de Valera, Ireland's great freedom fighter and later its prime minister and president, was born in the United States and returned home many times to raise funds for the Irish cause.² José Martí worked to free Cuba from Spanish domination from exile in Spain and Venezuela, and planned the ultimately successful Cuban revolution during the 14 years (1881–95) he lived in New York. Even before Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association launched a pan-African improvement movement from New York in 1914, the Jamaican-born leader had (unsuccessfully) urged the Jamaican government to stick up for the rights of its migrant workers in Central America.

From 1900 to 1906, 12.3 million postal money orders were sent from New York to immigrants' home countries. Then, as today, home-country governments used carrots and sticks to make sure that émigrés would send money back. In Italy, a 1913 law allowed émigrés to regain Italian citizenship by returning for two years, and their children born abroad were still deemed to be Italians. Another proposal, which never came to fruition, would have given political representation in Italy to Italians living abroad.³ Meanwhile, China required women and children to stay behind when Chinese men left to work in America so that the men would feel obliged to send money home and one day return to reunify their families.

The sparsely populated United States, for its part, used the promise of political rights for noncitizens as a means of luring immigrant laborers and speeding their incorporation into American society. For the first 150 years after independence, noncitizen immigrants were allowed to vote (at the peak of the practice) in 22 states and federal territories. But these rights were rescinded

beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and ended completely in 1926 during a period when the United States turned inward, closed off most new immigration, and used propaganda, workplace education programs, and often outright harassment to encourage immigrants to shed their ties to their homelands.

The issue of dual nationality emerged in the 1950s in a handful of cases in which the Supreme Court began to limit the government's power to strip Americans of their citizenship. The court decisively affirmed the right to dual citizenship in 1967 when it ruled in favor of Beys Afroyim, a naturalized Polish-American who the State Department argued had automatically given up his citizenship by voting in a 1951 Israeli election. This decision would come to have increasingly important consequences as a result of the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, which abolished the national-origin immigration restrictions of the 1920s and opened the doors to a massive new wave of immigration, still underway, which would greatly increase the number of potential dual nationals.

During this period, the need for workers to be able to move freely across borders lent added impetus to various regional integration schemes. The question then became how to foster a sense of belonging and civic responsibility among these migrant workers. In Western Europe, particularly after the creation of the European Commission in 1967 and the formation of a customs union in 1968, countries began to embrace the idea of enfranchising noncitizen residents. This idea spread and, from 1963 to 1992, 15 countries in Europe, Latin America, and the British Commonwealth approved varying forms of noncitizen voting rights, usually on a reciprocal basis within groups of affiliated nations—as within the Nordic Union or between Portugal and its former colonies. In 1992, as the European unification process accelerated, members of the European Community (as it was then called) agreed that citizens who were living in

other member nations could vote in municipal and European Parliament elections of the host country. Today, more than 20 countries now allow some form of immigrant suffrage. In the past two years, Belgium, Austria, and Rome have approved laws according various levels of voting rights to noncitizen residents. Their logic is simple and sensible, and it addresses the rhetorical question asked by the legal scholars T. Alexander Aleinikoff and Douglas Klusmeyer in their book, *Citizenship Policies for an Age of Migration*: “Why should [a European Union] citizen who has just recently moved to another member state enjoy a right to vote in a local election while a third-country national who has lived there for years but does not yet qualify for naturalization is excluded from participating in his or her city?”⁴

The idea of noncitizen voting rights has caught on more slowly in the United States, although New York City in 1968 and Chicago in 1988 approved voting rights for immigrant parents in school board elections. Recently, San Francisco, New York City, Washington, D.C., Portland (Maine), and a few Boston-area communities have undertaken initiatives to allow new immigrants who have not yet become citizens to vote in municipal and/or school board elections. These initiatives have alarmed Americans who believe that voting rights and citizenship are inextricably linked.

Here we get to the nub of the controversy: what is the meaning of citizenship? And what is the connection between citizenship and voting? The notion that voting should be reserved for citizens was not established in the United States until well after the country’s founding. And although most Americans might see the right to vote as a function of citizenship, half the electorate apparently does not see voting as a serious responsibility since even in presidential elections, which attract the highest number of voters, participation rates hover around the 50 percent mark, and barely 30 percent of eligible voters turn out for local

elections. In many other countries, however, voting is a major responsibility that governments and citizens take seriously. Citizens—even those living abroad—can be fined if they do *not* vote. Voting is mandatory in Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Greece, Italy (though not enforced), Luxembourg, Switzerland (in a few cantons only, not nationally), and Mexico.

Different attitudes with respect to voting illustrate how the varying and evolving notions of citizenship reflect cultural and political differences. In some countries that depend on the remittances of those who have gone abroad, the question of absentee voting rights for émigrés has brought to light resentments among those who have remained behind. The average Haitian émigré, for example, sends home more than three times what the average Haitian earns. But in desperately poor Haiti, émigrés often find themselves viewed with suspicion out of a cultural belief that one person’s success often comes at the expense of others: *djaspò*, Haitian Kreyol for a member of the diaspora, is a disparaging term. Not surprisingly, the ideas of dual citizenship and absentee voting are not popular in Haiti.

In some countries, voting rights for émigrés are controversial because many of those who live abroad left for political reasons and are thus thought to be more likely to oppose the incumbent government. Recently, for example, Venezuelans living in Miami complained that the Venezuelan consulate refused to accept signatures collected for recall petitions against Venezuela’s populist president, Hugo Chávez; some complained that when they had tried to exercise their right to register to vote in the referendum at the Miami consulate they were not permitted to do so.⁵

The Chávez government was right to fear the émigré vote. There are numerous examples of citizens abroad having a profound impact on the political order back home. It is only necessary to think of the

role of Cuban Americans in maintaining the U.S. embargo against Castro's Cuba or the role of Albanian Americans in raising money for arms in the recent Kosovo conflict to see why home countries might not welcome the political participation of their citizens abroad.

Yet there are many instances in which émigrés have made positive contributions to peaceful regime change and to the ongoing political discussion in their native countries. For example, in the Dominican Republic in 1994, the opposition agreed to allow then-President Joaquín Balaguer to begin another term after a fraud-riddled election only if he agreed to a constitutional change formally granting voting rights to Dominicans who had become American citizens. (Though technically illegal until then, it long had been common for dual-nationality Dominicans to return home to vote even before the rules changed—but this was a practice limited to those who could afford to do so.) Those “absent Dominicans,” particularly because of their financial contributions to political campaigns, have since become an increasingly important constituency. In 1996, when Balaguer was barred from running for reelection, Dominicans elected a Dominican who had lived in New York for a decade, returning to his native country at age 17.

Countries ravaged by war have enlisted émigrés in efforts to rebuild politically and economically. In the 1992 elections in newly independent Croatia, 12 of 120 parliamentary seats went to Croatians who had recently returned from living abroad. Latvia has enlisted Latvian Americans as the defense minister, lawmakers, and diplomats, and a former émigré to Canada as president. Lithuania has had a Lithuanian-American former U.S. Environmental Protection Agency administrator as president and another returnee as chief of staff. Many émigrés have returned from America and Europe to Afghanistan and Iraq to help rebuild their countries (in many cases, no doubt, with hopes of profiting financially as well).

Elsewhere, governments have created new entities designed specifically to solicit the input of diaspora members who have gained expertise and international connections abroad. In Cape Verde, a West African archipelago with a population of 450,000 and a diaspora more than a million strong, 6 of the 72 deputies in the national assembly are elected by Cape Verdeans living abroad. The government also holds periodic international conferences of scholars and business and community leaders in Cape Verde and abroad. By this means it hopes to create markets for the country's products and to encourage Cape Verdeans to return—whether temporarily or permanently—to set up businesses.

Homeland Political Ties

Many countries, including the Dominican Republic, the Philippines, and at least 47 others, now allow absentee voting. More than 60 percent of the 300,000 registered absentee voters voted in the Philippines presidential election in May 2004, the first in which overseas workers were allowed to vote. Though only a fraction of the 7.4 million Filipinos abroad voted this time, if more register in future elections they could well become a decisive voting bloc, especially in close elections. Ecuador and Mexico are also considering instituting absentee voting.

In 1996, the Mexican national assembly approved a bill to allow absentee voting for the approximately 10 million U.S.-based Mexican citizens in the 2006 presidential elections. Since then, 14 proposals for enabling legislation have been submitted, yet all have failed. No doubt this is because like many émigrés, Mexicans living abroad are thought likely to vote against the entrenched politicians whose failed policies made it necessary for them to leave the country in order to make a living (although Mexico in 2000 elected its first president in 70 years who was not a member of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the party still holds a legislative majority).

In 2003, the Mexican state of Zacatecas, which has seen half of its population leave for the United States, created two seats for émigrés to represent Zacatecas in the lower house of Mexico's congress. Zacatecans living in the United States are permitted to run for local office if they promise to move back home (although it is understood that they will travel back and forth between Mexico and the United States in order to serve both of their constituencies). This year, when the Institutional Revolutionary Party swore in Roman Cabral as its candidate for one of those two seats, it did so in Norwalk, California. Manuel de la Cruz of the Party of the Democratic Revolution, Cabral's opponent—and the eventual victor—also lived in Norwalk. A third candidate, representing the ruling National Action Party, was a woman who lives in Laredo, Texas.⁶

Even in cases where there are no political seats created explicitly for citizens living abroad, émigré communities have created them. In 1994, Dominicans living in the United States and Canada held primaries to elect a *dominicano ausente*—an “absent Dominican”—to run for a seat in the national legislature in the Dominican Republic. The *New Yorker* who won, José Fernández (no relation to President Leonel Fernández), then had to win a second nomination in his home province, Santiago.

Madhu Yaskhi Goud, a successful New Jersey businessman, became a minor celebrity when he returned to India in 2003 after 14 years abroad and pledged 25 percent of his annual income to provide primary healthcare and education for impoverished farmers in Nizamabad, his hometown. The visit so moved him that he decided to move back to India and run for parliament. As a member of the Congress Party ticket he won decisively in May 2004. Although he has pledged to give up his U.S. green card, he promised to be a voice not only for his Nizamabad constituents but for nonresident Indians as well.⁷

Like Goud, many members of diaspora communities get involved in helping their homelands, whether by funding sewage systems (Mexico, for one), providing seed capital and training for businesses (Bangladesh), or cleaning up after natural disasters (Central America). Another Indian émigré, Naresh Trehan, a Manhattan heart surgeon, returned to India to found Escorts Heart Institute and Research Center in Amritsar.

Although such commitments do not always turn into political involvement, there are many cases in which people do turn their education and skills abroad toward political causes in their homelands. This is particularly true with respect to the hometown associations that émigrés have created to channel funds toward improving living conditions for family and friends who stayed behind.⁸ Hometown associations can dramatically change the local political landscape as association members develop political capital, and this, in turn, can translate into personal benefits for the groups' leaders abroad. As the development economist Carol Zabin has pointed out, such leaders, who may hope to assume leadership positions in their hometowns down the road—may come to have more influence from abroad than they would by staying at home.⁹

Savvy governments have tried to harness this political power. The Mexican Foreign Ministry, for example, has established the Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior, an agency whose 152-member advisory council works to improve the living conditions of Mexicans abroad and promote ties to the homeland. Sending countries have been active in defending the rights of their citizens abroad, a goal that the Colombian Foreign Ministry explicitly recognizes. Similarly, Central American countries have lobbied for years to maintain temporary protected status for émigrés living in the United States.

Slowly, host country officials are embracing the idea that contributing to community development abroad is a good idea.

The Los Angeles-based Committee for Peace and Reconstruction of Cacaopera, (known by its Spanish acronym, COPRECA) coordinates the Los Angeles Salvadoran community's efforts to rebuild a town that was heavily damaged by El Salvador's civil war in the 1980s. Since 1992, COPRECA, by collecting monthly membership fees and sponsoring dances, has raised funds to pay for the building of a health clinic, a radio station, a clothing factory, a daycare center, and a water tank in Cacaopera. It has also contributed funds to a reforestation initiative, for the digging of wells, and for the purchase of an ambulance. Embracing the idea that civic activism abroad is related to community building at home, the Los Angeles city government has contributed funds for educational activities among its substantial Salvadoran-American community. In most places, however, involvement in homeland associations is controversial, especially in the United States, for it goes against the conventional wisdom that immigrants must give up their homeland ties if they are to become "true" Americans.

It also ties into a profound "us-versus-them" mentality that holds that America deserves the full direct benefit of immigrants' work. Recently, for example, after reading the results of a study detailing the more than \$30 billion in remittances sent to Latin America each year, the staunchly nativist Republican congressman Tom Tancredo proposed that the amount of remittances sent to a country should be deducted from the amount of foreign aid sent to that country by Washington. He had earlier proposed taxing these remittances until First Data/Western Union, the leading money transmission firm, which is headquartered in his home state of Colorado, protested.

Homeland ties are fodder for immigration alarmists, like Harvard's Samuel Huntington, who argue that the newest Latin American immigrants are not assimilating, despite extensive evidence to the contrary—

as measured by home ownership, intermarriage, and naturalization rates.

Embracing a New Home

Groups organized around homeland ties help immigrants feel less isolated in their new surroundings and give them confidence in their ability to contribute to a wider community. In the absence of such groups, an immigrant is less likely to be involved in any community and thus is less likely to benefit from the networking that is important to social and economic success. Such connections are particularly important for the second generation, for if the children of immigrants do not see their parents involved in transnational or local civic networks, they are less likely to develop a sense of civic commitment and become involved in their communities—a type of civic assimilation that the United States does far too little to encourage.

Not surprisingly, the recent rise in immigrant homeland political participation coincides with the rising number of immigrants who are becoming more involved politically in their adopted countries. Though this has not been documented systematically, the anecdotal evidence is substantial—and, in some cases, quite dramatic. Take, for example, the Colombian-American Jesús Galvis, a Hackensack, New Jersey, City Council member who in 1998 was a candidate (albeit unsuccessful) for the Colombian Senate; he is an example of the many immigrants who become involved politically in both their native and adoptive countries. Or consider Leonel Fernández, who on August 16 began a second (nonconsecutive) term as president of the Dominican Republic. Fernández lived in Manhattan for ten years when he was growing up, until age 17, and maintains extensive New York ties. In 1996, he told Dominicans in New York that the best way to contribute to the Dominican Republic was to become U.S. citizens. His point was that immigrants anchored in their host communities are more

likely to be successful economically—and thus better positioned to help their compatriots in both their homeland and in their adopted country.

In some cases, immigrants become involved politically to protect themselves against attacks. Thus, even in countries with rabid anti-immigrant movements, immigrant rights have gained a firm foothold. (Ironically, for a short time after the 2002 assassination of Pim Fortuyn, the right-wing, anti-immigrant Dutch Party leader, the son of a Cape Verdean guest worker was among the top candidates to be his successor.) In Switzerland, where one in five residents is foreign-born, large Italian and Spanish minorities have mobilized long-standing support groups to give them a voice in Swiss unions, political parties, and government. In the early 1990s, Switzerland loosened its immigration regulations to ease chronic labor shortages, particularly in the medical and technical fields. This resulted in violent attacks against foreign workers, and right-wing anti-immigrant parties began to make inroads in the Swiss parliament. Ironically, this helped forge ties among immigrants and Swiss who did not like the nativist turn that their country was taking, and who by late 1991 were holding counterdemonstrations denouncing xenophobia. Eventually, the Swiss government, responding to both sides, enacted laws banning racism and authorizing strict punishment of “improper behavior” by foreign nationals.

Similarly, in the United States, immigrant activists of many ethnicities joined with U.S. civil rights groups in 1996 to fight back after Congress passed laws that ended most forms of public assistance to legal, taxpaying immigrants, and led to the summary deportation of other immigrants. Sympathetic members of Congress successfully introduced several pieces of new legislation restoring some of those benefits. At the same time, U.S. labor leaders began to recognize that a growing number of work-

ers—and potential union members—were immigrants. Thus, although they historically had considered their constituency to be U.S.-born workers, the biggest unions in 2000 announced a campaign to recruit immigrants and to push the government to enforce labor law for immigrants as well as for native-born Americans. Noting the growing demographic power of immigrants, just as labor leaders have done, U.S. politicians have begun to think about immigrant voters and to cater to them.

From Purchasing Power to Political Power

Just as remittances are having a significant impact on immigrants’ home countries, the money immigrants earn in host countries is translating into power—not just purchasing power but political power.

Businesses have begun to recognize that immigrants are no longer just a source of cheap labor, but also a burgeoning market. The population of U.S. immigrants of Latin American origin is now 39 million, with a combined purchasing power of \$700 billion, or 8.5 percent of total U.S. purchasing power. The combined income of Latino immigrants is increasing at three times the average annual rate, with the result that by 2010 their share of U.S. purchasing power will have risen to 11 percent.¹⁰

The financial-services community has led the effort to integrate immigrants into mainstream banking, and, by extension, into American society. Banks have helped undocumented immigrants apply for individual taxpayer identification numbers, or ITINs, which allow individuals who do not have Social Security numbers to hold interest-bearing accounts and to pay taxes.

The financial power of the foreign-born population translates into an essential question about the requirements for political representation. Across the United States, an estimated 13 million legal permanent residents work and pay taxes. Because they are not yet citizens, they cannot vote, even in local elections. Yet it is a guiding principle

of liberal democracy that there should be no taxation without representation.

In the United States, the sheer number of immigrants, as well as the growing political clout of the U.S.-born second generation, has caught the attention of politicians. Some are courting the immigrant vote, but others are kowtowing to sentiment among those who feel threatened by the growing financial and political power of immigrants. Attempts to help immigrants integrate themselves legally into American society have drawn political fire; the Internal Revenue Service, for example, has been criticized for allowing undocumented immigrants to pay taxes using ITINs.

Citizenship purists put dogma ahead of pragmatism in other areas as well. Where driver's licenses are concerned, certainly public security is better served by having all drivers educated in the rules of the road, tested, registered, and eligible for insurance. Nonetheless, in 2004, legislators in 18 states introduced 66 bills to restrict the issuance of driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants. Luckily, common sense trumped ideology in the majority of cases; only seven of those bills passed.¹¹

Money Is Power

The driver's license and tax controversies show how the deeply emotional issue of national identity has become entangled with the practical issues that arise from today's global dependence on a perpetual migration machine. Developing nations' reliance on remittances has created large, permanent and semi-permanent immigrant populations in wealthy nations. This, in turn, has created an urgent need for migrant-receiving countries to think seriously about how to integrate these newcomers into their own societies, and how—or whether—to counteract the pull that sending countries are exerting on their citizens abroad.

Out of necessity, the developing world was the first to recognize that traditional definitions of citizenship are obsolete, and

to extend to émigrés an acknowledgement that they would still be welcome in their homelands even after becoming citizens of another country. So far, however, wealthy countries, particularly the United States, have been more resistant to new approaches to citizenship and immigrant rights—even though they have become increasingly dependent on migrant labor and benefit indirectly from the remittances immigrants send home, as such remittances prevent state collapse and promote economic growth.

Like George Bancroft a century and a half ago, today's naysayers rely on a marriage metaphor. They believe, along with Mark Krikorian of the Center for Immigration Studies, which advocates restricting immigration, that “the patriot is married to America; the post-American is just shacking up.”¹² But “shacking up” is no longer seen as a means of avoiding commitment: today 50 percent of American couples who are preparing for marriage live together first, up from one in ten in 1965.¹³ The institution of marriage began as an economic arrangement and changed as society changed. And just as the idea of marriage has evolved (and is evolving still), so must the idea of citizenship. Living as they do in a perpetual migration machine, wealthy countries can no longer afford a Victorian sensibility. ●

Notes

1. See David Montgomery, “Racism, Immigrants, and Political Reform,” *Journal of American History*, vol. 87 (March 2001).

2. See Ronald H. Bayor and Timothy J. Meagher, eds., *The New York Irish* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

3. Mark Wyman, *Round-Trip to America: The Immigrants Return to Europe, 1880–1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

4. T. Alexander Aleinikoff and Douglas Klusmeyer, *Citizenship Policies for an Age of Migration* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002).

5. Richard Brand, "Voting in Homeland Elections Sought," *Miami Herald*, December 29, 2003.
6. Jennifer Mena, "Mexican Elections Heating Up," *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 2004.
7. Sujeet Rajan, "New Jersey Businessman Swept into Office in Indian Elections," *Indian Express*, May 14, 2004.
8. See Michele Wucker, "Remittances: The Perpetual Migration Machine," *World Policy Journal*, vol. 21 (summer 2004).
9. Carol Zabin, "Mexican Hometown Associations and Mexican Immigrant Political Empowerment in Los Angeles," Nonprofit Sector Research Fund, Aspen Foundation 1998, p. 16.
10. "U.S. Hispanic Purchasing Power: 1978–2020," HispanTelligence, Santa Barbara, CA, May 2004 (based on an analysis of U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis figures).
11. National Immigration Law Center, "2004 State Driver's License Proposals," available at www.nilc.org.
12. Mark Krikorian. "Post-Americans: They've Just 'Grown' Beyond Their Country," *National Review Online*, June 22, 2004.
13. Jay Tolson, "No Wedding? No Ring? No Problem," *U.S. News & World Report*, March 13, 2000.