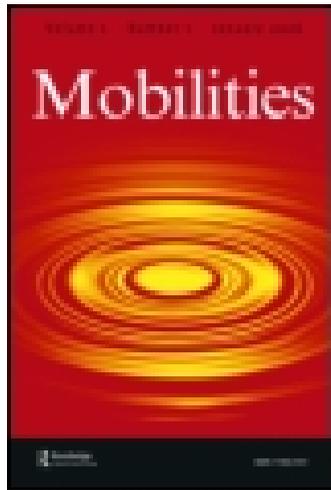


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Transnational Politics as Cultural Circulation: Toward a Conceptual Understanding of Migrant Political Participation on the Move

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ABSTRACT *This article contributes to the burgeoning literature on transnational politics by bringing tools used by scholars of cultural diffusion and circulation into these debates. We build on research on social remittances and their potential to yield broader and deeper effects or to 'scale up' and 'scale out.' Based on a variety of empirical examples, we propose that processes such as circulation, portability, and contact, viewed through a transnational optic, help to nuance recent research on political transnationalism and its empirical indicators – including, most notably, external voting.*

KEY WORDS: Politics, Transnational, Migration, Social remittances, Cultural diffusion, External vote

1. Introduction

Unprecedented levels of international migration are changing the ways that politics gets done. Not only do emigrants vote in homeland elections, they influence the way others vote, introduce new political ideas and strategies, and fund election campaigns. Yet we know little about how and why particular political ideas, tools, or tactics travel. To answer these questions, we wed discussions about transnational politics with research on cultural circulation and, in particular, social remittances.

The first studies indicating how much migrants continued to influence home country policies and politics were based primarily on research in Latin America – the same empirical backdrop (of course, not the only one) on which much of our analyses build. In the Dominican Republic and in Mexico, for instance, presidential

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candidates campaigned as much or more on the streets of American cities as on the streets of Santo Domingo and Mexico City, even before expatriates were allowed to vote (Levitt 2001; Itzigsohn and Villacrés 2008; Smith 2008). In Ecuador, after years of showing little interest, the government approved a constitution which includes ‘the right to migrate’ and states it is the government’s duty to ‘promote [emigrant] ties with Ecuador.’ Ecuadorians living overseas can now vote, and even stand as candidates, in national parliamentary elections (Ramírez and Boccagni 2010; Boccagni 2011). And as the Arab Springs have recently reminded us, emigrant participation in homeland politics and social movements is a global phenomenon.

This means that the boundaries of politics are changing. Non-resident citizens often continue to participate from afar in the politics of their homelands. At the same time, governments increasingly grant non-citizen residents limited rights, such as the ability to vote in local-level elections, when they settle in Western contexts (Bird, Saalfeld, and Wust 2011; Eckstein and Najam 2013). Sending states continue to provide a range of services and protections to their non-resident citizens, while receiving states increasingly use social policy as immigration policy, denying rights and access as a way to encourage non-permanent residents to remain just so (Sabates-Wheeler and Feldman 2011; Levitt 2013).

As the boundaries of politics shift, we need new ways to conceptualize, study, and evaluate political processes that cross, intersect, and challenge national borders. It is not just the migration of bodies that causes individuals, communities, and nations to define themselves as transnationally constituted. The circulation of people is intimately connected to the circulation of political ideas, practices, and projects. Therefore, we need strategies for understanding politics in motion: how political participation and institutions change and are changed by the concomitant circulation not only of political beings, but ideas, values, skills, and projects as well. We need ways of conceptualizing the spaces and places in which this circulation takes shape and ways to evaluate its impact on political institutions and arrangements.

2. Transnational Politics: An Overview

The political connections maintained by migrants with their homeland are not *per se* a new research topic. Researchers working on diaspora politics (Sheffer 1986) and long-distance nationalism (Anderson 1992) examines the cross-border efforts of diasporas and how citizens abroad gain political influence. Both in Europe and North America, however, migrant involvement in home country politics remained understudied. In the United States, most research focused on ‘ethnic lobbying’ (Shain 1999; Smith 2000) while, in Europe, migrants’ political integration into countries of destination received more attention than their persistent transnational political ties (Martiniello and Lafleur 2008). As research on migrants’ transnational practices grew, scholars on both side of the Atlantic also expanded their understanding of migrant political life and developed typologies of transnational political actions based on their level of formality (Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller 2003), the channels used by migrants to achieve influence (Koopmans and Statham 2001), who (Goldring 2002), the goals that migrants pursued (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003), or the types of diasporic identities that emigrants maintained vis-à-vis their homelands (Lyons and Mandaville 2010; Boccagni 2014).

2.1. The Spaces of Politics

We see politics as taking place within transnational social fields of interlocking, multi-layered, unequal networks of individuals, institutions, and governance regimes. This is a multi-sited as well as multi-layered space. By that we mean that various scales of governance are in operation at once. What Neo-Institutionalists and World Polity Theorists call ‘global culture’ aims to endow people with rights by virtue of their personhood rather than their national citizenship. Institutions such as the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) or The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) have been put in place to guarantee certain basic protections to people no matter where they live (Meyer 2000; Drori, Holleran, and Walgenbach 2013).

Also important are national regimes of diversity management and immigration and naturalization policies (Levitt 2015). All countries have national narratives about who they are and who can become a member. They put up high barriers to naturalization when they want to ensure that people remain long-term non-citizens and make naturalization easy when they want to drive their population numbers up. They generously provide for non-citizens when they want to encourage naturalization or they restrict access and services to ‘less desirable migrants’ to encourage them to return home.

Sending-states also take stands toward emigrants that shift dramatically over time with respect to how much migrants can participate in, are consulted about, and are represented in home country affairs (Levitt and De la Dehesa 2003; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Some states have become *Transnational Nation States* (Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001; Itzigsohn 2012). They treat their emigrants as long-term, long-distance members, granting them dual citizenship or nationality. Consular officials and other government representatives are still responsible for protecting and providing for them. Often these states have become so dependent on remittances that transnational migrants’ contributions and participation are an integral part of national policy (Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller 2003). States such as El Salvador and the Dominican Republic fall into this category.

More common are *Strategic, Selective States* that encourage some forms of long-distance economic and political nationalism, but want to selectively and strategically manage what immigrants can and cannot do. Like transnational nation-states, these states also recognize the enormous political and economic influence migrants wield upon which they depend so strongly. They acknowledge that most migrants are unlikely to return but want to ensure their continued involvement, albeit with some degree of control lest migrants’ interests conflict with those of the state. In response, they offer partial, changing packages of privileges and services to emigrants, encouraging long-distance membership while stopping short of dual citizenship or nationality—permitting some level of external voting, organizing consultative councils, and allowing for representation in the sending country legislature. They walk a fine line between providing enough incentives to reinforce long-distance membership while not ‘over-serving migrants’ and making non-migrants resentful. India, the Philippines, Haiti, and Turkey have all tried to obtain support from populations abroad without granting full participation in their internal political activities).

A third type of state is the *Disinterested and Denouncing State*. States adopting this stance treat migrants as if they no longer belong to their homeland. Any

overtures they make toward their ancestral home are viewed as suspect, because migrants are seen as traitors who abandoned the cause. This stance was more common prior to the current period of globalization. Even today, however, when governments face vocal and powerful political opposition abroad, they may try to discredit emigrants' influence, such as the case of Cuba, a particularly interesting one given that the country depends so strongly on remittances (Eckstein and Barberia 2002; Cervantes-Rodríguez 2010). Slovakia also kept populations abroad at arm's distance following the Cold War, allowing them no representation within their new political system (Skrbiš 1999). Similarly, throughout the Arab world, it was only when nation-states became the predominant organizational model in the second half of the twentieth century that states became interested in their citizens living abroad (Brand 2006; Fargues 2013).

Many of these relations change over time. Migrants once seen as traitors become 'hermanos lejanos,' or distance brothers, particularly when their successes overseas enhance the homeland's geopolitical fortunes. India's status as a world player, for example, increased with the rising influence of Indian high-tech professionals. Much also depends on when migrants left and what they left behind. Some leave countries just starting the nation-building process, while others leave failed states just beginning the process of repair. Involuntary migrants who supported regime change will most likely be rejected by their homelands or want nothing to do with them. Collyer (2014) not only documents the long-standing role from afar of Algerian migrants in homeland affairs, but also shows how the Algerian state has grown increasingly skilled at neutralizing their influence. In the Lebanese case, the diaspora is so old and far-flung that doing politics across borders has become the norm (Tabar 2014).

2.2. *Social Remittances or Circulating Ideas, Practices, and Know-how*

The idea of *social remittances* calls attention to the fact that, in addition to money, migrants export both positive and negative ideas and a variety of values, behaviors, skills, organizational forms, and know-how back to their sending communities (cf. Levitt 1998; Boccagni and Decimo 2013; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). What they are exposed to and adopt in their countries of settlement is very much influenced by the ideas and practices they bring from their countries of origin, which, in turn, influences what they send back. This constantly evolving circulatory loop occurs when migrants return to live in or visit their communities of origin; when non-migrants visit migrants in receiving countries; or through exchanges of letters, videos, cassettes, e-mails, blog posts, and telephone calls. Individual social remittances occur through interpersonal exchanges between individual family members and friends, while collective social remittances are exchanged between individuals in their roles as organizational actors. Individual and collective social remittance circulation functions separately from, but reinforces and is reinforced by, other forms of global cultural circulation, such as the ideas and practices to which people are exposed through the mass media. They have the potential to scale up to other levels of social experience (i.e. regional- or national-level organizations) and to scale out to other domains of practice (i.e. a skill first used in a religious organization that then gets applied to politics).

Many social remittances are political – a point which we expand upon below. For example, Levitt (2001) spoke with Dominican migrants in Boston and return

migrants in the Dominican Republic about if and how their exposure to US politics changed their political attitudes and practices. Some of the things they learned in the USA included the importance of accountability and transparency in budgeting and management, that politicians and elites had to follow the same rules as the person on the street, and that elections could be relatively freer and fairer. Their negotiations with Boston city bureaucracy, when they organized sporting or fundraising events, taught them organizational and management skills and different strategic approaches. She later found that Irish immigrants said they got ‘politically educated’ about school reform and political candidacies by going to church in the USA – ideas they then remitted back to their home communities (Levitt 2007). In contrast, Brazilian and Ecuadoran immigrants were much less likely to participate in political activities organized by their sending governments, because they did not bring that same tradition of active political engagement nor did they trust the political system (Levitt 2007; Boccagni and Ramírez 2013).

2.3. *Shifting Identities and Allegiances*

Along with political ideas, practices, and projects, identities and allegiances also circulate within transnational social fields.

- (a) *Individual Identities* – Because the world is on the move, more and more people identify with and participate in several communities at once. They are simultaneously embedded in networks, institutions, and social relations in multiple sites, although not with equal frequency or intensity. Migrating does not produce a single linear shift from one identity to another, but instead the embrace of a set of fluctuating identities and allegiances that change in response to life-cycle events, elections, climatic disasters, and economic downturns. Immigrants and their children, who may never have identified with or participated in the politics of their ancestral home, in response to some external catalyst, become active protagonists in homeland politics at the same time that they participate actively in the places where they settle. They engage in clusters of multi-directional political activities that change in form and direction over time.
- (b) *Communities* – A similar process occurs in communities. When a large proportion of residents migrate, how communities imagine their borders and who is included within them often gets redefined. In many indigenous communities in Mexico, for example, where indigenous governance structures operate alongside Mexican state institutions, residents must fulfill certain communal responsibilities to maintain their ‘citizenship’ that previously required physical residence. By redefining how and where these tasks can be completed, and thereby allowing migrants to complete them, the community reimagines itself, what its membership requirements are, and how and where they are fulfilled (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2013). Hometown associations also reflect this redefinition across borders, because they normally involve some combination of migrant and non-migrant project conceptualizers, funders, and implementers working together across borders to support infrastructural improvements and social services in sending communities (Orozco and Lapointe 2004; Lacroix 2005).

- (c) *Nations* – These dynamics can scale up to the nation and are reflected in the official stances sending states assume toward expatriates that we described above. When leaders in Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Tunisia, Italy, or Croatia allow non-resident citizens to be represented in the homeland legislature, they officially redefine the nation as transnationally constituted to include emigrants living abroad (Itzigsohn 2012). The transnationalization of the nation gets codified in the provision of dual citizenship and the external vote, which allows and encourages non-resident citizens to continue to participate actively in their homelands. While ‘real voters’ are typically a minority, for a number of reasons and constraints, external voting is expanding across the globe, which not only legitimizes emigrants as political actors, but also significantly shifts the domestic political landscape (Lafleur 2013; Collyer 2014).

2.4. *Changing Institutional Arrangements*

Heightened mobility, sending states’ increased dependence on migrant remittances, and that more and more states are approving some form of dual citizenship or membership are just some of the factors transforming the boundaries and spaces of politics. Transnational politics does not mean the decline of the nation-state. Rather, states are shedding old functions and assuming new ones in response to large-scale movement and the super-diversity that it precipitates.

Because countries-of-origin need migrant remittances and sometimes depend on emigrants to lobby in favor of their economic or foreign policy interests, they provide and protect emigrants in ways not done so before. The Mexican Government, for example, under the auspices of the Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior (IME), runs health clinics at its consular offices, helps US school districts place students so they do not fall behind, and provides financial literacy training so that emigrants can establish their credit worthiness and be able to buy homes or cars (Sabates-Wheeler and Feldman 2011). It also issues emigrants a *Matricula Consular*, or alternative identification card that some state and local governments and financial institutions accept as proof of identity, thereby facilitating access to credit, bank accounts, and driver’s licenses. A good, healthy, integrated Mexican, the thinking goes, is good for the United States and for Mexico. While some critics see this enhanced role as infringing upon US sovereignty, others see the Mexican Government as stepping in where the US Government refuses to provide.

In return, and particularly needed in the face of the current global economic crisis, precarious employment, and weak, corruption-ridden institutions, sending-states rely on migrants to provide where they come up short. Because education, healthcare, and physical infrastructure are often inadequate, sending-governments look to migrants’ financial contributions and hometown association activities to fill in. To ensure this happens, states use strategies such as tax and investment incentives, lowering customs charges, and matching contribution programs. While supporters applaud the improved standard of living that non-migrants enjoy, critics see ‘migration-funded’ development as letting states off the hook and allowing them to not address the underlying socioeconomic causes of migration.

Receiving-states also take on new functions in response to migration. In this case, national welfare state policies double as migration policy because denying services

and blocking political integration may strongly encourage migrants to return home. Bommess and Geddes (2010) saw national social policies as political filters that thwarted migrants' efforts to achieve social inclusion and incorporated certain kinds of migrants while excluding others. Countries also use border control policies to manage the competing imperatives of attracting enough labor, fulfilling the commitments of refugee convention obligations, and pacifying an often xenophobic public. In this context, the barriers to social inclusion and political participation may be just too great.

As an alternative, or a complement, migrants also look to transnational political institutions and social movements. Roberts and colleagues, for example, found that Mexican migrants participated in transnational political activities to send political remittances and to obtain the symbolic recognition they were denied in the USA (Roberts, Frank, and Lozano-Ascencio 1999). Keck and Sikkink (1988) coined the term 'boomerang politics' to describe nationally based political actors who, lacking visibility and support, appeal to transnational networks of allies and partners to shame the state from outside its borders (see also McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001; Bob 2005). In the case of the Middle East and Gulf regions, these transnational political networks may map onto, complement, or impede comparable religious networks, thereby thwarting and/or enabling political activism at various sites inside the transnational social field.

3. Transnational Politics, Reconceptualized? The Difference Circulation, Geography, Portability, and Contact Make

The first section of this article described the moving parts of transnational politics. In this section, we elaborate further on conceptual tools for studying politics in motion. We dissect notions of circulation, portability, and contact with an eye toward building bridges between conventional theories and research on political transnationalism and the mobilities paradigm (Sheller 2014). We reference a variety of case studies on state-led policies directed toward emigrants, as well as on immigrant transnational mobilization and participation, to make our case.

3.1. Transnational Politics as Circulating Politics: Political Remittances Revisited

The notion of circulation, as a way to capture the multi-lateral diffusion of a variety of resources across borders, is becoming increasingly common among researchers using a transnational optic. It is not just central to studies of high-skilled migrants, where 'circulation' actually means a renewed interest in temporary migration (Agunias 2011). In research on transnational families, for instance, the 'circulation of care' is used to underscore that 'not just people but all kinds of elements create interaction and connectedness ... across distance' (Baldassar and Merla 2013, 45; Levitt 2013). In other words, a focus on circulation brings to light how the 'in-betweenness' at the core of transnational relations is constituted; in our case, the modes of cross-border diffusion of the material and immaterial resources which are the grist of transnational politics. Transnational politics is itself a form of circulation, if we define it as an open-ended process encompassing the diffusion of ideas, values, information, and skills via cross-border mobility that includes political content or is used to drive forward state-led and/or migrant-driven forms of political engagement.

The notion of political remittances helps to elucidate the drivers of transnational political circulation, beginning from the ground-up and focusing on migrant agency. It is a subset of the broader category of social remittances and distinct from the political effects of *economic* remittances. The specificity of political remittances lies less in ‘what’ they are – broadly speaking: migration-driven ideas, values and norms, attitudes, practices – than in their primary impact on the civic and political sphere. The few scholars attempting to define political remittances do so quite differently. Goldring (2004, 805) referred to political remittances as the ‘changes in political identities, demands and practices associated to migration.’ More recently, Piper (2009, 218) argued for a narrower definition of political remittances as migration-mediated ‘ideas about democratisation and practices of political advocacy.’ To be sure, the definitional boundaries of political remittances may be more or less extensive, and the contents themselves – *which* ideas, among *which* actors, and *why* – are far from obvious (in fact, they are *political* themselves).

A necessary next step is understanding how and when political remittances circulate and how the changing structure of opportunities in host and home countries, and the interactions between them, affects their diffusion. Until now, most research has focused on the *impact* of migration, or, in our case, on how political remittances affect pre-existing political arrangements. What is missing is a systematic exploration of the ways in which remittances flow across distances and boundaries, making connections between different social and corporate actors and thwarting others. Analyses must include not only migrants’ overt political mobilization, but also the collective initiatives that different catalysts, be they entrepreneurial, religious, charitable, or cultural, drive forward and when these are institutionalized and at what level (supra-national, intergovernmental, translocal, or state-diaspora relations). Importantly, then, the empirical field of transnational politics need not be reduced to political militancy *stricto sensu*.

At its most basic, a bottom-up map of this shifting field should include at least three circulatory channels: migrants’ travels back home, their cross-border communication practices, and the information networks that traverse co-ethnic communities (Pérez and Crow 2010). A more nuanced and dynamic understanding of political remittance exchange requires further elaboration, as we suggest below.

3.2. *Portability, Contact, and Beyond: Accounting for the Differential Circulation of Political Resources Over Borders*

That migration enables the circulation of a range of political remittances is a reasonable and widely shared argument. However, empirically studying *circulation itself* – not just its consequences for the polities of sending or receiving countries – presents significant challenges. The first lies in the huge diversity of politically relevant ideas, norms, and practices encompassed under the label ‘political remittances.’ Their ability to travel is also influenced by the differences between the ideas and practices that are moving and those that are already in place, on how familiar what is circulating is compared to the existing practices and standards. The circulation of remittances must also be understood in the context of the uneven distribution of ‘mobility capital’ – i.e. the skills, resources, and infrastructures available to the parties involved in the circulation process (Kaufmann, Bergman, and Joye 2004; Sheller 2014). The underlying mechanisms and trajectories of transmission are complex and elusive. How is it that the circulation of politically relevant resources occurs? What

factors affect the ‘stratified potential’ for grassroots political remittances to scale up and out – that is, to feed into broader processes of political transformation?

We propose approaching these questions by focusing on the following dimensions: (1) *Actors and channels* of circulation; (2) *Portability* of political remittances as well as types of *contact* between the actors involved; (3) *Permeability and configuration of the boundaries* between the political resources on the move and the social systems at which they are directed; (4) *Transnational infrastructures* which enable the selective circulation of political remittances and other migration-mediated resources to be politically capitalized upon.

3.2.1. Actors and Channels. Individuals involved in some form of collective action (e.g. ethnic associations, religious organizations, or political parties) are the primary carriers of political remittances. The socioeconomic position they achieve overseas, their social status in sending communities, and their aspirations to (re)gain prominence at home all influence the diffusion and reception of their ‘political messages.’ Both their credibility as carriers and their perceived success through migration affect how, if at all, political remittances ‘take off’ in home communities. In response, a selective set of politically relevant ideas and orientations are adopted along a continuum ranging from superficial interest, emulation, identification, and implementation

Far from irrelevant are, likewise, the channels through which potential political remittances circulate. The most straightforward are the interpersonal contacts cultivated by migrants themselves. However, more formal and controllable channels, such as the circulation of newspapers or videos of meetings, fundraising events, protests, or campaigning can also play a significant role. As Levitt’s (2001) fieldwork suggested, when people from a Dominican *campo* watched videos of mayoral debates in Boston, they saw different models of political campaigning. They also noticed that some candidates for office were people of color. Likewise, when the children of immigrants raised in the USA watched videos of election campaigns from their ancestral homes, they saw that politics is an integral part of everyday life in the Dominican Republic. How the rank and file of ‘non-movers’ react to political remittances is also affected by their access to the web, and their exposure to mass media more broadly. Long-distance political engagement, therefore, is more socially stratified and intermittent than other transnational practices, such as those related to family care (Boccagni 2012).

3.2.2. Portability and (Ways of) Contact. This brings us back to how distinct forms of political remittances – whether they be ideas, norms, or practices – feed into transnational politics. Some ideas and practices are clearly more portable than others, and some messages are more transposable or less likely to encounter resistance. For example, official norms and documents for registering voters travel with relative ease and are applicable in most settings. In contrast, political ideologies are more leaky, contentious, and open to interference, and are therefore, more vulnerable to changes as they travel. The frequency and intensity of contact between circulating and in-place elements, and between their carriers and recipients, also influence the impact of political remittances. If what migrants and non-migrants directly experience reinforces the same kinds of values and goals promoted by other external sources, then the pre-existing political culture is likely to be significantly affected. As Allport’s (1954) traditional contact hypothesis would predict, then, societal arrangements underlying transnational contact, exposure to personal interactions and value/goal

convergence between ‘senders’ and ‘recipients’ are critical to the diffusion and embedding of political remittances.

Gender relations are a case in point. If, hypothetically, emigrants convey the idea that gender equality is ‘better’ than gender complementarity, and if returnees enact this in their daily lives, their ‘cultural feedback’ would resonate with the progressive messages conveyed by (some) media and NGOs, as well as those promoted by conventions such as CEDAW, thereby collectively bringing about a political shift. Such convergences are not automatic or necessarily frequent, nor are they always positive. If former gang members, deported back to their homelands, fuel crime, they thwart civic participation or calls for greater accountability and transparency. Political remittances themselves may simultaneously include untenable contradictory stances. For instance, the idea that budgeting processes should be open to the public means that the reasoning behind what political leaders say and do should be more transparent too (which politicians may or may not be willing to do). Other flows cancel each other out, as when the pastor who feels he should encourage his immigrant members to become politically active then tells them they should participate, above all, in the Kingdom of Christ (Levitt 2007). Finally, other ideas and practices depend on each other symbiotically for survival. Achieving a more equal gender balance at home is a precursor for women to assume more active roles in political leadership.

3.2.3. Permeability of Relevant Boundaries. Portability and the vernacularization and adoption of political remittances also depend, at least in part, on their interaction with a variety of geographic, institutional, or symbolic boundaries that mark the difference between what is in place and what is new or different (Levitt and Merry 2009). Boundaries can be high because remittance adoption would require a major change and therefore entails significant barriers to entry, or they can be low when what comes to ground resonates strongly with what is already there. ‘Remittances’ travel is delimited by boundaries that are thick, creating tight, dense data packets which circulate easily and efficiently, or thin, creating leaky packages that move with greater difficulty because they are given to spillage. Ideologies written down literally travel in bounded packages, while spoken narratives are more likely to change as they are translated and retold over and over again. Some boundaries are only permeable for a short time or to a small amount of input, depending on broader political and economic circumstances – after which, potentially innovative (and often divisive) ideas and practices may fall out of fashion and disappear. Whether meant as external filters to remittance circulation or as limits of the remittances themselves, boundaries tend to be selectively permeable, only permitting political remittances with particular shapes and textures to transcend them. Developments during ‘the Arab Spring’ are evidence to our argument – just a few months after it began, the limited, piecemeal, and contradictory assimilation of counter-hegemonic political ideals was well underway.

3.2.4. Transnational Infrastructures. The structural and institutional bases of the social fields through which political remittances circulate also matter. How things travel depends upon the degree to which the underlying infrastructure facilitates or blocks them geographically, technologically, organizationally, and juridically. The ‘textures’ of space (LeFebvre 1991) or the different representational regimes and signifying practices in place within social fields also affect the scope and intensity of remittance circulation. So do the different regimes of governance operating within its various scales.

That said, some transnational spaces are clearly more stable and better institutionalized than others. The social fields connecting Mexico and the United States, Britain and South Asia, or Germany and Turkey have relatively long and consistent histories. In contrast, less developed and uncertain social fields, such as those plagued by civil unrest or climatic disaster, are more difficult to navigate. Not only is communication hampered, but what travels is also more likely to stray or encounter impediments along the way. In some parts of the world, political remittances circulate in the context of failed states and markets, while in others they are greeted by strong states and booming economies. Tibetans in India, Indonesians in Malaysia, or Turks in Germany – who until recently were denied access to citizenship despite generations of residence – lived in a state of semi-permanent unsettlement which shaped their political experiences in different ways than groups who were allowed and were willing to assimilate into their host societies.

Clearly, the geographies within which actors and objects travel are not virgin territories. The history and culture of a particular place influences how ‘remittances’ travel and whether they get adopted or not. The re-introduction of full democracy after an authoritarian period takes a different path than when democratic ideas are introduced into a place where there has never been democratic rule. Therefore, the potential to remit ideas, skills, and attitudes, and whether or not they get vernacularized and adopted, is strongly influenced by the deep historical and cultural structures in place.

In fact, the content, structure, and outcome of political remittances are analytically distinct from each other. Messages about political involvement across borders might circulate, political organizations that are structured across borders might be in place, and people might actually become involved in home or host-land politics, but these do not necessarily go together nor do they always produce transnational outcomes – felt simultaneously in the sending and receiving countries. That political remittances circulate, and that political life itself is increasingly structured across borders, does not automatically produce significant political effects in multiple places (nor does it necessarily aim to).

Once we analyze the determinants of remittance circulation, we must take the next step of analyzing the ways in which transnational (hence *dis*-embedded) political resources are *re*-embedded within particularized, locally oriented political arrangements, whether territorially based or not. What is striking in several forms of ‘diaspora mobilization,’ as Lyons and Mandaville (2012) point out, is the combination of non-territorial ways of building networks or coalitions and political identities, interests, and aims that are often ‘specific, parochial and territorially based.’ A helpful analytical move is to distinguish between the arena of transnational politics that is potentially akin to cosmopolitanism, as it opens up the community to the ‘progressive’ agendas of things like human rights, democratization, and immigrant diaspora activation, which drives forward ethno-local, place-based, and not necessarily progressive political stances. External voting, as we argue below, is also characterized by this tension between the often universalistic, democracy-oriented *discursive* claims and the typically more narrow domestic and national interests that drive absentee ballots from emigration states. Migrants’ political remittances are central to any attempt to bridge, successfully or not, this recurring gap between de-territorialized *means* (i.e. ways of doing politics) and re-territorialized *ends* (i.e. political agendas and expected results).

4. Our Conceptual Framework in Practice: External Voting as a Matter of Circulation

The lens of circulation can also be applied, in a promising and innovative way, to the literature on migrants' voting rights in home country elections or external voting – an organizational form and associated practices, based on an ideological approach that is also socially remitted. How is it that external voting rights and arrangements circulate across states, local political communities, political activists, and the relevant institutions? And what are the main actors, channels, and patterns of such diffusion?

4.1. *External Voting: The Emergence of a Transnational Research Object*

In spite of the fact that research on political transnationalism has evolved over two decades, emigrants' participation in home country elections – external voting – did not receive immediate scholarly attention. This is all the more surprising since it is one of the few readily available quantitative indicators of emigrants' ties to their home countries. No less than 27 countries adopted external voting legislation in the 1990s, followed by 29 additional countries in the 2000s (Collyer and Vathi 2007; IDEA and IFE 2007; Lafleur 2013). Political theorists, in contrast, spotted earlier on the growing relevance of the phenomenon, debating the legitimacy of external voting and its effect on migrants' political integration in countries of residence (Nohlen and Grotz 2000). In recent years, political scientists and migration scholars alike have turned their attention to external voting. Much of this work so far focuses on explaining the growing trend to enfranchise citizens living abroad (Escobar 2007; Rhodes and Harutyunyan 2010; Lafleur 2011) and the impact of external voters on home country politics (Calderón Chelius 2003; Itzigsohn and Villacrés 2008; Smith 2008; Boccagni and Ramírez 2013).

How external voting should be defined has been the subject of some debate. Should it include, for example, returning physically to the home country on election day to cast a ballot? Moreover, voter registration and ballot-casting practices vary so widely between countries that it is sometimes difficult to compare them. How do we compare Italy, where all nationals registered with consulates automatically receive a ballot at home and return it to the polling station by mail, with Bolivia, where only those emigrants living in four countries of destination are allowed to register, or with Morocco, where immigrants are only allowed to vote via a proxy of their choice who still lives back home? The type of election in which migrants can participate also varies greatly between, on the one hand, presidential elections in Mexico, where the emigrant vote represents only a small proportion of the voting age population, and parliamentary elections in Ecuador, where emigrants elect their own Member of Parliament who represents the country's extra-territorial constituencies.

Because the scope and shape of external voting is defined so differently worldwide, and because different disciplinary approaches have been brought to bear on its analysis, the literature on the topic remains fragmented and heavily dependent on case studies. Here, we consider external voting as produced by the circulation of norms, practices, and opinions. Its production occurs on multiple levels of the transnational social field which reinforce one another. At the level of the world polity, there is evidence of an ideological and institutional shift toward allowing citizens to

participate without residence and some form of participation by non-citizens where they reside. Increasing numbers of countries are changing their national policies to reflect this. And individuals communicate these ideas, practices, and organizational forms to one another in their roles as family members, friends, and organizational actors. Depending on how external voting is defined, we argue that there is a great deal of variation over whether it qualifies as a political remittance, its level of portability, and the actors and channels that influence its production.

4.2. External Voting as a Circulating Norm

In its most literal sense, external voting can be defined as a legislation by which citizens residing abroad are entitled to participate in home country elections. As the number of states adopting such norms has grown in the past two decades, the idea that this could result from some form of cultural circulation is appealing. In previous work, Lafleur (2013) hypothesized that the adoption of external voting legislation by sending states was determined by specific actors and political remittance channels such as: (1) the lobbying of sending country authorities by migrant associations and (2) the diffusion and acceptance of the idea, in those countries, that economic remittances are crucial resources. His comparison of the adoption of external voting in Mexico and Italy, however, found that while social remittances played a key role in putting external voting on the political agenda in the home country, they played a limited role in its eventual adoption and in determining the form and scope of this right. This is because homeland political institutions have diverging and sometimes opposing interests when it comes to enfranchising citizens residing abroad. As the number of home country institutions potentially affected by external voting is large (including political parties, electoral authorities, electoral courts, diplomatic and consular services ...), the risk is high that some will oppose emigrants' enfranchisement even when residents and emigrants support it. Similarly, once legislation is passed, reluctant institutions may be tempted to implement it restrictively in order to protect their political or bureaucratic interests.

We might also argue, though, that the adoption of external voting results from the circulation of norms between states that does not necessarily involve migrants. In her analysis of the reform of external voting legislation in different countries following the Arab Springs, Brand clearly underscores the role of in-country civil society (Brand 2014). These actors seized the context of regime transformation to request franchise extension to citizens abroad who had been previously marginalized. Similarly, states may be growing more confident that they can implement reliable external voting systems, as international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration, gain expertise in this field and are ready to provide support. In these cases, world politics and national factors prevail.

Circulation of norms between states also occurs through treaties and other forms of international cooperation. Instruments such as the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (which has not been signed by most large destination countries) recognize the need for emigrants to be enfranchised in home country elections, but lack the binding power to force reluctant states to follow this path. Informally, however, norms circulate and states take inspiration from other country's external voting legislation. Bolivian authorities, for instance, did not hesitate to ask Mexico's electoral authorities for advice on how to legislate external voting. As the right to the external

vote spreads worldwide, it is increasingly likely that states are inspired, pressed, or simply want to emulate each others' practices. Circulation and adoption, however, are highly constrained by each state's legal framework and, in particular, their constitution, which often make it difficult for non-residents to participate in elections. External voting, as a norm and as a set of practices, that is socially remitted by immigrants and/or authorities, faces clear barriers to circulation.

4.3. External Voting as a Circulating set of Institutional Arrangements and Practices

What happens when we consider external voting as a practice – a set of administrative and technical steps by which citizens residing abroad: (1) register as voters in home country elections, (2) cast a ballot from abroad, and (3) have their ballots counted by home country electoral authorities or their representatives abroad? Sending state authorities are obviously central actors in the technical organization of home country elections abroad. Enfranchising thousands – and sometimes millions – of citizens dispersed in different parts of the world is a task that no state can really do on its own. Whether votes from abroad are cast in person or by mail, this requires negotiations with authorities and other actors in destination countries to ensure the feasibility and fairness of electoral processes.

For example, to organize the constitutional assembly election that followed the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, Tunisian electoral authorities negotiated with local authorities in destination countries to find polling stations in areas where immigrants clustered. In Belgium, authorities let Tunisian migrants vote in a limited number of local schools and municipal buildings. In Canada, in contrast, authorities tried to prevent the election from happening because they felt it would import foreign conflict to Canadian territory. The practice of external voting is thus partly dependent on cooperation between sending state authorities and actors in the receiving societies.

Most importantly, however, the Tunisian case, like others, shows that envisaging external voting as a circulating practice cannot exclude immigrants from the picture. Because of the technical challenges posed by external voting, states frequently rely on immigrants and their representative organizations at different steps of the electoral process. The weakest – but most frequent – form of immigrant involvement consists of diffusion of information about voter registration. At the other end of the spectrum, immigrants themselves can perform electoral tasks as mandated by home country electoral authorities. This was the case of the representatives of the Tunisian electoral authority abroad, who were all immigrants, and who took on the task of registering voters, managing polling stations, and counting ballots. This form of immigrant involvement in home country electoral processes is an obvious example of political remittances: immigrants with experience in fair and reliable electoral processes in destination countries try to export practices they consider desirable to their home country.

For political remittances to circulate because of immigrant involvement in the administrative and technical organizations of elections abroad, two factors are crucial. First, migrants have to believe that the electoral process abroad will have some level of influence on home country politics. If elections are perceived as lacking transparency or as being symbolic events not aimed at giving them a voice, immigrants and their representative organizations are unlikely to support the expatriate electoral process or to help organize it. Second, immigrant engagement in such activities also depends on their human and social capital: engaging in registration

campaigns and organizing electoral processes requires literacy, education, spare time, and social ties to electoral authorities and/or immigrant organizations that act as gatekeepers.

4.4. External Voting as Circulating Values and Opinions

A third approach to external voting envisages the votes cast by immigrants in home country elections as a reflection of their values and opinions. When immigrants vote from abroad, it is perhaps the clearest expression of these values and opinions, which fall all along the ideological spectrum of home country politics. However, elections held abroad are often characterized by high levels of abstention, which itself can be interpreted as a sign of disinterest or opposition to the home country regime. Not voting might also be a way of expressing the belief that only residents most directly affected by the election outcome should participate. Abstaining, then, can be a political remittance, although the values or opinions it conveys are not always clear.

There is, however, some research on the political preferences of those immigrants who do vote from abroad and whether or not they reflect the changing values and opinions of immigrants in the host society. In work on Bolivian external voters, Lafleur and Sánchez-Domínguez (2014), tried to determine the factors driving migrants' political choices when voting or abstaining from abroad. They found that, like other social remittances, external voting preferences reflect the ideas and values immigrants bring with them when they migrate and those they are exposed to in destination countries. Variations in external votes, based on migrants' country of residence, provide evidence for this argument.

External voting, however, has unique characteristics that differentiate it from other social remittances. First, variations in external votes by country of residence should not necessarily be interpreted as a sign of exposure to different values. For example, it is still unclear whether the fact that Bolivian voters residing in Argentina voted for the left-wing governing party, while Bolivians in the USA voted for the right-wing opposition party, can be explained by differences in what they have been exposed to in their countries of settlement or differences in the demographic profiles of the people that moved to these two destination countries. Pre-departure values and ideas are also strong determinants of electoral behavior. Because these are so strongly engrained, exposure to new values and ideas abroad has little impact. Bolivian respondents who, despite years in the USA, still expressed racist attitudes toward indigenous minorities in Bolivia, exemplify this trend. Third, although they have contacts with media and relatives in their countries of origin, immigrants may have very little information about the political platforms of home country parties. As a result, they often ask their relatives in the home country for advice before voting. Because they cast their vote in support of parties they think will act in the interest of their relatives, the external vote may reflect home country opinions more than a response to circulating ideas or ideas they encounter in the host country (Lafleur and Sánchez-Domínguez 2014).

4.5. Towards a Conceptual Map for the Study of External Voting

This section argues that including: (1) actors and channels of circulation, (2) portability, (3) permeability, and (4) transnational infrastructures in the study of political remittances sheds new light on the study of transnational politics, whether at the

state or grass-roots level. Using this framework, we have demonstrated that external voting is a multi-dimensional concept that can refer to norms, practices, institutional forms, and opinions. Our examination of each of these dimensions revealed that external voting is, in part, produced by circulation between immigrants and their sending and receiving societies and is often enabled by circulation at other levels of transnational social fields. Nonetheless, as the study of external voting as a norm demonstrates, each actor plays a different role. In extreme cases, we can even envisage that states adopt external voting norms without consulting emigrants. Also, recognizing that external voting as political remittances can take different forms, we shed light on new channels of influence for immigrants, such as their cooperation with home country electoral authorities in organizing elections – another potential pathway through which political remittances may travel.

Portability is also a characteristic of external voting that shows high level of variation whether we consider it a norm, practice, or an opinion. While differences in legal frameworks make external voting a difficult norm to export from country to country without variations, it is highly portable as an opinion expressed about home country politics by citizens residing abroad. But as we have shown above, immigrants registering as voters from abroad, casting a ballot, and expressing preferences for home country political parties face different internal and external boundaries. Complexity of external voting procedures, relations with home country and receiving country authorities, tensions within the immigrant community as well as lack of human capital are all potential barriers to the exercise of voting from abroad, which means that the portability of the external vote differs considerably across settings.

Lastly, the density of the transnational infrastructure in part determines the strength of the political remittances emigrants send through their votes. As the case of Italy demonstrates, the long-standing ties between Italian political parties, the Italian diaspora, and sister parties in destination countries created the necessary conditions for full and intense electoral campaigns to happen across borders. These campaigns, however, were mostly stimulated by a specific policy that allows Italians abroad to stand as candidates in extra-territorial constituencies. The case of Mexico confirms the influence of norms on the emigrants' ability to use external voting as a channel to send political remittances. In spite of the social fields connecting their homeland with the USA, the restrictive nature of the external voting law has limited electoral participation to less than 50,000 voters and pushes emigrants to seek alternative channels to import political remittances.

5. Conclusion

Politics, as a result of migration-induced transnational practices, takes shape in transnational spaces within which ideas, people, technology, political forms, and strategies circulate at multiple levels. Our examples show how trends in global governance, national policy reforms, and individual and collective political remittances of all kinds inform and transform each other. Political remittances can potentially shape how migrants are incorporated into receiving country politics. What emigrants send back, in turn, affects the sending country's politics and political attitudes more broadly.

Moreover, political remittances have the potential to scale up and scale out. Once people's attitudes change with respect to one scale of governance (local), parallel changes may migrate to another scale of governance (national or even international).

Hometown associations, ethnic organizations, and diaspora networks may all contribute to these processes by expanding the reach of some political remittances beyond the national boundaries of origin and destination countries. The diffusion of external voting, while primarily a state-led process that occurs in (not necessarily sequential or complete) stages, can also be understood along these lines. It reveals that the circulation of political remittances can be a highly variable and intermittent process – one which is shaped by the structure of opportunities and the strategic interests of sending countries (and even, to some extent, of the receiving ones). The implementation of external voting laws, on the other hand, raises questions about the influence of political remittances on long-term sending states' engagement with citizens abroad. Indeed, though limited emigrant participation in home country elections is usually the norm, it can be interpreted in many different ways. If emigrants are perceived to be disinterested, external voting can serve as a justification for sending states to disengage or focus exclusively on strategic policies (e.g. remittances attraction policies). If, on the contrary, bureaucratic hurdles or lack of campaigns by political parties are blamed for limited emigrant turnout, elections held abroad can trigger further policy reforms, administrative reshuffling, and party reforms. This confirms clearly that the impact of political remittances, in the form of external votes, extends beyond their mere impact on electoral results.

Empirically speaking, migrants' transnational political involvement should be investigated in light of the evolving interaction between two sets of factors. On the one hand, there is migrants' social and economic position in the countries where they settle, which combines with their prior experiences as political actors. On the other hand, there is their orientation toward the homeland polity, which is shaped by the reach of external citizenship policies, by migrants' interaction with significant others left behind, and by their own affective and future investment in the home country. While the structure of opportunities in both sending and receiving countries needs to be taken into account more systematically, still more research needs to be done on what happens in-between: the selective way that political remittances circulate and their complex interactions with the political resources and institutions they encounter on the ground. We hope that the research questions and strategies we suggest here, and model through the case of external voting, motivate future studies on the emerging connections between cultural circulation and political transnationalism.

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