

Reviews

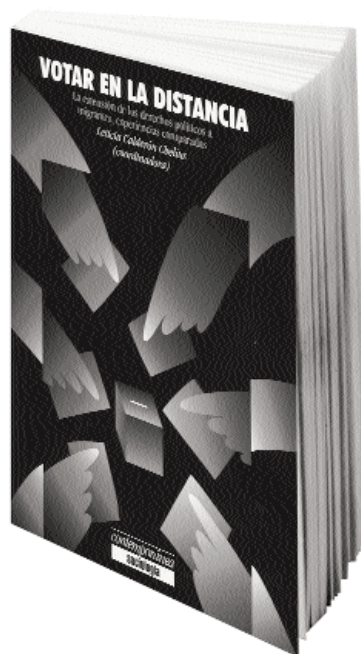
Votar en la distancia. La extensión de los derechos políticos a migrantes, experiencias comparadas

(Democracy in an Ever-Shrinking World
Immigrant Voting Rights Back Home)

Leticia Calderón Chelius, compiler

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Strictly speaking, *Votar en la distancia*, compiled and coordinated by political sociologist Leticia Calderón Chelius, is an important and provocative anthology of essays that discuss the extension of voting rights to diasporas of 17 immigrant-sending countries across Latin America, as well as Spain, Portugal, Canada and the United States. The potential and sometimes pivotal participation of immigrants in the political culture of their home countries can take many forms but within the transition to and reinforcement of democracy prevalent in so many countries, the right to vote easily earns its place as the most prominent of political rights. While the majority of these Latin American immigrant communities are located in the United States, increasingly they also live in Canada, Europe and in Latin America itself.

The diversity of case studies eminently demonstrates that extending voting rights to citizen-migrants residing beyond the national boundaries of their home countries varies greatly, and is largely a product of each country's political

history and culture and tradition of emigration. The transition to democracy and the particular political culture that it engenders in each immigrant-sending society also determine the ease with which immigrants have access to electoral processes in their home countries. While the gamut of political rights extended to immigrants will undoubtedly continue to be discussed and implemented in both the sending and receiving countries, the focus on voting in elections back home will intensify as transnational networks reinforce migrant populations' roles in their countries of origin through social networks, economic support and political participation.

Calderón Chelius categorizes the essays into groups according to the status of voting rights for diasporas. The first group of essays discusses those Latin American countries that have legislated and actually held elections abroad for nationals living outside the country. Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Honduras and Peru have all taken particular care to reinforce political relationships with their diasporas as part of a process to rid themselves of military dictatorships and ins-

titute meaningful electoral processes. Whether the goal is to symbolically integrate political expatriates, encourage investment and other economic ties with emigrants, or simply to open bridges with particularly important communities abroad, these societies have decided to incorporate their diasporas into national political life. In the case of Colombia, emigrants can even participate in elections as candidates.

The following section focuses on Chile, the Dominican Republic and Mexico, significant but different immigrant-sending countries that have legally approved extending the vote to emigrants, but delays in regulations have postponed conducting elections abroad. Political transitions in each country and a widespread awareness of maturing communities living ultramontane have fostered a recognition that geographical distance has not prevented emigrants from being participants in hometown politics. The very particular circumstances of the exodus from Chile transformed the politically charged emigrant community into vociferous and effective critics of the military dictatorship in international arenas, thus creating an obligation to include them in Chilean national life when the democratic transition was realized. Intensively studied as a highly transnationalized immigrant community, the Dominicans living abroad present a different profile. While Dominicans abroad have developed many strategies of fostering transnational political networks, a government crisis in Santo Domingo in 1994 forced a re-evaluation of their demands for dual citizenship and the right to participate in elections back home. Finally, a highly documented essay of the status of extending the vote to the Mexican immigrant community abroad authored by Calderón Chelius herself is particularly valuable since the analysis details the controversy the discussion has generated in Mexico and places the issue within the political chess game of the party system.

The ensuing section studies those immigrant sending countries that have not addressed the issue of extending voting rights to citizens living

outside national boundaries. While Salvadorans and Paraguayans living abroad have already openly demanded the right to vote in elections in their home countries, Uruguayan and Guatemalan emigrants are just now reaching a consensus that they also deserve the legislated right to vote in elections back home. The governments of these countries have not yet taken official positions regarding extending the vote to the citizens living abroad but organizations of each corresponding migrant community are already raising awareness within the diaspora and often demanding of the home governments that they be included in elections. El Salvador has already

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recognized the contributions that emigrants have made to their home country, although sectors of both Paraguay and Uruguay are extremely reluctant to include the diaspora in the political scene back home.

Finally, case studies outside of Latin America reflect strategies useful for comparison. Both Spain and Portugal extended the right to vote to emigrants living outside national boundaries during the 1970s as part of complicated political processes to move out from under the shadows of longstanding dictatorships toward democratic, participatory forms of government. Both societies openly recognized that emigration was largely a response to political repression; extending political rights to emigrants was a logical consequence of implementing a broadly-based participatory form of government. While the Spanish emigrant population is not large, some immigrant communities with regional attachments (Gallegos in

Buenos Aires, e.g.) acquire significance in voting abroad. However, the longstanding migratory tradition of Portugal means that today 40 percent of its citizens reside beyond its national boundaries, although Portuguese elections suffer from high abstentionism. Spanish and Portuguese emigrants can vote by sending their ballot through the mail.

The final section of the book treats the cases of Canada and the United States, countries that routinely incorporate the votes of citizens abroad through “absentee voting.” Both countries explored early the possibilities of seeking to include the votes of military personnel stationed away from their homes; interestingly Canada also included the Bluebirds, nurses stationed in Europe during World War I. Experiences of both countries showed that votes cast outside of electoral districts, be it nationally or internationally, would be no problem. Indeed, by the 1970s, the United States had incorporated absentee voting for those outside of their official electoral districts, or temporarily or permanently abroad. Concurrently, Canada legislated that Canadian citizens who had voted in the elections of another country, could still vote in Canadian elections, regardless of their residence, and later defined the right to vote as universal for people living outside their electoral districts. Incorporating absentee voting has not challenged the political cultures of either Canada or the United States,

but has expanded the voting franchise in efforts to respect the spirit of democracy.

Since the authors hail from many countries and disciplines, the studies use many perspectives and sources of information to present the data regarding each country, many with extensive bibliographies. Moreover, each section also includes useful basic statistical data about population, voters and percentage of the population actually living abroad. Chelius Calderón opens the volume with an extensive analytical essay about the short-term and long-term significance of studying the electoral systems of immigrant-sending countries, and the processes through which they evolve to include emigrants or not on their voters’ lists.

In conclusion, *Votar en la distancia* fills voids in many areas of studies. Students of Latin America, elections, political science, acculturation and migration will all find useful information not easily available in other formats, unique in presentation and practical in application. Since the question of extending voting rights to emigrant communities is evolving quickly, one would only wish that Calderón Chelius would repeat the study in 10 years to ascertain the future electoral relationship between body politic and the corresponding diasporas.

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