

Capítulo 3

The participation of Colombians in Spain at ‘home’ and ‘host’ country elections*

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Introduction

The electoral participation of migrants vis-à-vis the home and host countries, defined by some authors as “transnational suffrage” (see Emmerich in this volume), is receiving increased attention. Recent studies highlight how more and more states are extending political rights to their nationals residing abroad through the practice of ‘external voting’, often as part of broader strategies to strengthen links with their diasporas (see Calderón Chelius, 2003; Collyer and Vathi, 2007; Gamlen, 2009; IDEA/IFE, 2007; Nohlen and Grotz, 2000). On the other hand, the expansion of political rights to non-nationals within the borders of the nation-state (generally through ‘alien voting’), together with growing naturalisation rates, is boosting interest on the political attitudes and behaviour of immigrants in host societies (see De Rooij, 2011; Earnest, 2003, 2006; Hayduk and Wucker, 2004; Moya Malapeira and Viñas Ferrer, 2011).

But concern about these “two sides of transnational citizenship” (Bauböck, 2007: 2394) is not limited to the academic world; policy-makers, institutions and civil society at the local, regional, national, supranational and international levels have also shown increased consideration. Initiatives like the ‘Im-

* The data and discussion in this chapter is based on several research projects conducted in 2006-2010. These include doctoral research on the transnational political practices of Colombian migrants in the UK and Spain (funded by the ESRC), postdoctoral research on the political engagement of Latin Americans in Spain (funded by the *Junta de Andalucía* (principal investigator Dr. Escrivá) and JISLAC) and a British Academy-funded project on the transnational vote of Colombian migrants in the UK and Spain (led by Prof. McIlwaine).

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migrant Voting Project', for instance, promotes discussion of this issue internationally,¹ while for some time the European Union has been stressing the need for greater migrant civic and political participation in host countries.² In the Spanish context, in recent years there have been frequent media references to the electoral impact of Spaniards abroad on home elections, and to immigrant participation in local and home country polls. Finally, at the local level, initiatives like 'Cities of Migration' include a wide array of "good ideas in integration" relating to the civic and political participation of migrants.³

Although transnational suffrage is not new, it is undeniable that its relevance is rising as international migration flows and settled migrant populations, as well as democratic political systems, expand. One of the consequences of this is the emergence and/or consolidation of transnational political fields or spaces connecting migrants, political systems and civil societies across national borders in a "dense and systematic" way (see Emmerich, this volume).⁴ These new political spaces are also contributing to revise key classical political concepts, such as those of citizenship and/or nationality.⁵

In this chapter, I explore such issues in the case of recent migration from Colombia to Spain. These flows offer an ideal context in which to explore transnational suffrage for several reasons. First, Spain has become one of the main recipients of Colombian, and more generally Latin American, migration.

1 See <http://immigrantvoting.org/ivp/index.php?option=com_content&task=section&id=7&Itemid=32> (Consulted on 14/10/12).

2 One of the Common Basic Principles on integration adopted by the European Council in 2004 establishes that "The participation of immigrants in the democratic process and in the formulation of integration policies and measures, especially at the local level, supports their integration" (CBP 9) <http://ec.europa.eu/ewsi/en/EU_actions_integration.cfm> (02/10/12).

3 See <<http://citiesofmigration.ca/good-ideas-in-integration/connect/>> (Consulted on 14/10/12).

4 For more on the wider concepts of "transnational fields of action" or "transnational social fields", see Basch, et al. (1994), Guarnizo and Díaz (1999), Itzigsohn, et. al. (1999), Levitt and Nyberg-Sørensen (2004).

5 The terms "citizenship" and "nationality" are often used interchangeably, although in theory they do not mean the same. Generally, nationality is legal status linking a person to a sovereign state, while citizenship refers to the rights that a group of people residing in a territory hold. In this text, unless otherwise expressed, both terms will be used as synonyms to refer to "a legal status linking individuals to a territorial political entity" <<http://eudo-citizenship.eu/citizenship-glossary/terminology#.UHRo167EziQ>> (Consulted on 14/10/12).

Second, such flows are part of a larger picture involving centuries of human, economic, social, cultural and political exchanges between the two countries. Third, a significant proportion of Colombian migrants in Spain have acquired formal political rights, whether through naturalisation or via reciprocal treaties allowing foreign residents to vote in local elections. Finally, Colombian nationals abroad enjoy wide political rights with regard to the home country, as will be shown below. The next section focuses on the historical context that explains current migration flows from Colombia and the political rights that Colombians abroad have acquired. This will be followed by an analysis of the electoral participation of Colombian migrants in Spain, both vis-à-vis home and host country polls, based on research conducted by the author. The final section discusses some of the implications of this data for the debates on transnational suffrage and the emergence of new forms of citizenship.

1. Historical setting

Colombia does not have a long history of large immigration or emigration flows. The first notable emigration movements were directed towards neighbouring Venezuela, and date back to the 1930s. From the 1950s, the United States became the main recipient of Colombian migrants, with emigration rates growing steadily throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Pearce (1990) suggests that between 1970 and 1990, some 5 million Colombians moved abroad. However, it is only in the last couple of decades that population outflows reached such levels as to make Colombia one of the main countries of emigration in Latin America. As emigration rates accelerated, flows became more diversified and complex, both in terms of their composition and destination (Ramírez, et. al., 2010), as well as their causes and consequences.

Estimates of the current number of Colombians residing abroad vary depending on the source, but the most recent official figure is around 4.7 million (out of a total population of 46.5 million). Close to 35% of these migrants are supposed to reside in the United States, 23% in Spain and 20% in Venezuela, with the rest spread widely within the Americas and beyond.⁶ Most studies

6 Data taken from the web pages of the official programme *Colombia Nos Une* and the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE): <<http://www.cancilleria.gov>.

highlight that Colombians have emigrated mainly in search of employment and social mobility, or for family reasons, while political or security issues are a minor cause (Ramírez, et. al., 2010). However, the political and social violence that the country has experienced throughout its history has also played a significant role (directly and indirectly), with migration motives sometimes being very complex (Bermudez, 2011; Cruz Zúñiga, et. al., 2008; McIlwaine, 2005).

As emigration rates accelerated, Colombia started to develop an integrated policy towards its nationals abroad. The first programmes aimed at emigrants were based on the brain-drain approach, but by the 1990s initiatives began to assume a more 'diasporic' stance (Guarnizo, 2006). As part of this process, Colombians abroad have seen their political rights vis-à-vis the home country expand greatly, and the country stands out as "one of the democratic paradigms in the Latin American region" in this respect (Serrano Carrasco, 2003: 115; see also Guarnizo, 2006, 2001; Vono de Vilhena, 2006).

Colombians residing permanently abroad won the right to vote in presidential elections in 1961 (first exercised in 1962), a measure taken to allow members of the two main traditional political parties who had become exiled to participate politically. Later, the 1991 Constitution, adopted as part of wide efforts to reduce levels of violence and boost democratic participation, extended this right to all Colombians who happened to be out of the country at election time (permanently or not). It also allowed for dual nationality, and granted Colombians abroad the right to vote in elections to the Senate (first exercised in 1994) and to choose a representative of the diaspora to the Chamber of Representatives as part of a special electoral district (created in 2001 and applied during elections a year later). In addition, Colombian migrants have been able to participate in the mechanisms established for direct democracy, for instance by voting in the election of members for the 1991 Constituent Assembly and in referenda.⁷ As a result, to date Colombian migrants have participated in 13 presidential elections, have voted four times for the Senate and on three occasions have chosen a representative to the lower chamber.

co/footer/join-us/introduction> (Consulted on 17/06/12); <http://www.dane.gov.co/reloj/reloj_animado.php> (Consulted on 17/06/12).

7 The information contained in this paragraph has been taken mainly from Restrepo de Acosta (2007).

Despite this, external voting rates have been generally low and declining, as the research carried out in Spain shows.

Colombian migration to Spain in large numbers is a fairly recent phenomenon. Up until the end of the 1980s, only around 4,000 Colombians resided in the country, but ten years later they numbered more than 100,000 and by 2005 they reached over 280,000. According to the 2007 National Immigrant Survey, a large majority of Colombians residing in Spain arrived in the country between 1997 and 2001, with most of the rest migrating from 2002 onwards (Actis, 2009). Official data shows that by the end of 2011 there were some 244,670 Colombian nationals living in Spain, and an additional 128,533 people born in Colombia with Spanish nationality.⁸ The latter figure reflects the fact that it is relatively easy for Latin American migrants to naturalise,⁹ and means that a significant proportion of migrants originating in Colombia have acquired the same political rights as native Spaniards. In addition, following new electoral legislation, Colombian nationals who had been legally resident in Spain for at least five years, were able to vote in local elections for the first time in 2011.¹⁰

2. The 2006 and 2010 Colombian elections from Spain

This section analyses key aspects of the participation of Colombian migrants in Spain in home country elections, based on the secondary data available, as well as primary quantitative and qualitative data collected as part of the fieldwork conducted during 2006-2010.¹¹ First, it discusses practices related to

8 See provisional data from the municipal registries (Padrón Municipal) as of 1st January, 2012: <<http://www.ine.es/jaxi/menu.do?type=pcaxis&path=%2Ft20%2Fe245&file=ine-base&L=0>> (17/06/1012).

9 Latin American citizens residing legally in Spain can apply for Spanish nationality after two years, rather than ten years as demanded to most other foreigners (see OPAM, 2012).

10 Spanish legislation allows citizens from countries with reciprocal rights for Spaniards abroad to vote in local elections. These include EU nationals, as well as citizens from third countries with which Spain has signed treaties, among them Colombia (see Alarcón Requejo, 2009; Cebrián et al., 2011; Zapata-Barrero and Zaragoza, 2009).

11 The fieldwork carried out as part of the PhD research involved qualitative interviews with 40 Colombians residing in Spain (Madrid and Barcelona); as part of the postdoctoral research, an additional 23 qualitative interviews (in Madrid, Barcelona, Sevilla and Huelva)

active suffrage, and secondly it looks at other types of electoral participation related to elections, including passive suffrage.

2.1 Active suffrage

To be able to vote in home country elections, Colombian migrants must first register their *cédulas* (national identity document) at their respective consulates. Since the right to vote in presidential elections from abroad was first exercised in 1962, registered electors outside Colombia have gone from 3,227 to 415,118 (second round of presidential elections, 2010) (McIlwaine et al., 2011; Restrepo de Acosta, 2007). For the 2010 elections, the Colombian government authorized registration for nationals abroad in 195 places in over 50 countries, with the majority of voters being in the United States, Venezuela and Spain. Despite this expansion, during the last three presidential polls (for which there is detailed information), voter turnout from migrants went from a maximum of almost 65% in 2002, to around 23% in 2010 (second round), while voting rates inside Colombia have remained more or less stable (see table 1).¹²

Table 1:
Registered electors and turnout in Colombian presidential elections (2002-2010).

<i>Election</i>	<i>Registered electors abroad</i>	<i>Polling stations installed</i>	<i>Turnout abroad</i>	<i>Registered in-country electors</i>	<i>Polling stations installed</i>	<i>Turnout inside country</i>
2002	165,631	534	64,6%	24,208,311	60,829	46,5%
2006	319,045	747	38,0%	26,731,700	56,258	45,0%
2010 (1 st round)	415,118	948	25,4%	29,983,279	72,727	49,3%
2010 (2 nd round)	415,118	948	22,6%	29,983,279	72,727	44,3%

Source: Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, Colombia. <http://www.registraduria.gov.co/Informacion/elec_2011_histo.htm> (17/07/12).

and a survey of an additional 400 Colombian migrants (in Madrid) were carried out.

12 Registration and turnout tend to be lower for congressional elections.

In the 2010 presidential elections, Colombian migrants in Spain registered some of the lowest turnout rates: of the slightly more than 55,000 registered voters,¹³ only around 16% voted in the first round, and less than 14% did so in the second round. Considering the three main countries of reception for Colombian migrants, turnout was slightly higher among nationals voting from Venezuela (15% in the second round) and more than double within the migrant community in the United States (29%) (see table 2). One of the main explanations for the low rates of participation in home country polls among Colombians in Spain could be the fact that this is a very recent migrant flow; in addition, the geographical distance between home and host countries could difficult communications and engagement. This would help explain the higher turnout registered in the United States (but not in Venezuela). Nevertheless, voting turnout was also considerably higher in other European countries with much smaller but equally recent communities of Colombian migrants, such as France, Belgium or Germany. Therefore, other factors should be taken into account.

Table 2
 Rates of participation in the 2010 (second round) presidential election
 in Colombia from migrants in main host countries.

	<i>Spain</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Ger- many</i>	<i>Bel- gium</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>USA</i>	<i>Can- ada</i>	<i>Vene- zuela</i>	<i>Ecu- dor</i>
Reg. voters	55,095	7,101	5,129	2,150	1,004	3,309	154,971	9,414	116,400	15,915
Total votes (%)	13.8	19.4	27.9	22.7	29.4	14.7	29.3	24.0	15.3	26.4

Source: Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil <<http://www.electionguide.org/>> (Consulted on 5/6/2011).

The survey conducted in Madrid in 2010 shows that the main explanations for the low levels of participation were ‘lack of interest’ on the part of migrants,

13 As the data shows, registration rates are also quite low.

together with bureaucratic problems or lack of information. By contrast, those Colombians who voted from abroad did so for several reasons, such as their desire to return one day to their country of origin, to improve the situation in Colombia or to increase the political profile of the diaspora, as well as the idea that voting was a responsibility. Regarding obstacles to voting, the lack of interest on the part of some migrants became evident during the qualitative interviews. However, this needs to be qualified, since in many instances, it was related to other factors, such as lack of information, bureaucratic problems, living more or less isolated from other Colombian migrants (not feeling part of the Colombian ‘community’ abroad or in Spain), frustration with things not changing or improving, and negative perceptions of Colombian politics:

“I never had any interest in registering my *cédula* at the consulate, and when I decided I wanted to do it, it was too late... I have the *cédula* but I am not registered to vote... because they promise things and they don’t comply, because we always are in the same situation or worse...” (Colombian woman, Madrid, 2010).

“I never liked politics, nor in Colombia, when I was there, and even less here... I don’t like to be involved in politics, I have never liked it... in Colombia I managed to vote once... but they are all liars, so no, we don’t vote, and here in Spain even less” (Colombian woman, Madrid, 2006).

The interviews conducted in Madrid with embassy officials around the 2006 elections also emphasise the fact that this is a very recent migrant flow, and that in general, migrants were preoccupied with their economic wellbeing and had no time to think about anything else. In response to this, the authorities were making concerted efforts to increase participation rates. However, in the opinion of quite a few migrants, these efforts were not enough, and they blamed the lack of official information, the bureaucratic processes put in place, or the distance they had to travel to consulates in order to register and vote for their lack of participation. As ‘Sandra’,¹⁴ a 28-year old Colombian woman explained during the fieldwork conducted in 2010, if you live in Madrid it is easy to go and vote, but if you have to come to Madrid all the way

14 All names used are pseudonyms, unless specified.

from Bilbao “no one will go to vote”. Interestingly, among those respondents who said they had never voted in Colombian elections when they lived there, lack of interest was also the main reason for it, often related with a mistrust of the political system.

On the other hand, during the fieldwork in 2010, a total of 200 Colombian voters were interviewed (100 on the day of the congressional elections, and another 100 on the day of the first round of the presidential poll). In general, they were more likely than non-voters to have higher education levels, work in professional and managerial occupations, be married and have naturalised or hold legal residential status. The issues of length of residence and level of general contact maintained with the home country seem to be ambivalent, since the research found that voters were more likely to have resided in Madrid for less time than non-voters and to travel to Colombia more often, but were less likely to send remittances (see McIlwaine et al., 2011). Also important to consider is the fact that voters were more likely to be involved politically or civically in other ways (apart from voting). As mentioned above, a significant number of the Colombians who participated in the elections did so due to some sense of responsibility or a desire to change the situation in the home country:

“Yes, I am interested in my Colombian politics because, even though we are far away, we can’t forget our characteristics, our co-nationals, and it is my country that gave me life and youth and everything” (Colombian woman, Madrid, 2010).

“I don’t believe in the country any more. I vote because I have to, because change is needed” (Colombian woman, Madrid, 2010).

In this case, there were also coincidences in the main reasons why Colombians voted, whether from abroad or while living in the home country, since among those who had previously voted in Colombia, a majority said they did so to “support ideas”, including the need to support the democratic system and to exercise their rights as citizens, while less mentioned they voted to support a political party or a specific politician.

Regarding the political orientation of Colombians abroad, a comparison of the 2006 and 2010 polls shows interesting differences. While in 2006 there was

Table 3:
 Votes for the main candidates in the 2006 and 2010
 Colombian presidential elections.

	<i>Votes for Uribe (2006) %</i>	<i>Votes for the PDA (2006) %</i>	<i>Votes for Santos (2010) %</i>	<i>Votes for Mockus (2010) %</i>
SPAIN	77.8	15.1	56.0	41.9
UK	74.7	18.4	47.9	50.2
FRANCE	47.3	40.7	25.0	72.6
GERMANY	53.0	33.9	21.6	76.2
BELGIUM	52.6	38.5	32.2	64.1
ITALY	73.4	15.3	44.8	51.7
US	90.7	5.2	82.0	17.2
CANADA	72.7	19.3	48.7	49.0
VENEZUELA	78.6	16.3	85.3	14.1
ECUADOR	81.8	7.3	71.7	26.7
TOTAL ABROAD	84.2	10.1	74.2	24.7
TOTAL COLOMBIA	62.2	22.0	74.7	27.5

Source: *Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, República de Colombia*

<<http://www.electionguide.org/>> (Consulte on 5/6/2011); <<http://www.registraduria.gov.co>>
 (Consulted on 12/03/07).

overwhelming majority support for the official right-wing candidate (Uribe), in 2010 this support (this time around for Santos) was more moderate. On both occasions, the official candidate obtained a greater percentage of the external vote than they did inside the country, but in 2010 the main opposition candidate (Mockus, from the Green Party) won a majority in several European countries (see table 3). In 2006, the main opposition candidate (from the left-wing PDA) only got close to achieving a majority of the external vote in France. As the table below shows, there is some sort of political split between the Colombian communities settled in Europe, and those Colombians voting from the United States and neighbouring countries (Venezuela and Ecuador),

since in the latter the support for Uribe and Santos was much higher. This could be due largely to differences in the main characteristics of the migration flows going to one country or another, but also to the impact of the electoral campaigns in each place (see below).

In Europe, Spain was the country where a greater percentage of Colombians voted for the official candidate (both in 2006 and 2010), which would give the impression that the Colombian community there is more conservative politically. However, regarding political affiliation, the survey conducted in 2010 shows that only 11% of Colombians considered themselves to be right-wing, 21% said they were centrist, and 28% left-wing, while 36% did not know (many found the issue of political alignment difficult to pinpoint). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that in general identification with individual politicians was much higher than with specific parties, which indicates that there is the potential for large mobilization of voting power between different parties or ideological positions.

2.2 Other types of electoral participation

The participation of Colombian migrants in home country elections involves more than the act of voting (or not). They can engage in many other ways, such as taking part in election campaigns, as members of political parties or even as candidates to represent the diaspora. Generally, participation in these activities tends to be even lower, as other studies have shown (see Guarnizo, 2008, for research on Colombians in London). However, as the Colombian political parties have become more aware of the potential of the external vote, their presence (actual or virtual) among the largest migrant communities abroad has become more visible, especially around election time. The traditional Liberal and Conservative parties have had a established presence among the largest Colombian communities in the US since the 1980s, playing an important role in fomenting the political participation of migrants there vis-à-vis both the home and host countries (see Escobar, 2005; Guarnizo, 2001; Guarnizo and Sánchez, 1998; Hazán, 2001; Serrano Carrasco, 2003). Their protagonism in Europe has been much less, probably a reflection of the fact that the Colombian communities there are more recent and less important in numerical terms (with the main exception of Spain), and also the greater physical distance

from Colombia.¹⁵ However, in the case of the newer Colombian political movements, the vote from abroad could become more significant, and as such there seems to have been stronger efforts to court it, even at the European level.¹⁶ This was highlighted by a representative of the left-wing Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA) party interviewed in Madrid in 2006:

“As you know, we represent a specific sector of Colombian society, what we call the democratic left... for Polo members, Colombians abroad are equated with a group of people, of co-nationals, who had to leave the country in many cases because of the armed conflict... This explains why the party is so sensitive to the theme of migration... Also, electorally speaking, the number of Colombians abroad represents a significant potential... In the case of Spain, the Colombian community is very important, in terms of numbers it carries an important weight... In addition, Colombians here play a political role. Those who have kept their political work have built important relations with the European political world, with political parties here, with social movements, associations, NGOs, migrant groups, and so on. And these relations represent a very valuable asset for the political struggle we carry out in Colombia”.

During the fieldwork in Spain on 2010, the presence and influence of the Colombian political parties was much more visible in the case of the more recently created movements. For instance, upon approaching the Colombian consulate in Madrid on the day of the presidential poll, it was possible to see clearly identified supporters of the Christian party MIRA, the green Partido Verde or Compromiso Ciudadano por Colombia (and independent movement formed around the candidature of Sergio Fajardo) directly or indirectly seeking to muster some last minute votes, something that consulate authorities were trying to discourage (see figure 1). Despite this, of the Colombian migrants surveyed, 26% said they did not identify with any Colombian party, 19% chose the Liberal Party and another 14% the ruling Partido de la U, while 16% identified with the Green Party and 10% with MIRA (Conservatives and the PDA were only favoured by around 5% of respondents). However, while this refers to

15 A not-very exhaustive analysis of the 2006 electoral campaign abroad by Loboguerrero (2006) hardly mentions any activities by some of the main presidential candidates in Europe, and only a little more in the case of the US. <http://www.terra.com.co/elecciones_2006/reportaje/25-05-2006/nota285985.html> (Consulted on 16/07/07).

16 For more on recent changes to the party system in Colombia, see Giraldo (2007).

Image 1:
 Sympathisers of presidential candidate Fajardo outside
 the Colombian consulate in Madrid on election day, 2010.



Source: The Author.

both voters and non-voters, those who voted were more likely to identify with MIRA and the PDA. In addition, around one-quarter of interviewees said they were not following the election campaign at all, while slightly less than a third were following it intensively. The internet was by far the most common medium for Colombians in Madrid to obtain information about the campaigns, followed by the press and television. “Magdalena”, a 33-year old woman from Bogotá explained that she had searched the internet for information on the proposals of the different presidential candidates and after following Mockus’ (Green Party) campaign in Spain on Facebook, she had joined a group of people seeking to boost support for this candidate among migrants. Around 22% of Colombians in the sample said they had been approached from Colombia to try and get them to vote, whether by parties, friends or family, and a majority of were contacted by email or in person, while less were contacted using more traditional methods such as the post or telephone.

Colombians abroad, including those settled in Spain, have also participated in the election of their own representative to the lower chamber, and have

stood up as candidates of the diaspora themselves.¹⁷ In the 2006 election, out of 32 candidates, MIRA obtained the second largest percentage of votes, after the official Partido de la U candidate (a resident in Florida). The total percentage of valid votes for the special international district was only 37%. In Spain, out of a potential electorate of some 34,000, only 13% voted, with the MIRA candidate obtaining a majority of votes (43%). During the fieldwork conducted in Madrid and Barcelona in that year, three Colombian candidates to this *circunscripción* were interviewed. At least two of them had previous experience of running for this seat or of supporting another candidature. Their electoral campaigns, although based in Spain, were coordinated with diaspora communities in the US, Venezuela and Mexico in a truly transnational manner, and their manifestos focused both on demands for greater political, economic and social rights in Colombia (“emigrant politics”), as well as on improving their conditions in the host society (“immigrant politics”).¹⁸ However, they also tackled wider issues to do with the international relations of Colombia and the need to find a solution to the armed conflict. As one of the candidates, a lawyer with ample experience of community work, said:

“the idea is to choose a representative who knows not only about migration, but also has the necessary parliamentary initiative in Colombia to fight for better conditions, not only for migrants abroad, but also inside the country, since our families are back there”.

In the 2010 congressional elections, at least 11 electoral lists were competing to represent Colombians abroad in the lower chamber. Amid allegations of fraud and some delays in the announcement of the results, the candidate that won this seat with just over 9,000 votes was Jaime Buenahora, representative of the U Party and resident in the United States (the MIRA candidate

17 Colombia is one of the very few countries that allow their nationals abroad to elect their representative to Congress, in this way “enabling promotion of their own legislative agenda and direct intervention from an overseas viewpoint in the debate and processes of political decision making on topics of national interest.” (IDEA, 2006: 5).

18 According to Østergaard-Nielsen (2003: 762-763), the first refers to when “migrants work towards the institutionalization of their transnational status as residents abroad who are economically, socially and politically engaged in their country of origin”, and the second, to “the political activities that migrants or refugees undertake to better their situation in the receiving country”.

came once again second).¹⁹ These results led to renewed demands on the part of Colombians abroad for a reform of the international *circunscripción* so that other segments of the diaspora (and not just the US-based electorate) are represented at 'home' (see Bermudez et al. in this book).

3. Colombian participation in Spanish politics

Although much of the literature on the political integration of migrants in host societies seems to emphasize their low levels of interest and/or participation, this issue has attracted increased interest in recent years. However, in the case of Spain, there is hardly any information about it, especially with regard to migrant engagement in electoral processes or party politics.²⁰

As mentioned earlier, Colombians residing in Spain not only have the opportunity to participate in elections in the home country, but also in the host society. However, this does not apply to all migrants, only to those who have naturalized (have acquired Spanish nationality), and since 2011, also those Colombians with stable residency in the country (can vote in local elections). The survey carried out in 2010 showed that a significant proportion of Colombian migrants in Madrid are interested in Spanish politics (almost half of the sample), while only 21% said they had no or very little interest. When asked whether they were more interested in Spanish or Colombian politics, around one-sixth preferred local politics, while a majority, 40%, responded they were interested in both. Not surprisingly, length of residence in the host country and acquisition of Spanish nationality were related positively to interest in Spanish politics, although other factors came up as also important in the qualitative interviews. 'Elena', a refugee woman interviewed in Madrid in 2006 explained that although she remained interested in Colombian politics, it was not easy to keep up her political engagement with the home country from abroad due to the physical distance. This is why she had sought to channel

19 The information contained in this paragraph comes from the websites of *Conexión Colombia* and *Votebien.com*.

20 The scant literature on this has concentrated mostly on more 'informal' types of political participation, such as through migrant associations (for the Latin American case and some general references, see Moraes et al., *forthcoming*).

her political interests towards a left-wing Spanish political party instead. In addition, Elena argued that she now had a daughter born in Spain, whom she wanted to learn about the political history of both her country of birth and that of her parents.

Regarding the actual participation of Colombian migrants in the Spanish elections, or their involvement with political parties in the host country, the information available is very limited. Colombians are among those migrant groups more likely to acquire Spanish citizenship; of the estimated 373,203 people of Colombian origin (with Colombian nationality or born in Colombia) currently resident in Spain, around 34% have Spanish nationality. As a result, a significant proportion of the Colombian community enjoys full political rights in the host society, and according to the results of the survey conducted in 2010, most of them exercise these rights (almost half of the sample said they had voted in the Spanish general elections, and 38% had participated in local polls). In addition, among those Colombian respondents who could not vote in Spanish elections yet, 62% said they would do it if given the opportunity. Nevertheless, after Colombian residents (and not just those with a Spanish passport) were given the right to vote in municipal elections for the first time in 2011, only 12,632 registered in the electoral census, and there are no figures on how many actually voted. Such low levels of participation, which affected the migrant community in general,²¹ has been largely blamed on the fact that this is a very recent law and that there was quite a lot of disinformation about it, as well as lack of sufficient time to register and other bureaucratic hurdles.²²

Although there were concerted efforts on the part of the authorities and migrant organizations to boost participation ahead of the elections, many migrant representatives have complained about the lack of interest that Spanish political parties have shown up until now towards the political integration of migrants. Yolanda Villavicencio, a Colombian woman with a long experience of involvement with the migrant movement in Spain (former director of AESCO, a large migrant organizations), was the first migrant of Latin American or-

21 Less than half a million foreigners were registered in the electoral census prior to the 2011 municipal poll, including EU citizens and those potential voters from third countries that had acquired the right to vote in local elections.

22 For some media references on this, the reader can see: <<http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2011/05/22/madrid/1306076328.html>>, <http://elpais.com/elpais/2011/01/25/actualidad/1295947035_850215.html> (Both consulted on 15/10/12).

igin to occupy an elected post in 2007, after she was elected to the Madrid assembly with the Socialist Party. However, as ‘Jacinto’, a Colombian man interviewed in Seville in 2008 argued, it was difficult to get involved politically since “there are no opportunities, no political party accommodates immigrant people”. Nevertheless, as a young Colombian man interviewed in Madrid in 2006 showed, despite all these obstacles, for those who consider voting as a duty, there are other ways to fulfill it:

“I have Spanish citizenship. During the last elections I was already Spanish, but had not received my identity card yet, which meant that I could not vote. But my boyfriend, with whom I lived for five years, was not interested in voting, so I asked him to vote for me. On other occasions, friends have also voted for me. I find it incredible that people do not vote if they can, it is a shame. Since they were not voting, I asked them to do it for me and told them who to vote for”.

Despite this perceived lack of interest on the part of the main political parties in Spain, the little research that has been conducted on this issue suggests that in the future party efforts to attract this new electorate will be key to explain the migrant vote (Morales and San Martín, 2001). The survey conducted in 2010 suggests that a majority of Colombians in Spain support the centre-left PSOE party, with 17% stating that they identified with the conservative PP and a smaller minority choosing smaller parties; around 11% of respondents said they supported no-one party. These results coincide with other similar research with the migrant population in Spain, which suggests that a lot remains to be done in order to give migrants the opportunity to participate politically in the host country in equal conditions as the native population.

4. Implications for the debate on transnational suffrage and citizenship

The empirical material detailed in the previous sections offers some pointers as to how concepts like suffrage and citizenship or nationality are evolving in the context of the emergence of transnational political fields of action linked to international migration. Despite the reservations that transnational suffrage still raise among academics, policy makers and civil society in general, many of the Colombian migrants who participated in this research found no contra-

diction in being able to exercise their political rights as citizens in more than one country, whether they are nationals of those countries or not. As a matter of fact, the migrant organizations representing Latin American migrants in Spain researched often engaged in activities aimed at boosting the social, civic and political participation of migrants both in the home and host countries (see Moraes et al., *forthcoming*). In addition, quite a few studies have now demonstrated that one type of participation does not necessarily prevents the other, but can actually support it, i.e. that those migrants who are involved politically in the home or host country, are more likely to be engaged in the other as well (see Portes and Rumbaut, 2006).

Although in the case of Colombian migrants residing in Spain this transnational participation might be made easier by the fact that they can hold more than one nationality, the research in Spain also found that for many migrants, the concept of citizenship, especially in the context of being able to participate politically in a given society, went beyond what nationality (formally belonging to a state) means. For quite a few respondents, citizenship meant participating and belonging to a society or community. Having said this, it is also important to point out that being a national of a country other than the one of birth does not automatically confer a sense of belonging. For some Colombian migrants, acquiring a Spanish passport can be seen merely as a practical step oriented to have certain facilities:

“It is a necessity because it lets you travel and work but I don’t feel proud to have it... I would never say I am Spanish as others do and forget where they come from; that is mediocrity. Denying your nationhood is like denying your mother.” (Colombian man, Madrid, 2010).

These findings highlight, on the one hand, how transnational suffrage and political engagement on the part of migrants is giving way to new, “hybrid” modes of political incorporation (see Guarnizo, 2006) that go beyond traditional conceptualisations, and in which nationality, citizenship and belonging combine in different manners. For instance, rates of participation in home country elections from abroad might be low, thus limiting the political influence of migrants, but at the same election day can serve as symbolic events that help migrants sustain feelings of “patriotism”, diminish their homesickness and “reproduce their social milieu abroad” (Boccagni, 2011: 76). However,

it is also important to realise that this does not necessary lead to greater political participation or the strengthening of democratic systems. The precarious situation in which many international migrants find themselves, together with the fact that many of the transnational political rights are still granted at the level of the nation-state (i.e. only if a person is recognised as a national or citizen of a country(ies)) and the bureaucratic and other obstacles that many migrants face to be able to exercise their transnational voting rights, means that actual levels of political participation are still low (see, for instance, Lafleur, 2012, on the Bolivian external vote; Lafleur and Calderón, 2011, for a study of the Mexican case). Thus, whether they have or not formal political rights, the reality is that many international migrants still remain politically disenfranchised.

Despite this, the expansion of transnational political rights and international migration flows is having certain influences, not only for migrants, but also in terms of the emergence and/or strengthening of transnational political fields with the potential to link political systems and civil societies. This might seem a normal consequence of living in an increasingly globalised world. On the other hand, it remains to be seen how this growing transnationalisation or globalisation of politics is affected by the current economic crisis.

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