## Chapter 3: Regime change in Mexico and the transformation of state-diaspora relations

Jean-Michel Lafleur, University of Liège, Belgium.

### Introduction

Mexico has attracted attention among academics, civil servant and politicians interested in home state policies towards their emigrants. In some instances, its policies have even been copied by other governments. Many reasons —which we will discuss in this chapter— may explain this interest in Mexico: the size of its population abroad, its concentration in one destination country, the economic impact of migrants on the home country and the rapid development of most of these policies over the last two decades. Indeed, while Mexican authorities’ expertise in this field is acknowledged today, Mexico also used to be known for its negative discourse towards emigrants and its absence of policies.

This chapter will briefly describe the historical evolution of Mexican migration to the United States and how it has been managed by both governments. It will also underline the main characteristics of contemporary emigrants, then turning to analysis of the policies and institutions directed towards emigrants that have been implemented by Mexican authorities on the national and sub-national level. Due to the number of policies and institutions that have been set up in recent years, attention will be focused on those that are most politically relevant: the Paisano program, the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad, the 3x1 matching fund program, the legislation on dual citizenship, the consular identity card, the creation of the Institute for Mexicans Abroad (IME) and its consultative council (CCIME) and lastly, the right to vote from abroad. Over the course of this analysis, it will be shown that the transformation of Mexico’s attitude towards its emigrants is strongly connected to the evolution of its political regime. For this reason, the last part of the chapter will discuss the evolution of power relations between the emigrant community and the Mexican state through the lens of the external voting debate, which illustrates both the influence of the community and the fear it creates among certain domestic political actors.

### History and geography of migration

*A brief history of Mexican migration to the United States*

Due to its proportion and its duration over time, along with the fact that it is intertwined with the history of both the United States and Mexico, summing up Mexico’s international migration history is an arduous task. Even before Mexicans started to cross the border in large numbers, people found themselves foreigners because of border changes. With the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War in 1848, a large part of the Mexican territory moved under U.S. sovereignty. At the time, around 75,000 of the 100,000 Mexicans residing in the former Mexican territories opted to become U.S. citizens (the other option being to move south to Mexico). These people are often considered the first generation of Mexican migrants to the U.S. (Cano and Délano 2007, 698).

International migration as we know it today did not happen during the 19th century because the poorly demarcated border allowed back and forth movement. The importance of controlling the border became more evident for authorities on both sides with the U.S. Civil War and the 1910 Mexican Revolution. In addition to the progressive tightening of border security, restrictive policies in the US — such as the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) — threatened the booming economy of the West and created a demand for Mexican workers. U.S. employers therefore turned to private labour contractors who, through a system known as *el enganche*, recruited Mexican workers by telling them tales about the good working conditions waiting for them up north (Durand 2000, 21). The situation repeated itself with World War I and the restrictions on Eastern European migration. Despite the absence of a bilateral agreement between the two governments, Mexican authorities nonetheless tried to make sure that the rights of their citizens were being respected (Durand 2006, 31-33).

While U.S. economic and political factors pulled early Mexican migrants to the United States, Mexico’s domestic politics have been another decisive factor. Between 1876 and 1911, Mexico was ruled by President Porfirio Diaz, whose effort to modernize Mexico’s economy happened at the expense of rural areas. The *campo*’s crisis stimulated internal migration to Mexican cities until 1910. During the revolutionary decade (1910-1920), violence encouraged around 200,000 citizens to seek refuge in the U.S. (Massey, Durand and Malone 2002, 30).

The 1920s witnessed conflicting trends towards migration in U.S. society. On the one hand the booming economy stimulated demand for unskilled Mexican workers. On the other hand, the increase in nativist sentiment and the 1929 Great Depression opened an era of massive deportation, and migration naturally fell from an average flow of 46,000 legal immigrants a year in the 1920s, to less than 2,700 in the 1930s. It is estimated that the Mexican population in the U.S decreased by 41 percent over the course of the 1930s and that 458,000 Mexicans were deported between 1929 and 1937 (Massey et al. 2002, Durand 2000). In reaction to this situation, the Mexican state tried to help repatriated Mexicans to return home through the use of special bodies, a citizens’ committee and the consular network (Sherman 1999, 842).

With the New Deal and the entry of the United States into World War II, the conditions for economic growth and labour shortages in the U.S. soon reappeared. In Mexico, the policies of President Cardenas had allowed land redistribution but migration was still perceived by many peasant workers as a way of accessing capital to develop their farms (Massey et al. 2002). For the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) — the party-state that ruled Mexico for 71 years — allowing temporary labour migration to the U.S. was a dilemma. Though doing so would be an explicit recognition of the government’s incapacity to address the problem of unemployment in Mexico, population pressure, the need for foreign exchange and economic difficulties encouraged the PRI to make such migration possible (Pfeiffer 1979, 74-75).

In this particular context, American farmers also lobbied Congress to pass legislation on temporary Mexican migration. The U.S. government, however, was conscious that its Mexican counterpart, unsatisfied with the treatment given to its emigrants so far, would oppose any unilateral move by the U.S. in the field of temporary migration. Indeed, Mexican officials distrusted American employers so much that they insisted that the United States government itself be the formal employer of the *braceros* (Kiser and Kiser 1979, 68). In 1942, the U.S. and Mexican governments signed the Farm Labor Supply Agreement, allowing Mexican workers to work in the U.S. temporarily when American workers were not available to fill the positions. Guarantees included a minimum wage, round-trip transportation and the right for workers to bring their families into the U.S. (even though no families were eventually admitted) (Martin 1998, 880-881).

Between 1942 and 1945, 168,000 *braceros* went up north to work but that remained insufficient to face demand for labour and undocumented migration simultaneously increased (Massey et al. 2002: 36-37). While the United States was trying to address its labour shortages with this program, the Mexican government was using it for political purposes by allocating large shares of *bracero* contracts to regions where political opposition was concentrated (Alarcón 1995).

The release of influential studies and opinions on the adverse consequences of Mexican temporary migrants on the domestic farm workers’ wages and working conditions led to a decline in the number of visas issued. As the program lost support, Congress unilaterally decided to terminate it in 1963 (Martin 1998). It is estimated that over the course of the *bracero* program, 4.5 million temporary working contracts were issued and another 5 million undocumented migrants were apprehended and deported from the United States (García y Griego and Verea 1988). The Mexican government first sought to convince U.S. authorities to reconsider their decision as they feared the end of the *bracero* program would stimulate undocumented migration. They eventually abandoned the idea of signing a new agreement due to concerns regarding their own capacity to protect Mexican migrants (Garcia y Griego 1998; Mexican Embassy 1979; Echeverría 1979).

The end of the *bracero* program is the starting point of what Massey and colleagues (2002: 45-46) call the era of undocumented migration in the U.S. that lasted until 1985. During this period, around 28 million Mexicans entered the United States irregularly, in contrast with 1.3 million documented Mexican migrants. Factors on both sides of the border account for this dramatic increase in the flows of undocumented migration. In the United States, the *bracero* program had created a structural dependency on Mexican labour. Furthermore, repeated reductions in the number of visas allocated to Mexicans encouraged undocumented migration. On the Mexican side, the *bracero* program created dependency on migration income in many households. Also, the progressive decline of the Mexican economy (culminating with the 1982 peso crisis) provided would-be emigrants with more reasons to do so. These different factors consolidated the bi-national labour market between the U.S. and Mexico (Bustamante and Cockroft 1983, 312).

With the economic downturn in the 1970s and Cold War security concerns in the 1980s, migrants were increasingly perceived as threats. As a result, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was adopted in 1986[[1]](#endnote--1) with the objective of reducing the number of migrants illegally crossing the border (Escobar Latapí, Bean, and Weintraub 1999, 121-122). The consequences of the IRCA are significant. Under the provisions concerning undocumented migrants, around 1.2 million Mexicans legalized their status and obtained permanent residence in the U.S. Under the provisions for special agricultural workers, another 1 million Mexicans gained residence. Most importantly, the IRCA transformed the traditional ‘sojourner’ Mexican migration to a ‘settler’ migration (González Gutíerrez 1995, 268).

On the Mexican side, the government adopted what some observers called ‘a policy of not having a policy’ from the mid-1970s onward (see below), motivated by the principle of non-interventionism and the fear of supporting a U.S. migration policy that might harm its emigrants’ rights (González Gutíerrez 1995; García y Griego and Verea 1988).

As elaborated below, the controversial election of President Salinas de Gortari in 1988 strongly affected the development of policies towards the diaspora. His election also supported the transformation of Mexico into a neoliberal economy. The project of joining the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) became a priority. The government’s motto was that Mexico wanted to export goods, not people. For fear of rejection by the U.S. Congress, Salinas eventually decided to leave the free circulation of workers out of the NAFTA negotiation. In the United States, it was already clear by 1990 that the IRCA had failed to reduce both documented and undocumented migration. As border control increased, the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration Act in 1990 that limited family immigration to 480,000 per year. Because of the repeated failures of these policies to prevent undocumented migration, Congress further supported the INS move towards stricter border controls by passing the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996.[[2]](#endnote-0) At the state level, California passed Proposition 187 by referendum in 1994 to deny access to social services to undocumented migrants.

Data of the Mexican Population Council indicates that the restrictive U.S. policies implemented during the 1990s have had a limited effect on the growth of the Mexican population in the U.S. (CONAPO 2005). This population increased from 4.4 million to 8.8 million between 1990 and 2000 and again to 10.6 million in 2005. For Mexico, the annual average net loss of population due to migration moved from 315,000 people between 1991 and 1995, to 396,000 between 2001 and 2005. With regard to the modalities through which migrants have crossed the border, the share of undocumented crossings in total border movement rose from 48 percent in 1993-1997, to 63 percent in 1998-2001 and further to 77 percent in 2001-2004. Also, as a result of the tightening of the border, the share of migrants who have made use of smugglers to cross the border increased during the 1990s.

In 2000, Mexico experienced a historic change with the victory of the liberal party *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) and its presidential candidate Vicente Fox. His election put an end to 71 years of uncontested PRI rule. That same year, Mexico proposed to its NAFTA partners to discuss the possibility of adopting an open border policy. While the Canadian and U.S. governments showed scepticism towards such an idea, they agreed on a negotiation agenda that included items such as the regularization of undocumented immigrants, a temporary labour migration program, a number of visas to be given to Mexican citizens, border safety and cooperation in the development of migrant-sending regions. The September 11, 2001 attacks, however, put an end to those discussions and prompted instead the signing of the Smart Border Agreements (2001 and 2002) and the setting up of the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America acknowledging the interdependence of the three countries in dealing with border security (Emmerich 2003; Benítez Manaut and Rodríguez Ulloa 2006). For Mexico, the consequence has been not only the impossibility of negotiating a new migration agreement with the U.S., but also militarization of the border, epitomized by Congress voting for the construction of a wall along the border in September 2006.

*The changing patterns of Mexican migration to the United States*

As seen above, both the context of departure and arrival of Mexican migrants have evolved over time. This has naturally affected the profile of Mexican emigrants to the United States, which has changed in terms of origin, destination, socio-economic profile and gender.

In discussing migrants’ origins, I refer to the typology of emigration regions drafted by the Mexican National Population Council which consists of the Traditional region, the Northern region, the Central region and the Southeast region (CONAPO 2005).

The traditional sending states include Aguascalientes, Colima, Durango, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, Nayarit, San Luis Potosi and Zacatecas. These states have a common history of labour migration to the United States and have always been large sending states, representing 44% of flows in 1926-1932, around 55% of *bracero* migrants, 50% of pre-IRCA migrants in 1984 and 54% of those who migrated in 1992 (Durand, Massey, and Zenteno 2001, 110). In 2005, the emigrant population originating from this region represented 21.2 percent of the total population.

The Northern region contains the six states sharing a border with the United States (Baja California, Coahuila, Chihuahua, Nuevo León, Sonora and Tamaulipas) and two other states connected with the border states (Baja California Sur and Sinaloa). Historically, strong connections with the U.S. border made the Northern Region a large contributor to migration flows, yet in a lesser extent than the Traditional region, with emigrants representing 10.6% of the region’s population in 2005.

According to the Binational Study on Migration (1997), a diversification of flows moving from a domination of the Traditional region (which still provides the largest share of emigrants in absolute terms) to other areas occurred in the 1990s. Based on CONAPO data, these new flows come from two main regions. The Central Region – including states such as Hidalgo, Morelos, Puebla and Querétaro, the state of México and the Federal district – started to contribute significantly to migration flows in the 1990s. This is supported by data showing that the share of migrants originating from non-urban areas moved from 44 percent between 1998 and 2001 to 51 percent between 2001 and 2004 (CONAPO 2005). The Southeast region is the newcomer in Mexican migration, sending significant numbers of migrants only in the 1990s and includes Guerrero, Oaxaca and Veracruz.

With respect to places of destination, Mexican migration has historically tended to concentrate in specific areas of the United States. For instance, the 1920 U.S. census revealed that the majority of the Mexican population residing in the U.S. was concentrated in just four states (Arizona, California, Illinois and Texas). For Durand (2005), four elements explain Mexican emigrants’ choice for a specific destination: transport networks, the labour market, geographical proximity to the border and the possibility of circulation and the networks helping new migrants settle where other members of the community are already present.

Prior to the adoption of the IRCA, the majority of Mexican migrants moved to California, Texas and Illinois. With the adoption of the IRCA, the militarization of the border and the legalization of 2.3 million Mexicans, California lost some of its appeal. At the end of the 1980s the share of migrants moving to non-traditional states had reached 25 percent, compared to 90 percent of the flows absorbed in California and other traditional states in the 1980-1986 period. With the increase of anti-migrant sentiment in traditional receiving states such as California in the 1990s and economic growth in the Northeast, the Midwest and the Southeast, 30 percent of new legal immigrants avoided California, Texas and Illinois by 1998 (Massey et al. 2002: 126-28). The East Coast and Great Plains regions however showed major dynamism, moving from 10 percent of the total Mexican population in 1970 to almost 20 percent in the early 21st century (CONAPO, 2005)

The socio-economic profiles of migrants have also evolved. First, though the level of education of Mexican migrants has increased through the 1990s, their average level of educational achievement remains inferior to that of other Latino migrants to the U.S. Second, migrants’ occupations have also changed. Between 1993-1997 and 2001-2004, more migrants previously holding a job in Mexico arrived, while the share of Mexican workers occupied in U.S. agriculture decreased from 44 to 21 percent. These figures illustrate the fact that a lot of Mexican migrants leave a job in Mexico to work in the U.S. increasingly in the secondary and tertiary sectors (CONAPO 2005).

With regard to poverty, the UNDP report (2007) underlines that both the richest and poorest households in Mexico have the lowest probability of having a member who migrates; migration is most likely to occur at the intermediary level of income. The socio-economic situation of Mexican migrants in the U.S. is particularly alarming as it is estimated that 2.9 million (26 percent) live in poverty, which represents 46 percent of all poor migrants in the U.S. The over-representation of Mexican migrants among the disadvantaged in the U.S. is further illustrated by the fact that 53 percent (5.9 million) do not have health insurance (CONAPO 2005).

The third element that has significantly evolved over time is gender distribution. Whereas women represented only 5 percent of the workers recruited during the *bracero* program, women already represented around 18 percent of the Mexican migrant population before the adoption of the IRCA (Donato and Patterson 2004). In the 1990s, when newly legalized Mexican male migrants began to sponsor their spouses, the absolute number of women migrating continued to increase while decreasing in relative terms (Ávila, Fuentes, and Tuirán 2000) (CONAPO, 2005).

Female Mexican migrants differ from their male counterparts in many regards (Ávila, Fuentes, and Tuirán 2000; CONAPO 2000): they have a higher level of education, come principally from the Northern region of Mexico and are more frequently from urban areas. They are also younger and usually married at the time of departure. On the professional level, women work in the service sector more frequently than men, but they obtain on average 44 percent less income than their male counterparts in the same sector. The last element of importance is that women use smugglers more frequently than men to cross the border and are accordingly more exposed to violence in the migration process (Donato and Patterson 2004; Alonso Meneses 2005).

### Institutions and policies

The above summary of the history of Mexican migration to the United States has already introduced the idea that the Mexican authorities’ attitudes towards their population abroad have changed over time. According to Durand (2004), there are five phases in Mexico’s emigration policies. First, authorities tried to dissuade Mexicans from migrating in the early 20th century. Second, they negotiated migration agreements with the US after World War II. Third, they opted for a ‘laissez-faire’ approach in the 1970s and 1980s (or the ‘policy of not having a policy’). Fourth, they developed new policies to ‘control the damage’ in the 1990s after relations with the diaspora had deteriorated. Fifth, they advocated a policy of ‘shared responsibility’ with the United States, which continues today. These phases depict different attitudes of the Mexican government towards its population abroad and the U.S. government. This section of the chapter focuses on how the changing posture of Mexico towards its emigrants since the end of the 1980s has materialized into concrete policies and institutions.

As underscored by Alarcon (2006), at the end of the 1980s, the Mexican government paid the price for not having a policy towards its expatriates for the previous two decades. Indeed, the 1988 Presidential election saw the controversial victory of Salinas de Gortari, the candidate of the state party (PRI). This moment was decisive in two respects. First, Mexican emigrants had proved supportive of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the candidate of the left-wing *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD) who had been campaigning among Mexicans abroad despite the impossibility of voting from abroad. Suspicions of fraud outraged citizens abroad, whose demonstrations embarrassed Mexican authorities. Second, because he made NAFTA a priority of his mandate, Salinas was hoping that Mexican Americans and their associations would pressure the U.S. Congress in Mexico’s favor (which eventually did not happen) (see Leiken 2000; de la Garza and Desipio 1998).

These two elements made the Mexican government realize it needed to do more to reach out to its citizens abroad. Two main programs started during Salinas’s presidency. The first one is the ‘Paisano’ program created in 1989 to make the journey safer for migrants coming back to visit relatives. To this end, stronger controls were put in place at major transit points to gradually decrease extortions and bad treatment by civil servants of migrants. This was a way for the authorities to show that they were taking concrete measure to address a pressing need of Mexicans abroad and to improve their image. The creation of the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad (PCME) set up within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by Presidential Decree in 1990 was even more explicit in this regard. From its inception, the program had three major goals: strengthening relations between Mexican citizens on both sides of the border in areas such as business, education or even culture; improving the image of Mexican Americans in Mexico; and improving the image of Mexico among Mexicans in the United States (González Gutíerrez 1993).

For González Gutíerrez (1993) — a migration scholar who later became the director of the Institute of Mexicans Abroad — the program has been very successful in reaching out to the Mexican American establishment: Latino organizations started to cooperate with the public and Mexican private agencies and business agreements were signed. As underscored by Alarcón (2006), the PCME also encouraged Mexican associations in the US to form coalitions on the state level to facilitate communication with Mexican civil servants on the local, regional or federal levels.

In addition to these achievements, the PCME led to the promotion of the ‘2 for 1 program’ in 1992 which encouraged migrant associations, also known as hometown associations, to develop projects for the benefit of their home communities (Figueroa-Aramoni 1999; Goldring 2002). The matching fund program was originally created to permit Zacatecan migrant associations in California to invest in development projects (such as roads, wells, and schools) in their home communities (García Zamora 2005). It provided that regional authorities would match every migrant’s dollar invested. For scholars such as Gonzalez Gutiérrez (2006) or Delano (2009), there is little doubt that this program (which was subsequently supported by the federal government and extended to other regions) contributed to empowering communities abroad by recognizing migrants as valid interlocutors in their home communities.

As mentioned earlier, the legitimacy concerns of the PRI government and the desire to join NAFTA motivated Mexican authorities to change their posture towards emigrants. It was however the development of anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States in the 1990s that played a major role in another important reform: the permission to have dual nationality. Indeed, the adoption in 1994 by the citizens of California of Proposition 187,[[3]](#endnote-1) aimed at denying access to social services to the undocumented population, shed light on the growing hostility towards Mexicans in the U.S. In response to this, Mexican legislators reformed the nationality law by suppressing the rule according to which a Mexican citizen automatically loses his/her nationality by taking that of another state. In other words, authorities sought to make it easier for immigrants (who were traditionally reluctant to give up their Mexican nationality) to take U.S. citizenship. Doing so, Mexican authorities not only hoped that U.S. citizenship would give migrants the full set of rights in that country, they also believed it would discourage U.S. politicians from openly promoting anti-immigrant policies (see Alarcón and Martínez in La Jornada 1995). At same time, dual citizenship was a hotly debated topic in Mexico. Political parties disagreed on the rights that ought to be attached to this status and some feared it would promote foreign influence in Mexico (Fitzgerald 2005; Calderón Chelius and Martínez Cossío 2004).

The amendments to Article 32 of the Constitution[[4]](#endnote-2) officially recognized the possibility for a Mexican national to hold another nationality. It also stated that, like foreigners, dual nationals would be submitted to some restrictions. For example, access to government offices and functions was restricted to Mexican citizens by birth. However the restriction applied to foreigners in the purchase of land was not applicable to dual nationals. Indeed, legislators’ motivation was also to stimulate Mexican American investments in Mexico, (Becerra Ramírez 2000).

More than just recognizing dual nationality, the constitutional reforms made it impossible for Mexican nationals who acquired their nationality by birth to ever lose it (Art. 37). In other words, non-forfeiture was introduced into Mexico’s dual nationality law by these reforms. Following this principle, former Mexican nationals who had acquired a foreign nationality before 20 March 1998 were given five years, starting in 1998, to request it back from consular authorities. Similarly, Mexicans who acquired a foreign nationality after that date would not be deprived of their Mexican nationality (González Martín 1999).

At the end of the five-year period, only 67,000 former Mexican nationals had regained their lost nationality – a figure which contrasted with the much larger expectations of the Foreign Affairs ministry (Castañeda 2007; Marcelli and Cornelius 2005). In the U.S., the rate of eligible Mexican citizens applying for U.S. citizenship has traditionally been among the lowest in comparison to other communities. In 1995, their rate of naturalisation was only 20 percent, a situation the Pew Hispanic Center (Passel 2007) considers to be partly due to the fact that the community fits the criteria traditionally associated with low citizenship levels, such as low education levels, lower levels of knowledge of the English language, or higher poverty rates. In the following decade, the rate of naturalization among Mexicans, while remaining lower than the average non-Mexican eligible foreigners’ rate (66 percent), increased more than in any other group to reach around 35 percent by 2005. It is, however, difficult to estimate what role the Mexican non-forfeiture law has played in this increase, since other factors (especially factors related to the U.S. migration policy) also have to be taken into account.

As noted by Calderón Chelius and Martínez Cossío (2004), dual citizenship was a government-controlled issue that did not address a need that had been strongly expressed by the community beforehand. For this reason, different migrant organizations considered that dual citizenship was a government manoeuvre to avoid addressing the demand for external voting (see below). For the PRI, external voting was deemed too risky for they feared it would mostly benefit the left-wing opposition party, the PRD. In 1990, President Salinas therefore proposed that the electoral law be modified to explicitly prohibit it. With the Chiapas rebellion in 1994, however, the government was forced to make concessions.

To ensure the country’s stability, the PRI agreed to pass a series of electoral reforms. The PRD agreed to offer to support the dialogue process in Chiapas in exchange for the PRI and the PAN’s support for reforms on external voting. Article 36.III of the Constitution[[5]](#endnote-3) was subsequently modified to suppress the obligation that the vote be cast in the electoral district to which the voter is attached. The same proposal instead states that Mexican citizens have the obligation to vote according to the rules set in the law. The constitutional reform, which entered into force in August 1996, therefore accepted the principle of external voting but left legislators the responsibility to define the conditions to access this right and the organization of elections abroad. Despite emigrant lobbying, the idea of potentially adding several million external voters to the Mexican voting population was unappealing to many politicians and government agencies alike. Accordingly, the necessary legislation was not passed before the 2000 Presidential election.

With respect to emigrant-oriented policies, the next decisive step was taken by the first PAN (right-wing) President Vicente Fox, who was elected in 2000 after 71 years of PRI rule. According to Cano and Délano (2007: 713), “[o]ne of the main pillars of his election campaign had been to seek a new relationship with the almost 22 million people of Mexican origin living in the US, and integrate them into the design and implementation of policies directed towards them”.

At the beginning of his mandate, President Fox established the Presidential Office for Mexicans Abroad (OPME) whose main focus was to promote Mexican businesses, invest in areas of high emigration and manage remittances. The innovative feature of this office was that the Director (directly responsible to the President) managed the relations with the diaspora directly, not via the consular network anymore. However, the OPME lacked both human and material resources to be effective and for this reason it was decided in 2002 to integrate the PCME and the OPME in one single entity called the Institute of Mexicans Abroad (IME). The IME’s goal was to foster a strong relationship between the emigrant communities and the Mexican state for the benefit of both (González Gutíerrez 2003).

The IME has been active in promoting Mexican American leadership by holding conferences with Latino leaders to discuss possible cooperation between the IME and migrant organizations. The IME has also granted the Ohtli leadership awards that show Mexico’s recognition of the role performed by association leaders. Other programs have been put in place by the IME to allow migrants to access distance-learning programs with the possibility of earning credits at Mexican institutions. In addition, IME has sought to establish partnership with U.S. health organizations to raise awareness among the communities (Smith 2008).

One of the IME’s biggest achievements has been to contribute to the recognition of Mexican consular ID cards as a valid form of identification by the U.S. Department of Treasury, many financial institutions and U.S. authorities on the local and state levels. Indeed, the security restrictions put in place after the attacks of September 2001 greatly increased the need for undocumented Mexican migrants in the US to hold some form of identification. The Mexican government soon introduced a new card with enhanced security features and the IME, along with other Mexican agencies and migrant associations, then started to lobby in favour of its widest acceptance possible in the U.S. Despite the opposition of anti-immigrant politicians who suggested that the card would facilitate terrorist access to the territory, this lobbying effort proved fruitful. The card thus became highly desirable and almost 1.2 million cards were issued in 2002 alone (Waldinger 2008; Smith 2008).

The most innovative feature of the IME is the creation of the Consultative Council (CCIME), integrating 105 community leaders elected in 45 constituencies by the emigrants themselves, 10 representatives of the most influential Latino associations in the U.S., 10 special advisors and 32 representatives of Mexico’s federal entities. The CCIME is organized around seven working groups (business, education, legal affairs, political affairs, health, border issues and the media) and its main task is to make recommendations to the state with regard to issues concerning the communities. Altogether the CCIME embodies the very goal set out in the creation of IME, which is to stimulate dialogue between the state and the emigrants but also to foster cooperation between the associations themselves (as they often had little contact). The CCIME has however attracted criticism from members of the emigrant community and regional politicians expressing doubts about its leverage and legitimacy (Escobar 2005; Santamaría Gómez 2007) .

Despite the creation of the IME and its associated policies, the presidency of Vicente Fox was to many migrant associations the right time to ask for the passage of external voting legislation once and for all. As outlined in the last section of this chapter, the evolution of this debate was however strongly determined by the opinions of domestic actors on the economic and political roles emigrants should be allowed to play in the home country.

### Debates on the role of emigrants

Mexican “asociacionismo” in the U.S. is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, associations created in the second half of the 19th century already provided ‘funeral and illness benefits, collective support, group defences against exclusion from political participation or abuse at the workplace, as well as recreational services’ (Cano and Délano 2007: 699). The creation of these associations in response to the subordinate positions occupied by Mexicans in the U.S. laid the foundation for the emergence of a sense of solidarity among this community. The Mexican state insisted on the protection of this group through its consular network. Nonetheless, the pre-revolutionary Mexican government was also reluctant to consider Mexican emigrants as members of the nation and feared the development of political opposition among this population.

After the revolution, new associations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) appeared to address the needs of Mexican Americans. The Mexican authorities, on the contrary, focused on helping Mexican citizens abroad and increasingly perceived U.S. citizens of Mexican origin as traitors (de la Garza and Vargas 1991). Also, the derogatory term “pocho” soon came to label those Mexican American citizens considered as having forgotten their Mexican roots.

In the 1960s, in the context of the post-*bracero* era and civil right movements, the Chicano movement developed to support Mexican American citizens in their fight to have both their rights as U.S. citizens and their own identity respected (Cano and Délano 2007:706). The early 1970s saw a period of reconstruction of the relationship between Mexican authorities and the Mexican community in the U.S. For the Chicanos, the objective was to obtain the support of their homeland in the struggle for better status in the United States. Mexico’s reaction, initially shy under the Echevaria presidency (1970-1976), intensified with Lopez Portillo and the creation of the Office of Chicano Affairs within the Labour Ministry. In doing so, Mexico progressively gave up the so-called Estrada doctrine: the refusal to intervene in other nations’ internal affairs (de la Garza and Vargas 1991).

The new relationship left some actors on the sidelines, however. Mexican authorities at the time considered Mexican American and Hispanic associations as ‘the only representatives of the Mexican immigrant communities’ because their focus was on the inclusion of migrants in the U.S. Hometown associations (HTAs) are traditionally led by first generation immigrants and had, on the contrary, specific requests such as external voting that the home country government was not ready to address (Santamaría, 2007: 31-32).

As shown above, Mexico’s interest in its population abroad started to rise during the end of the 1980s with the PRI’s legitimacy crisis, the perspective of joining NAFTA and increasing hostility towards migrants in the United States. During the same period, the economic importance of migrants appeared all the more evident with a boom in remittances — shifting from USD 698 million in 1980 to USD 1,680 million in 1989, and again from USD 6,573 million in 2000 to 26,069 million in 2007 (Tuirán 2002; CONAPO 2010). Remittances represent one of Mexico’s largest sources of income together with oil and tourism revenues. This element is to be added to the above-mentioned factors in explaining the development of emigration policies in Mexico. As a matter of fact, remittances not only increased, they became more valuable for Mexico both on the micro and macro-economic level (Goldring 2004). Also, as HTAs turned from being mutual aid societies to transnational associations supporting development in the home community, the economic role of migrants in the home country became acknowledged by Mexican authorities in the 1990s with programs such as the ‘3x1’ matching fund program.

On the symbolic level however, it was the election of Vicente Fox in 2000, after a campaign emphasizing the positive role of emigrants, that put an end to the ‘pocho’ stereotype in favour of a vision of Mexicans as the nation’s new heroes. Despite this change in rhetoric and Fox’s promise to make external voting a reality before the end of his term, the recognition of migrants as valid political actors in Mexico was still a long way away.

*The right to vote from abroad*

With their economic importance being acknowledged and a new rhetoric on migrants being part of the nation, migrant associations were now in a much more favourable position than in the 1980s when they first expressed the demand to vote from abroad. Also, with the renewed connections between actors on both sides of the border, some associations were more able to impact the homeland political scene. The creation of the Coalition for the Right to Vote of Mexicans Abroad (Coalición por los Derechos Políticos de los Mexicanos en el Extranjero, CDPME in Spanish) illustrated this new strength. This association linked emigrant leaders in the United States with lobbyists living in Mexico. Through their transnational coordination, they were able to pressure Mexican political parties with the support of grassroots organizations in the United States (Santamaría Gómez 2007, Lafleur 2011).

Knowing that Mexican political parties would be afraid of the political consequences of being presented as ‘anti-emigrant’, associations such as the CDPME started to publicly accuse them of blocking the adoption of external voting legislation. It targeted its lobbying at politicians from large emigrant sending states such as Michoacán and Zacatecas, knowing that these politicians would be receptive, given that a large share of their constituents was economically dependent on emigrants. For similar reasons states like Zacatecas proved to be supportive of the idea of transnational citizenship by creating the status of ‘binational citizen’, through which emigrants cannot vote but can be appointed as mayor or Member of the Regional Assembly (Moctezuma Longoria 2003). Michoacán, on the other hand, was discussing the possibility of granting emigrants the right to vote from abroad in gubernatorial elections.[[6]](#endnote-4)

Despite these favourable elements, different domestic political actors were reluctant to see the external voting legislation pass. First and most importantly, political parties were uncertain of the impact of this vote on electoral results. The PRI, for one, was convinced that migrants would use their newly gained vote to sanction the party that some considered had encouraged them to leave. Even within the traditionally migrant-friendly left-wing PRD, some promised to block any legislation except that which would include reserved seats for emigrant MPs in Parliament. Second, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also expressed concerns about the practical consequences of potentially adding several million voters to the electoral lists.

As the 2006 elections approached, President Fox found himself under increasing emigrant pressure to comply with his promise and commissioned one his ministers to consult with political parties and identify the lowest common denominator upon which they could agree. This consensus was subsequently formalized in the June 28, 2005 legislation on external voting that allowed a very restrictive form of voting from abroad. Among the restrictions passed by the legislators was the limitation of voting rights to presidential elections; emigrants could not elect their own representatives to Parliament. Furthermore, political parties would be prohibited from campaigning abroad. The most important restriction was however that only those emigrants already holding a voter identity card would be capable of registering as voters from abroad. Despite the fact that it was estimated that a large share of the emigrant population had never applied for such card before migrating (or had disposed of it upon crossing the border), legislators decided that these cards would not be delivered abroad. Migrants with no card who wanted to vote therefore had to go back to Mexico to apply for it.

For obvious reasons, this last provision strongly impacted registration figures –as intended by political parties when they approved it. Not knowing what the impact of that vote on electoral results would be, they decided to limit as much as possible the number of external voters. After a registration campaign led by the IFE, which was strongly criticized by emigrant associations, only a limited number of emigrants managed to register and around 32,000 of the potentially millions of Mexicans voters residing abroad eventually cast their vote in the 2006 presidential election. Despite their limited representation, electoral results confirmed emigrants’ anti-PRI posture while the traditional supporter of external voting — the PRD — was outperformed by the liberal party PAN. Altogether, and in contrast to what happened at home, the electoral process abroad was deemed transparent, to the great satisfaction of the Federal Electoral Authority.

The failure of external voting in 2006 to enfranchise massive numbers of citizens abroad did not discourage Mexico from repeating the experience. Just a few months after the presidential elections, the state of Michoacan was the first to allow its citizens abroad to take part in the gubernatorial elections from abroad under the same administrative requirements as the presidential election. As expected, the regional legislation on external voting had a similar outcome in terms of emigrant participation – only 349 ballots were cast from abroad. Despite these experiences, few attempts were made to improve the registration figures in view of the 2012 presidential election. The lack of political consensus rendered it impossible, for instance, for voter identity cards to be delivered to citizens abroad as requested by several migrant associations. Thanks to minor administrative adjustments around existing external voting legislation, the IFE managed to almost double the number of registered voters abroad in spite of its much smaller budget to do so (see Lafleur 2013). The figure of 59,000 registered voters however remained marginal in comparison to the millions of Mexican adults abroad who did not register.

### Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the evolution of Mexico’s emigration policy is linked to the evolution of its migration flows, its relationship with the United States and most importantly its own domestic political evolution. Indeed, as the PRI was concerned with the political influence of emigrants in the home country, most policies implemented in the 20th century focused on the protection of Mexican citizens abroad. After a period of relative inactivity in the field of emigration, described as the ‘policy of not having a policy’, the regime found itself obliged to re-establish links with communities abroad in an attempt to increase its legitimacy. Similarly, its desire to embrace a neoliberal economic model forced the government to reconsider the role of its emigrants and see them as potential allies in reaching this goal. By the end of 1990s, Mexican authorities had developed a number of policies in the field of protection, co-development, and citizenship. Regime change in 2000, however, marked a turn in the rhetoric used to define migrants moving from the ‘pocho’ stereotype to the ‘heroes of the nation’ image. The coming to power of President Vicente Fox also permitted the materialization of the long-time demand of emigrants to participate in home country elections along with other substantial reforms such as the creation of the Institute for Mexican Abroad. The historic desire to control the impact of citizens abroad on Mexican politics however strongly restricted the use of this right. In that sense, Mexico’s external voting legislation may be said to play a primarily symbolic function by explicitly formalizing their citizenship status, despite their absence from the national territory, while ensuring at the same time that they do not affect the existing electoral balance.

Looking at the latest developments in this area, the simultaneous concern to protect emigrants and to connect with migrant communities seems to persist. Indeed, Mexican authorities are nowadays preoccupied with both growing resentment towards undocumented immigrants in some parts of the United States, as well as formalizing their connections with migrant communities outside of the U.S. Evolutions in these policy areas will undoubtedly invite to more academic research on Mexico in the coming years.

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2. 2 Pub. L. 104-208, 110 Stat. 3009 (1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
3. 3 1994 Cal. Legis. Serv. Prop. 187 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. 4 Ley de nacionalidad. D.O.F. 23 de enero de 1998. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. 5 Decreto de Reformas y Adiciones a la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, D.O.F. 22 de agosto de 1996. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
6. 6 The state legislature eventually passed similar legislation on external voting to the one passed on the federal level. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)