

## The external voting right of Bolivians abroad: What role for emigrants in regime transformation in their homeland?

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Within migration studies, the relations between sending states and their citizens abroad have received major attention in recent years. Different works have demonstrated how the frontiers between exclusion and inclusion in the political community are being redefined (Smith 2003; Calderón Chelius 2003; Gamlen 2008; Dufoix, Guerassimoff, and de Tinguy 2010). Historically, academic interest in the extension of political rights to nationals residing abroad was located within the context of South-North migration. Mexico, in particular, is a country about which a significant amount of the literature on external voting has been produced (Carpizo and Valadés 1998; Santamaría Gómez 2001; Espinoza Valle 2004; McCann, Cornelius, and Leal 2006; Smith 2008; Calderón Chelius 2010; Lafleur 2013). In the case of Bolivia, socio-political studies on the relations between the homeland and the diaspora have been scarce.

In this chapter, we propose to analyze the development of the external voting issue in the Bolivian political context between 2003 and 2009. Examining the evolution of relations between the Bolivian Government and its diaspora (particularly after the coming to power of Evo Morales Ayma in 2006), we will demonstrate how the topic has progressively become central within Bolivian politics and how emigrants have played an active part in their own enfranchisement. In particular, we will see how “the process of change” instigated by the Morales government has found an extension among citizens abroad. To do so, we will analyze different government documents, public interventions and interviews of civil servants and representatives of civil society organizations.

After the first part of this article on the path to the adoption of the 2009 electoral law enfranchising citizens abroad, we shall proceed to an analysis of the electoral behaviour of citizens abroad based on an exit-poll survey conducted with citizens abroad during the Presidential Election on 6<sup>th</sup> December 2009.

## **1. State responses to Bolivian emigration: a historical perspective**

Except for limited intra Latin American migration that took Bolivia as a final destination, the history of international migration in Bolivia is characterized by the emigration of Bolivian citizens. Different estimates suggest that between 20% and 30% of the Bolivian-born population currently resides abroad. According to the few sources available such as the 2007 *Mesa Técnica de Bolivia*, the phenomenon has significantly accelerated in the past decade: the 1976 census estimated the emigrant population to 250,000 in 1976, to 380,000 in 1992 and 1.2 million in 2001. Today, because of the important variations in the different estimates realized by the Bolivian Government, international organizations and NGOs, it is usually considered that the Bolivian population abroad ranges between 1.5 and 2 million citizens.

Argentina is the historical destination country of Bolivian migrants. Bolivian migration to Argentina first concentrated in rural areas around the border but started to expand to large Argentine urban areas in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the 1980s, Buenos Aires became the biggest point of concentration of Bolivian migrants occupied in construction, manufacture, services and horticulture. The United States is the second favourite destination of Bolivian migrants where migrants proceeding from the region of Cochabamba and Santa Cruz de la Sierra have started to move during the 1970s. Bolivian migration to Brazil happened mainly during the 1980s and 1990s is mostly a masculine migration occupied in manufacture. Spain is the most recent destination country for Bolivians. Most of the emigrants who decided to move there had previous emigration experience or close family connections with Argentina, the United States and Brazil (Hinojosa Gordonava 2008).

In opposition to what these population movements suggest, the Bolivian State has traditionally been more concerned about regulating foreign migration to Bolivia. For this reason, it long limited its emigration policy to trying to reduce and control the number of citizens leaving the country through

migration laws. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the State thus sought to limit departures, including in times of crises such the Chaco War with Paraguay or the 1952 Revolution, by taking measures such as denying help to citizens abroad who left the country without a passport. The year 1976 is a turning point when the military regime created through Law decree 13.344 the National Council on Immigration. One of the objectives of this institutions supervised by the Ministry of the Interior was to promote the return of Bolivians abroad. Simultaneously, the Bolivian dictator Hugo Banzer agreed with Argentine authorities to put in place a forced-repatriation program for Bolivians in Argentina (Mugarza 1985: 101).

During the mid 1980s, a new wave of massive internal and international emigration started after the implementation of Decree 21.060 which put in place a neoliberal socio-economic model in the country. It is during this period that Bolivia emigration starts to diversify to new destination countries such as the United States, Brazil and Spain. In spite of the increase of departures, the Sanchez de Lozada Government maintains the historical focus on restricting immigration to Bolivia with the adoption of Decree 24.423 in 1996. With regards to emigration, the focus remains throughout the 1990s as the National Council on Immigration is given the task to prevent Bolivian citizens from leaving the country.

The transformation of National Council on Immigration into the National Service for Migration in 1998 by the newly elected President Hugo Banzer did not alter the course of history. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Bolivian State refused to acknowledge the fact that it was an emigration nation and focused its efforts on immigration control.

## **2. The increasing visibility of “Bolivians abroad”**

The increase in emigration flows and the diversification in destination countries explain only partly why the topic of emigration has gained growing importance in Bolivian politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Other factors such as socio-political transformations in Bolivia and in destination countries, the activities led by several non-governmental actors and the changing representation of the emigrants in the media also have to be noted.

First, two phenomena related to the economic and socio-political consequences of the neoliberal economic model adopted by both Bolivia and Argentina increased the visibility of Bolivian migrants. On the one hand, the 2001 Argentine economic crisis triggered a wave of xenophobic violence against Bolivians in that country. On the other hand, the effects of the economic crisis on both Argentina and Bolivia encouraged Bolivians to consider new destination countries to migrate. Bolivian migration to Spain attracted substantial attention in Bolivia for different reasons. The large increase in the demand for passports, the return of undocumented migrants expelled from Spain, the advertising campaigns of travel agencies and the continuous inflow of remittances attracted substantial media attention. Above all, the Bolivian public opinion seemed particularly affected by the consequences on Bolivian families of the fact that this new migration was predominantly made of women who often left children in Bolivia to work as care-takers in Europe (Román Arnez 2009).

Second, as underscored by the Federation of Bolivian Civic Associations, the economic and social consequences of the crisis in Bolivia and Argentina triggered a reaction among Bolivian associations abroad. This process gave rise to the increase politicization of emigrant communities through associations such as the Bolivian Youth in Action. During the 2003 conflict on water in El Alto (La Paz), the increased involvement of emigrants in Bolivian politics was visible through the organization of demonstrations and strikes in Buenos Aires by which they were demonstrating support to Bolivian social movements. Through their support to the causes of the nationalization of natural resources in Bolivia and the impeachment of President Sanchez de Lozada, a new actor suddenly appeared on the Bolivian political scene: Bolivians residing abroad. Considering their stake in Bolivian politics, these associations also rapidly demanded to be allowed to vote in Bolivian elections from abroad. At the same time, they were also heavily involved in debates surrounding the new immigration law in Bolivia. They were accordingly mobilized in two different national political contexts.

Early 2006, the party Movement for Socialism (Spanish acronym is MAS) led by the social movement leader Evo Morales Ayma took power. With this party, the topic of emigration suddenly took a large place in the agenda of the Government. One immediate measure was to include the topic within the government program known as the National Plan for Development. Specific

measures aimed at Bolivians in Argentina included increasing resources to attend emigrants' needs and reducing the costs of documents delivered to citizens abroad. Another evidence of the change of paradigm within Government on the topic of emigration is that a Human Rights Observatory was created to monitor the situation of Bolivians living in Argentina.

At the international level, Bolivia's new posture towards emigration was visible through its participation in numerous forums and international events on the issue. Most importantly, Evo Morales —along other Latin American political leaders—took a very critical stance against the so-called Return Directive voted by the European Parliament in 2008 by denouncing the fact the European Union was unfairly blaming migrants for its lack of social cohesion.

### **3. Bolivians abroad: The construction of the political project of MAS**

In spite of the existence of different norms and bodies working on migration issues before the coming to power of MAS, the various representatives of governmental and non-governmental bodies we interviewed confirm that has been absent or at best passive when it came to Bolivians residing abroad. As summed up by a Human Rights activist we interviewed, “there was a total indifference of the State”. On the same line, one person in charge of migration issues at the Ombudsman Office of Bolivia considered that “the State kept quiet” on the topic and, in that sense, could even be “considered an accomplice” in the sufferings experienced by citizens abroad. Similarly, another civil servant in Consular Affairs recognized that Bolivia “never wanted to deal with the roots of the issue” and believed that “the State did not want to look at emigration phenomenon”.

This indifference and absence of the State towards emigration can be analysed in terms of “objective complicity” following the term first coined by Sayad (Sayad 2006). According to this author, it appears that migration requires to be ignored and not accepted as permanent in order to reproduce itself. With regards to sending societies, emigrants are thus necessarily considered as absent temporarily. In this sense, the indifference of the Bolivian State toward the emigration issue for a long time was revealing of a double negation. On the one hand, the State only perceived itself as an immigration country, and

on the other hand, it never acknowledge that Bolivian emigration could be permanent phenomenon in which the State could have responsibility. Focusing on immigration as being the result of individual decisions only, the State turned its nationals living abroad in “non-nationals” excluded from the political community.

With the coming to power of MAS at the Presidential level, the main priority around the topic of emigration became to demonstrate that the State had a strong interest in emigrant communities residing abroad. The new category of “Bolivia exterior” was even coined to refer to these communities (de la Torre Avila 2006). With the adoption of the new National Plan for Development, different objectives are set in favour of citizens abroad: help the legalization, defend their rights and enfranchise them. At the symbolic level, the new government was thus trying to reincorporate citizens abroad in the Bolivian nation by removing the territorially-based divisions that were created between residents and nationals abroad. On the 182<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Bolivia’s independence, Evo Morales addressed directly a message to citizens abroad in those terms:

‘Even though you are far away, we feel you are close, because Bolivia is made of us all, those who live here and those, like you, who went abroad looking for better living conditions. [...] Be certain that we will make efforts. From Bolivia, we will continue to work and fight for your rights to be recognized worldwide’ (Message of President Evo Morales, August 2007).

In addition, with the coming to power of MAS, a constitutional reform re-defined the Bolivian State as “Plurinational and Community-based”. The new Constitution established a new relation between the State and citizens abroad. Because Bolivian consular services has traditionally been characterized by a relation of ethnic and racial subordination between the administration and citizens abroad, Evo Morales proposed to establish a two-way diplomacy. This meant that the Bolivian Government would not only seek to negotiate better living conditions with receiving country governments but would also make that all citizens abroad would receive adequate consular services without any form of discrimination (Interview with President Evo Morales in Magazine Pagina 12, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2004).

Interviews with civil servant of the Foreign Affairs Ministry revealed that consular services were traditionally very distant from the emigrant communities. One interviewee noted that a closer cooperation with emigrant associations was necessary because the role of consular services was not only to attend the emigrants' needs but also to represent them. One priority that clearly stated in the 2007 Activity report of the Ministry was to provide undocumented emigrants with some form of Bolivian documentation. Once in possession of such documents, Bolivians in Argentina could apply to Legalization Programme. However, this effort to provide documentation did not only serve to protect citizens abroad. As noted by Evo Morales himself, this was also the first step of a process that would eventually see them participate in Presidential elections from abroad (op. cit.).

In the name of principles such as democracy, national unity, participation, justice and equality, Evo Morales and his Government exhorted citizens abroad to take part in the political project of the new Government by voting from abroad if they were to be enfranchised:

'Dear brothers and sisters, you have to help me build a more democratic Bolivia, with the largest participation of us all. Our commitment as Government is to let you decide the destiny of the country by voting from wherever you are. It is not only about respecting your constitutional obligation [to vote] but rather to strengthen our democracy with the participation of different sectors of the population and especially the brothers who live abroad' (op. cit.).

This demonstrates that the implementation of external voting in Bolivia was based on a relation of mutual support between the Government and citizens abroad: in return for increased protection and services abroad, emigrants were expected to support the political project of the new Government with their vote. Before the implementation of the external voting law, a Foreign Affairs civil servant summed up the situation as such:

'The emigrant population has a particularly important weight for the new Government because of its political affinities. In other words, we are talking about a population that identifies itself with their political project [...].'

One further factor that explains the increased visibility of communities abroad and the State interest is the remittances. Even though reliable data are difficult to compile, it appears that the inflow of remittances grew from 83 million USD in 2002 to 1.097 million USD in 2008 (Centro de Estudios Monetarios Latinoamericanos 2010). This exponential increase obviously rendered emigration a major factor in the country's macro-economic stability. At the micro-economic level, despite continuing debates on the real effect of remittances, this influx of money played a part in preventing certain sectors of the population from falling further into poverty. Accordingly, in spite of the absence of any explicit references to remittances in the external voting debates, it cannot be excluded that the Government also saw an economic interest in stimulating the loyalty of citizens abroad by enfranchising them.

#### **4. How was the external voting law passed?**

Despite the lack of interest of Bolivian authorities for citizens abroad during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Electoral Code of Bolivia recognizes the right of its citizens abroad to take part in presidential elections since 1991 (article 97). The Electoral Code however mentioned that an additional law had to be adopted to implement this right. Due to the absence of political willingness to adopt such law, a collective of Bolivians in Argentina filed a complaint with the Supreme Court of Justice in La Paz in 2005 which, in turn, gave the order to Congress to adopt such law. When MAS came to power in 2006, the emigrants pressured it immediately to act on this matter. Many within Congress had traditionally opposed the enfranchisement of citizens abroad on the basis of financial, logistical or legal arguments.

On 21<sup>st</sup> May 2008, the MAS-dominated House of Representatives managed to adopt the Law on the Vote of Bolivian Citizens Residing Abroad and sent it to the Senate for final approval. In the Senate, the main opposition party Social Democratic Power (PODEMOS, Spanish acronym) managed to block the adoption of the law until April 2009. This party's main fear was that, once enfranchised, citizens abroad would massively support MAS. Their view was later supported by the fact that symbolic elections abroad held on the Day of the 2008 Constitutional Referendum showed strong support in favour of MAS. One PODEMOS Senator summed up his party's position as such:

'Because Bolivia is an emigration country, the implementation of the vote of Bolivians abroad would mean that those who left would decide the result of national elections and referenda without benefiting or suffering from the consequences of the results of these elections. In other words, those who are abroad would decide who govern those who stayed. How can we justify that those voters residing in Argentina alone, whose number is estimated to 500,000, have more electoral weight than the Departments of Tarija, Beni or Pando which sum up 372,000 votes together?' (Carlos D'Arlach, PODEMOS Senator).

In spite of this situation, the debate on external voting experienced a major breakthrough in August 2008 when a collective made of associations representing many sectors of societies (CONALCAM) and ideologically close to MAS called for the organization of a referendum to approve a new Constitution. Evo Morales used the pretext of the referendum to reiterate his support to external voting and asked all MAS senators to start a hunger strike until the Senate approved the external voting law.

At the end of October 2008, MAS and PODEMOS eventually agreed that a referendum would determine the approval of the new Constitution (in January 2009) and that it would be followed by general elections (in December 2009). Until that date, the text of the new Constitution had been drafted, debated and amended in Congress. The text explicitly recognized in its article 27 that emigrants would be enfranchised: "Bolivians residing abroad have the right to participate in the elections for President and Vice-President and any other election permitted by law. This right is exercised after the registration and enfranchisement processes are conducted by the Electoral Body".

After this call by Evo Morales, various civil society organizations continued to pressure the Senate to pass the New Constitution and the external voting law. In Argentina and Chile, associations of Bolivians abroad replicated these efforts. In Buenos Aires and Arica, emigrants started a hunger strike in front of the consulates in solidarity with protestors doing the same in front of Congress. These movements triggered a larger movement of support for external voting as demonstrations and petitions were being organized in front of Bolivian embassies in Brazil, Spain and Germany.

To understand the evolution of Bolivia's policies towards citizens abroad, it is necessary to replace it in the context of increasing participation of civil society actors in the definition of migration policies (Domenech 2008). This

participation is visible through the mobilization of different migrant organizations but also through the invitation made by both sending and receiving states to migrants to voice their opinions on these issues. One example of this involvement is the creation of the “International Commission on Bolivian External Voting”. Even though it was created in Buenos Aires, this organisation coordinated with similar organizations in Spain, Brazil and Chile. Their main goal was to demand the immediate adoption of the law of implementation on external voting. However, they also mobilized on other issues such as the nationalization of gas. Following the work of Sayad (1998), these migrants could be considered as “heretics” in the sense that they refuse to stick to the traditional role that is expected from the sending and receiving them which consists in being exclusively economic actors excluded from any active political role.

The participation of Bolivian migrants in different marches and hunger strikes, are illustrative of their refusal to stick to purely economic roles. One particularly visible instance happened on 10<sup>th</sup> August 2008 (Day of the revocatory referendum) when different migrant organizations, human rights organizations and others organized a day of symbolic elections in different cities of Argentina to demand that their right to vote from abroad be explicitly recognized. The issue for these emigrants was thus to be formally recognized as members of the community despite their absence. One leader, Mario Flores, expressed this demand very clearly in the press: “We are going to demand that this law passes, even at the expense of our own lives, because abroad we are dead from civic standpoint”.

A little later, to increase pressure on the Bolivian Congress, Bolivian citizens in Argentina and Chile decided to start a hunger strike in front of Bolivian consulates. This movement triggered similar actions in Brazil, Spain and Germany. As the pressure built up, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs communicated on 18<sup>th</sup> December 2008, the international of the migrant, that a national agreement on the external rights of Bolivians abroad had been found. Whereas this agreement between many Bolivian institutions and organizations was a big step in creating a permanent dialogue between emigrants and their home state on migration issues, emigrants remained disenfranchised.

Finally, the debate on external voting accelerated in a decisive manner in February 2009 when the Senate rejected once again the external voting legislation after its principle had been approved a couple of weeks before during

the constitutional referendum. Evo Morales subsequently issued a Supreme Decree by which it gave instructions to the National Electoral Court to register Bolivians abroad in view of the next presidential election. The continuing opposition of the main right-wing party to external voting subsequently pushed Evo Morales to start a hunger strike to increase pressure on the Senate. Bolivians living on the national territory and abroad (Argentina, Spain and Chile) rapidly followed this movement and the pressure on the Senate became too important to continue refusing the enfranchisement of citizens abroad.

Even though it formally enfranchises citizens abroad, the external voting system put in place by Electoral Law no. 4021 of 14 April 2009, contains a series of strong limitations. First, the right to vote from abroad is limited to the presidential election. Second, the number of voters that can be registered abroad is capped to 6% of the total number of Bolivians abroad. This implies that only 230,000 Bolivians would be allowed to register from abroad. Even though the constitutional character of this limit is debatable, it is reflective of the right-wing's fear that over a million of pro-Morales Bolivians abroad took part in the elections. The third limit is that only those emigrants residing in Argentina, Brazil, the United States and Spain could register as voters from abroad. Bolivians residing in other countries were denied the right to participate in the election. Fourth, the modality through which citizens could register and cast their ballot from abroad was to go in person to the registration booths and polling stations set up by the National Electoral Court of Bolivia in a few large cities of the four above-mentioned destination countries.

## **5. Lessons from the 2009 Presidential elections**

The first experiment of external voting took place on the Day of the Presidential Election on 6<sup>th</sup> December 2009. Previously, the National Electoral Court of Bolivia had registered 169,096 voters residing abroad (less than the 6% limit). Comparing this figure to the estimated total number of Bolivians abroad of around 1.7 to 2 million (according to consular authorities), this figure seems rather limited.

Table 1.  
2009 Bolivian presidential election results (%)<sup>1</sup>

	<i>Argentina</i>	<i>Brazil</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>USA</i>	<i>All external voters</i>	<i>All domestic voters</i>
<i>Manfred Reyes Villa</i> Plan Progreso para Bolivia–Convergencia Nacional (PPB-CN)	3.1%	2.7%	43%	61%	22.1%	26.6%
<i>Evo Morales Ayma</i> Movimiento al Socia- lismo-Instrumento Político por la Sobe- ranía de los Pueblos (MAS-IPSP)	92.1%	94.9%	48.2%	31%	75.7%	63.9%

Source: Corte Nacional Electoral de Bolivia 2009.

73.9 per cent of the registered external voters ultimately cast a vote in polling stations abroad on Election Day on 6 December 2009. With over 75 per cent of votes abroad cast in the MAS's favour, emigrants proved to be more supportive of this party than domestic voters. This figure, however, hides the disparities between three different electoral realities abroad. Indeed, Bolivians in Argentina and Brazil expressed almost unanimous support for the MAS, while Bolivians in the United States strongly supported the right-wing opposition's electoral list. Bolivians in Spain, on the contrary, were nearly equally split between the two biggest electoral lists.

These results, which confirmed that the right-wing fears toward external voters was founded, came as little surprise to most observers in Bolivia. Indeed, as we showed, many emigrants had proved supportive of Evo Morales' government during the years preceding the election. But why emigrants were more supportive of MAS than PODEMOS? Is it related to their socio-economic

1 Table 1 only presents the electoral results of Bolivia's two largest parties which, together, collected 90,6% of the votes casts by emigrant and domestic voters.

profile before departure or does the migratory experience affect their vote in a particular direction?

To answer these questions, Jean-Michel Lafleur and colleagues conducted on 6 December 2009 a survey among Bolivian voters abroad outside of polling stations in Buenos Aires, São Paulo, New York and Madrid. The survey was designed to collect basic demographic and socio-economic data on the voters, as well as more specific questions on their transnational activities and political participation in their host and home countries. 324 valid surveys were collected in total.

One of the main findings of this survey was to demonstrate that the vote of citizens abroad is strongly determined by factors set before the emigrant left his/her home country: region of origin, ethnicity and education.

Looking at the correlation between emigrants' department of origin in Bolivia (their region of origin) and their voting behavior, it appears that the home country's regional divisions are reproduced abroad. There is indeed a sharp geographical contrast in Bolivian politics — between the Eastern provinces (Santa Cruz, Beni, and Pando), which strongly oppose Morales' government, and the rest of the country, which strongly supports it. Respondents in the survey very much verified the importance of regional origins in voting behavior. Over 78 per cent of respondents from Morales' strongholds of La Paz and Cochabamba declared to be satisfied with his government. On the contrary, more than 60 per cent of respondents originating from Santa Cruz expressed unhappiness with Morales's government. In this department, 56.6 per cent of the domestic voters also supported the main right-wing opposition party. This data underlines the fact that political socialization, which happens before emigration, remains influential on the voting behavior of citizens abroad. The political background shared by migrants and non-migrants from Santa Cruz is one explanation for the fact that they similarly rejected Evo Morales.

Another long-term variable that could be verified in the Bolivian case is the ethnic origin of emigrants. Emigrants who declared speaking Aymara or Quechua at home can indeed be considered as belonging to one of Bolivia's many indigenous peoples. Aymara and Quechua speaking citizens abroad show over 90 per cent of approval of Morales' government, which, similarly to the regional origin, is a close reproduction of the situation in the homeland. Evo Morales was indeed elected on a platform that emphasized the rights of indigenous peoples in Bolivia. Indigenous groups constitute his electoral basis,

and the formal recognition of their rights was a central element in the constitutional reform promoted by Morales in 2009. Considering these elements, it can be argued that the role of ethnicity on voting behavior did not disappear with residence abroad.

Emigrants' level of education is another variable with which we found a correlation. Contrarily to the previous variables, this one can change after the emigrant's arrival in the country of residence (as a matter of fact, 17.3 per cent of the Bolivian voters surveyed in the United States declared having immigrated to this country for educational purposes). The survey shows that only 39 per cent of Bolivian emigrant voters who have a university degree voted in favor of Evo Morales. In other words, Bolivian emigrants with the highest educational levels are also the least likely to support him. Once again, considering that Morales is most successful among the most disadvantaged sectors of the Bolivian population, the behavior of citizens abroad is consistent with the electoral preferences of non-emigrant Bolivian voters.

Lastly, the experience of discrimination in the host country showed a strong correlation with political choices. Emigrants who declared they faced discrimination in the destination country because of their origins in the last 12 months were also most likely to be supportive of Evo Morales. Combining the experience of discrimination with the previous observations on the level of education and the ethnic origin, it appears that the emigrants with the weakest social statuses in the host and home society are also the ones who are most likely to be most supportive of Evo Morales.

### **Conclusion: The role of Bolivian emigrants in the political transformation of the home country**

In this article, we have demonstrated that Bolivians abroad have traditionally received little attention from home country authorities. This was particularly visible in the limited number of policies dedicated to this population. With the coming to power of MAS, the situation dramatically changed with the recognition at the rhetorical and policy-level by home country authorities that Bolivians abroad are members of the national community.

The new inclusive discourse of Morales' government towards citizens abroad came with the expectation that citizens abroad be supportive of its

government in exchange. As demonstrated in the article, migrant organizations have indeed responded positively to this demand by conducting different kind of activities in support of the government and its proposed policies (marches, symbolic elections, hunger strikes...). Doing so, emigrants have contributed to build the necessary pressure on the right-wing party PODEMOS that had traditionally opposed the enfranchisement of citizens abroad. The fear of this party was citizens abroad, because of their large number and their supposed preference for MAS, would be able to decisively influence the results of Presidential elections in Bolivia.

The combined pressure of MAS and its emigrant supporters forced the Bolivian Senate to come to a compromise on external voting by which only a limited number of citizens abroad would be enfranchised. This compromise implied that just about 200,000 Bolivians abroad (of the more than 1.5 million emigrants) registered and voted in their home country elections in 2009.

In our analysis of the electoral results at home and abroad, we demonstrated that PODEMOS' fear of being defeated by citizens residing abroad was largely founded: emigrant voters are indeed predominantly left-wing voters. However, the emigrant vote is not primarily in favour of MAS as a result of this party's effort to reach out to citizens abroad. As demonstrated by the survey, the political opinions of citizens abroad were for the most part firmly established before emigration. Indeed, with the exception of the experience of discrimination in the country of residence, these are factors set the most part well-before migration (the region of origin, ethnicity, educational level) that determine the political choices of citizens abroad.

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