



Migrant Perspectives on External Voting

Abstract This chapter explores migrants’ perspectives on voting in country-of-origin elections and on participation in democratic politics in countries of origin in Central and East Europe. We build on 80 semi-structured interviews with migrants from Poland and Romania, living in Barcelona, Spain, and Oslo, Norway. The chapter offers an analysis of their thoughts on and experiences of practicing external voting, as well as choosing not to cast a ballot in any given election. The first part explores the reasons why migrants do—or do not—vote “back home,” offering illustrations from our data, focusing on motivations for external voting, practicalities that impede or facilitate external voting, and discussing intersecting scales of motivation. These discussions are set within the context of migrants’ broader motivations to engage in politics transnationally, and intimately connected with their reflections on the principled question of the democratic legitimacy of external voting. The second part of the chapter extends the view from external voting to migrants’ own perspectives on transnational political engagement, including but not limited to external voting, as set within often transnational lifeworlds affected by both “here” and “there” in varying ways.

Keywords Migrants • Perspectives • Motivations • Transnational • Political engagement • Turnout

This chapter explores migrants' perspectives on voting in country-of-origin elections. It follows directly on from what we presented in the previous chapter on the aggregate patterns of diaspora voting. In this chapter we draw on our interviews with migrants from Poland and Romania, living in Barcelona, Spain, and Oslo, Norway, to include their thoughts on and experiences of practicing external voting, as well as choosing not to cast a ballot in any given election. Through this, we will add illustrations to several of the patterns already discussed in the previous chapter, notably in relation to how migration impacts migrants' motivations to vote in country-of-origin elections, and in relation to affecting their views. These discussions are set within the context of migrants' broader motivations to engage in politics transnationally, and intimately connected with their reflections on the principled question of the democratic legitimacy of external voting.

These reflections are all situated within a context where migration impacts citizenship, where citizenship does not necessarily mean residence, where dual citizenship can entail residence in one country of citizenship and not the other, and where issues of membership and belonging, both formal and informal, crystalize in experiences of inclusion/exclusion, with implications for the nature and practice of democratic politics (Smith, 2007; Vink et al., 2019). The chapter focuses on migrants' own perspectives, foregrounding migrant agency in relation to the practice of citizenship rights—here in the form of electoral participation—as a complementary perspective to much research on emigration state's regulation of external voting (Collyer, 2014; Lafleur, 2011; Lesinska, 2018, 2019; Palop-García & Pedroza, 2017; Pallister, 2020).

Through this, we address what the determinants and motivations for engaging in homeland politics are, in the context of Central and Eastern European migration within the EU in the early decades of the 2000s. The question of why migrants vote in elections in countries of origin necessitates answers at several scales. First, considering dimensions to do with the desire and opportunity to cast a vote in a given election as such. Second, exploring this as linked somehow to an interest in participating politically and specifically in democratic processes “back home,” and third, as closely intertwined with personal approaches to the society of emigration, both at the level of identity and belonging, and in more practical terms, such as in relation to owning property, family considerations, as well as possible plans to return. We thus build on important scholarship on migration and social change in Central and Eastern Europe, foregrounding the issue of

external voting within this broader landscape (Drbohlav & Džúrová, 2021; Garapich, 2016; Horváth & Anghel, 2009; White & Grabowska, 2019; White et al., 2018).

Here we also consider the relationship between voting in any given election—and the broader theme of engagement in homeland politics. Migrants might be politically engaged in their country of origin and in its societal development, but either might not have the right to vote there, depending on enfranchisement rules, or might not have the desire to vote in a particular election, despite having the right to do so, as a matter of political choice. Conversely, migrants might not be particularly politically interested or well-informed, yet desire to vote, as a matter of confirming membership as a non-resident citizen of a given polity. As such, knowing how many migrants vote from abroad, in itself can be telling—yet migrant voting may include a vast array of different types of motivations for doing so, which may point in contradictory directions (Szulecki et al., 2021).

Exploring our qualitative data, we shed light on how migrants describe, discuss, and reason around external voting and transnational political engagement. These migrant perspectives broaden the remit within which we seek to interpret and make sense of external voting as a practice in Central and Eastern Europe. Such an exploration underscores questions of how electoral participation can and should be understood in relation to the citizenship institution, and how the state (and society) of emigration relate to non-resident citizens, as members of the political community in a given nation-state (Erdal, 2016; Gamlen, 2019).

Our qualitative insights also reveal that the practicalities of being able to vote go far beyond rules of enfranchisement but relate heavily to the nitty-gritty aspects of implementation (Boccagni, 2011; Cristina et al., 2014). Such implementation impacts migrants who often live in far-flung diasporic contexts, with poorly staffed consular services in capital cities, often miles away from where particular migrants live.

Thus, in many cases the reasons why migrants vote, and why migrants *do not* vote, relate to the practicalities of casting a ballot in any given election: where, when, and how, notably including requirements for registration, timelines, and locations, when digitally solutions are not offered. Therefore, more principled overarching considerations, while important, must be tempered with very mundane issues (Szulecki et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, migrants' external voting should also be seen in relation to their life abroad overall—which could be assumed to have some impacts—whether in affecting political views, in relation to experiences of

acceptance or discrimination, or regarding whether voting in the country of settlement is possible and/or practiced too. Thus, migrant voting in country-of-origin elections is usefully explored in relation to the transnational social fields within which (many) migrants' lives unfold (Bell & Erdal, 2015; Levitt & Schiller, 2004). Furthermore, migrants' electoral participation in countries of origin is varyingly associated with the nature and extent of diaspora politics—in the context of a given country of origin, but also in relation to the specific country and place of residence abroad. This brings in a collective level of consideration, which may be significant in cases where emigrant political influence has mattered (Adamson, 2016; Kleist, 2008; Smith & Bakker, 2005).

Placing migrants within their context of emigration, both individually and collectively, allows for an exploration of diaspora politics dimensions of external voting, from a migrant rather than state of origin perspective (Koinova, 2021). Simultaneously a diaspora politics perspective also contributes to opening the space for what is often a critical view on relations between state and society in the country of origin itself, which clearly involves conflicts of interests and struggles over both resources and narratives—which may be transposed from country-of-origin to diaspora contexts or can take on independent dynamics in different diaspora locations (Brand, 2014; Brun & Van Hear, 2012; Orjuela, 2008).

Questions about migrants' voting in country of origin elections thus refer not only to politics “back home,” but also to lives which are, to an extent, lived both “here” and “there,” and by extension therefore also have an interface with issues to do with politics in contexts of immigration too (Chaudhary, 2018; Erdal, 2020; Finn, 2020). For migrants, this may relate to questions of where they see their future: returning to the country of origin, moving onward to further destinations, or aiming to settle for the long-term in the country of immigration. However, from a bird's-eye view, these are ultimately questions about how the citizenship institution is understood in modern-day European states, which are not only dealing with significant immigration—but also emigration. That is, in societies where populations are increasingly made up of non-citizens, whereas the citizenry of the nation-state is increasingly also constituted by non-residents. Arguably, faced with such empirical realities, an analytical view which adopts a transnational lens to the task of shedding further light on the determinants and motivations of external voting from migrants' perspectives has much to offer.

In this context, it is worth noting that our use of phrases such as voting “back home” and considerations around engagement in “homeland politics” do so from a conceptually and empirically justified basis, where migrants’ sense of belonging, identities, and identifications, as well as both formal and informal membership(s), in political communities in the form of citizenship are recognized to be dynamic, (potentially) plural, and thus changeable over time (Antonsich & Matejskova, 2015; Harpaz & Mateos, 2019; Shaw, 2020). So, whereas for migrants from Poland or Romania, “back home” has a particular national reference point, this is not to say that this can be understood as in opposition to (potential) political engagements in a new “homeland”—simultaneously or in successive phases, often but not always reflecting longer-term migration experience. A transnational perspective allows us to acknowledge the different ways in which ties to countries of settlement, origin, and potentially other countries too may interact to shape an individual’s motivations and choices (Erdal & Oeppen, 2013), as regards political engagement and voting externally in a particular context.

This chapter explores migrants’ perspectives on participation in democratic politics in countries of origin in Central and East Europe. The first part seeks to make sense of the reasons why migrants do—or do not—vote “back home,” offering illustrations from our data, focusing on motivations for external voting, practicalities that impede or facilitate external voting, and discussing intersecting scales of motivation. The second part of the chapter extends the view from external voting to migrants’ own perspectives on transnational political engagement, including but not limited to external voting. Here we discuss migrants (often) transnational life worlds. Based on this, we ask, how does the experience of migration influence political views?

MAKING SENSE OF THE REASONS WHY MIGRANTS VOTE “BACK HOME”

The expanding body of knowledge on external voting, spanning electoral studies, political science, and migration studies, often with particular regional foci, already provides crucial insights of relevance to making sense of the reasons why migrants vote “back home” (Itzigsohn & Villacrés, 2008; Boccagni, 2011; Escobar et al., 2015; Lesinska, 2018; Mügge et al., 2021; Finn, 2020; Sevi et al., 2020).

Often, however, the elephant in the room remains unnamed and hence also not really explored: for most migrants do *not*, in fact, vote in country-of-origin elections (Hutcheson & Arrighi, 2015; Ciornei & Østergaard-Nielsen, 2020). And, this is the case even when they have the right to do so, and even when it is not practically impossible to actually do so. This picture is also true for the region we focus on this book.

Yet, existing research has only recently started to examine the determinants of external voting in relation specifically to electoral turnout and beyond single cases (Chaudhary, 2018; Ciornei & Østergaard-Nielsen, 2020; Lafleur & Sánchez-Domínguez, 2015; Pallister, 2020). Indeed, Fliess and Østergaard-Nielsen's (2021) review on extension of the voting rights to emigrants identifies four waves of research, on normative dimensions, patterns and trends, states motivations and the roles of political parties and other institutional actors. It also underscores the curiously absent focus on migrants' reactions and responses to enfranchisement. This book contributes to a fifth wave of research emerging, addressing this area.

From a micro level, often qualitatively based view, research that sheds light on the transnational political engagement of migrants, to a degree enters into questions of how migrants relate to state's diaspora policies, including those in the area of enfranchisement (Peltoniemi, 2018). Meanwhile, more emphasis has been placed on diaspora politics and political engagements in their own right (Koinova, 2009).

A largely distinct body of work considering diaspora roles in relation to development, typically geographically confined to countries in the Global South, remains in little dialogue with literature on external voting, albeit there are intersections as regards the political realm (e.g., Brand, 2014; Şahin-Mencütek & Erdoğan, 2016). Yet, there are important insights on political engagement and participation, which the study of external voting could merit from engaging further with (see e.g., Erdal, 2016; Horst, 2018; Faria, 2014; Tan et al., 2018; Yanasmayan & Kaşlı, 2019). A few studies have started to explore questions of electoral participation "here" and "there" (Chaudhary, 2018; Finn, 2020), indicating the need for further in-depth scrutiny of the connections between voting practices linked to citizenship and/or residence status in multiple nation-states.

Motivations for Voting in Country-of-Origin Elections

The question of migrants' motivations for external voting, drawing on what our interviewees themselves shared with us, needs to be unpacked, emphasizing not the migrant part, but the motivation to vote part. This relates both to electoral turnout specifically, and to motivation for political participation more broadly. These are interconnected, of course, yet also distinct. We cover the first dimension here, and the second in the next section of this chapter.

Focusing on motivations to vote, in the sense of electoral turnout, it is important to note that most of the mechanisms that apply, in general, are also relevant to migrants (Myatt, 2015; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968; Silberman & Durden, 1975; Settle & Abrams, 1976; Smets & van Ham, 2013).

Thus, people who have the right to vote in any given election are likely to reflect on questions such as:

- *Does my vote really matter?*
- *Who can I vote for, if none of the alternatives really fit my views?*
- *Who do I vote for, if I don't really trust any of the candidates to bring the political change I would see as best?*

These reflections are clearly articulated by Julia and Natalia, both Polish migrants interviewed in Oslo:

We believe that our vote will not change anything. This is how 20 million people think, and nothing, in fact, ever changes. I always try to mobilize people. Because, really, once a year you can go out and do something for your fatherland. We live in times when it's important to pressure the politicians to make them feel they represent us and they are for us, not the other way round.

(Julia, Polish migrant, in Oslo 5 years, in her 30s)

Why? For various reasons, maybe they aren't interested in politics. Maybe they left and they want to leave it all behind them. Maybe they don't know how to vote. Maybe they don't have a mind for it. Maybe they are prioritizing other things. Maybe they just are not interested in politics. I also think that the people who do not vote in Poland are also the people who do not vote abroad. (Natalia, 35, Pole in Oslo)

(Natalia, Polish migrant, in Oslo 7 years, in her 30s)

Both these two women focus not only on migrants but also on similarities with non-migrants, in relation to motivations to vote, as Natalia underscores. Therefore, voting behaviors pre- and post-migration really also need to be understood jointly, and in the plural, recognizing that (to an extent), each single election is a separate event, which may or may not be participated in, and the considerations and dynamics driving voting or non-voting in each instance may vary.

Conversely, voting even in contexts where it is not compulsory is often discussed in terms of a “democratic duty”—and in newer democracies such as in Poland and Romania, an obligation one owes to those who helped fight for a democratic system, where elections actually do matter. Thus, reasons for voting, for migrants, as in general in democratic elections, focus on participating in democratic politics and contributing to a direction of change that one perceives as superior, as reflected in Julia’s statement above.

Meanwhile, some interviewees also share very honest reflections about how they perceive elections, and the broader political “game” as Szymon (*all names used are pseudonyms*) refers to—this may be affected by being “away” abroad, but is also not uniquely linked to being away, but rather to being a regular average voter:

Like I said I am interested in it but I am interested in it like I’m interested in a football match. I know the techniques, how to play, I can see that they played well or poorly, and how they could play differently, but I can’t go into his place on the field, or even go to him and pass him the ball or block his opponent. I can’t do that. But I am interested. But I can’t influence this game.

(Szymon, Polish migrant, in Oslo 10 years, in his 40s)

Being socialized into particular ways of relating to electoral behavior does not change overnight due to migration. Thus, migrant or migration-specific answers to the question of why migrants vote and what the determinants of external voting are can be illusive and lead to significant blind-spots, whereas basic motivations for electoral participation that apply across populations may in fact be salient.

This said, being an emigrant, and voting “from abroad,” does entail some peculiarities, which may also affect motivations for external voting in specific ways. Some of these motivations are well-summarized by Ion, a migrant from Romania whom we interviewed in Oslo:

I think it is normal for the diaspora to have the right to vote because they are citizens of that country, but morally speaking I only think it is ok to vote if you are thinking of going back to your country or if you still have a family back there and you are thinking about their well-being. If you are completely separated from that society, then I don’t understand why you want to keep influencing their lives if you don’t want anything to do with that country anymore.

(Ion, Romanian migrant, in Oslo 2 years, in his 30s)

Here, reflecting common considerations among the migrants we interviewed, Ion points to questions of membership and belonging, as key constituents of a motivation to vote, but also of viewing external voting as “morally” legitimate. Some migrants, however, like Sorina were of the very clear view that voting rights should be tied to residence:

To be honest, I would take away the right to vote of any person who changes their residence once you change that you shouldn’t be allowed to vote in the country you left. Why should we dictate the destiny of a country that we do not live in?

(Sorina, Romanian migrant, in Oslo 4 years, in her 40s)

Migrants from both Poland and Romania discussed their reasoning around voting, often though not always, with the backdrop of the principled question of whether they should have the right to vote at all. For some this was a natural right—as a citizen, as a part of the nation, and as someone who sees themselves as part of the society of the origin country. Seeing arguments for and against was also common, and this ambiguity around the legitimacy of external voting is arguably a factor that can play a role in the motivation to vote too, as Kasia reflects on:

Yes and no. Because the fact that we are not there should not authorize us to have an impact on what happens in our country. On the other hand, we never know what the future holds and we can return to our country anytime and we’d want to return to a county we like.

(Kasia, Polish migrant, in Barcelona 4 years, in her 30s)

Some migrants who felt less connected with the origin society, or simply reflected on the fact that they do not in practice live there, pay taxes there, use public services there, discussed their motivations to vote in relation to family ties and choosing to vote similarly to siblings or parents, lending support to their vote, to their visions of necessary political change, and thus balancing a certain ambiguity around voting.

For many migrants, not least in the context of intra-EU mobility, with relative ease of movement, the question of return remains open-ended—and many indicate that they plan to return at some point, for retirement, or to live “here” and “there,” if not planning to return more permanently (Bygnes & Erdal, 2017; Drinkwater & Garapich, 2015; Friberg, 2012). Thus, the connection with the country of origin, at some level, and beyond family ties and holidays, is for many, kept alive—but with varying implications for motivations for—and actually choosing to—vote from abroad. Indeed, questions about return often function as a proxy for expressing continued membership and belonging, as much as about actual mobility and settlement preferences (Carling & Erdal, 2014).

The Practical Possibility of Casting the Vote in Elections

Drawing on our interview material, on the one hand we find that the salience of the practicalities around voting cannot be underestimated, if seeking to understand the determinants of external voting, and on the other hand, that disillusionment with the political programs on offer in certain elections, appear as an even more weighty explanation for low voter turn-out.

In this section we will therefore explore the types of nitty-gritty issues that matter to whether migrants in fact do cast a vote in a given election. As mentioned previously, there are different systems for voter registration, and when cumbersome, this in itself will reduce the number of migrants who are eligible to vote—despite their general enfranchisement. In the context of the two countries of origin which our interviewees referred to, registration procedures for external voting seem to have been streamlined, simplified, and digitalized in recent years, which means that few of our interviewees discussed the registration process as a current challenge, though it was noted that this is something that has to be done—and thus constitutes a practical threshold already.

A main topic of discussion in our interviews pertained to the location of polling stations, the distance to these, their opening hours, and capacity for processing people coming to cast their ballot. At the overarching level, among our interviewees, some Polish migrants had never experienced a queue, but most of those who had voted in at least one election in Barcelona or Oslo referred to queues of one or several hours. Among our Romanian interviewees, there are a lot of experiences of long queues in both Barcelona and in Oslo—of 3–9 hours of waiting. However, in both cities, the 2019 Presidential election was a turning point, with the number of polling stations and their preparedness experienced as adequate:

[The 2019 presidential elections] were the first real elections, that is the first time when there was no queue, and I came to vote and solved everything in two minutes. Now, I do not claim to say that I have to necessarily vote in two minutes, but one thing is to wait for five, ten minutes, maybe half an hour, and another is to wait for ten hours and then stay out [of the polling station].

(Madalin, Romanian migrant, in Barcelona 9 years, in his 30s)

The issue of queues is revealing of the nitty-gritty aspects of executing external voting in practice, often in contexts where migrants live in many places within a region or country, and many travel for a long time to bigger cities to be able to cast their ballot. The change in experiences among migrants from Romania, with the 2019 Presidential election, also points to the ways in which embassies and missions abroad, are not just executing, but in fact responsible for planning and organizing the details of how external voting actually happens.

Interestingly, the issue of queues to vote at polling stations was seen very differently. While some migrants were discouraged and left without voting, others felt a sense of encouragement and community with co-migrants and their country of origin—seeing the many people coming to vote:

Maybe some people would be discouraged, I personally was more motivated when I saw what is happening there [the queues]

(Lorena, Romanian migrant, in Oslo 11 years, in her 30s)

Among our interviewees, there were also varying views on what was a long distance to travel to the polling station—some migrants had

experienced driving for hours to the polling station, when not living in Barcelona or Oslo, both cities with one or more polling stations available for external voting in elections in Poland or Romania. One of our interviewees from Romania compares with the ease of voting back in Romania, and from this perspective, choosing to take out time to go and cast a ballot is something that requires more time and effort from migrants, than it does from the average citizen “back home”:

The section was really far from me, it would take me an hour of traveling to the voting station in Oslo.

(Crina, Romanian migrant, in Oslo 8 years, in her 40s)

Another practical issue, which the Polish case illustrates well, relates to the role of diaspora votes in each election. In the Polish context, diaspora votes are included in one of the voting districts in Warsaw, which for some migrants can be off-putting. As Martyna discusses, whether this matters, depends on the individual voter, and whether they mainly see their vote in support of a political party—or more focusing on the individual representatives:

That’s also a problem, because voting here, I could only vote for representatives from Warsaw who I don’t know, I don’t have anything to do with them. I think that could be a negative factor, but it’s not such a huge problem for me, because I decide on the party who I support [...]. So, in my case, it’s not a big problem, but I think that yes, that could dissuade people from smaller municipalities, from smaller towns, who are more closely tied to the local authorities.

(Martyna, Polish migrant, in Oslo 4 years, in her 30s)

Nevertheless, the ways in which external votes work in the democratic system in each country, whether they are merged into a voting district, whether there are specific diaspora representatives elected, all these things will potentially also impact migrants’ motivations to vote.

In our interviews, we also asked migrants about how external voting, in their view, should be made simpler. Our interlocutors’ answers span the whole array of points of view—from the very practical issues on voting day at the polling station and mode of voting, through to questions of policies

that actually impact migrants directly being raised within the election campaigns, to the issue of political choice on offer as represented through the political parties with candidates standing for election:

If it was possible to vote electronically more people would vote. Or if there was an exact time or date for different people. More people would be encouraged to go.

(Olivia, Polish migrant, in Barcelona 4 years, in her 30s)

If there were a topic related with migrant's taxes, or some political program that would encourage them to go back and would give any concrete solution. For sure, it would engage those groups, because it'd be something what concerns them directly.

(Paulina, Polish migrant, in Barcelona 3 years, in her 30s)

If I were to take my own case, the answer would probably be more options, I mean right now I am facing a choice between a neoliberal right wing and a corrupted left – I don't have what to vote for.

(Teodora, Romanian migrant, in Barcelona 13 years, in her 30s)

Whereas in research, discussions on migrants' motivations to vote often focus on questions of democratic participation, or of citizenship, and matters of identity and belonging, we find that the mundane, everyday modes of actually casting the vote, merit further attention—across diverse empirical contexts. Meanwhile, among our interviewees, there is also a strong sense that if the right political choice is on offer, that will drive a motivation to vote, which will overcome practical challenges of the necessary time, transport, or other matters, as Michał states, reflecting not just on practicalities of the organization of voting—but on the practical aspects of remembering to go to vote:

You know, but it wasn't any priority it seems. Because if it was very important then I definitely wouldn't have forgotten it. It seems to have been pushed down somewhere to a lower priority. So those are the facts.

(Michał, Polish migrant, in Oslo 6 years, in his 30s)

Thus, perceived lack of political options to vote, and sense of importance of actually voting to each individual, appears to be a larger obstacle to increasing turn-out, even in the face of very real practical investments that migrants have to make in order to vote.

Interacting Scales of Motivation for External Voting

Emigrants' motivations for voting in country-of-origin elections, much as the practical modalities disabling or enabling such political engagement, can be sorted according to scales. Motivations of individual migrants depend on their previous (political) socialization, previous patterns of electoral behavior pre-migration, the individuals' interest in politics, their understanding and experience of what it means to be a citizen, and how they relate to this. It seems evident that motivations to cast a vote in elections "back home," appear to be intertwined also with future plans, notably about settlement, onward or return mobilities—thus tying more identity-based questions with practical dimensions of mobility, such as obtaining or managing properties, tax affairs, and pensions.

Thus, motivations at the individual level are already spanning the past, present, and future considerations, and demonstrate the ways in which political participation may intersect with different spheres of life, for migrants, as is the case for non-migrants. Meanwhile, the question of motivations for external voting is not only an individual matter. Rather, motivations to vote—or to refrain from doing so, whether as an active choice to disengage, or simply as the flip side of the lack of an active choice to vote—are also affected by collective dimensions. These can be connected to the individual's family and social network—in the country of origin as well as in the country of settlement. If the migrants' close others remain in the country of origin, motivations for involvement overall "there" are known to be higher; however, it remains unclear whether this can be associated with higher degrees of motivation to vote externally.

EMIGRATION, EXTERNAL VOTING, AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Political participation in the form of voting in elections is a particular mode of realizing citizenship rights and engaging in democracy. Meanwhile, voting is indeed set within the broader tapestry of democratic political participation, and in the case of emigrants—of transnational political participation (Waldinger, 2014; Koinova, 2021; Nowak & Nowosielski, 2022; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2003). As has been argued by researchers since the early 2000s, despite the increasing rates of enfranchisement of migrants and technological advances which plausibly should make external voting more feasible—there continues to be little evidence of mass mobilization among emigrants in the political sphere.

Rather transnational political action “is regularly undertaken by a small minority, is socially bounded across national borders, occurs in quite specific territorial jurisdictions, and appears to reproduce preexisting power asymmetries” (Guarnizo et al., 2003: 1211). But further to this, the statement that “a stable and significant transnational field of political action connecting immigrants with their countries of origin does exist” (ibid.: 1239) has been documented with case studies from around the world. Within this research, which foregrounds migrant political transnationalism—nonelectoral activities tend to gain most of the attention, however (Bauböck, 2003).

In the below we seek to contribute to discussions weaving migrant external voting together with their broader political engagements. We do so first by sketching out key connections between transnational lifeworlds and politics, as this emerges from our interviews. Next, we explore the ways in which the experience of migration may impact migrants’ political views.

Transnational Lifeworlds and Politics

Among our 80 interviewees in Barcelona and Oslo, we found different transnational practices, some more frequent, other more sporadic, and variation in spheres—economic, social, cultural, political, and so on. As with most migrants who engage transnationally, in one way or another, our interviewees’ transnational practices were focused around sustaining interpersonal ties with close others living in Poland or Romania, or in other locations. Transnational interactions were therefore much focused around family—but also networks of friends. We asked all of our interviewees about membership in political parties, trade unions, and other organizations—and found that a big majority of them neither were members in any such in Poland or Romania, nor in Spain or Norway—which we can take to reflect the reality which Guarnizo et al. (2003) describe—where transnational political engagement is rarely a mass issue, and indeed that this also reflects realities in the settlement context, as well as pre-migration socialization, to some degree at least.

Meanwhile, political transnational engagement does exist—which we also found reflected in discussions around voting. The most striking aspect of this was the fact that most of our interviewees both had voted at least once prior to leaving Poland and Romania—and also had voted at least once since coming to Barcelona and Oslo. This was a qualitative study, and

we make no claims to representative conclusions here. However, it underscores the fact that external voting is not something which migrants do, or do not do—each single election is an instance where many migrants consider whether to vote. In this sense, the realm of political engagement transnationally in the country of origin is something which figures on their horizons. Also, none of our 80 interviewees stated that they had voted in every election since becoming eligible to vote, thus a pattern of not voting in every election is a likely pre-migration pattern that is being continued, or at least that is a possibility that merits further investigation.

Our analysis of interviews revealed the many different reflections and considerations around voting in any given election. The more fundamental analytical (and methodological) insight, however, is that migrant political transnational engagement is not a binary variable—where some are—and others are not—participating. Neither in terms of “being” external voters nor in terms of “being” engaged in political transnationalism. Rather specific events, campaigns, elections, or periods of time can be scrutinized to better understand how migrants participate politically from afar.

Our interviewees spanned a continuum from those who had lived abroad for a long time to those who only had a few years’ experience abroad and included those who had close family in Poland or Romania, as well as those whose closest family members were abroad. Thus, the ways in which transnational lifeworlds came into being, and mattered, for different of our interviewees, contrasted—and these types of different transnational modes of being arguably have an impact on the foundations on which transnational political engagement may be built. As we have argued elsewhere (Szulecki et al., 2021), non-linearity best describes the ways in which different aspects of migrant experience come together with their political engagements vis-à-vis the country of origin.

These findings feed into ongoing conversations about migrant transnationalism and integration, and questions of how priorities and time are divided and spent “here” and “there”—as well as both or nowhere (Chaudhary, 2018; Erdal & Oeppen, 2013; Erdal, 2020; Finn, 2020). As Maria reflects on below, questions of attachment and belonging may have a quite direct bearing on political interest in the country of origin, which in his case leads him to argue for the legitimacy of external voting:

I don’t think it’s a right you should lose as long as nationality keeps conditioning our life. As long as I’m a Romanian citizen and this has conse-

quences at a level of... That I, as an immigrant, as long as there's a link to my nationality and my daily life, no matter how small, then I have a say. [...] I think we should be able to vote in both places. From my point of view, both political lives affect me. Not only... And, on the other hand, it affects me because I have a family, friends in Romania. So, I'm not completely detached from what's going on there. And how my parents live affects me, too. So, yeah.

(Maria, Romanian migrant, in Barcelona 18 years, in her 40s)

In our study, we deliberately did not seek to interview diaspora political activists, or diaspora politicians, and instead sought the perspectives of a mix of migrants from Poland and Romania, respectively, in Barcelona and Oslo, with a variety of levels of political interest and engagement, and types of views. However, clearly there are more politically engaged pockets of migrants, who participate in more systematic and structured ways transnationally in politics in Poland and in Romania. These individuals, “diaspora entrepreneurs” as Maria Koinova (2021) refers to them, can have an impact on extended diaspora networks in particular locations, and at times are closely connected with political elites in countries of origin, something we also saw was more present in the case of Romanians in Barcelona, than with our other interviewees.

The transnational lifeworlds of migrants, the ways in which diaspora politics may develop, and the links to transnational political participation are intimately tied with questions of membership—formally and informally—with both the state and the people in context of origin (Bauböck, 2003; Brubaker, 2010; Erdal, 2016). We found that among our Polish interviewees, national community membership was very closely tied to a sense of Polishness as an identity—which for many also supports the idea of having the right to vote from abroad. Meanwhile, the idea of Polishness as an identity is also something which is acknowledged to be independent of the voting rights, that is, even without voting rights, even without citizenship, that heritage and identity would be there. Thus, transnational political engagement is tied to sense of membership and belonging, which is usually but not necessarily linked to citizenship.

Whereas “the Polish homeland” for most of our interviewees, albeit in range of different ways, was a strong notion, this was not the same among Romanian migrants. The Romanian migrants we interviewed tie citizenship to ideas that are more civic and constitutional. Among Romanian

migrants, some express doubts over unlimited rights to vote from abroad, articulating a tension between permanent residence abroad, leading to a cutting of ties to the country of origin, as opposed to temporary residence abroad, where you are still really a member of the society of origin, and return is a definite part of the picture (or thought to be so, at least).

Romanian citizenship is less romanticized in terms of Romianness. Those that express doubts about whether diaspora should have the right to vote do so in terms of ownership of political issues and whether you have a plan to return or not. So, the question of not being so well connected, informed, and not having stakes in the future of Romania, if you do not want to return, are seen as arguments against diaspora voting rights in countries of origin.

Some migrants reflect on the balance of where you live your life, and the implications of that for your political engagements—as well as rights and citizenship status. Others remain more inconclusive or ambivalent about these issues, maintaining both “here” and “there” approach, as part of transnational social fields that exists, and certainly remain latent, if not massively politically engaged at any given moment in time.

Meanwhile, some of our interviewees had also participated in elections in Norway and Romania—mainly local level elections as only a couple of our interviewees had naturalized and had dual citizenship. For many interviewees, this might be a prospect later; however, for others, the practical need to naturalize was felt as low: what difference would naturalizing really make, in terms of rights? And, for some, the identity aspects of being a citizen also were a deterrent—given that the practical reasons to naturalize were perceived as limited, also making the question rather less important to consider.

Their reflections around being part of a transnational social field and political engagement “back home” were thus produced in a setting where there was a very clear sense of having both a “here” and a “there” as salient in their everyday lives. While several reflected on implications for the legitimacy of external voting rights, foregrounding residence as a consideration, there was little doubt that both societies—and thus to an extent polities—played a role for them, in more tangible ways, as well as relationally, and emotionally—whether most attention was geared toward country of origin or settlement.

Thus, when it comes to transnational lifeworlds and politics, from a migrant perspective, these are latent or actual interconnections—which may be experienced as more or less important, but at some level exist.

However, when it comes to the actual impact which transnational political participation has, in tangible or just visible ways, in origin contexts, this is often much more varying, and often driven by activists and “diaspora entrepreneurs,” although the opportunity to vote externally does allow for migrants across the spectrum of levels of political engagement to also formally participate.

Meanwhile, political participation in contexts of settlement—or more specifically the desire to do so—appears to reflect the sense of anchoring that migrants have in their places of residence. This, however, is tempered by their types and levels of political socialization, pre-migration predominantly, but also during time spent abroad, where the practices and organizational structures within particular contexts matter. In our interviews, we found that considerations around political participation “here” and “there” were mainly discussed in relation to residence and to membership.

Interestingly, the implications of these two entry-points, in the context of transnational political engagements, appear to diverge. For residence, this was linked to questioning the legitimacy of the right to vote if you are not and will not be living in the country of origin, or underscoring the need for political engagement also in the place of settlement, if that is where the future is. That is, residence was by most of our interviewees, though not all, understood as singular—though possibly serial. By contrast, in relation to membership, the situation was different—many interviewees reflected on developing attachments, often of a very different nature, but with both contexts of origin and settlement. Based on these membership considerations, then, political participation both “here” and “there” appears justified and of interest.

How Does the Experience of Migration Influence Political Views?

A central question in research about external voting is not only how migrants differ or remain similar to the electorate “back home”—but also *how does the experience of migration influence political views and electoral preferences?* In our study, we approached this question from several angles, including asking migrants themselves about their perspectives on how migration affects their views, which is notably just one part of this bigger puzzle. We also asked migrants about their views on a number of more or less contentious political issues, in order to solicit reflections on these based on their experiences in the country of emigration as well as immigration.

Below we present some insights from our interviews about how migrants discussed gender equality, an issue on which there is arguably some variation between the contexts of origin and settlement—and a degree of contentiousness, perhaps especially in Poland. Through this, we show that migration does have a bearing on the development of people’s political views; however, there are many factors which play a role here in terms of shaping the strength of this process, and its directionality on specific issues. We then turn to the question of how migration is perceived, by migrants, to be impacting their political views—which allows us to get insight into migrants’ own reflections around these processes.

Questions of gender equality, and more specifically about equal opportunities for women and men, were something many of our interviewees shared thoughts about. Among our 80 interviewees, very few of the 40 in Oslo said they felt opportunities were more equal in Poland or Romania than in Norway. Among our 40 interviewees in Barcelona, more interviewees were uncertain about the balance, some suggesting the situation is better in Poland than in Spain, for instance.

Of course, what interviewees referred to when discussing gender equality and equal opportunities varied. However, overall, we found this issue to be less contentious among our interviewees, than both questions around sexual minorities and family values. As might be expected, we did have a few interviewees who interpreted questions of gender equality as part of a thematic package, connected to questions around “traditional family values,” and whose point of departure was shaped by this:

[Women in Spain] have abnormal behavior, [...] they no longer have respect for family values.

(Calin, Romanian migrant, in Barcelona 18 years, in his 40s)

However, a more prominent finding was the fact that across these themes and beyond, there was a high degree of non-linearity, in the sense that holding particular views on one issue need not entail holding what might be assumed to be corresponding views on other issues (see also Erdal et al., 2022). In other words, assumptions about clear “liberal” or “conservative” views did not become visible in the patterns of views expressed by our interviewees many times. And in particular in the case of some more “traditional” or “conservative” views. Meanwhile some of the (younger) and very clearly “liberal” interviewees had a pattern of more cross-cutting “liberal” views, albeit sometimes also with some nuances to

this picture. We found that different themes solicited reflections on views which were based on people's own lived experience often, and not mainly perhaps political rhetoric around them—thus a patchwork of opinions that taken together might appear disconnected, in fact made very good sense in our interviewee's own lives.

Our interviewees' discussion on gender equality centered around insufficient gender equality in many contexts in Poland and Romania. This referred for instance to stereotypes about women, expectations around working life, caring responsibilities, and responsibility for household tasks, but also questions about provision of welfare (paternal leave, abortion, contraception, birth care). As Aleksandra's statement shows, some migrants clearly reflect on the "here" and "there" realities they know, where this does not mean that "migration changes people's views"—but rather that lived experience impacts outlooks, just as that would be the case without migration, though chances of exposure to different things increases with migration:

I think that men have a much better situation in Norway than in Poland because it's possible for them to have a better family life, and more responsibility for your family happiness, because in Poland this is all on the shoulders of women to make sure that children are happy and the husband is happy. Here it sometimes makes me really emotional to see fathers with three children on a walk, or two men who look like real professionals, of a high class, who are sitting in a café and drinking coffee with two small babies who they are feeding them milk, in their laps. These are the kinds of pictures that you wouldn't find in Poland.

(Aleksandra, Polish migrant, in Oslo 5 years, in his 50s)

Some migrants, from both Poland and Romania, were quite vocal about what they perceived as need for dramatic change in their countries of origin as regards gender equality:

No support is offered, I haven't heard anyone, and believe me, when I say that I'm reading the Romanian press almost daily, the first thing I do in the morning is browse the newspapers from Romania and from here. I didn't see anyone talking about equal rights. There are articles about equal pay, maybe they appeared in Romania, but it's not emphasized.

(Lucian, Romanian migrant, in Barcelona 16 years, in his 40s)

However, many like Lucian did not tie very clear views about need for change in the country of origin directly to any particular action which they

themselves could perform, neither in relation to external voting nor in relation to other transnational political engagement. In fact, as we return to in the concluding chapter, the idea that migrants in general can be assumed to have a desire to be “agents of change,” based on insights from our interviewees, merits some critical questioning.

In our interviews, we also asked migrants about their own thoughts on the question of how migration may affect political views. Views were quite split on this question. Some migrants argued that many Poles (in Norway, specifically) work here, but have their family and life there (Poland), and so migration really does not affect much change, based on exposure to a new context:

I think that the Norwegian debates don't have an impact at all. Let's not hide the fact that the majority of people who vote are simply workers who are working and are strengthening the Polish economy and they have houses in Poland and they have family in Poland. I think that they are dedicated and always go vote and never watch Norwegian TV and don't integrate at all, so to speak, with Norwegian Society. and I think that's the largest portion of people who vote, that's what I think.

(Mikołaj, Polish migrant, in Oslo 11 years, in his 30s)

Other interviewees reflected on the fact that there may be dual orientation points, which are likely to have some impact, perhaps also on political views and voting preferences “back home”:

I tend to believe that we aren't watertight compartments from this point of view, what... I've been politicized here, and it might well be that many other Romanians share my same story. So yeah, both. The expectations you have about the Romanian politics are of course influenced by the political culture here.

(Maria, Romanian migrant, in Barcelona 18 years, in her 40s)

Further interviewees reflected on the possibility of quite dual approaches to political questions in the country of origin and settlement—including in relation to voting preferences:

I strongly believe that it is possible to vote in one country a certain color and in the other an opposite color. As it happened to me, I didn't even have hesitation at one point (smiles) to vote center-right instead of a left, and here to vote left.

(Laura, Romanian migrant, in Barcelona 15 years, in her 40s)

Based on our interviews then, we see that the impact of migration on migrants' political views varies. Often previously held views are kept, while some form new opinions on new issues. We saw no shift from right- to left-wing or vice versa. Meanwhile, voting preferences can be split, with positions that differ between the two contexts. The political dynamics in both countries of settlement and origin matter to a degree, but with considerable variation, not least depending on exposure to and engagement with political developments in each of the contexts.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Our interviewees' reflections around external voting and transnational political participation resonate in clear ways with current debates about citizenship—and its relation to, respectively, residence and voting rights. But also with the highly contested question of citizenship *as membership* of what? The polity and therefore the national community? Or the polity as a structure which does not overlap perfectly with the nation, but holds the nation-state together nevertheless? These are questions that matter as much in relation to emigration—as to immigration, though the real political and economic implications are clearly most salient for *residents* of any given polity (Bauböck, 2005; Bauder, 2014; Bloemraad & Sheares, 2017; Bloemraad, 2022; Brubaker, 2010; Erdal et al., 2018; Finn, 2019; Weinar, 2017).

Any state's residents might be non-citizens, or citizens from birth, or by naturalization, thus contributing to a complex mix of who the “people” in the polity actually are (Erdal, 2016; Smith, 2003). This is the case, even before non-resident citizens aka our “external voters” discussed here are mentioned. And not to mention non-resident *former* citizens, who may have renounced their citizenship in order to naturalize, but nevertheless are emotionally and sometimes practically tied to their country of origin, are considered (Erdal et al., 2018; Vink & Bauböck, 2013). The latter being relevant for migrants from Poland and Romania who left during Communist times, and can have naturalized before many West European states permitted dual citizenship, and thus are no longer citizens, but certainly considered a part of the diaspora.

While numerically external voting may matter in a given election, depending on how diaspora votes are practically made to count, it is rarely the top-most crucial issue in any election. However, the relationships

between citizenship, residency, and membership are brought to the fore in very concrete ways when considering (possible and actual) transnational political participation. This, arguably, has the potential to offer space for constructive exchange about these relationships, in what are otherwise often highly polarized debates, with quite exclusionary rhetoric involved, if centered on “immigration.”

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