

# Latin American Immigrants and their Transformation of the Americas

by **Susan Eckstein** | Boston University | eckstein.susan@gmail.com

I am honored to be this year's recipient of LASA's Kalman Silvert Award for Lifetime Achievement, and am indebted to LASA and the Awards Committee for the inspiration for this essay. As it is very much a work-in-process, I welcome your feedback. My goal is to demonstrate how Latin American immigrants are transforming and transnationalizing the Americas. Analyses that focus on trade, aid, development, democratization and its backsliding, and the like, and on theories and strategies of development, have ignored the impact that Latin American immigrants have had across the Americas.

## **Background: Internal Migration, The Urbanization of Latin America**

The development models imposed on Latin America first by European colonial powers and, most recently, by the United States, together with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have left all too many people in the region impoverished and have contributed to the region having the most inequitable distribution of wealth in the world. After World War II, during the era of import substitution industrialization—the one strategy Latin American governments initiated—Latin Americans did gain new rights and opportunities, but only selectively, in the cities, and at the expense of the peasantry.

The urban bias contributed to massive rural-to-urban migration. By 2020, 79 percent of Latin Americans lived in cities, approximately the same percentage of people as lived in cities in the Global North, even though Latin American cities offered far fewer economic possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

When in the 1980s the IMF insisted that Latin American governments implement neoliberal reforms to address fiscal crises that import substitution had generated, the Latin Americans living in cities faced a dramatic deterioration in their living conditions. The majority of city dwellers found themselves with no secure income, no pensions to cover their needs in old age, no health insurance, and no unemployment compensation when they lost their jobs. As economic conditions deteriorated crime picked up, making the cities less safe.

On the positive side, some governments in Latin America initiated programs to raise people out of poverty and to reduce income inequality. However, hurricanes, earthquakes, droughts, and floods, exacerbated by climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a surge in violence (especially in Central America), left many Latin Americans with little hope where they lived.

## **From Migration to Emigration: Latin Americans Demographic Transformation of the U.S.**

Faced with deteriorating prospects, in the neoliberal era Latin Americans increasingly envisioned their future in emigration. Many of them fled their homelands under extremely hazardous conditions, at great personal risk and at great cost, guided by illicit human smugglers. As of 2022, more than 10 percent of Latin Americans in twelve of the twenty main countries in the region had packed their bags and left. The

<sup>1</sup> UN Habitat, *World Cities Report 2020: The Value of Sustainable Urbanization*, [https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/10/chapter\\_1\\_urbanization\\_and\\_cities.pdf](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/10/chapter_1_urbanization_and_cities.pdf).

percentages of Salvadorans, Venezuelans, and Jamaicans who had emigrated reached as high as 24, 25, and 37 percent, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

Where Latin Americans moved varied. Nearly 90 percent of the Central Americans, Mexicans, and people from the Caribbean who uprooted went to the United States, whereas the South Americans mainly migrated to neighboring countries or to Europe.<sup>3</sup> With six times more migrants relocating in the United States than elsewhere, I focus on them.

As Latin Americans flocked to the United States they replaced white Europeans as the main foreign-born. By 2000, half of all immigrants in the United States came from Latin America, up from 20 percent just twenty years earlier, at the eve of the Latin American debt crisis that led to the neoliberal restructuring. By 2020, over 62 million people of Latin American origin resided in the United States—immigrants, plus their family members born in the United States (who identify as Hispanic, Latinx, or Latino/a): more than a sixfold increase in fifty years.<sup>4</sup> With nearly two-thirds of them having been born in the United States, Latin Americans became the largest ethnic as well as the largest immigrant group in the country. More than 50 percent of the Latin American immigrants came from Mexico, 7 percent from both El Salvador and Cuba, and 6 percent from the Dominican Republic. In smaller numbers Latin Americans came from other countries.

Latin Americans have been so determined to come to the United States that many who failed to get visas immigrated without authorization. Before the implementation of immigration reforms in 1965, Washington exempted Latin

America from admission quotas applied to other world regions, which had enabled all Latin Americans who wished to move to the United States to come lawfully. Because of restrictions imposed with the 1965 reforms on all foreign-born, increasing numbers of Latin Americans wishing to move to the United States who were unable to obtain immigration visas came without authorization. By 2020 approximately 11 million unauthorized Latin Americans lived in the United States.

Conditions in Central America have been so bad that parents have even sent their children, unaccompanied, to the United States where they have worked illicitly in highly exploitative, unsafe conditions, and such long hours that they have been unable to attend school, to improve their long-term economic prospects.<sup>5</sup>

## **How Latin American Immigrants Have Been Transforming the United States**

Latin American immigrants and their family members born in the United States have been reshaping US culture, the economy, politics, and demographics. Their impact in these domains has been especially great in locations where they have settled in large numbers.

### ***The Latin Americanization of Mainstream American Culture***

Latin American immigrants, not entirely leaving the values and practices of their homelands behind, have been Hispanicizing mainstream American culture. They also have been creating new cultural formations that draw on both Latin American and United States cultures.

<sup>2</sup> "International Migration from Latin America & the Caribbean: In Numbers," *The Dialogue*, April 2023, [https://www.thedialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Changes-in-LAC-Migration\\_In-Numbers.pdf](https://www.thedialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Changes-in-LAC-Migration_In-Numbers.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Dany Bahar and Ernesto Talvi, "Can Latin American Countries Benefit from Their Large Emigrant Populations?," Brookings Institution, March 20, 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/can-latin-american-countries-benefit-from-their-large-emigrant-populations/>.

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Treisman, "Key Facts about the U.S. Latino Population to Kick Off Hispanic Heritage Month," NPR, September 15, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/15/1037358346/us-latino-population-demographic-figures-pew-center-hispanic-heritage-month>.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Dreier, "As Migrant Children Were Put to Work, U.S. Ignored Warnings," *New York Times*, April 17, 2023.

In terms of language, Latin American immigrants have not entirely adopted the official language of the United States. Forty-two percent of them speak Spanish at home.<sup>6</sup> Their children, raised at home in Spanish but educated in English in school, lead bilingual lives.

Latin American immigrants have also Hispanicized the English they speak. So-called Spanglish melds words and short phrases from Spanish and English. In Miami, Cuban immigrants who settled there in large numbers beginning in the early 1960s blended Spanish meanings, borrowed translations, and English words into a colloquial dialect that is understood locally but sounds “off” to most English-speaking Americans. More recent arrivals from Cuba, as well as from other South and Central American countries, have contributed to the evolution of the dialect.<sup>7</sup>

Latin American immigrants have also Hispanicized food tastes in America. While bringing their food preferences with them from their homelands, they have hispanicized the food palate of those born in the United States. Mexican immigrants and U.S.-born Latinos of Mexican descent have most influenced food tastes of the broader American society. Corporate America has contributed to this broadening of the American diet, in producing the foods, in advertising them to create demand for them, and in marketing the foods. As a result, Americans now consume more salsa than ketchup, and Taco Bell clientele include non-Latinos as well as Latinos of different country origins.

Corporate America has contributed to this broadening of the American diet, in producing the foods, in advertising them to create demand for them, and in marketing the foods: Mexican

foods, above all. As a result, Americans now consume more salsa than ketchup, and Taco Bell clientele include non-Latinos as well as Latinos.

Latin American immigrants have also brought their religious convictions with them, and in so doing they have been reshaping religion in the United States. In the colonial era, many Latin Americans converted to Catholicism, while in the twentieth century increasing numbers of the region’s Catholics have been converting to Protestant denominations. In a reversal of history, in recent times Latin American immigrants have been bringing their foreign-rooted religious beliefs and practices with them to the U.S. and been converting people where they settled to join their churches. They thereby are revitalizing churches native-born have been abandoning.

All the while that Latin American immigrants are fueling cultural changes in the United States they are also acculturating, especially their children born in the United States. As of 2019, for example, it was reported that nearly 75 percent of all Latinos age 5 and older spoke English proficiently, up from 59 percent in 1980.<sup>8</sup>

### ***The Latin American Remaking of the US Economy***

Latin American immigrants and their family members born in the United States play an increasingly important role in the US economy. The number of Latino workers in the labor force nearly tripled between 1990 and 2020, such that their proportion of the workforce jumped from 8.5 percent to 18 percent. Latinos account for most of growth in the US labor force.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Abby Budiman, Christine Tamir, Lauren Mora, and Luis Noé-Bustamante, “Facts on U.S. Immigrants, 2018: Statistical Portrait of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States,” Pew Research, August 20, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2020/08/20/facts-on-u-s-immigrants/>.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Luscombe, “‘Get Down from the Car’: Unique Miami Dialect Traced to Cuban Influence,” *The Guardian*, June 19, 2023. [https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jun/19/miami-dialect-cuban-americans-english-spanish?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jun/19/miami-dialect-cuban-americans-english-spanish?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other).

<sup>8</sup> Treisman, “Key Facts.”

<sup>9</sup> Kevin Dubina, “Hispanics in the Labor Force: 5 Facts,” *US Department of Labor Blog*, September 15, 2021. <https://blog.dol.gov/2021/09/15/hispanics-in-the-labor-force-5>.

Census data show that many Latinos are clustered in specific sectors of the economy. The sectors with the highest concentration of Latinos are farming, fishing, and forestry (43 percent), building and grounds cleaning and maintenance (38 percent), construction and extraction (36 percent), food preparation and serving (27 percent), and transportation (24 percent).<sup>10</sup> They do essential work, an unfortunate portion of which is back-breaking and poorly paid, offers little job security, and involves laboring under hazardous/unhealthy conditions. Yet, it is important to note that a growing numbers Latinos are accessing managerial and entrepreneurial jobs. In 2020 Latinos held 11 percent of management jobs, up from 5 percent in 2000.<sup>11</sup> Among the Latinos born abroad 12 percent worked in businesses they owned.<sup>12</sup> Dominicans and Cubans are especially known for operating small businesses.

In comparison to Latinos, non-Hispanic Whites are better educated, better socially networked to access jobs, and subjected to less racial and ethnic discrimination, which provides them greater work options. With fewer job options, Latinos are overrepresented, relative to their numbers, among what Michael Harrington referred to as “the other Americans,” our country’s poor. The poverty rate among Latinos has declined from 30 percent in the early 1980s to about 16 percent in 2019.<sup>13</sup> However, in most years the poverty rate among Latinos was at least double that of Asians’ and non-Hispanic Whites. Even when controlling for gender, Latinos, on average, earn less than Asians and non-Hispanic Whites.<sup>14</sup>

Citizenship matters. Between 1980 and 2010 the poverty rate among Latinos who were birthright and naturalized citizens declined, respectively, from 22 and 17 percent to 19 and 15 percent. In contrast, during the thirty-year span the poverty rate rose from 23 percent to 32 percent among those who were not citizens.<sup>15</sup> An unfortunate number of the unauthorized immigrants, by definition without citizenship rights, live economically precarious lives—as well as in fear of arrest, detention, and deportation. They would benefit from being granted lawful permanent residency rights with a path to citizenship.

Overall, Cuban immigrants have done better economically than other Latin American immigrants, although this is truest of the first wave of arrivals, who fled to America between 1959 and the early 1960s, after the Castro-led revolution stripped them of their property, subjected them to Communist influences, and penalized dissidents. They came with human and social capital, if not also financial capital. The portion of Cuban immigrants living below the poverty line rose after 1980, since the so-called Mariel boatlift brought more racially mixed, less educated, and less well-connected Cubans to US shores.<sup>16</sup>

The varied economic experiences of Latin Americans of different national origins and different immigrant waves are rooted in differences in the human and social capital with which they emigrated, differences in the entitlements they have received once in the United States, and differences in labor market opportunities where they settled and when. Cubans who settled in Miami benefited from

<sup>10</sup> Dubina.

<sup>11</sup> DOL blog

<sup>12</sup> New economy 2021; DOL blog 2021.

<sup>13</sup> John Creamer, “Inequalities Persist Despite Decline in Poverty for All Major Race and Hispanic Origin Groups,” US Census Bureau, September 15, 2020. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/09/poverty-rates-for-blacks-and-hispanics-reached-historic-lows-in-2019.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Eileen Patten. 2016. “Racial, Gender Wage Gaps Persist in U.S. Despite Some Progress,” Pew Research Center.

<sup>15</sup> Maybeth Mattingly and Juan Pedroza, “Why Isn’t the Hispanic Poverty Rate Rising?,” Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality, <https://inequality.stanford.edu/publications/media/details/why-isnt-hispanic-poverty-rate-rising>.

<sup>16</sup> Mattingly and Pedroza.

the US' most generous refugee program and from unique immigration entitlements, but also from opportunities the city offered. They created their own economy, with their own shops, restaurants, and professionals, which contributed to transforming Miami into what has come to be known as the "northernmost Latin American city," a city with hemispheric reach.<sup>17</sup>

Whether from Cuba or elsewhere in the region, a survey conducted by PEW of over 3,000 Latino adults in March 2021, found them, in the main, to perceive themselves better off in the United States than had they not uprooted. Most of them felt that in the United States they benefit from better opportunities to get ahead, from better conditions for their children, and from better access to health care. They did, however, feel their family life has suffered.<sup>18</sup>

### ***The Latin Americanization of US Politics***

In recent decades Latinos have become increasingly important in US politics. In growing numbers they have been elected to political office, and non-Hispanic politicians, anxious for their votes, have come to address their concerns. Where there are many votes to be had "Anglo" as well as Latino politicians even transnationalize their political involvements.

Contributing to Latinos' mounting political influence, between 2000 and 2022 the number of eligible Latino voters doubled, to approximately 14 percent.<sup>19</sup> Although only about half of all Latinos are eligible to vote (the other half are too

young or undocumented, without voting rights in national elections), in New Mexico, California, Arizona, Texas, and Florida, Latinos account for between 21 percent and 44 percent of eligible voters, and in New Jersey and New York they account for 15–16 percent.<sup>20</sup>

Latino influence is mainly at the local level. In Miami, a majority-Hispanic city, Cuban immigrants and their US-born children are the most politically powerful ethnic group,<sup>21</sup> At the turn of this century nearly one-third of the city's population was Cuban origin.<sup>22</sup> With such a presence, including at the ballot box, Cuban Americans have been elected to political office at the state as well as municipal level.<sup>23</sup> Cuban Americans elected to the US House of Representatives and Senate, although few in number, are so influential that they have, in effect, veto power over US Cuba policy. Meanwhile, in Miami, they dominate high-level appointed as well as elected offices. They have established a modern version of the political machines of the past, commanding patronage and awarding contracts to "their own."<sup>24</sup>

For Cuban Americans, foreign policy is very much a local concern. In Miami, candidates' stance on Cuba affects how Cuban Americans vote.<sup>25</sup> Rare is the politician who dares to visit Cuba or take an accommodating stance on Cuba, for fear of alienating Cuban American voters averse to any ties with Cuba as transformed by the revolution. Influential Cuban Americans push for policies they hope will debilitate the Cuban government to the point of collapse. They have

<sup>17</sup> Susan Eckstein 2009. *The Immigrant Divide: How Cuban Americans Changed the US and Their Homeland*. New York: Routledge.  
Susan Eckstein. 2022. *Cuban Privilege: The Making of Immigrant Inequality in America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Hugo Lopez and Mohamad Moslimani, "Latinos See U.S. as Better Than Place of Family's Ancestry for Opportunity, Raising Kids, Health Care Access," Pew Research Center, January 20, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Anusha Natarajan and Carolyne Im, "Key Facts about Hispanic Eligible Voters in 2022," Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/10/12/key-facts-about-hispanic-eligible-voters-in-2022/>.

<sup>20</sup> Natarajan and Im.

<sup>21</sup> Eckstein.

<sup>22</sup> Eckstein, *Immigrant Divide*, 46. My discussion of Cuban American politics draws mainly on this book, especially chapter 3.

<sup>23</sup> Eckstein.

<sup>24</sup> Eckstein.

<sup>25</sup> Eckstein, 93.

even convinced presidents to champion the Cuba policies that they want. With Florida having the third-largest number of electoral college votes, presidents cater to their concerns.<sup>26</sup>

New York City is another city where Latinos have become a major political force. Today, Dominicans, who comprise 8 percent of the city's population (outnumbering Puerto Ricans), are the largest ethnic group in the city. Like Cuban immigrants, Dominican immigrants have not forgotten where they came from, although they have a much more fluid and open stance toward relations with their homeland than do Cuban immigrants.

Recognizing the importance of the Dominican vote, in New York City non-Dominican politicians address Dominican concerns—including regarding their homeland. Mayors Rudy Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg, for example, rushed to the Dominican Republic, as well as to Puerto Rico, after natural disasters, to win votes among their constituents. With his eye on media coverage, Bloomberg even very publicly danced the merengue upon deplaning in the Dominican Republic. The Latin American outreach made for good local politics. As in Miami, in New York City the transnational and the local have become intertwined.

In turn, Dominican American politicians have used their influence to pass a New York City law, effective since 2023, to allow lawful permanent residents (LPRs), whether of Dominican or other origin, to vote in local elections. As a result, immigrants in the U.S. city with the largest foreign-born population no longer need to wait until they qualify for citizenship to weigh in on local elections. New York City is the first major city to grant voting rights to non-citizens.

In New York, politicians also reach out symbolically to Latinos, and not only to Dominicans. For example, they participate in ethnic parades. Illustrative, Bloomberg marched

in Puerto Rican parades in the Bronx and in Ecuadorian parades in Queens. He typically also began remarks before Hispanic audiences with a smattering of Spanish.

In addition, amidst divided electorates politicians have found Latino votes to be crucial. Politicians try to appeal to Latinos not only on matters of specific ethnic/homeland concern, but also on broader concerns, such as crime, poverty, and abortion.

### **Latin American Immigrant Impacts in Their Homelands**

Latin American immigrants are also transforming their homelands, humble as many of them are. Their impact is far greater than they typically recognize, and extend to the national level.

#### ***Immigrant-Based Economic Changes***

Many of the immigrants who uproot to improve their lot in life, and who, in so doing, deplete their homelands of human capital, enrich the material lives of non-migrant relatives, when sharing some of their US earnings. Remittances to Latin America have soared over the years. Between 2001 and 2021, they increased nearly sixfold, from \$25 to \$148 billion.<sup>27</sup>

Those who receive remittances use them to address basic needs, to buy consumer goods and improve their standard of living, to cover medical expenses and costs of children's schooling, and to invest in home improvements. Some use remittances to fund businesses that they otherwise could not. On occasion, migrants also collectively invest, through hometown associations formed in the United States, in community projects, such as in road, school, and church construction. Indicative of how important remittances have become to those who stay behind, by the late 2010s, an estimated 16 percent

<sup>26</sup> Eckstein, especially 113–119.

<sup>27</sup> "Family Remittances 2022 in Numbers," *The Dialogue* April 5, 2023.

to 28 percent of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans received remittances, mainly from relatives in the United States.

Latin American countries differ in how much their diasporas remit, in total and on a per capita basis. Mexican immigrants remit the largest amount, though not on a per capita basis. Neither immigrant earnings nor the economic needs of family in the home country determines the amount of money immigrants send home.

Latin American governments, and not merely Latin Americans, covet immigrant remittances. Governments turn to the generosity and goodwill of their diasporas to address their own institutional needs for hard currency and to finance imports, investments, and repayment of foreign loans. In 2022, remittances accounted for 21–29 percent of the gross national products of Central American countries, and for 18–26 percent of the GNP in Haiti and Jamaica. Arguably, the home countries may benefit more from their people abroad than at home.

Wanting to transform their diasporas into transnational hard currency transmitters, Latin American governments have implemented strategies and established institutions to foster the sending of remittances that they can access. Some governments have been especially creative in their strategies. The Mexican government has been among the most innovative. It instituted the Three for One program, which called for state and municipal governments to match the funds migrants send home, in essence transforming their diaspora into hometown fund raisers. However, because the program involved only funds that immigrants channeled through hometown associations for collective projects, not the much larger amount of money they transmit transnationally to family privately, it has fueled little economic development.

Governments across Latin America have changed their views towards their diasporas in recent decades, especially once they became an economic asset, a source of remittances. Where they previously portrayed their people who uprooted as unpatriotic, for abandoning their country, they now view those who emigrated as long-distance nationals and heroes. Ecuador's government has even designated a day to honor the "absent ones" annually.

Remarkably, in the aggregate, immigrants have come to infuse nearly as much money into their home country's economies through remittances as foreign corporations invest. In 2021 foreign investment in Latin America totaled nearly \$143 billion, compared to the \$128 billion that immigrants remitted.<sup>28</sup> And immigrants remitted over one hundred times more money than the U.S. provided the region in aid, aid which potentially could fuel economic growth and generate jobs so that Latin Americans could envision their future at home rather than abroad.

### ***Immigrant-Induced Normative and Cultural Changes and the Transnationalization of Bases of Status and Prestige***

The immigrants who are Hispanicizing mainstream American culture also transmit "cultural remittances" to their homelands. On return trips they pack their bags with gifts, for example, with blue jeans and T-shirts that "Americanize" local clothing styles. And they bring CDs that introduce American music, to supplement local rhythms.

Even Latin American immigrants who affiliated with U.S. gangs transmit the cultural practices of the gangs to their homelands when deported. For example, deported Salvadorans who had joined gangs in Los Angeles are recognizable in the streets of San Salvador by their tattoos associated with the violent California gang subculture

<sup>28</sup> See US Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justifications for Foreign Operations, FY2018-FY2021*, <https://www.state.gov/plans-performance-budget/international-affairs-budgets/>; U.S. Department of State, FY2020 estimate data, June 15, 2020. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/739579/fdi-latin-america/#statisticContainer>.

they brought home with them. In their return, deportees have also transnationalized the US gangs they affiliated with.<sup>29</sup>

Remittance sending has also contributed to a transnationalization, and transformation, of the basis of social status and prestige in Latin America. With remittance recipients unable to reciprocate materially for the generosity, they reciprocate in-kind, symbolically, such that remittance-giving generates its own reward. It improves immigrants' social standing back home. They are treated with respect, deference, and authority that they did not enjoy before uprooting—and irrespective of how they earn a living abroad.

By way of example, in my own work on Cubans, I have documented the transformative, transnationalized impact remittances have had on Cuban immigrants' social status. The change occurred against the backdrop of the Castro-led government, during its first decade of rule, having stigmatized both people who rejected the revolution and fled, and people in Cuba who showed signs of ties with the diaspora, for example, in wearing imported US-style clothes sent by family in the U.S.<sup>30</sup> In the context of the economic crisis caused by the Soviet Union's collapse, which brought Soviet aid and trade to a standstill, ordinary Cubans defied the normative order the government had imposed. They came to view Cubans abroad as an asset, not a liability, as a source of remittances essential for their survival once the value of their peso earnings plunged, such that the status of Cubans abroad rose in the eyes. Ordinary Cubans across borders thereby generated their own transnationally embedded basis of status and prestige.

### ***Immigrant-Linked Political Changes***

Immigrants' homeland influences extend to politics and involve a transnationalization of once-national politics. Immigrants contribute to political parties and campaigns in their

homelands; they vote in homeland elections; and they obtain dual citizenship which entitles them to rights across country borders. In some instances, immigrants have even run for political office in their homelands from abroad. Latin American governments that have come to value their diasporas have, in turn, established institutional bases for linking migrants to their homelands.

Ambitious Latin American politicians fundraise for their campaigns in the United States. The politicians able to tap into the most funds can run expensive campaigns, thereby improving their electoral prospects. Politicians have also campaigned in the United States for votes back home. In Mexico national politics became transnationalized with the presidential campaign of 1988, when the center-left candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cardenas, campaigned among Mexicans in California and Illinois, to convince them to get their families in Mexico to vote for him (Mexico subsequently outlawed such out-of-country campaigning).

In turn, Latin American governments have instituted policies to enable their diasporas to remain politically engaged in their homeland. For one, pressure from diasporas has contributed to some governments honoring dual citizenship, whereby immigrants who have become US citizens can retain political rights in their country of origin. Two, some Latin American governments, such as the Mexican, Dominican, Colombian, and Brazilian, have instituted formal ways for their diasporas to vote in homeland elections from abroad. Three, some diasporas have been granted formal representation as a collectivity in their homeland polities. Since 2021 Mexicans born in Mexico City who reside abroad, for example, elect a migrant representative to Mexico City's Congress. Other Mexican states elect statewide migrant representatives, but only in-country residents can elect them. The Mexican as well as some other governments have also established

<sup>29</sup> Jose Miguel Cruz, "Beyond Social Remittances: Migration and Transnational Gangs in Central America," in *How Immigrants Impact Their Homelands*, ed. Susan Eckstein and Adil Najam (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 213–233.

<sup>30</sup> Eckstein, *Immigrant Divide*, chap. 6.



special offices, ministries, and institutes to address diaspora concerns and promote their political involvement in Mexico.

The Mexican government has even encouraged its diaspora to become politically active in the United States. For example, in the mid-1990s it turned to its diaspora to lobby for the North American Free Trade Agreement. It even encouraged Mexicans in the United States to become dual citizens so that they could vote against US anti-immigrant legislation, such as against Proposition 187 in California in 1994, which called for denying unauthorized immigrants access to health care, public education, and other state services. The Mexican government, in essence, has turned to its diaspora to extend its political reach beyond Mexico's country borders.

In another example, Dominican immigrants have transnationalized Dominican politics. Dominican political parties have regional offices in New York City, home to the second-largest concentration of Dominicans outside of Santo Domingo, and Dominicans in the United States have successfully run for political office in the Dominican Republic, including for the presidency.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

Since 1990 Latin Americans have been the main immigrants to the United States. They are remaking America as well as their homelands—demographically, culturally, economically, and politically. So too are they transnationalizing the Americas, breaking down country borders. Thus, a full understanding of Latin America, as well as the US, rests on taking the thoughts and actions of Latin American immigrants into account. //

<sup>31</sup> For an excellent analysis of Dominican transnational politics, see Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof. 2008. *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.