

Introduction

On a clear day in the winter of 2009, I boarded a bus leaving Guadalajara, the second-largest city in Mexico, and headed toward the municipality of Comarga nestled high in the northern mountains of Jalisco. The bus hugged the shoulder of the two-lane highway and zigzagged its way through switchbacks along Route 23. Agave fields, old Catholic churches, and rural villages punctuated the rural countryside. Every so often the bus stopped to collect and drop off travelers. I welcomed these little pauses in the journey, precious moments to recover from vertigo, take in the local scenery, and buy fruits and veggies soaked in lime and chilies from sellers who hopped on the idling bus. Each town we passed had its own history and feel—San Cristóbal de la Barranca, Teul, Tlatenango, and Momax. Rows of tomatoes, beans, greens, and livestock farms lined the road leading into the municipal town center where local residents congregated in plazas with round pavilions and market stalls.¹ Chickens, goats, and lambs milled about the courtyards of adobe and concrete flat-roofed houses that lined the roads. I saw cars and trucks with license plates from California, Texas, and Illinois. And peppered throughout the towns, alongside more modest dwellings, sat renovated houses with grand new additions, gable roofs, circle driveways, and buffed wooden garage doors. Many of these improvements were funded with remittances earned in the United States and sent home to migrant families in Mexico. In each town we passed, signs of northern migration to the U.S. commingled with familiar features of the rural countryside.

Along the bus route I also saw big placards that noted sites of new public infrastructure. In connection with the Mexican government, migrants also financed public goods and services with remittances. They pooled resources in the U.S. and built schools, bridges, and health clinics in their hometowns. They paved roads



FIGURE 1. Road pavement project completed through 3x1 Program in Guanajuato. Photo by author.

and sidewalks; supplied school buses and ambulances; constructed parks; and extended public electricity, water, and drainage for residents left behind. Between 2002 and 2016, migrants implemented more than 26,000 public works projects in half of all Mexican municipalities, many in localities classified as “poor” and “very poor” by the Mexican government. Some migrants in the United States from a common place of origin have formed voluntary associations where they express shared ties to the people and places they leave behind and invest collective resources back home. These hometown associations (HTAs) (*clubes de oriundo*) exist around the globe—from Ghana to Germany, Japan to Cuba—and go by different names—*sons and daughters of the soil*, *landmanshaftn*, *kenjinkai*, *cabildos de naciones*.² But Mexican HTAs are different in one important way. In response to their collective, grassroots mobilization, these migrant groups and the Mexican government developed a federal social spending program that matches migrants’ collective resources to coproduce local public goods and services. The program is called the 3x1 Program for Migrants (*Programa 3x1 para Migrantes*) (hereafter “the 3x1 Program”).

While scores of studies have documented migrant hometown groups and their role in development,³ little is known about how partnerships with the sending state

affect local democratic governance. What are the political consequences that result from migrant transnational partnerships with the sending state? Who is involved in these transnational partnerships and how do they differ from place to place and over time? What can migrant participation in public goods provision tell us about who makes decisions in local governance and how those decisions are made? This is why I came to study in Mexico.

The answers to these questions lie in the underlying social and political conditions in which transnational partnerships are situated because they contribute to partnerships being organized differently. Some migrants remain socially embedded in the hometown by maintaining diverse social ties and constructing new social relationships with important stakeholders. Migrants who are more socially embedded also practice meaningful cultural repertoires that confer their community membership even while living abroad. In the political sphere, the bureaucratic capacity and electoral considerations of local governments also affect the organization of transnational partnerships. Together, these social and political factors determine how involved local residents and political officials are in the provision of transnational public goods and yield different political consequences. For example, when broadly inclusive of the local citizenry and when local government is also engaged, partnerships induce a form of transnational participatory governance in which both territorial and extraterritorial citizens articulate interests, exercise rights, meet obligations, and mediate conflicts⁴ through deliberation and cooperative decision-making. This kind of synergetic partnership entwines migrants, local citizens, and government representatives in a network of democratic decision-making, which leads to more socially accountable and responsive government authorities. Participatory governance also expands the array of non-state actors who are involved in democratic decision-making and empowers many local citizens to participate in local civic and political processes for the first time.

By contrast, different combinations of community inclusion and government engagement reflect more corporatist, substitutive, and fragmented types of transnational partnership and are associated with different political outcomes such as outright corruption and partnership failure. For example, in many cases of corporatist and fragmented coproduction, political clientelism results.⁵ Broadly conceived, clientelism refers to the exchange of goods for political support and involves an asymmetric power relation between patrons and clients in which clients receive targeted, nonprogrammatic spending (e.g., bags of rice, gift cards, cash) in exchange for their political support come election time. In more substitutive cases of coproduction, local political officials offload responsibility for public goods provision entirely onto migrant groups. And in cases of corruption, resources that migrants commit to cofinancing public goods “disappear” from state coffers, which often leads to project and partnership failure.

Over the last eight years, I examined when, why, and how people who left their countries of origin collaborated with state actors to provide public goods back

home through transnational partnerships. During my fieldwork, I visited municipalities across Mexico and studied the interactions between government officials, migrant groups, and residents as they unfolded over time. I listened to residents, current and former migrants, priests, business owners, mayors, political party officials, civic leaders, state and federal political officials, and learned that migrants' involvement in public goods provision had unintentional, yet profound political effects. I found that migrant actors, when more socially embedded, facilitated new modes of inclusive, democratic engagement that made local government more responsive to the citizenry. A focus on how migrants organize transnational partnerships reveals not only the conditions under which public service delivery increases and democratic participation and government performance improves in high-migration locales, but also how the process of coproducing public goods across national borders changes relations between state and society.

MOTIVATING EMPIRICAL PUZZLES

Although official Mexican statistics classified the municipality of Comarga as middle-income, like many of the 196,000 localities in Mexico with less than 2,500 inhabitants, the village of Atitlan was much poorer and greatly in need of public goods, especially when compared to the more densely populated county seat.⁶ Atitlan is one of Comarga's five main localities and home to 340 residents. Despite democratization and decentralization reforms over the last 30 years, residents could not recall a single public works project in Atitlan since the late 1970s. As soon as I got off the bus this was evident—little improvement could be seen. Unlike the county seat where streets and sidewalks were paved, most streets in Atitlan were compacted dirt that flooded during the rainy season and swelled with garbage and sewage. Since the public drainage system reached just half of the households, those without access either purchased piping with their own money or disposed of sanitation in the old stone latrine that snaked its way through the back part of town. There were also few light posts in the village. Residents gave me a flashlight to navigate the streets at night. I had never experienced such darkness before my first night in Atitlan. But for the stars in the sky, it was pitch black. It was hard to tell where one's body ended and blackness began.

In 2004, the mayor (*presidente municipal*) of Comarga traveled to U.S. cities to meet paisanos, fellow countrymen and women, who had emigrated abroad.⁷ During dinners and meet and greets, the mayor asked migrants to form clubs, raise money, and help the municipal government provide public works through the 3x1 Program. Four clubs formed after the mayor's trek across U.S. cities. Emilio and Esme, migrants from Atitlan, agreed to form a club and worked with the mayor on his proposed project: a concrete vehicle bridge. The mayor proposed the bridge project because the town was separated by a river. The only way for residents on the west side to access the main route into town was to cross a rickety, wooden

footbridge or wade through the river on horseback or donkey and in small boats, which often capsized. After they recruited other paisanos, Club Atitlan planned the bridge project with the mayor's administration.

When the bridge was finished, club members in the United States were proud and felt like they contributed something important in their absence that locals appreciated. I was a bit taken aback, then, when residents told me they resented migrants' involvement. Many locals were initially confused—who were these migrants? Why had the paisanos not discussed their plans with leaders of the town's most important civic association, the *Patronato*, the patron saint festival group? Why did locals not have the same privileges, the ability to access political officials and get them to deliver goods and services they needed in their town? Residents felt slighted. After all, they lived there, they had voted for this mayor, and they had their own ideas about what the village needed. Relations further deteriorated when residents who were left out of discussions about 3x1 projects became increasingly suspicious of migrants' intentions. At the height of tensions, residents of Atitlan prohibited the club from participation in local public affairs and mobilized to vote against the incumbent mayor's political party to punish the administration for their alliance with the migrant club.

The turmoil unleashed by Club Atitlan's cross-border participation in public goods provision had several unanticipated impacts on political participation and relations between local government and Atitlan society. Residents mobilized a collective effort and punished the incumbent's party for privileging migrants' voices over that of local citizens. Their social exclusion from project governance motivated short-term political activism. Atitlan voters banded together and cast ballots for the opposition in the 2010 election, which likely played some role in the defeat of the incumbent in a close race. But the initial wave of political activity petered out and turned into political disenchantment. Frustrated with members of the migrant club who residents perceived as allies of the local government, residents turned away from politics and refocused their energy on the social and religious activities of the community.

The case of Atitlan and its paisanos in the U.S. raises important questions about how international migration reconfigures local democratic engagement in origin countries. Migrants who use material resources collected abroad mobilize new mechanisms of voice and make political decisions in their places of origin that affect migrant and nonmigrant households alike. The cross-border participation of migrants and migrant groups upends traditional modes of local governance because although migrants have exited, some never really leave. Migrant loyalty and social connectivity to the hometown catalyzes the collection of new-found resources acquired abroad, which they use to participate in public affairs back home.

A 30-minute drive along a potholed road took you from Atitlan to El Mirador, another locality in Comarga. Because a bus could not safely navigate the high

mountain road, El Mirador was only accessible by all-terrain vehicles such as trucks or jeeps, or on horseback. It was also a poor village with a substantial portion of its population living abroad, mostly in Chicago and southern Indiana. I hitched a ride to El Mirador with a local crew going up to finish the most recent transnational project between Club El Mirador and the municipal government; the last bits of corrugated metal roofing were being installed on a new recreation court (*cancha*). More geographically remote and higher up in the Sierras, I thought El Mirador would be worse off than Atitlan because the town's geographic isolation meant the provision of public goods was more difficult to implement up in the mountains. But after entering through the tall gates of the long paved road into town, I saw this was not the case at all. Every street in El Mirador was newly paved with a hydraulic drainage system underneath. Almost every house was connected to the electricity grid. A new kindergarten school room was recently constructed. And while only half the town had use of the public water system every other day, a well had recently been installed to meet local needs. In addition to the new recreation area, a new rodeo ring (*lienzo charro*) was built for neighbors to enjoy horseback competitions and festivals. All of the new infrastructure was provided through the collaboration between migrants from El Mirador and the local government with matching funds from state and federal 3x1 Program partners.

Yet, none of the tension or political turmoil between residents, migrants, and political officials in Atitlan was present in El Mirador. Residents spoke highly of HTA members—as friends, paisanos, and community members—and said their relationship with the club was copacetic. Local residents of El Mirador were actively engaged in the selection and implementation of projects and visited the municipal government building (*ayuntamiento*) in Comarga. There they discussed project budgets, timelines, materials, and labor contracts with political officials. Local residents even fundraised and donated resources to a few projects. The first year into the transnational partnership, residents formed their own public works committee in El Mirador, the first of its kind in recent memory. The contrast in number of public services between Atitlan and El Mirador was stark. The nature of the interactions between key social and political actors was also qualitatively different. The Atitlan partnership was mired in conflict and cleavages that divided residents, migrants, and municipal officials. After a short burst of political interest and activity, citizens recoiled from politics and from involvement with “outsiders” (dubbed *fuereños*). In contrast, citizens of El Mirador formed a civic association, solved local problems through deliberation, and became more politically aware and active through the process of providing public goods.

Why were transnational partnerships between organized migrants and local government in the two communities within the *same* municipality so different? The same mayor organized and worked with the clubs. Both villages were similar in terms of population size and level of economic development. Both villages had high rates of out-migration. And both villages were “strongholds” of

the incumbent party in which a plurality of voters regularly turned out to support the National Action Party (*Partido Acción Nacional*, PAN). Furthermore, El Mirador did not benefit from any favoritism from the mayor, who, in fact, had been born and raised in Atitlan. Unlike in Atitlan, Club El Mirador recruited local residents to participate in public goods projects and residents regularly engaged in deliberations with municipal officials. Since El Mirador was more geographically isolated, there was more trust and cooperation among neighbors,⁸ and migrant club members regularly engaged in festivals, home ownership, the local Catholic church, and maintained the dress, traditional customs, and mannerisms of their rural community. Migrants, in other words, continued to practice cultural repertoires of community membership while living abroad in ways that were meaningful to friends, family, and strangers who remained behind. Despite their physical distance, they remained socially embedded in the local community from beyond national borders.

In comparison, migrant club members from Atitlan did not remain well integrated into the social life of the hometown after exit. Time away from Atitlan taxed the breadth and depth of social ties, and migrants' quest for social status and an alliance with political authorities created animus with residents. Migrants still felt connected to Atitlan even though they had emigrated. They also had a common bond with each other in the U.S. as they shared a migration experience. But their physical absence and social location outside the hometown network prevented them from exercising legitimate voice in the community in which they were no longer inhabitants. In turn, the process of public goods provision created contests for recognition between migrants, migrant families, and residents in relation to the municipal government in Atitlan, while the process broadened civic engagement in collective decision-making practices in El Mirador.

The transnational partnership case of El Cerrito, a larger locality in the municipality of Selvillo, Guanajuato, was organized differently and produced different political dynamics over time. Unlike in Atitlan and El Mirador, where political officials were enthusiastic about coproducing public goods with migrant groups, the PAN administration in Selvillo was initially inactive. Club El Cerrito produced its first few projects without the involvement of local government because the mayor who had promised support never delivered on it. The migrants relied on cofinancing from state and federal tiers of the Mexican government and implemented projects on their own. Club El Cerrito selected the projects, hired the contractors, sourced the materials, and coordinated all facets of project implementation. In the early years of migrants' investment in El Cerrito the club substituted for local government provision with limited involvement of El Cerrito residents.

Living far away from their homelands, migrants from El Cerrito were able to improve public goods without support from local officials and community residents, but doing so presented two challenges. The first obstacle was logistical. Accountable to the migrant members who invested their own scarce resources to

better conditions back home, club leaders feared that poor management and inadequate implementation of projects discouraged future investments. Since the club leaders and members had moved far away from their hometowns, they lacked the capacity to monitor projects during and after implementation. Moreover, monitoring was crucial, as the projects were targets of predators of various sorts, whether laborers or contractors who shirked on quality and failed to supply materials on time or outside parties who tried to seize the materials bought for the projects that the association funded. Club El Cerrito, like many hometown clubs, faced the constant risk that unscrupulous local actors, such as local political bosses referred to as *caciques* and organized gangs connected to criminal drug-trafficking networks, would take advantage of the migrants' absence.

The second obstacle concerned legitimacy.⁹ While the migrants' distance from their hometowns made them vulnerable to local opportunists, it also potentially undermined their legitimacy, as they claimed to belong to a community in which they no longer resided. Just as in Atitlan, residents in El Cerrito were suspicious of the club's motives and publicly challenged the migrants' involvement in the delivery of public goods. The migrants still had family and friends in El Cerrito, but they had limited social ties beyond their immediate social circles and only a few residents knew those migrant leaders who served as the visible ambassadors of the club. Since migrants were no longer embedded in hometown social life, residents did not initially recognize them as social actors with a legitimate voice to make decisions in public affairs. Moreover, low levels of trust that were pervasive in the town spilled over into migrants' efforts. However meritorious Club El Cerrito's project proposals were to the migrants and their close circle of familiars, since a broader swath of local residents did not have a direct stake in the outcome and they did not believe that migrants represented their interests, the proposal was insufficient and illegitimate.

But just three years later the local government and residents were active contributors in the transnational partnership. By 2013, close to 30 public works projects had been completed throughout El Cerrito such as road pavement, sidewalks, electricity, street lamps, a computer lab, and a recreation area for the elementary school to name a few. Migrants' horizontal ties in the community and vertical ties to local government facilitated new modes of interaction and deliberation between local citizens and elected representatives through the process of coordinating public goods with migrants. Migrants constructed meaningful social ties with different citizen groups in El Cerrito through social events such as rodeos, dances, and fundraising dinners and actively recruited residents into project governance. Three new civic associations were created to work with Club El Cerrito, but they also completed their own projects and solved local problems on their own. In turn, when they witnessed increased involvement of residents (voters) and experienced fiercer competition from opposition political parties, local government scaled up its engagement in the process and continued to be supportive