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***“La Migración Cambió Mi Visión (Migration Changed My Vision)”:***  
**How and Why Oaxacan Return Migrants Run For Mayor of their**  
**Hometowns**

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Politics

Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

Daniel Lawrence Tepler

Lewiston, Maine

May 5th, 2021

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### **Abstract:**

This thesis studies the phenomenon of migrants returning to their communities of origin to run for municipal president (mayor) in San Pablo Huixtepec and Silacayoapam, two indigenous communities in the State of Oaxaca, Mexico. I ask why political parties seek migrants to run on their ticket for the municipal presidency, a puzzling phenomenon given that Oaxacan local politics is rooted in traditional indigenous governing norms which privilege in-person communal service. I also ask why return migrants seek the role of the municipal presidency. Data is collected through 19 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with return migrant municipal presidents, return migrants who sought the municipal presidency but lost, other prominent community members of the two communities, as well as Oaxacan and American migration scholars. I find that political parties seek partnerships with return migrants to increase their odds of electoral victory through association with ‘return migrant prestige’ - a set of positive communal perceptions which are attributed to migrants. I also find that international migration instills in migrants a vision of how to modernize their communities of origin, which I posit is linked to new forms of administrative knowledge and personal administrative efficacy. This vision, and its constitutive phenomena of knowledge and efficacy, motivate return migrants to seek the municipal presidency.

## **1. Introduction**

Why do political parties perceive return migrants as viable political candidates, and conversely, what are the logics that make return migrants seek the municipal presidency? How do these relationships affect local governance more broadly? This thesis explores these questions through an examination of return migrant municipal presidential candidates in two municipalities located in Oaxaca, a state in southern Mexico. At the core of my thesis are return migrants, individuals who, after emigrating to another country (in the case of my thesis, usually the United States) resettle into the country from which they emigrated. Some migrants who return to their communities of origin run for positions of local authority, including the position of municipal president (mayor).

Despite the fact that it is relatively common for mayoral candidates in Mexico to be return migrants, still little is known about why and how return migrants decide to compete for office. Taking into account that many of Oaxaca's municipalities are deeply shaped by indigenous communal norms which privilege in-person community service and community contributions, it is puzzling why parties seek return migrants, who often have not fulfilled those services and contributions, as political partners. Additionally, we are only beginning to ask why return migrants want to run for the position of municipal president. Finally, we know very little about return migrant municipal presidential governance. There is little scholarly consensus on how return migrant municipal presidents impact local governance in indigenous Oaxacan communities and how the experience of migration and its concomitant values and assets affect the relationship between return migrants and political parties. Drawing on analysis of 19 in-depth semi-structured interviews with return migrant municipal presidents, return migrant municipal

presidential candidates, and other experts on the two Oaxacan municipalities of San Pablo Huixtepec and Silacayoapam, I argue that parties seek political partnerships with return migrant mayoral candidates in an effort to increase their electoral winnability through association with a migrant's prestige. I also suggest that the experience of international migration allows migrants to change their vision of what is possible in their community of origin by allowing them to notice the difference between the levels of development of their receiving communities in the United States and their communities of origin. I suggest this observation is linked to an increased perception of personal efficacy in carrying out this vision. This appears to be due to returning migrants' increased administrative knowledge and sense of personal administrative efficacy. I find that this vision inspires return migrants to seek the municipal presidency. By administrative efficacy I mean the *belief* that they have what it takes to make the changes they want to see in the municipality, and by administrative knowledge I mean a technical understanding and capacity to carry out the administrative procedures that bringing about change entails. I find that this vision and its constituting self-perceptions and knowledge motivate return migrants to seek the municipal presidency.

My findings have strong implications for our theoretical understanding of the impact of political decentralization and transnational citizenship. I contribute to the literature on social remittances, suggesting that return migration is an important but overlooked vessel for the transmission of ideas and attitudes to communities of origin. I also offer a more comprehensive understanding of the political relationships between political parties and return migrants, suggesting that such relationships can be constructive in accordance with a migrant's vision. Finally, by placing emphasis on the ideas and attitudes which return migrants bring to the

municipal presidency, we can better understand whether return migrant municipal presidents diminish the presence of indigenous customs and communal practices in local politics.

The organization of my thesis is as follows: I first define the concept of return migrant mayoral candidacies and contextualize the phenomenon in contemporary Mexican politics. Subsequently, I review how various literatures help us to understand why parties seek return migrants to be mayoral candidates and why return migrants seek municipal presidencies. I then outline the design of the study by stating my theoretical expectations, detailing my case selection, and describing the use of evidence. Subsequently, I discuss why political parties view return migrants as valuable political partners, explaining the composition and significance of migrant prestige. I then move to discuss why return migrants seek the municipal presidency, suggesting that international migration instills a vision of local development that is linked to feelings of personal administrative efficacy as well as administrative knowledge. These factors motivate migrants to seek the municipal presidency. I then conclude and offer a discussion of the implications of the relationship between political parties and return migrants in the broader context of contemporary decentralized Mexican politics, particularly within indigenous communities.

## **2. The Political Context of Return Migration in Oaxaca: Decentralization and Indigenous Political Systems**

Return migration is becoming increasingly relevant as a subject of study due to recent shifts in the flow of US-Mexico migration. Since 2005 more than 2.4 million have return-migrated to Mexico from the US (Gonzalez Barrera 2015). On a more general level, the

net flow of migration on the US' southern border has switched such that return-migration outpaces emigration to the US, a trend which has been attributed to the US' slow economic recovery from the great recession and a relatively competitive Mexican economy in the past decade (Gonzalez Barrera 2015). Moreover, more returnees appear to be staying permanently in Mexico, which marks a change from a previously more transitory system of migration (Masferrer 2018).

When migrants return to their communities of origin, they participate in hometown politics in several ways, including running for municipal president. The practice of return migrants running for municipal president of their communities of origin has a history as far back as the 1940s, though it became more common in the wake of Mexico's political liberalization beginning the 1980s and 1990s, as emblemized by the passage of NAFTA under presidents Salinas and Bush (Fitzgerald 2013, Smith and Bakker 2008). Studies have shown that return migrant participation has persisted throughout many states in Mexico (Smith and Bakker 2008; Félix 2018; Fox and Bada 2008). Oaxaca, the state that serves as the focus of this thesis, is no exception to this trend, as exemplified by Danielson (2018), who finds that 15% of municipal presidents in municipalities governed by traditional indigenous norms (*Usos y Costumbres*, which is alternatively referred to in the literature as *Sistema de Normas Internas*) are return migrants.

Return migrant municipal presidencies in Oaxaca must be contextualized in terms of the decentralization of the Mexican government. Understanding decentralization highlights the heightened political stakes of the local government with respect to the administration of public services. Mexico's subnational governing bodies have had weak tax enforcement capabilities

since the country's 1910 Revolution. For 100 years, this limitation laid the groundwork for a steady process of centralization whereby the national government was given the exclusive right to tax income, among other mechanisms of primacy. The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) enjoyed a long period of national hegemony under this system, as sustained by as subnational governments delegating their power to the PRI in exchange for the clientelistic distribution of positions in power and patronage (Díaz Cayeros, Gonzalez, & Rojas 2002). This system remained relatively untouched until a series of changes to national tax codes, national education systems, and social investment programs during the 1980s and 1990s deconcentrated the once immense amount of power that rested with the PRI.

This decentralization process was executed in an uneven, piecemeal fashion. Extant literature on contemporary Mexican politics reveals that the effects of decentralization are highly salient at the local level (Fox 2007). For example, Diaz Cayeros and Magaloni (2013) suggest that a series of changes to national laws beginning in 1997 have increased the flow of national funds to local governments. They posit that the role of local governments in reducing poverty and the provision of public goods has increased in turn (Diaz Cayeros and Magaloni 2013). Fox (2007) affirms this effect of decentralization by suggesting that the power of *Ejidors* (land grants given to peasants by the formerly hegemonic PRI to quell unrest after the Mexican revolution) has waned significantly since the Salinas era (1988-1994), and that mayoral politics has taken up this slack in the provision of goods. He also posits that decentralization has led to increased party competition at the local level (Fox 2007). Notably, although decentralization has given municipal governments greater autonomy in deciding how to spend public funds, they still lack independent taxing capacity.

A key aspect of the decentralization process was a 1983 constitutional reform that increased the allocation of funds and responsibility for the distribution of federal funds at the state level. A consequence of this reform was that governors gained control over the public funds to be allocated to each municipality. This change, in turn, further connected local governments to broader subnational political dynamics (Armesto 2009). This reliance on state government funds for the provision of public goods and services made small and rural localities (i.e. Oaxacan municipalities) especially vulnerable given their physical isolation and lack of connection (Armesto 2009). Beyond fund allocation, state-level administrations establish the rules and procedures through which local political actors exercise the power of their position (Giraudy 2012). In this way, decentralization has augmented the benefits conferred on local government actors that maintain close ties with party-dominated state politics. At the same time, this dynamic has shaped how state governments and state-level party leaders seek to influence politics at the state level and pursue relationships with local political actors.

Decentralization has thus heightened the stakes of local politics by increasing the extent to which national party politics affect elections at the local level. Specifically, decentralization has placed in the hands of national parties the control of nominations for the municipal presidency, as well as the financing of campaigns (Langston 2017). Conversely, this dynamic has heightened the value of winning local office by making municipal presidencies an entrance to later electoral office in state and national politics. To illustrate this point, one study found that from the 1980s (a decade generally understood to be essential to Mexico's decentralization) onward, there was a dramatic increase of candidates competing for positions in the PRI at the national level who had served in the party's local and state positions (Langston 2017). In short,

the decentralization of Mexican politics has increased the relevance of local politics by increasing the flows of funding to municipalities, fortifying the value of local-state political relationships, and increasing the extent to which partisanship on the local level is a prerequisite to more lofty political aspirations later on.

Beyond decentralization, strong indigenous governing tradition stands out as another crucial aspect of the local political context into which many Mexican return migrants re-enter. Among the states in Mexico's southwest, the county's most prominently indigenous region, Oaxaca has the highest percentage of citizens who speak an indigenous language. It is thus unsurprising that Oaxacan local politics are deeply rooted in indigenous traditions. Oaxaca is one of three Mexican states to have passed into law a system of *Usos y Costumbres* (UC). *Usos y Costumbres* seeks to protect indigenous norms by granting some indigenous communities the choice to elect to use customary rulership and juridical practice, as well as basic self-governance putatively free from the influence of national political parties (Danielson 2018). Upon its passage into law in 1995, indigenous leaders praised the new law as having multiple benefits. In their view, a transition towards self-governance would legitimize ancient histories and cultural practices, act as a meaningful step towards collective indigenous authority over lands as well as a recognition that previous efforts by the Mexican government towards these ends had fallen short (Eisenstadt 2007).

It is important to note that this system is a local-level law ratified by individual municipalities; therefore some municipalities in Oaxaca are governed by UC while others are governed by the national political system.

The most notable difference between municipalities that chose to use UC governance and those that did not are the ways in which they select municipal presidents. In UC communities, municipal presidents are chosen through a communal assembly whose eligibility to vote is predicated on having completed unremunerated communal service. Rendering these services also conditions eligibility for the position of municipal president in UC communities. In communities that did not elect into UC governance, candidates run for municipal president on a ticket with a political party, and eligibility to vote is not dependent on having completed communal service.

The majority of Oaxacan municipalities, whether governed by a UC system or political parties, have a mayor and a municipal council called a *Cabildo*. Positions in the *Cabildo* are voted on by a community assembly of eligible citizens, where this eligibility is usually based on ethno-religious identity and the completion of unremunerated community labor called *Tequio* and the completion of positions in the local council called *Cargos*. The legitimacy of *Tequio* and *Cargo* create highly credible systems of social sanctioning, and are so integral to life in indigenous Oaxacan communities that migrants who are called to complete a *cargo* while abroad will often return to the communities to do so (Eisenstadt 2007).<sup>1</sup>

Despite the fact that the communities this thesis focuses on are governed by political parties and not *Usos y Costumbres*, adherence to *Cargos* and participation in traditional indigenous festivals nonetheless emerge in the analysis as having varying importance to the electoral successes of mayoral candidates. For instance, this thesis focuses on San Pablo Huixtepec, a municipality in the Valles Centrales region of Oaxaca. Though San Pablo Huixtepec is governed by a political party regime, interviewees spoke of the burdensome nature of *Cargo*

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<sup>1</sup> Now, in some municipalities, migrants can offer an alternative payment or service from abroad instead of having to return to complete in-person service.

positions as well as the very high social cost of not completing them. In other words, *Usos y Costumbres* is both the name of a formal juridico-electoral system *as well as* a shorthand for the customs and traditions which dominate local Oaxacan social and political life.

Thus, Oaxacan local politics is rooted in indigenous notions of citizenship which entail both rights as well as significant responsibilities. Considering how the responsibilities that are integral to public perception privilege physically being in the community, it is altogether puzzling why political parties would choose return migrants as political partners. Considering that political parties do not stand to gain politically from unremunerated community-based labor and similar indigenous governance norms, political parties may have an interest in dismantling such systems. My thesis' study of return migrant municipal presidencies and the political partnerships they create will therefore also consider how such partnerships affect the prevalence of indigenous norms.

In sum, return migrants run for local office in Mexico. Specifically, they compete in local political contests that have become more salient as a result of a decentralization process that gave local officials more control over how to spend public funds yet made them more reliant on elected leaders (and their partisan interests) at the state level. The stakes in these local contests have become ever greater for candidates who aspire to state or national elected positions, even as they interact, in indigenous communities, with customary forms of governance that typically eschew competitive electoral party politics altogether. This thesis explores how US-Mexico migration experiences condition candidates' interactions with these dynamics.

### **3. Literature Review**

There is a vast literature on how Mexican migrants impact politics in their receiving communities in the United States, as well as how they affect politics in Mexico from their new homes abroad. The political consequences of return migration, including how the experiences and assets that result from migratory experience shape the local communities to which migrants return remains largely underexplored. This thesis contributes to filling this gap by studying the phenomenon of return migrants running for municipal president.

Only a limited body of scholarship examines return migrant candidates running for local elected office. As a result, I draw on various other literatures to glean further insights into why return migrants run for municipal presidencies as well as how, in doing so, they interact with political parties and affect local government. For instance, the research on social remittances highlights the possibility that migrants bring home new values and ideas that influence political visions and actions at home. Yet it does not fully consider how the values and ideas that return migrant candidates obtain through migration might impact their choice to run for office or how they interact with political parties. I also draw on studies about how both individual and collective financial remittances affect democratization in sending countries, particularly at the local level. Though democratization is not the focus of this thesis, this literature helps us understand the relationship between parties and return migrant mayoral candidates by pointing out that parties have an interest in migrants with financial resources because they can contribute to partisan coffers and increase the likelihood of electoral success or, conversely, because these resources can enable them to challenge entrenched incumbent parties. I conclude this section of the literature review by demonstrating how the literature on party-return migrant relationships overlooks migrant prestige as an important aspect of winnability. Finally, I draw on research

concerning the role of parties in local elections. Given that until recently, and for the most part, candidates must run for local office on a political party's ticket, parties are an important mediator of return migrant municipal presidencies.

There has recently emerged a small number of scholars who study return migrant participation in local politics. Within this literature there is scholarship which claims, as this thesis does, that migration changes the political attitudes of those who return and run for local office. Mercier (2016) finds that those who studied abroad in a wealthy OECD country and returned to be the mayor of their community of origin had higher democracy scores during their tenure than those who did not study abroad. In the Mexican context, many scholars conclude that as a result of time spent in the United States, Mexican migrants behave more democratically when they return to their communities of origin (Burgess 2012). Danielson (2018) posits a nuanced finding in this regard by showing that attitudinal changes do not necessarily cause migrant political actors to have more democratic attitudes or behave more democratically, and when they do they may become nullified through incorporation by dominant political parties.

Although not explicitly, these arguments echo a broader literature on social remittances. Social remittances, a term first posited by Peggy Levitt (1998), refers to the ideas, identities, behaviors, and social capital which flow from receiving to sending country communities. This literature is principally concerned with whether or not international migrants remit democratic attitudes back home. For instance, Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow (2017) and Crow and Pérez and Armendáriz (2010) suggest that migrants abroad transmit values that favor democracy to their communities of origin through speaking with their friends and family back home, and resident-citizens of Latin America who regularly speak to a member of their household who is

living in another country are less proud of their democracy. Jiménez (2008) similarly finds that people in high-migration communities have higher levels of political efficacy, participate in elections more often, and have less favorable views of corruption. Cordova and Hiskey (2015) show that Latin Americans with cross-border connections with migrants living in the United States are more likely to participate in local politics and persuade others to vote for a party. Meseguer et al. (2016) conclude that social remittances from the United States to Mexico increase the perceptions of members of the community of origin towards the role of the state. Finally, Burgess (2016) finds that when migrants are embedded in translocal social networks with members of their origin communities, those back home are more likely to hold local officials accountable.

As a continent with many of the world's most prominent sending countries, it should not be surprising that this phenomenon is especially well-documented in Latin America. The pattern also holds outside of the region, however. Chauvet and Mercier study the transmission of norms that migrants experience abroad to analyze the participation and democratic attitudes for those back in Mali. They find that the amount of return migrants in any municipality increased the levels of political participation in the 1999, 2002, and 2004 local and national elections (Chauvet and Mercier 2012).

Taken in concert, this literature shows that attitudes towards government and politics change when those in communities of origin remain in contact with emigrants living in other countries and when migrants return. Given the robustness of this literature, it is surprising that so few have explored the social remittances that return migrants who run for office bring home with them. We know that social remittances that flow from interactions between “ordinary citizens”

who return to communities of origin contribute to changing gender norms (Andrews 2018; Suksomboon 2008), for example, but we do not know whether returning *leaders* bring these gender norms home and if it affects their aspirations for running for office, or their relationship with parties. Similarly, we know that the attitudes of those who receive social remittances are more pro-market (Meseguer, Lavezzolo, Aparicio 2016), but we do not know whether returning leaders share this distinct view, and if so, how it affects decisions to run for office or returnees' relationships with political parties. Collectively these studies broach the question of whether, and if so, to what extent, return migrants' attitudes and ideas are attractive to parties. They also raise questions about how migration affects return migrants' notions of political efficacy and, in turn, their choice to run for local office.

This thesis contributes to filling this gap. Studying return migrant municipal presidents is a suitable way of doing so because when return migrants run for the municipal presidency, the new attitudes, values, and ideas which they possibly bring home with them are manifested in observable and important political spheres, such as partisan electoral competition, direct contact with their origin communities, and the management of municipal funds.

Much of the literature of return migrant municipal presidencies concerns their effect on local political practices, specifically the degree to which they influence local politics to become more or less democratic. While some scholars show that return migrant mayors shore up local democracy, many more suggest that political parties co-opt return migrant mayors. Politically aspirational return migrants, rather than changing dynamics with parties, are subsumed by political parties - incorporated into parties' practices in a manner that reinforces authoritarianism on the subnational level (Martínez 2013). Danielson (2018) suggests that when migrants are

recruited by political parties to run for mayor, they can serve to entrench elites' strength and legitimacy. Bakker and Smith (2003) similarly find that by redefining notions of migration and citizenship, parties co-opt return migrants into participating in infrastructure projects, which deliver goods and improved services disproportionately to party strongholds. Accordingly, many return migrants perceive political parties as antithetical to local democratization (Bakker and Smith 2003). Understanding the relationship between return migrant candidates and democratization is largely outside of the scope of this thesis; however, the preceding research raises questions and points to possibilities about how migrants come to run with a party and why parties target return migrants to represent their party.

Parties may seek to capitalize on financial remittances that migrants bring home either personally or through connections to a hometown association (HTA). HTAs are social organizations formed in migrant-receiving countries by migrants from the same community of origin to provide mutual aid, maintain connections between migrants and their community of origin, and sometimes to pool together funds to support public events or infrastructure projects in the origin communities through collective remittances (Duquette-Rury 2018). In the past, political parties have pressured HTAs to direct the flow of migrant remittance dollars in ways that strengthen partisan interests. For example, the PRI-dominated national government consolidated some HTAs into larger state-level federations in Oaxaca so that their funds could be channeled towards electorally favorable public-private partnerships (Smith & Bakker 2008). Aparicio and Meseguer (2012) find in a study of PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional* - National Action Party) -dominated municipalities that funds from the *3x1 Program for Migrants* - a matching funds program by which municipal, state, and federal authorities each match migrants'

collective remittances, dollar per dollar - are allocated based on the political interests of state and national party leaders, and that less electorally competitive municipalities benefit most from the program. Danielson (2018) finds similar partisan patterns of 3x1 fund distribution. Such studies reveal a pattern wherein parties create or foster a relationship with HTAs in the United States in order to reward their base of support with migrant remittance dollars. We can glean from the preceding literature that parties seek to co-opt migrant remittances as a strategy to ensure resources do not go to another party and, by extension, succeed electorally. The conditions under which migrants resist this co-optation remain open to debate. Namely, the victory of candidates from parties other than the currently hegemonic PRI, as well as the advent of competitive multiparty elections, demand a more nuanced account of questions of return migrant co-optation.

Indeed, while parties have inserted their interests into the work of HTAs, there also exist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that cultivate relationships between migrants and parties. These grass-roots movements to create partisans out of migrants indicate that relationships between return migrant candidates and parties are not necessarily co-optive, and that assessing whether a candidate has been co-opted by a party or not is not straightforward. The most predominant among such organizations in some regions of Oaxaca is the FIOB (*Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales* - Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front), an organization which advocates for indigenous migrants in the United States and throughout Mexico and fights for the self-determination and rights of indigenous Mexican within Oaxaca's sending communities. The FIOB works to build linkages between migrants and Mexico's left-most national parties - a fact that is surprising given that most of Oaxaca's municipalities are not governed by the party system (Andrews 2018; Fox 2007). Other scholars note that the FIOB

enters into a quasi-competition to collect funds for their hometowns and to define the terms of their relationship with the municipal administrations and the Oaxacan State government.

(Velasco Ortíz 2005)

Moreover, just as parties seek to co-opt the financial resources of migrants, financial remittances can aid political actors to resist co-optation and clientelism. Research on family remittances (those sent privately by migrants to household members remaining in the community of origin) shows that remittance receivers are less susceptible to clientelism and party patronage (Pfütze 2014). We also know that migrant organizations who transmit collective remittances have a stronger ability to hold leaders accountable (Burgess 2016). Though the empirical support for such conclusions is strong, researchers have not sufficiently examined how monetary remittances affect return migrant candidacies. For instance, what are the implications of Pfütze's finding that voters who receive remittances are less susceptible to clientelism for return migrant municipal presidential candidates who return home with wealth? How might Burgess's finding about the accountability benefits of collective remittances extend to return migrant candidates with ties to organizations that transmit these remittances?<sup>2</sup>

Beyond financial remittances, the effects of migrant participation in hometown politics is presented in a similarly binary manner as either strengthening or challenging party entrenchment. For instance, Danielson (2018) finds in a study of 12 municipalities in Oaxaca that return migrants can either resist co-optation by political elites, which results in increased political competition, or that political elites incorporate migrants into the prevailing system, thereby deepening party hegemony. Fox (2007) highlights how politically-aspirational return migrants

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<sup>2</sup> One notable exception here is Danielson (2018)

help to strengthen competition and undermine the control of authoritarianism. Félix (2018) similarly claims that when Mexican migrants resist corruption, co-optation, coercion and control of clientelistic Mexican party politics they can improve local accountability.

Instead of assuming that migrants, their ideas, and the individual and collective financial remittances they bring to their communities of origin are either subsumed into partisan clientelistic practices or are used to resist said practices, this thesis adds a slight nuance by paying attention to the ways in which return migrants can express agency within the migrant-party relationship, and how such a relationship can be reciprocal and constructive. For example, I provide evidence that suggests we should further explore the dual phenomena of why parties want to work with return migrant mayoral candidates *as well as* why return migrant mayoral candidates would seek partnership with a given political party. Studying how migrants' perceive local parties as integral to carrying out their governing agendas, and the ways in which these perceptions are caused and conditioned by their international migration experience, allows for a more complete and migrant-centered understanding of the effects of both social and financial remittances as well as party-return migrant relationships in the local political context.

Another way in which this thesis adds to the literature on migrant-party relations is by considering migrants' pre-migration political activities and partisan affiliations. Scholars of return migrant leaders have generally neglected their pre-migration political formation. For instance, Felix (2018) denotes the act of emigrating as the "political birth" of migrants, thus ignoring how migrants' pre-migration political lives and socialization altogether. In a review of Danielson's (2018) *Emigrants Get Political*, Cohen (2018) writes that the author's "political biography of San Miguel Tlacotepec's Arturo Pimentel Salas focuses on his political capacity

after having organized workers in Northern Mexico and California. Yet...passes over Pimentel Salas's role in the anti-PRI protests of 1968 and his training as a teacher" (p. 166). Although scholarship on return migrants has tended to ignore pre-migration political experiences, other migration scholars have noted their importance. Segio Wals (2013), for instance, argues that Mexican migrants enter the US with a "political suitcase," meaning that at the point of emigration, migrants will have already developed significant ideological leanings and partisan affiliations. Wals' research suggests that pre-migration political lives are indeed influential and that they shape the political choices and attitudes which migrants develop abroad. Using Wals' analogy, this thesis contributes to the literature by studying if and how pre-migration political activity and attitude formation are relevant for the relationship between political parties and return migrants.

Finally, I draw on research that documents the challenges return migrants face when they return to their origin countries. This section of the literature review, and indeed much of this thesis, highlights one of the central puzzles of return migrant municipal presidencies: Given that return migrant candidates have often lived away from their communities in the United States for an extended period of time, it is puzzling how they become the mayoral candidate of choice for any party. Indeed, there is significant literature that describes how return migrants are branded as outcasts and find themselves removed from indigenous communal life. This empirical phenomenon is observable throughout Latin America. Bibler Coutin (2016) shows that Salvadoran youth who fled to the United States to avoid the violence of the 1980-1992 civil war and were eventually deported back to El Salvador after a number of years in the United States, reported feeling detached and ostracized from their communities of origin. There is also an

abundance of literature that documents this phenomenon in the Mexican context, including in indigenous Oaxacan communities governed by both *Usos y Costumbres* as well as political parties. According to Martinez (2013), for instance, migrants who are perceived as not sufficiently supportive of their communities of origin because they fail to fulfill their *Cargo* or *Tequio* during their time abroad are essentially excommunicated in a process where their land is redistributed to community members and the migrants themselves are forbidden from returning. Andrews (2018) writes that members of a Oaxacan community which she pseudonymously calls ‘partida’ perceived return migrants to be supercilious and similarly excommunicated them.

Given the negative images that return migrants appear to carry, why do parties seek return migrants as potential mayoral candidates? The literature posits various possibilities. As referenced earlier, parties co-opt collective remittances from HTAs for partisan advantages (Smith & Bakker 2008; Su 2009; Aparicio and Meseguer 2012). An extension of this logic could be that parties seek to co-opt return migrants who return home having accumulated wealth. Relatedly, Smith and Bakker (2012) suggest that Andrés “the Tomato King” Bermúdez, a return migrant who became mayor of his hometown of Jerez in the state of Zacatecas in 2004, had a *reputational* advantage as a result of his commercial success as a tomato grower in the United States. Prestige was thus a salient feature of this specific return migrant’s rise to power. However, researchers have not fully explored return migrant prestige, including its sources and the degree to which it factors into return migrant-party relationships.

The literature also points to the fact that migrants may have already established relationships with parties prior to emigrating as another reason why migrants and parties might interact closely despite a long absence. Beyond the scholarship of Wals (2013), a somewhat

limited field of scholarship suggests that ordinary Mexican citizens emigrate to the United States already with partisan affiliations (Pachon and DeSipio 1994; Lien 1994). Yet we don't know if emigrants with partisan affiliations are also aspired to run for elected office before they left, or whether and how their migration experiences catalyzed these aspirations.

Additionally, migrants cultivate or sustain relationships with Mexican political parties during their time living in the United States through various avenues. Mexican State governments have attempted to involve themselves in transnational migration politics over the past 20 years for a number of reasons, chief among them being to curry favor with the economically crucial migrant populations. Mexican governors are known to visit hometown associations in the US, and State governments have opened *casas de representacion* (representation houses) across Los Angeles, California and surrounding areas to help migrants with bureaucratic and administrative work and to act as communal spaces (Andrews 2018; Cruz-Pérez 2016). Parties may also seek the support of migrants abroad because they are aware of the impact of social remittances on voting patterns in the community of origin (Paalberg 2017). Whether these state and party-driven relationships serve to groom return migrant candidates is unknown, however.

Taking into account the preceding discussion, why do political parties seek partnerships with return migrants? Why do return migrants seek the municipal presidency? Though answering these questions is important for understanding local politics in the era of large-scale return migration, they have only begun to be a topic of scholarly interest. Answering them is the main thrust of this thesis. My goal is to add to and bring together ostensibly disparate literatures by highlighting the possibility that return migrant leaders bring home new values and ideas that

influence their political visions, goals, and actions. I also show that relationships between return migrant candidates and parties may be more nuanced than current literature suggests insofar as parties may have an interest in migrant prestige, not just migrants' money, and because return migrant candidate agency within the scope of competitive multi-party elections may be greater than expected. Finally, I argue that pre-migration political socialization - migrants' "political suitcases" - may condition the influence of migration experiences on choices to run for office and relationships between return migrant leaders and political parties.

#### **4. Theoretical Expectations and Research Method**

I approach these central questions with a set of theoretical expectations. I expect that parties perceive a potential increase in 'winnability' by being associated with a return migrant's prestige, which I expect to be based on a number of factors including increased communal participation, connections to international migrants, and that they have endured the migratory journey in and of itself. Regarding the question of why return migrants seek the municipal presidency, I expect that the experience of international migration, and specifically taking inspiration from the more developed political and economic administration in the United States, instills both a vision of modernizing their communities of origin that is rooted in administrative knowledge as well as a sense of personal administrative efficacy that they are well-suited to carry out the administrative changes their communities of origin need to develop. In accordance with these two migration-inspired phenomena, I expect that return migrants seek the municipal presidency because they perceive it to be the position through which they can implement their administrative vision. I expect this administrative vision to vary depending on the individual

migrant's pre-migration socialization; and, finally, I expect that return migrants manifest this administrative vision as municipal presidents by focusing their governance on securing funding for municipal development, which I in turn expect to diminish unremunerated traditional practices such as *tequio* and *cargos*.

I assessed these theoretical expectations primarily through interviews. From June 2020 to April 2021 and spanning the municipalities of San Pablo Huixtepec and Silacayoapam, Oaxaca I carried out 19 interviews with return migrant municipal presidents, ex-return migrant municipal presidents, return migrants who unsuccessfully sought the municipal presidency, Oaxacan and American scholars, and other members of the communities who have been part of the municipal council or whose positions grant them an intimate knowledge of the politics of their communities. Such ancillary figures included town historians, prominent judges, municipal treasurers and other positions in the town council. Mike Danielson generously introduced Professor Pérez-Armendáriz and me to three of his Oaxacan contacts, Martín Carreño, Rafael Vera, and Victor Leonel. From these initial interviews, I employed a snowball sampling method by which I allowed previous interviewees to introduce me to new ones. It was through this organic process that San Pablo Huixtepec and Silacayoapam emerged as the two communities in which I base my study. It bears mentioning that I include analysis of an interview with a return migrant from Piaxtla, Puebla. Due to the fact that it is also governed by *Usos y Costumbres* de facto and has similar characteristics to Silacayoapam and San Pablo Huixtepec, I found the results gleaned from the interview to be valid and thus included them.

I used a semi-structured interviewing approach that involved preparing a list of questions usually between two and three pages in length to use as a rough guide, while allowing the

conversation to flow organically. Interviews were carried out virtually by video call using Zoom or by phone calls via the popular messaging application WhatsApp, depending on the strength of the interviewee's internet connection. These interviews were conducted in Spanish, and usually lasted between one to three hours. Per the approval from the Bates College Institutional Review Board (IRB#20-21), I obtained informed consent verbally from each interviewee. After receiving verbal permission to do so, I used either Zoom's built-in recording function or a voice recording software on my personal laptop to save a recording of the interview. After the interview I uploaded the files to Amazon Transcribe using an Amazon Web Service console and downloaded the completed transcripts to my laptop. The quality of the transcriptions was relatively poor, and poorer still if the recording file was originally from a WhatsApp call. Therefore, in order to assure that the quality of my data was as high as possible (i.e. that I was analyzing the exact language of the interviewees), I manually double-checked the transcript while listening to the audio recording. A few interviews were not recorded and transcribed. In such cases, Professor Pérez-Armendáriz and I took detailed notes on a shared online document to which I referred when conducting analysis.

My process of analyzing the transcripts began by listening to each recording either once or twice (depending on the complexity of the conversation) while taking detailed notes on a separate document to map the flow of ideas of our conversation. When there were certain quotations or fragments of the conversation which I found to be especially pertinent, confusing, or whose specific language was otherwise notable, I would transcribe them manually onto the document. With detailed notes and selected fragments from all interviews compiled onto a single document, I looked for similarities between interviews that emerged, created a list of themes

accordingly, and color coded the document according to these themes. Below is a list of some of the themes I employed:

- Descriptions of modernization / westernization
- Perceptions of Usos y Costumbres before and after migration
- Clientelism
- Civic engagement as stemming from migration
- Pre-migration socialization and party affiliation
- Working with resources, perceptions of personal efficacy
- Influence of migrant diaspora on hometown politics

I coded the transcripts using (but not limited to) the above themes. I intended for these themes to be broad so as to consider interviewees' relations to them in as comprehensive a manner as possible and not to bias my results by only including examples that corroborated my theoretical expectations. I then compiled all passages I felt to be related to a given theme on a separate document, where I would look for similarities and differences that emerged between different interviewees speaking about the same themes. In this phase I paid particular attention to the language of the quotations, noting the recurrence of certain phrases or words. For example, the phrase *la migración cambió mi visión* ("migration changed my vision") emerged verbatim or in some closely related form in a majority of the interviews with return migrants, from which I drew an insight that international migration experience causes migrants' outlook to change. After this phase I returned to the aggregate document to understand how an interviewee's reflections on a specific theme is situated within the broader narrative of a migrant's life.

I assessed the connections between many interviewee's reflections on a given theme in order to come to my findings. When one interviewee's reflections on a certain theme contradicted another's, I appealed to the recurrence of this contradiction. If there was minimal recurrence of a certain idea, or it recurred but was contradicted by the perspectives of a

significant number of other interviewees, I would not include the idea in my findings. Where there was a strong recurrence of a given perspective regarding a related theme, but this perspective was contradicted by a small number of other interviewees, I appealed to the epistemological value of their perspective. For instance, if several return migrants claimed that their experience abroad influenced their attitudes about local governance but a non-return migrant in the community claimed that return migrants did not perceive governance in a dramatically different way, I would note this difference in the findings and nonetheless conclude that a sufficiently high percentage of interviewees agreed that it reflects a shared experience.

Zoom and phone interviews are an appropriate primary mode of research because the information I seek is not available in newspapers or other archival documents, and because COVID-19 travel restriction precluded the ethnographic research I had received funding to do in collaboration with Professor Pérez-Armendáriz over two months in the summer of 2020. Despite some limitations, the interviews, in combination with secondary sources, enabled me to develop detailed narratives of the experiences of several return migrant candidates. This thesis' research centers the lives of return migrants, delving deeply into their occupations, social networks, and political affiliations before and during their international migration experience as well as upon returning to their communities of origin. The conversations often entail lengthy discussions of subjects as subjective as changes in attitude over time. Such themes defy quantification and are most richly understood through detailed stories.

In order to avoid many of the pitfalls which arise from exclusively using interviews, such as personal and political biases, this thesis weaves secondary sources into the interview analysis to corroborate, draw contrasts with, or otherwise make comparisons to the interviews.

### Background Information on Communities of Study

The return migrant mayors I focus on are from the two Oaxacan municipalities of San Pablo Huixtepec and Silacayoapam. San Pablo Huixtepec is a municipality located 25 miles from Oaxaca city in the Valles Centrales region. It has a population of approximately 17,500. With over 60% of San Pablo's residents living in poverty, it is statistically slightly less poor than the average municipality in the State of Oaxaca, which is one of Mexico's poorest. (INAFED 2010) It has basic social services and education. The local government is composed of a municipal president, an *alcalde constitucional* (a figure responsible for administering religious and cultural festivals), secretary, treasurer, as well as 6 *regidurías* (councilmembers) and other *agentes municipales* (municipal agents) who are responsible for provision of public goods and services. San Pablo never elected to switch to a custom of *Usos y Costumbres* governance, and as such municipal presidential elections are carried out through political parties. Beyond municipal presidential elections, however, San Pablo is a typical indigenous Oaxacan municipality in which citizenship entails not only rights but responsibilities. Though it is possible that it is not as stipulated in tradition or as isolated as communities that are governed by *Usos y Costumbres*, its communal life exhibits tradition and indigeneity. For instance, *mayordomías* (religious festivals carried out in the name of patron saints) are some of the most important days of the year in San Pablo. Non-municipal president positions in the *cabildo* (municipal council) are elected through a communal assembly, and *tequio* (unremunerated communal labor) and *cargos* are expected (INAFED 2010). Benito Muñoz Cruz, the *cronista* (town historian) of San Pablo, explained in an interview that having completed unremunerated communal service positions is a prerequisite for

political aspirations. In this way, *Usos y Costumbres* should not be exclusively understood in the narrow sense as a legal framework; rather, we can understand that the impulse of protecting and upholding indigenous traditions and communal life which the *Usos* legal codes ossify as present in most smaller and poorer communities in Oaxaca like San Pablo.

This thesis also carries out interviews in the municipality of Silacayoapam. Silacayoapam is both a municipality as well as the capital of a district of the same name which comprises 13 villages. It is around 200 miles to the northwest of San Pablo, located in the Mixteca region with a population of around 6,700. It is listed in Mexican government databases as having high rates of social marginalization, with 80% of its population living in poverty (with half of that population living in extreme poverty) (SEDESOL 2010). Around 30% of its population speaks an indigenous language, and indigenous customs and ceremonies are central to communal life. Like San Pablo, festivals of patron saints (*mayordomías*) are among the most important days of the year in Silacayoapam, and members of the community are expected to participate in *tequio* and men are expected to run for communal governmental positions. Finally, Silacayoapam elects their municipal presidents through political parties. While the 13 auxiliary villages that are part of Silacayoapam district are governed by *Usos y Costumbres* practices, they can participate in the party elections of the *cabecera municipal*. Moreover, unlike San Pablo, there is a presence of transnational indigenous organizations in Silacayoapam, namely the FIOB.

As mentioned above, I came to focus on these two communities through the organic process of snowball sampling. I was originally hoping to focus on one community governed by *Usos y Costumbres* community and one community that is governed by national political parties in order to carry out a comparative case study, but due to the insular nature of indigenous

Oaxacan communities and their social networks, the inability to physically travel to other communities due to the pandemic, and some potential interviewees lacking interest or not responding to my initial messages or calls, the process of locating return migrants outside of the communities of San Pablo Huixtepec and Silacayoapam proved challenging. It does bear mentioning in nearly all ways except the process by which the mayor is elected, the indigenous traditions and norms from which the formal juridical system of *Usos y Costumbres* derives its name (literally “ways and customs”) comprise the social fabric of San Pablo and Silacayoapam. This may be especially true for Silacayoapam, which is located in the more traditional Mixteca region. Silacayoapam is unique in that it can be considered a hybrid of the two systems. Therefore, we can nonetheless use San Pablo and Silacayoapam to observe how return migrants’ unique vision of governance supplants or otherwise affects the traditions which are the essence of *Usos y Costumbres*.

Finally, although the majority of communities (around 75%) in Oaxaca are governed formally by *Usos y Costumbres*, other Southwestern indigenous States such as Chiapas more prominently feature communities without *Usos y Costumbres* governance but with very strong indigenous traditions. Therefore, I suggest that comparing two non-*Usos y Costumbres* communities allows for my findings to be relevant in a broader Mexican context.

## **5. Why Parties Seek To Work With Return Migrants. The Role of ‘Prestige’**

My analysis shows that migrant prestige does encourage political parties to seek return migrants as municipal presidential candidates, and that migrant prestige reflects several key qualities of return migrants’ wealth and attitudes that could affect a party’s chance of winning. I

have identified three main qualities: 1. a generalized increase in the reputation of migrants among members of a migrant's community of origin on the basis of having migrated in and of itself; 2. the use of migrant wealth to contribute publicly to religious and customary life, infrastructure development, and patronage politics, which in turn gives migrants a public perception as someone who is honorable and can 'get things done,' and 3. an understanding by local political parties that return migrants are integral members of transborder social networks that are highly influential in the political attitudes of migrant communities in the United States, which will in turn influence the political behavior of nonmigrants. I analyse these themes as they are embedded in the interviews to understand the composition of migrant prestige. In disaggregating the concept of migrant prestige and understanding its components individually, the analysis presents a more nuanced understanding of the various reasons for which political parties seek to work with returning migrant political candidates.

#### Prestige as emerging from the migratory experience

One aspect of migrant prestige is a reputational increase which migrants gain on the basis of having found success in the United States. One of the first interviewees to suggest that return migrants leaders shared a migration-driven increase in their personal reputation was Martin Carreño, a public servant from San Pablo Huixtepec who has served as the municipal secretary of agriculture and rural development since 2011. He suggested at various points throughout our two interviews that ex-migrants who found success while in the US are generally perceived as successful individuals in their community. He suggests that this perception has implications for their ability to run for the municipal presidency, claiming "And [successful migratory

experience] leads you to have that experience of what you can do to obtain better profits, what you learned over there [in the United States] Well, they're successful. You apply that here and you can run for the municipal presidency.”

The idea that successful migration experience while in the United States gives a status which facilitates access to the municipal presidency is echoed in the academic literature. As referenced in the literature review, Smith and Bakker (2003) suggest that Andrés Bermúdez, a return migrant who became the municipal president of Jeréz, Zacatecas, became known for his success as the owner of a tomato growing operation in Winters, California. They report that much of the rhetoric of his campaign was rooted in allusions to his business acumen, and that if elected to the municipal presidency he would apply the same leadership and ability to get things done to the administration of his community.

More notably, Martin also linked this perception of success to political parties' desire to work with migrants. For example, he claimed, “A political party sees in this person, in this migrant, an example of life.” Later in the interview, Martin elucidated what he means by “success” by making reference to Demetrio Velasco, a return migrant who made an unsuccessful campaign for municipal president in 2007. While in the United States, Demetrio started La Oaxaqueña Inc., a successful import-export business in which he shipped Oaxacan artisan goods and specialty foods to California. Martin mentioned that the community's perception of Demetrio improved on account of his business venture; he said Demetrio's successful business helped him to become known as someone who was “successful.”

Again speaking to the example of Demetrio Velasco, Martin claims, “These examples of life, of self-improvement, have helped the political parties see in him a good candidate.” The use

of the phrase “self-improvement” when referencing Demetrio’s business is notable. In this way, we can understand the community’s perception of Demetrio’s success as stemming from the acquisition of wealth through taking advantage of the economic opportunities in the United States.

Professor Pérez-Armendériz’s and my interview with Demetrio himself corroborates this idea. When asked about his life in San Pablo Huixtepec after living in the United States, Demetrio reported that people in San Pablo knew of him as someone who had started a successful business in the United States, referring to a communal perception that “he was someone who could get things done.” This idea of someone being able to “get things done” as a result of their actions as an international migrant is corroborated by Duquette-Rury (2016) who suggests that communities appreciate migrants who are able to contribute to the coproduction of goods through HTAs and think of them as effective and competent.

Benito Muñoz Cruz, the *cronista* (town historian) of San Pablo Huixtepec, corroborates these claims. Namely, he referred to Demetrio as the migrant who returned after starting a successful business in the United States. Benito claimed that Demetrio’s business was the reason for which “he became the most evident migrant” out of those who also returned in the late 1990s. The notion of Demetrio’s status increasing on account of his business emerges in three separate interviews, from which I conclude that Demetrio was a beneficiary of migrant prestige. This aspect of Demetrio’s prestige was notably not predicated on his wealth in and of itself, but rather the interviews suggest that it was from his ability to run a business. The fact that Demetrio sustained his business even from inside Oaxaca appears to add to this. His business success did not end when he re-entered Mexico. Instead, he continued to build upon the success he achieved

by establishing a store that sold Oaxacan products in Seaside, California and by widening his business model to not only export Oaxacan goods, but also to import American products. It is easy to see why a political party would want to link its fate to this type of individual, if they were to show an interest in electoral politics.

While in the case of Demetrio Velasco the importance of prestige is hard to disentangle from the question of wealth, the interviews suggest that return migrants enjoy an elevated status simply on the basis of having migrated in and of itself. For example, Nallely Itzel Cruz-Pérez, a scholar of Oaxacan migration and Professor at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, explained that the status of being a migrant helps to make up for the fact that migrant mayoral candidates had not participated in the cultural events of their communities of origin. This is significant in UC communities where the path to the municipal presidency often *requires* this participation.

Cruz-Pérez also posited this as one of the central reasons for which parties seek partnerships with return migrants. In her words, “Parties approach migrants in their home communities not because they have money, but because they have influence.” Ramiro Marquez López, the municipal president of Silacayoapam from 2007-2009, shared an almost identical conception of migrant prestige. He complained that the PRI’s relationship to return migrants was shallow and transactional. He insisted that they are not actually interested in the welfare of the migrant population, but instead used migrants in local elections because they “want to be associated with the prestige and power that migrants hold when they return to the community.”

Another notable source of the prestige which migrants enjoy comes from the understanding that they suffered on behalf of the community. This idea emerged in my interview with Bernardo Ramirez, a Oaxacan State coordinator for the FIOB. He claimed that migrants

earn moral authority from the hard work they do while in the United States, and that by returning to their communities of origin “[migrants] have not forgotten about their pueblo.” He continued to explain that when migrants return, the community perceives their work abroad as a sacrifice made on behalf of the community and that return migrants have strong morals. He suggests that this is especially true in cases when migrants contributed financial remittances while abroad. Bernardo suggested that “for migrants who have worked hard for their communities, when these people return to complete their service to the community, the community chooses them as their leader.” In traditional communities, service and communal contribution are paramount to notions of honor and citizenship. We can therefore conclude that the sacrifices which migrants make are an important source of honor.

What Bernardo explained reflects an inversion of the common sentiments expressed in Andrew’s 2018 book *Undocumented Politics*. As referenced earlier, the municipality which she refers to as ‘partida’ rejects migrants completely, and she describes members of the community complaining that when migrants leave for the United States, they perceive themselves to be above the community, choosing to view their community of origin as “backwards” (Andrews 2018). In light of this, Bernardo seems to suggest that by returning to a migrant’s community in earnest after having worked hard in the US, their community perceives them with additional respect and appreciation.

The narrative that migrants have suffered on behalf of their communities emerged in other interviews as well. In an interview, Rafael Vera, the municipal treasurer of Calihualá and currently a candidate for municipal president of Silacayoapam with the *Partido Trabajador* (Labor Party), spoke about how perceived sacrifice was important for Ramiro Marquez’s

successful 2007 campaign for mayor of Silacayoapam. He said “And he was well seen [by his community], it was seen that he could perform, because he lived and suffered in the caves in the United States.” This passage of the interview suggests that having suffered on behalf of the community bestows a public perception that one can endure hardship and therefore can serve the community well. Juan Abdón Mata Ramos, the *Alcalde Constitucional* (an honorific position akin to a judge that deals less with politics and more with the cultural and ceremonial aspects of the community) of San Pablo Huixtepec from 2017-2019, similarly claimed in an interview that “When you’ve migrated, the community knows you, the people know you... for the suffering and hard work you do over there [in the United States] for the community.” As with the previous passage, Juan highlights that communities recognize and appreciate that migrants have worked hard for and suffered on behalf of their communities, and that this constitutes an increase in public standing.

Francisco Villa, a primary school teacher who emigrated to Seaside and Watsonville, California in the 1980s and then unsuccessfully ran for municipal president of San Pablo Huixtepec in the 2010s, also referred to the reputational gains that return migrants enjoy. Francisco claims that people from San Pablo have a successful image of him in their minds because he was a migrant worker in the US and then came back with significant wealth and a desire to participate in the affairs of his community. He specifically mentions that people perceive him as successful because he had saved a lot of money while in the US, so when he moved back to San Pablo he was able to buy himself a nice house. During our interview he joked that “[he] was the first to build a nice house in all of San Pablo Huixtepec.” He claimed that because he was able to make this money as a migrant, people in the community perceived him

well. From this excerpt we can glean that the source of his status was both due to the wealth he accumulated while abroad as well as a willingness to bring his wealth back to the community. In this way, we can see the above passage as in direct conversation with Andrews' 2018 work, which posits that migrants lose status in the community if they never intend to return or contribute to their communities upon leaving.

Though not explicitly referred to as such, the narrative of suffering as giving prestige to return migrants is also echoed in the academic literature. Namely, Smith (2003) shows that in an attempt to co-opt migrants into financing State development projects, the PAN glorified the figure of the migrant by suggesting that their hard work abroad constitutes them as an extraterritorial insider citizen rather than an outsider who has forgotten about their hometown. Here, as in the interview analysis presented, migrant labor is constituted as having a connection to the wellbeing of the community of origin and leads to an elevated status for the migrant despite the fact that the work is completed while abroad. This thesis' findings add to the extant literature on the narrative of migrant suffering while abroad by suggesting that in addition to being a coercive tool used by parties, the suffering narrative emanates organically from the community.

Thus, the preceding series of interview excerpts have put forth numerous types of migrant prestige and have demonstrated that it is a significant reason why parties perceive migrants as valuable political partners. Benito, Demetrio, and Martin all independently corroborated the idea that being perceived as a "successful" migrant bestows prestige. Cruz-Pérez and Ramiro suggest that migrants enjoy an elevated status by virtue of having migrated to the United States in and of itself. A third type of migrant prestige can be understood as existing through a narrative of

suffering. In these cases, when migrants show a willingness to return to their communities of origin after working what are often very demanding jobs, the work migrants complete while abroad is perceived as akin to suffering on behalf of the community.

It is worth noting that in some cases the interviews do not fully permit us to disentangle the effects of wealth and prestige. Moreover, some interviewees felt strongly that what I am calling prestige was in fact entirely based on migration-driven access to money. For instance, Victor Leonel, an academic at the *Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social* (CIESAS - Center of Investigations and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology) in Oaxaca, said that he did not perceive the act of having migrated in and of itself bestows prestige among the community. He instead noted that the migrant identity can bring a heightened reputation in a community of origin, but that this comes from using their financial resources to participate in communal festivals. While most interviews intimated that prestige and migrants' enhanced leadership was intrinsically associated with the identity of being a return migrant, I now turn explicitly to how migrants' financial resources also emerged as a key reason why migrants draw the interests of parties.

#### Prestige as emerging from financial assets

Throughout the interviews the idea that wealth begets prestige took numerous forms, including personal wealth distribution through gift giving and sponsoring prestigious and costly religious events, as well as organized wealth distribution through participation in a hometown association.

The idea that spending personal wealth begets an increase in status emerged as a salient theme in Professor Pérez-Armendáriz's and my interview with Demetrio Velasco. Demetrio returned to San Pablo having earned significant wealth as a result of his previously mentioned import-export business in the United States. In the interview he recounted numerous examples of using his wealth for personal distribution and communal contributions. Regarding individual donations, Demetrio told us that with the monetary support of his friends one mother's day he gifted home supplies to between 2,200 and 2,500 mothers, and that he would often help out members of his community when they would approach him for favors and monetary loans. Demetrio additionally contributed his wealth through more communal donations, for instance telling of his regular donations to school committees and schoolhouse constructions and his donation of a truck to help transport children with disabilities to school. With these acts of generosity in mind, let us consider the following passage, prompted by Professor Pérez-Armendáriz asking him whether his migratory experience earned him an elevated status in his community:

"I owe everything to migration. Without it I am sure I would not be where I am today, because it complements my family's good roots and what I do for my community. What I do for my community is due to what I've accomplished through migration and the fruits of my work in the US, and they have been large."

While still suggesting that the wealth he garnered as a migrant was largely responsible for his successes, he frames the role of the wealth as facilitating communal contribution. In this excerpt Demetrio thus suggests that his wealth was not the sole source of his increased reputation; rather, he suggests that it plays a complementary role in his and his family's

commitment to the community. Demetrio also nuanced this idea by suggesting that his ability to gain permanent residency in the United States allowed him to economically support his community. “Crossing [the border] easily helps because you have more resources, and you can do more for people. Legal residency helps you support the community [Demetrio is a legal permanent resident of the US].”

Martin Carreño corroborated many of the above ideas, suggesting that “you can earn more as the bottom planter in the US than as the owner of your own land in Mexico.” He said that the money earned in such a market “can immediately turn you into a potential winner [of the municipal presidency].” Later in the interview, Martin pivoted to specifically highlight the role of wealth as begetting prestige by facilitating participation in local affairs and traditions, which is crucial to electoral success in Oaxaca given its indigenous customs. He made reference to migrants collectively paying for a large clock in the town square and the renovation of the town church, as well as migrants paying for the repatriation of cadavers into the community. During the famous *discursos de campaña* (campaign discourses), which are community meetings during which candidates verbally campaign and cast aspersions at their political opponents, a common theme levied against return migrant candidates is that they have been away from the community and therefore have fled their community engagement. In communities like San Pablo Huixtepec, where customary indigenous agreements like completing *cargos* are central to communal life, such accusations can spell the end of a bid at the municipal presidency. Martin explained that extensive contributions to the religious, cultural, and educational life of the community by way of remittances and sponsoring *mayordomías* (important religious festivals), for example, allows one to avoid such accusations and therefore bolsters their chances at attaining the municipal

presidency. It bears mentioning that the extant scholarship has noted a similar phenomenon (Eisenstadt 2007). Paradoxically, wealth can have the effect of enhancing migrants' status in the eyes of parties looking for electable candidates precisely because indigenous governance places such a high premium on community contributions through roles such as that of sponsoring the *mayordomía*.

The story of Francisco Villa's post-migration life which he recounted during our interview stands as another example of how using migrant wealth to participate communally is a source of migrant prestige. He claimed in our interview that through the success of his packaging and export business in the United States, as well as his frugality, he was able to help renovate the schools in San Pablo. He said that his generosity with the schools helped to build a 'cooperative relationship,' and described a dynamic of reciprocity wherein he was generous with his community and in return people in the community perceived him well. He described that "you get more out of being generous," and explained that the community's heightened perception of him was one of the factors that facilitated his relationship with MORENA (*Movimiento Regeneración Nacional* - National Regeneration Movement), the party with which he would run for the presidency. Ramiro Marquez Lopez invoked similar themes while describing his journey into partisan politics as a return migrant in Silacayoapam. When asked why the PRI approached him and asked him to run for municipal president on their ticket, he responded by describing his engagement with the community, namely that once he returned he used his wealth to begin to organize basketball tournaments and karate lessons for local youth. Thus, conversations with Demetrio, Martin, Francisco, and Ramiro collectively suggest that beyond merely being perceived as enterprising and productive, the distribution of migrant wealth through individual

gifts or contributions to community infrastructure or cultural events is shown to bestow prestige on migrants, and is moreover cited as a reason why parties view return migrants as valuable political partners in local elections.

### Influence as emerging from links to communities of international migrants

Finally, return migrants also gained influence from social ties to communities of migrants living in the United States. I subsume this under this section focused on prestige because I find that the two ideas are only nominally different, and, moreover, that the impact is largely the same in the context of this section of my thesis: parties see this influence and seek to associate themselves with migrants for purposes of electoral winnability.

Even though these diasporic groups typically vote at very low rates, the secondary literature on transnational partisanship in Latin America suggests that there is good reason for political parties to want to be well perceived by migrant populations living in the US. As evidenced in the Lit Review, by carrying out interviews with migrants in Mexico, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic, Paalberg (2017) finds that migrants influence their relatives and social networks abroad in a manner that reinforces their partisan sympathies and further motivates political activities that are typical of party militants. Also, Córdova and Hiskey (2015) show that individuals with strong cross-border ties are more likely to participate in local politics, sympathize with a local party, and persuade others to vote for a party. In other words, when people in communities of origin are enmeshed in migrant social and informational networks in the US, they are more civically engaged, politically participatory, and partisan. Political parties thus stand to improve their electoral winnability by being in the good graces of migrants.

Before positing the link between migrants and return migrants, it is important to note that interview analysis widely corroborated the above scholarly finding. For instance, Martín Carreño spoke at length about recent technological developments that have fostered more frequent communication between migrants and their families. He claimed that this increase in communication technology allows for migrant communities in the United States to be better informed of the “acts that migrants do for their communities [of origin].” As the preceding section of this discussion suggested, financial contributions to communal development projects and sponsorship of cultural events permitted by migrants’ accumulated wealth constitute an important aspect of return migrant prestige. Insofar as parties seek to be associated with these cultural and infrastructure projects, it thus follows that associating with migrants could increase winnability for these parties.

Francisco Villa corroborated that migrant informational networks are a crucial factor as to why political parties see the support of migrants as such a valuable political asset. When he was living in the United States, PRI officials and militants would show up at his local church and try to get migrants to join the party. When I asked why the parties were so keen on having migrants join the party even though most migrants do not vote while abroad, he said, “I think that we, migrants, always chat with our families back home about matters related to politics.” This quotation once again suggests that parties seek migrants as political allies because migrants are influential in the voting patterns and political attitudes of their families in the communities of origin. Demetrio shared similar thoughts in an interview, claiming that “they [political parties] knew who we migrants are, and that we speak to our families about who to support.” He also claimed that migrants have ‘a certain preeminence’ over their families, and that parties seek to

benefit from this preeminence. Ramiro shared nearly identical comments by stating that part of the reason migrants were influential in the political affairs of their communities of origin were that they influenced the political views of their families and social networks.

Leonel similarly reflected upon the political consequences of the social and informational networks found in migratory communities. He characterized the link between San Pablo Huixtepec and Seaside, California as one of a “back and forth” style of circular migration. In cases like these, where there is significant yearly outmigration from San Pablo, the migrants and their hometown associations “do not lose contact with their communities.” In this sense, Leonel corroborates a theme which has been outlined by many others, that in communities where there is a regular flow to and from set communities in the US, there is significant information sharing between migrants in satellite communities and their families in Oaxaca.

“When the population is in oscillation, in a constant back and forth of coming and leaving, you don’t lose contact with the community. And indeed, [migrants] acquire a political character. Including in some cases like a local party. A local political impact like those great concentrators of power, like FIOB, FOCOICA, and the others who want to play a more fair game.”

Here Leonel invokes transnational associations like the FIOB and FOCOICA (*Federación de Organizaciones y Comunidades Oaxaqueños Indígenas de California* - California Federation of Oaxacan Indigenous Organizations and Communities), which is an organization whose work is similar to the FIOB, but is instead aligned with the right-wing PAN. By suggesting that migrants abroad are akin to large political organizations who “want a more fair game” (i.e. assure the quality of local governance), Leonel suggests that the political interest and power which migrants

hold in their communities of origin is so robust that it takes on the character of a large organization.

To understand the implications of Leonel's claim, let us briefly reconsider how literature on the FIOB characterizes the organization's political activities. As referenced in the literature review, organizations like the FIOB enter into a competition to distribute funds for their hometowns, define the terms of their relationship with the municipal administrations and the Oaxaca state government, and work with parties to promulgate municipal presidential candidates (Velasco Ortíz 2005). Cross-referencing this information with Leonel's quotation, we can understand that in San Pablo Huixtepec, migrant social networks are a formidable political entity in their communities of origin. It thus follows that political parties would attempt to work with or win the allegiances of migrants and return migrants in order to benefit from these formidable political forces.

I suggest that return migrants are important members of the social connections which migrants maintain in their communities of origin. The interviews also suggest that parties understand that return migrants maintain ties with members of their migrant social networks after they resettle in Mexico, and accordingly that parties value return migrant candidates because they can draw the support of migrant electorally important migrant communities abroad. Alejandro Cruz, mayor of San Pablo Huixtepec with the PRI from 2017-2019, explained that migrants in Seaside are in frequent communication with "ex-migrants" (return migrants) in San Pablo, and that communication between return migrants and migrants abroad frequently includes the quality of governance of those currently in power:

Well, there is a very strong link between the migrant community in the United States with [*sic.*] our population. That is, we do not lose the link... This link is of vital importance for the political parties,

why? Because to be an immigrant does not mean that you leave your community, rather, simply you are in another place. Your citizen's rights are in the population and for this simple fact, through the internet, through technology, social media, through television, you have to learn what is happening, you have to see which [municipal presidential candidate] is the best option... Migrants abroad know who are the migrants who are here [in San Pablo Huixtepec], they talk to the migrants here, and they guarantee the things that they see as necessary.”

This excerpt suggests that migrants abroad still have a vested interest in the political outcomes of their communities of origin, and are able to scrutinize these outcomes by communicating with their communities of origin using modern communication technologies. In this way Alejandro corroborates previous excerpts. Importantly, however, Alejandro expands on this point by suggesting that migrants abroad speak *to return migrants* as part of the political conversations which constitute their investment in politics in their communities of origin. This highlights an aspect of migrant political transnationalism that the literature largely ignores: that return migrants maintain their cross-border social networks with migrants living in the US after they return to their communities of origin and that this has political value and consequences. Among such consequences is the fact that parties seek to link themselves to the politically influential and invested migrant community abroad by working with return migrants.

Cruz-Pérez illustrated this more explicitly. During our interview she stated “a reason that parties seek migrants who return is a recognition of their work and connection with those migrants still in the American Union [*sic*].” This excerpt echoes the idea put forward by Alejandro that political parties value the linkage they perceive between return migrants and their migrant networks abroad, and that by having a return migrant as their candidate they would win

the support of the migrants abroad. This would seem to be especially true in municipalities with large proportions of their population having recently emigrated and living in the US.

I find additional evidence for this conclusion in my interview with Rafael Vera. Notably, Rafael does not have international migration experience himself. However, he tapped Gregorio Ramirez as his *suplente* (vice municipal president), who is currently living in the border town of Tijuana and also has strong connections with communities to the international migrant community in California. Rafael suggested that he chose Gregorio for two reasons. He claimed that he primarily chose him because the community members in Silacayoapam perceived him well due to his robust ties to Silacayoapam's current migrant population. A second, related reason is that he would have strong potential to campaign with emigrants living abroad. We can conclude that the first reason implicitly evidences migrant prestige, as Rafael felt that his candidacy would be strengthened through a perceived relation to the community of migrants abroad. Furthermore, the second logic for picking Gregorio corroborates Paalberg's finding that winning the allegiance of communities of international migrants is crucial despite their low turnout rate.

### The Role of Prestige, Discussion and Conclusions

In this section I set out to understand why political parties seek return migrants as their candidate for municipal president in a deeply traditional political context that privileges having been physically present in the community to serve community obligations. I hypothesized that political parties seek such partnerships due to a belief that they stand to increase their odds of

winning the municipal presidential elections by co-opting the prestige and economic resources migrants enjoy when they have returned to their communities of origin.

Broadly, the findings presented in this section of the discussion confirm this hypothesis. Nearly all interviewees suggested that the prestige of migrants is an important factor in why they ran for mayor, and the majority of interviewees either explicitly claimed or suggested that this prestige was among the reasons why they developed relationships with the parties with which they ran. While I found my hypothesis to be generally confirmed by my findings, the interviews also revealed migrant prestige to be a concept much more complex and nuanced than I had originally thought.

Migrant prestige emerged in the interviews not as a singular concept, but rather as the various ways in which the experience of having migrated affects a community's perception of someone. Some interviewees suggested that migrants enjoy an increase in communal clout and party interest by virtue of the migratory journey. Some understand these benefits as being a result of having migrated in and of itself. Others attribute the benefits more specifically, suggesting that migrants enjoy prestige when they are perceived by their communities of origin as having been a "successful" migrant. In the salient case of Demetrio Velasco, the perception of success in migration arose from creating a commercially successful business while in the United States. Finally, the "suffering narrative" emerged from the interviews as another key subcategory of prestige associated with the migratory journey. In this case, return migrants benefit from prestige as communities of origin recognize the sacrifices migrants have made on behalf of their communities made by leaving to work demanding jobs in the United States. Inherent in the logic of this subcategory of prestige is that by returning, migrants prove they have not forgotten about

their communities of origin. This is found to be especially true if the migrant contributed financial remittances while in the United States. The suffering narrative is compelling because it conceptualizes the migratory experience fundamentally as a sacrifice for the betterment of the community of origin, despite the fact that migrants may have had other motivations for migrating. Inasmuch as sacrifice for the betterment of the community is a fundamental component of what makes someone honorable in the indigenous Oaxacan custom, the suffering narrative presents a possible answer to the fundamental puzzle of how return migrants can be valuable political partners in a political context rooted in indigenous tradition wherein having been absent from the community for long stretches of time can logically be seen as a significant electoral disadvantage. Such an explanation for overcoming the fundamental quandary presented above and in the literature review in turn presents a rationale of why parties perceive return migrants as valuable political partners. By exploring the idea that the suffering narrative is not solely a tool used by political parties to coerce migrants into funding State development projects and can be understood as a source of migrant prestige from within the community, this understanding also contributes to the body of scholarship surrounding the suffering narrative.

Another salient aspect of migrant prestige was tied to migrants' access to increased financial resources in the more robust American job market. There emerged several subcategories of note within the understanding that financial resources contribute to prestige. For instance, Demetrio Velasco distributed the money earned from the import-export business both individually, in the form of personal loans and gifts to mothers, as well as communally, in the form of donating to communal causes like school committees and educational infrastructure. In his perception, his wealth was not the source of the prestige in and of itself (see the "successful

migrant” narrative above), but rather it augmented the resources he had available to bring to communal contributions which were his task. Regardless, the wealth he gifted to San Pablo in various forms still augmented his communal standing. Francisco and Ramiro offered similar narratives wherein their wealth accumulated from their time abroad allowed for an increased level of community contribution, which was cited as a cause for their perceived increase in communal standing. Insofar as political parties perceive association with a community member of high communal standing as increasing their odds at electoral success, increases in migrant wealth may be understood giving an answer as to why parties seek return migrants as viable political partners.

In centering the role of international financial remittances, Martin offered a different perspective on how wealth can increase one’s chances of winning the municipal presidency. Martin allows us to understand that due to the fact that collective financial remittances are channelled towards projects for public benefit, they are considered as among the forms of communal contribution on which San Pablo’s and other similarly indigenous and traditional municipalities’ norms and systems of honor are based. Similarly to the preceding discussion of the “suffering narrative,” insofar as communal contribution and responsibility are central to the processes by which such communities elect their municipal presidents, we can understand migrant prestige by virtue of providing international financial remittances as presenting an answer to the fundamental puzzle of why parties would approach return migrants despite their often lengthy time away from the community. With this section of the analysis in mind, I conclude that economic resources are a fundamental aspect of migrant prestige due to their ability to facilitate an increase in prestige-begetting communal participation.

I also conclude that political parties seek return migrants to run for the position of municipal president because return migrants are perceived by parties as links to politically influential migrant communities in the United States. This section began by broadly confirming the existing academic literature which posits communities of international migrants as highly influential political actors despite their low levels of voter turnout. From my interview with Alejandro I conclude that return migrants can be important members of the social networks that migrants in the United States use to gather information about politics at home and accordingly exert non-voting political influence. Cruz-Pérez corroborated this idea and suggested that parties seek return migrants as political partners to be in the good graces of international migrants. In this way, return migrants possess a form of indirect migrant prestige. This finding nevertheless gives insights into the logic of why political parties perceive return migrants as increasing their odds of winning the municipal presidency. Finally, this finding contributes to the literature on the influence of international migrant communities on community of origin electoral politics by positing the ways that such influence extends to migrant-party relationships in the sending community.

Having explored these arguments, I now confirm their robustness by addressing the possible emergence of the counterfactual: Would parties not seek anybody whose prestigious reputation would increase their chances of electoral success? I suggest that this is partially the case. However, I point to Danielson's (2018) evidence that the return migrants who end up becoming municipal presidential candidates emerge from sectors of society that would not have otherwise been sources of local party leadership. There also arises another counterfactual to consider: Does one have to be a migrant to have this prestige? To address this question I point to

the analysis of my interview with Rafael Vera where he claimed that he chose a migrant, Gregorio Ramirez, as his *suplente*. In the interview, Rafael suggested that he chose Gregorio because he was not a migrant himself, so choosing Gregorio would influence those abroad to tell their families and social networks back home to vote for their ticket. In this example it is thus precisely Gregorio's status as a migrant that was the cause of the influence.

This section of results thus suggests that return migrant prestige is a deeply complex phenomenon whose detailed analysis offers a compelling answer to the fundamental question of why political parties seek return migrants to run for the municipal presidency. Namely, political parties seek to run with return migrants for the fundamentally transactional reason that they perceive association with return migrant prestige as increasing their chances of electoral success.

## **6. Return Migrant Developmental and Administrative Vision**

I now turn to uncover why return migrants seek the position of municipal president. Focusing on the two Oaxacan municipalities of San Pablo Huixtepec in the Valles Centrales region and Silacayoapam in the Mixteca region, I find that international migrants' experiences abroad change their vision of what is possible in their community of origin by allowing them to notice the difference between the levels of development of their receiving communities in the US and their communities of origin. I find that this observation is linked to a heightened sense of their own potential role in realizing this vision. The reason for this appears to be the return migrants' increased administrative knowledge and sense of personal administrative efficacy. By administrative knowledge, I mean an understanding of how to carry out these administrative challenges. By administrative efficacy, I mean the perception that they have the ability to carry

out complex and politically challenging administrative acts such as bringing resources to their community. I find that it is this vision, and its constitutive phenomena of knowledge and efficacy, that motivate return migrants to seek the municipal presidency.

Before I proceed to expound these arguments through interview analysis, I return to the key aspects of municipal government administration to place administrative efficacy and knowledge in context. As suggested in the introduction, Mexican decentralization in the 1980s and 90s increased the importance of local government in managing public funds in Mexico. This primarily happened through the promulgation of two laws called Ramo 28 and Ramo 33. These laws are budgeting mechanisms designed to transfer money from the Federal and State governments to the local government. Insofar as municipalities received the right to allocate funds as local leaders wished, this marked an increase in the power of local authorities.

An important constraint on this new power, however, is that it is incumbent on the municipal government to solicit these funds from the State and Federal government for them to be granted. If local governments do not solicit the funds (and the power that arises therefrom), they automatically stay with the state and federal governments, whose leaders use them to advance their partisan electoral interests. It is in the interests of parties to control state and federal level politics to control these funds as opposed to handing them over to municipal governments unconditionally. In other words, these laws (Ramo 28 and 33) were designed to minimize the amount of money the Federal and State governments would be obligated to transfer to communities. Therefore, processes by which municipal governments seek funds are structured to be confusing and opaque, and Federal and State governments do not go out of their way to ensure the municipal leaders know which funds are available to them or how to obtain them.

This is particularly true for leaders from parties that opposed the party of a State governor or President.

It is important to note that in the Mexican context, it is often the case that political parties seek to be in power not to pass a specific law or otherwise govern as effectively as possible on behalf of constituents; rather, they seek to strengthen their own party's power. With this context in mind, we can consider how the opt-in structure of Ramo 28 and 33 laws implicates partisan interest in local elections, which is the focus of my thesis. To the extent that the PRI (the hegemonic party in Oaxaca for much of recent history) has maintained power it has not distributed funds to the state's municipios and has instead held onto them or allocated them strategically for electoral advantage. In other words, entrenched parties have no interest in redistribution. Alternatively, opposition parties need to be able to promise to potential voters that, if elected, they would upend the status-quo in a way that benefits voters, such as through redistributing the ramo 28 and 33 funds the PRI had been keeping to the community. Due to the fact that the PRI hegemony made this process as opaque as possible, it takes significant administrative knowledge and efficacy on the part of an individual in order to be able to redistribute the funds.

The *Programa Tres por Uno (3 x 1) Para Migrantes* program is similar to Ramo 28 and Ramo 33 in that it involves the transfer of funds from state and federal governments to the municipio, but with the 3 x 1 program, the State and Federal governments match remittance dollars sent by HTAs in the United States (Duquette-Rury 2016). Research shows that the implementation of this program has been plagued by partisan politics as well. As explained in the literature review, 3 x 1 funds are distributed according to political interests, especially to

electoral strongholds of the party in power (Aparicio and Meseguer 2012; Danielson 2018).

Therefore, it takes strong administrative knowledge and administrative efficacy in order to secure these funds for the community.

For mayors to serve the interests of their municipalities following decentralization, they therefore need strong administrative capacities. This administrative knowledge includes the ability to work through a maze of state and local bureaucracies to secure funds from Ramo 33 and 28. Interviews suggest that many of Mexico's mayors either lack this knowledge or fail to exercise it for the purpose of benefiting the municipio, as opposed to the party controlling the State government, particularly in small indigenous communities. I argue that return migrant candidates pursue office with a vision of changes they want to see in their origin municipalities. The migration experience imbues them with a sense of administrative efficacy, which is the belief that they can bring about this vision through the office of municipal presidency. While return migrant candidates also bring administrative knowledge - some of which was obtained through migration - to their aspirations, their pursuit of a vision of change as well as their sense of administrative efficacy further enables them to gain administrative knowledge as they pursue the municipal presidency in Mexico. For some return migrants, the requisite knowledge entails navigating bureaucracies to realize their visions through government funds. For others, government funds are important but so too are the realizations of local capitalist development, with or without the aid of state funds.

In addition to decentralization-driven municipal funding structures, Oaxaca's local governing culture is another important piece of context for telling the story of why return migrants may seek the municipal presidency in San Pablo Huixtepec and Silacayoapam. Despite

the fact that these two communities elect their leaders through political parties, they are nonetheless governed by *Usos y Costumbres* de facto. Therefore, whether return migrant political participation influences the traditional norms which constitute this de facto *Usos* governance is central to a comprehensive understanding of the impact of return migrant municipal presidencies generally. The administrative knowledge and efficacy which constitute the vision I claim influences migrants to run for municipal president have the potential to dramatically change the social fabric of a community, regardless of whether it is based on capitalist entrepreneurship or on securing government funds. Given that the deeply traditional and communitarian cultural context of the two municipalities I study is antithetical to precisely this administrative approach to bringing about change, and in some cases to change itself, I find that in some cases, return migrant vision has the additional effect of diminishing the traditional aspects of local indigenous governance. To illustrate these arguments, I now turn to analyzing the interviews from San Pablo Huixtepec to uncover how these logics are manifested in this community.

Interviews reveal that international migration causes return migrants to perceive that they know how to properly carry out development in their communities. Martin Carreño, a public servant from San Pablo Huixtepec who has served as the municipal secretary of agriculture and rural development since 2011, posited a linkage between migrant vision and perceptions of local government administration. He specifically noted that after having seen “how much better things are in the United States,” migrants often “question the competence of the municipal president” in power when they return to San Pablo.

Professor Pérez-Armendáriz's and my interview with Demetrio Velasco illustrates how the perceptions of mismanagement and feelings of efficacy which Martin describes cause return migrants to seek the municipal presidency. He claimed,

There are things in my town that should be done so that my town can grow. I had a lot of ideas of how to do things differently in my town based on my experiences and how I dedicated my time in the United States. In the United States I learned that yes, we can do things better to produce more, so that people have an improved economic situation, which in reality is what moved us to run for municipal president. Because we see that in Mexico there is a lot of potential but unfortunately the lack of technology and lack of anyone who can carry out proceedings; I have dealt with all that has to do with commerce, cattle raising... and this is what made me realize that we could do something for our town, for our people. Over there, there is more potential, more technology, and as a result you can produce more with the same amount of costs. This is what, more than anything, moved us to run for the presidency.

In this excerpt, Demetrio outlines the phenomenon of migrant vision. The language in this excerpt shows how Demetrio's vision as a migrant is fundamentally linked to his administrative knowledge and, relatedly, a belief in his own administrative capabilities. Towards the former point, he claimed that his familiarity with commerce and cattle raising from his time in the United States gave him a strong knowledge of how he could develop San Pablo economically. He also suggested that his time in the United States acted as a sort of model from which he learned about proper administration and development practices, and that as a result he "had a lot of ideas of how to do things differently in my town." Moreover, his claim that San Pablo suffered from a "lack of anyone who can carry out proceedings" suggests that he felt a

sense of personal administrative efficacy, or the perception that he had the capacity to carry out these changes.

These same themes were expanded upon later in the interview when Demetrio made reference to his attempts to implement the *Programa Tres por Uno (3 x 1) Para Migrantes* program to help those in San Pablo attain some of the modernizing which he had envisioned. He claimed “There hasn’t been 3 x 1 implementation because they [the local government] lack this vision to find where they can find the money. They only look for the migrants to somehow bring money to their town.” Here Demetrio instantiates Martin’s earlier contention that due to their changed vision, returning migrants call into doubt the quality of governance of their hometown government. Furthermore, by suggesting that those in power do not properly bring resources to the community and that he himself would know how to do so, we can understand Demetrio as expressing a sense of personal administrative efficacy that is related to knowledge of administrative procedures which motivated him to seek the municipal presidency.

A similar administrative vision arose from my interview with Alejandro Cruz, the PRI mayor of San Pablo from 2017 to 2019. Alejandro was a teacher for fifteen years before migrating to the US, where he lived in Seaside, California for a number of months before being deported. He reported that due to the short duration of his stay in the US, he was unable to amass monetary resources to bring back home. However, he claimed that his time in the United States nonetheless had a major impact on the trajectory of his life when he returned home. He claimed that while he was in the US, “I could see the comparison between how other places were progressing and my pueblo was progressing,” and that migration “changed [his] vision of what was needed in his community.” Given that he was a teacher for many years, it is not surprising

that the manifestations of his modernizing vision for the community were especially pronounced with regard to education. He claimed, “The experience we had by going to the United States to be immigrants, well we realized precisely that the educational system there, well there are sources of funding, it is much more integrated, there are strong basic services and good food.” He added that he returned from his time in the United States “feeling confident that he would know how to bring these changes to San Pablo Huixtepec,” and that this confidence inspired him to run for municipal president. When speaking about his time serving as municipal president later in the interview, Alejandro emphasized his pride in being able to bring about the economic modernization and school improvements which were inspired by his time as a migrant, citing his ability to create gardens and better cafeterias in all of the schools in the community. He described how since he was unable to save money while in the United States, the funding that made these improvements possible came through cooperation with the state government. It is worth mentioning here that when Alejandro was in office, the PRI was not the hegemonic party. In light of this, we can consider the feat of bringing significant funding to the school system (which likely happened through liaising with a recalcitrant State government run by a different party) to be a manifestation of significant administrative knowledge and efficacy. As with the case of Demetrio, Alejandro’s experience in the United States caused him to consider new ways of community improvement through funding and additionally caused him to consider himself apt to carry out these improvements.

The themes of modernization and its effect on the role of the municipal president are deepened in an interview with Antonio Villa, municipal president of Piaxtla, Puebla in the early 2000s. Piaxtla is a municipality in Puebla that is similar in size to San Pablo and is *de facto*

governed by *Usos y Costumbres*. Antonio lived in the United States for 16 years, during which time he worked in a vegetable store, studied English at night with other adults, and earned his degree in accounting. Over time he took on a managerial role at the vegetable store and said he learned how to work with clients. When asked if his migration experience influenced the way he governed as municipal president, he responded by saying

“Definitely. I was trained by my boss [at the vegetable store]. I was trained to treat clients well and get them what they need. And I implemented this here [in Piaxtla] because at the end of the day we are public servants, we are employees, and the people are going to pay for a service, whether it be a record, a birth certificate, and you have to treat them well. In this way the experience served me a lot.”

We can understand this passage as Antonio speaking to how his business orientation imbued during his time working in the vegetable store changes his perception of the role of municipal president to center on transactions and serving individuals who have ‘paid for a service’. In this regard, his characterization of the job of municipal president using the capitalist analogy of being an ‘employee’ is notable. Throughout the interview he also repeatedly referred to his job as municipal president as being like an accountant of his business. Though the municipal president is also responsible for procuring communal traditions, these aspects are notably absent from his description of the influence of his migratory experience on how he governed.

Later in the interview, he claimed “God told me that ‘you are going to serve your town’ and I am doing it... From here I do not want more public *cargos*. It is very stressful, you sacrifice your family, there is no time to live with your family.” The communal and unremunerated logic of *cargos* are contrary to the efficient, transactional, and administrative work he did in the vegetable store which he cited as the inspiration for his vision of ideal local

government. We can therefore understand Antonio's desire to curtail the role of *cargos* as an extension of this administratively focused vision of the municipal presidency.

Thus Alejandro, Antonio, and Demetrio all witnessed a more economically sophisticated society as migrants in the US, imbuing in them a knowledge of administrative practices as well as a perception that they are apt to manifest this knowledge which collectively caused them to seek the municipal presidency.

Victor Leonel corroborated that return migrants run for the municipal presidency primarily because they seek to improve the municipality by augmenting its administrative capacity. During our conversation, he invoked decentralization as an important context for understanding why he perceived an increase in the amount of return migrants who seek the municipal presidency. He explained that prior to decentralization, municipalities did not see any significant funding from the State and Federal governments, so the municipal presidency was primarily responsible for intra-municipal social accords such as *tequio*, *cargos*, as well as religious and cultural affairs. With the onset of decentralization in the 1990s, there emerged significant sources of Federal- and State-level funding for municipal development. Due to this change, the responsibilities of municipal president were expanded to prominently include the administrative task of securing funds from governmental institutions. As explained in the following quotation, these expanded administrative responsibilities catalyzed return migrants seeking the position of municipal president.

“This is really what has detonated migrants running for municipal president - decentralization and its greater level of control of resources. This has inscribed the interest in the municipal presidency of professionals, of migrants, other sections of the population who had traditionally not participated so actively, or had not participated through high posts in the council... Resource management as a way into the political questions of the

community. Because of [decentralization] migrants seek to come back, and when they do they do so to find positions of power. Not just political power but now also political power accompanied with resource pools [with which] they can make change possible. ”

In this excerpt Leonel suggests that the promulgation of Ramo 28 and Ramo 33 (note that these are the programs to which he was referring, even if he does not name them explicitly) have increased the potential for the municipal president to control the community’s resources. By claiming that migrants began to seek the municipal presidency at higher rates in direct response to the greater availability of and potential to control the direction of municipal resources, we can glean that migrants are motivated to run by a vision of municipal government that is rooted in a knowledge of administrative processes as well as a confidence in their own ability to carry them out.

Furthermore, Leonel suggests that the sense of administrative efficacy which motivates migrants to seek the municipal presidency also changes how municipal presidential campaigns are carried out and, by extension, the role of the municipal presidency within local politics more generally. He explained that in the past, the municipal presidency is akin to a customary stewardship of the community and that those who campaigned for the municipal presidency were largely motivated to do so by notions of family honor and out of a sense of duty to the community. Campaigns for the municipal president were carried out accordingly: candidates promised to uphold communal traditions and cited their long career of completing unremunerated posts in the municipal council as proof of their commitment to the community and their fitness to lead.

Alternatively, he suggested that return migrants who seek the presidency in the era of decentralization often do so shortly after returning from the United States with far fewer years of unremunerated municipal service than those who had not migrated. He also noted that, both in communities who elect their leaders through political parties as well as those who elect their leaders through a system of *Usos y Costumbres*, return migrants campaign more prominently on bringing resources to the community and have caused municipal elections to become more competitive in nature. As a result, he claimed, “You lose the centrality of the idea of service to the post.” As the previous paragraphs have shown, return migrants seek the municipal presidency in a way that reflects their competitive and administration-oriented attitudes instilled during their time as an international migrant. Leonel has also demonstrated how return migrant municipal presidencies act as catalysts of decentralization by changing the position of municipal president towards one that is fundamentally competitive and administrative, thereby supplanting the traditional role of the municipal president as a steward of the municipality concerned with its internal administration and cultural affairs. Thus, one effect of decentralization and the administrative reasons for which return migrants seek the municipal presidency is a diminishing of the insular and communitarian nature of Oaxacan municipal politics in both *Usos* and non-*Usos* communities.

The changes in the perception of the role of the municipal presidency which have heretofore been illustrated by Alejandro, Antonio, and Demetrio and contextualized by Leonel also facilitate the presence of political parties in indigenous Oaxacan communities. Abigail Andrews, an Associate Professor of Sociology at University of California, San Diego who spent several years carrying out field work in various indigenous Oaxacan communities, recounted in

an interview that for many migrants the experience of living in the United States imbues westernized attitudes about governance. She suggested that in her experience, westernized attitudes typically emerge among return migrants as recalcitrance about having to complete communal labor and being forced to hold leadership positions and pay money to the community. Importantly, Andrews suggested that the westernization of return migrants' perceptions of local governance creates an ideational framework that is propitious for more robust partnership with political parties. This is best understood in light of her explanations of the disparate governmental visions of parties and indigenous communities. For instance, she claimed during our interview that regardless of whether a community elects its local leaders through political parties or through formal *Usos y Costumbres* processes, the logic of political parties is antithetical to the logic of *Usos* governance. She explains that central to communities influenced by indigenous philosophy is the understanding that citizenship denotes responsibilities as well as rights. Alternatively, Andrews claims that parties operate under a "more western logic of how citizenship operates," and that both in *Usos y Costumbres* communities and communities governed by national elections, parties will seek to operationalize this western citizenship logic through diminishing communal labor requirements, implementing taxes, and by focusing governance on maximizing the distribution of funds according to their partisan vision. Put briefly, Andrews claims that "when parties come in they tend to erode and undermine the spirit of tradition." Thus migrants' administrative post-migration rationale for seeking the municipal presidency is broadly similar to political parties' vision of government: both govern with an emphasis on the administration of funds. A perhaps unintended consequence is that return

migrants' administrative vision contributes to minimizing the role of nonwestern traditions such as communal labor and forced leadership.

Paradoxically, my conversation with Cruz-Pérez reveals that transnational migrant organizations such as FOCOICA, which is a binational organization that advocates for the rights of indigenous migrants, works with municipal presidents in a way that increases knowledge of administrative processes. She claimed that FOCOICA will partner with migrants and non-migrants in sending communities to help them secure 3 x 1 funds from the State and Federal governments. This is important insofar as we can think of migrant organizations as contributing to the administrative knowledge which catalyze cultural change in communities of origin.

The story of Ramiro Márquez López's exceptional municipal presidency further demonstrates how international migration instills knowledge of administrative processes and the efficacy to carry them out, which in concert causes return migrants to seek the municipal presidency. Ramiro holds an important place in the political history of Silacayoapam. After living in the United States for 16 years, he returned to Silacayoapam and subsequently ran for municipal president with the PRD. In coordination with the FIOB (an organization of which he was a State-level coordinator), Ramiro won the municipal presidential election in 2007, thus ending 28 years of local PRI electoral dominance.

In our two interviews in the Summer and Winter of 2020, Ramiro spoke to the events and ideas that led him to run for the municipal presidency of Silacayoapam. He claimed that his time spent in the United States gave him "a lot of ideas" about how he could improve his community of origin and allowed him to realize the extent to which his community back home was 'falling behind'. He also noted at one point during the interview that his compatriots in Silacayoapam

were ‘wasting their time and energy.’ From these excerpts we can infer that Ramiro’s international migration experience introduced him to new knowledge of how to improve his community. Such language is emblematic of Ramiro’s migrant vision.

When Ramiro returned, he was angered how local leaders that were affiliated with the PRI would intentionally not liaise with State and Federal officials to distribute Ramo 28 and Ramo 33 funds to Silacayoapam’s 13 constitutive communities, and would instead keep the funds. Due to the fact that Ramiro has voted for the PRD his whole life, even though PRD leaders rarely won elections in Oaxaca, we can glean that he had left-leaning partisan inclinations. Danielson (2018), who interviewed Ramiro in 2010, describes the process by which he became municipal president as a fundamentally oppositional effort against the hegemonic PRI. While this is true, Ramiro’s affiliation with the left-leaning PRD, as opposed to the right-leaning PAN, which was also an opposition party, is notable. This partisan distinction, and how it interacts with return migrants' sense of administrative knowledge, adds an important nuance to current work’s classification of migrants as either in opposition to or co-opted by the hegemonic party. It points to the need to pay more attention to diversity within political opposition and the agency of return migrant political actors to be oppositional in different ways.

Upon his return, Ramiro launched his campaign for municipal president with a greater sense of political and administrative efficacy, which he used to carry out the left-leaning goal of bringing government resources to his community to carry out the vision he saw abroad. During his campaign, the PRI offered him a bribe to switch partisan affiliations, but he denied the offer (Danielson 2018). In partnership with the FIOB, he was able to successfully negotiate the release of Ramo 28, Ramo 33, and 3 x 1 funds the PRI had previously been holding onto and

subsequently distribute these resources to Silacayoapam's 13 auxiliary communities. With these resources he and the FIOB were able to implement significant public infrastructure projects such as road improvements, increased electrification, and drainage. In a similar vein, Ramiro and the FIOB jointly implemented informational campaigns and educational workshops to help the leaders of Silacayoapam's villages navigate the confusing process of applying for 3 x 1 funds and administered Spanish lessons to those who only spoke Mixtec, an indigenous language, so as to facilitate their public participation.

Because it is in the interest of the PRI - or whichever party controls the State and Federal governments - to keep Ramo 28 and Ramo 33 funds in state coffers, it takes significant administrative and political knowledge to access these funds. Given the magnitude of the administrative tasks that fighting for the funds entails, it makes sense that any individuals who attempt to carry them out would be highly motivated by a vision for change and have significant trust in their own administrative efficacy. We can think of Ramiro's international migration experience and his participation with the FIOB as instilling both of these. That Ramiro carried out these actions in accordance with the FIOB corroborates Cruz-Pérez's earlier contention that FOCOICA helped community members to know how to solicit 3 x 1 funding; with both examples in mind we can conclude that transnational migrant organizations *in addition to* the experience of international migration in and of itself help to instill the very complex and often intentionally withheld administrative knowledge.

Interviews with people in Silacayoapam who have worked with Ramiro in the FIOB or know him personally echo that his policies have roots in administrative knowledge and efficacy gained through international migration. Rafael Vera corroborated that the idea of migrant vision

was a foundational factor of Ramiro's desire to affect this change: "he came [back to Silacayoapam] with a more, I'll say, open vision, which is why he sought to to run... he doesn't want to personally benefit from the resources, he wants the authorities to give the money to the municipalities... There for the first time the municipal president was in charge of getting and distributing these resources [Ramo 33 and Ramo 28] to the communities. This is a practice that the PRI did not do when it was the party in power." We can understand the allusion to "a more open vision" in this excerpt to refer to the increased administrative knowledge that these changes require. It is also notable that Rafael specifically suggested that this 'vision' was the reason why he decided to run for municipal president.

Pedro Avillas Salas, a carpenter in Silacayoapam and a founding member of the community's chapter of the FIOB who worked with Ramiro while he was in office, echoes the perception that international migration influenced Ramiro's redistribution of local funds.

"There is a lot of influence when one migrates. I think that, yes, there was influence in the case of Ramiro Marquez because when someone from our community leaves to go to another country, the first thing they see is economic, cultural, and political development, much more than in our communities. We see that their government is more faithful in giving information to its communities. People are much more educated than we are. They see this betterment, and therefore all of this helps to influence such that we want to make things in our communities similar. I think that in this way there was influence in the case of Ramiro's municipal government. It had an influence in many aspects, including the management of resources, because it is my understanding that in the US the management of resources is more transparent... In the case of Ramiro there was this type of influence, it definitely served his vision for how to try to get things done in his town."

Once again, the idea of 'a changed vision' is used to allude to the fact that being a migrant in the United States offers a comparison from which one changes their governing priorities and

policies. This is specifically salient with regard to the management of resources. Pedro draws a direct and causal connection between witnessing the United States government's more transparent use of resources to Ramiro's desire to bring a more transparent and equitable distribution of Oaxacan Ramo 28 funding and federal Mexican Ramo 33 funding to all of the villages of Silacayoapam. Insofar as the local PRI hegemony's keeping of municipal resources was predicated on keeping citizens uninformed, one can also understand Pedro's recognition of the United States' increased transparency as part of the changed vision of good governance. Pedro's comment also broaches the theme of education, which is notable because Pedro and Ramiro were responsible for setting up the previously mentioned information campaigns and educational programs for those who spoke indigenous languages to increase their civic engagement and ability to participate politically. It is therefore possible that his inspiration to carry out more inclusive governance in his community, thereby risking running against an illiberal local hegemon such as the PRI, was inspired by the model of transparency he witnessed in the United States.

In our interview, Pedro also spoke to how return migration affects Silacayoapam's development more broadly:

“We speak to people who come back with other religious ideas, their type of government is very different from that of someone who has lived here in the community. Because a person leaves, they come to know many more things about what we in the community need. What services we lack, which employments can we promote so that our people have some money. For all of this they bring a different government, the migrants. The migrant population returns with a much wider governmental vision of what development is.”

By claiming that return migrants “come to know many more things about what we in the community need,” and additionally using the metaphor of ‘vision,’ Pedro highlights that international migration experience imbues significant administrative knowledge that is unavailable to those who have not migrated. As in previous examples where this metaphor was used, Pedro suggested that by living in a more politically or economically developed society and therefore having a point of comparison, migrants ascertain a stronger understanding of the ways in which they could improve their hometown (or, “a much wider governmental vision of what development is.”) As with the case of Demetrio, Pedro suggests that migrants’ vision for communal improvement follows the administrative logic wherein those back home are not able to prosper due to a lack of resources and the administrative capabilities to utilize them. The following excerpt exemplifies how migrants seek such knowledge in their communities:

Here all of the municipal agents of the community work with Ramo 28, resources that come from the state, but it is too reduced, and Ramo 33, a resource which the federal government provides us. This resource comes and is well used, as the migrants have more vision as to how to send and use this resource. They have more vision because they can with less money make a bigger project because they know this type of resource application. For this reason even though they do not want to participate in *Tequio* nor do they act in traditional ways, they do participate as municipal agents.

Once again Pedro suggests that international migration causes migrants to have a greater knowledge of how to administer Ramo 28 and Ramo 33 funds, claiming that “they know this type of resource application.” It is furthermore notable that he claims “They have more vision because they can with less money make a bigger project,” because this suggests that beyond an

increased knowledge, international experience also causes return migrants to have an increased aptitude for resource administration. Moreover, we can understand that the perspectives and experiences migrants gain in the United States predispose them to participate in this more institutional capacity, in this case fund management work as municipal agents. In another interview, Osiel Nicholas, an ex-migrant who is president of Silacayoapam's communal goods committee, explained that these *Agentes Municipales* (municipal agents) are those who carry out the community's resource management principally by liaising with state and federal officials. Osiel noted that return migrants participate in this role at very high rates throughout Oaxaca.

Thus Pedro, Rafael, and Osiel jointly demonstrate how Ramiro's municipal presidency exemplifies a wider phenomenon wherein international migration experience causes return migrants to possess a 'vision' for local government that is linked to a knowledge of local administrative practices, a almost ideological commitment to technical administration as the best means for achieving change, and a perception of their personal aptitude in bringing about these changes.

At one point Pedro pithily said, "migration helps us economically but hurts us culturally." He explained that when migrants from Silacayoapam move to the United States, they convert from Catholicism (Silacayoapam's predominant religion) to Evangelicalism and imbibe American cultural norms. When they return with these new cultural experiences, Pedro described, return migrants do not want to participate in the communal aspects of indigenous governance, citing a recalcitrance to complete *tequio* as a prime example. Given the centrality of such traditions to insular communities like Silacayoapam, such recalcitrance often causes deep cultural rifts. Insofar as the preceding quotation demonstrates how migrants return to the

community of origin with a disposition to participate in the administrative affairs of the community but not the cultural ones such as *tequio*, we again see the emergence of a pattern wherein administrative rationales for seeking municipal office supplant the communal and traditional indigenous local political culture.

The final interview through which I illustrate my point is with Bernardo Ramirez Bautista, a man from Silacayoapam who served as a State coordinator for the FIOB in Oaxaca. Bernardo echoed the idea that return migrants are drawn to run for president by administrative knowledge and efficacy. Moreover, he claims that this tendency can sometimes adversely affect the community by increasing party entrenchment. In our interview he suggested that the political context of the United States is very different from that of Mexico, and for this reason they “completely unlearn the political and social context of their municipalities.” By this, he appears to refer to the local political knowledge required to carry out complex infrastructure projects as well as a familiarity and comfort with the *Usos y Costumbres*-style traditions. Bernardo explains that in the cases where these return migrants win the municipal presidency, their previous immersion in the political context of the United States causes their vision for development to consist primarily as investment in infrastructure works in their communities, but their unlearning of the Mexican political systems impedes their ability to access and administer various funds that are required for such development. Bernardo’s claim contrasts directly with the argument I have developed above. He suggests instead that migrants lose the administrative knowledge required to run the municipio well. I now turn to explain what might explain this inconsistency.

Bernardo noted that in Oaxaca, parties, specifically the PRI, have traditionally sought to co-opt migrants because parties want to use migrant remittances for development projects to

facilitate clientelism and patronage politics, which benefit candidates and parties as opposed to citizens. Bernardo specified that parties are interested in return migrant presidents not for their personal wealth but for the access to municipal funds held by state and federal governments. His comments merit further inquiry, particularly as they align with research by Waddell (2015) and Meseguer and Aparicio (2012). Nevertheless, his statements suggest that leaders of the party in power at the state level are aware that return migrants who seek the municipal presidency bring administrative vision, knowledge and efficacy, which can, in turn, undermine the party's control over public funds. Bernardo thus intimates that it is precisely these aspects of return migrant political actors that motivate parties to recruit them as candidates.

#### Return Migrant Developmental and Administrative Vision, Discussion and Conclusions

Analysis of interviews carried out in San Pablo Huixtepec and Silacayoapam thus collectively allow us to draw out the specific rationales as to why return migrants run for the position of municipal president. Namely, I find that when international migrants come to see their community of origin's relative lack of political and economic development, they gain a 'vision' of how to develop their hometowns. This vision has the goal of economically modernizing their hometowns, and it entails familiarity with more robust forms of administration as well as a perception of their personal efficacy to manifest change in their communities. I conclude that these factors cause return migrants to seek the administratively-centered post of municipal president.

The political context of decentralization emerged as a central factor to understanding why return migrants seek the municipal presidency. As Leonel explained, decentralization augmented

the role of local government in securing State and National development funds, in turn increasing the administrative responsibilities and political stakes of the municipal presidency. This causes return migrants to seek the municipal presidency as they perceive the heightened funding power of the role as facilitating their administrative vision for improving local government.

The interview analysis presented in this section suggests that return migrants who participate in the politics of their community of origin often seek to diminish the importance of *Usos y Costumbres* customs such as *tequio*, as well as its traditional notion of prestige as earned through unremunerated labor. I find that the change is due to the fact that the community service-based understandings of local government are antithetical to return migrants' vision of economic modernization and the administrative logic through which such modernization is carried out that I claim motivates return migrants to seek the municipal presidency.

The recurrence of administrative knowledge and efficacy suggests that they are germane frameworks for conceptualizing the motivations and effects of return migrant participation. From this point of consistency in the data, however, I posit that the ways in which administrative efficacy and knowledge influences a return migrant's specific political vision and subsequent political actions can vary significantly based on their lives prior to international migration. I conclude that pre-migration political socialization is one such axis of variation to consider. Return migrants with leftist pre-migration political predispositions can result in political partnerships that result in a vision of municipal development that is redistributive and rooted in partnership with government. Conversely, this migration-induced administrative efficacy for return migrants with right-wing pre-migration political socializations and/or partisan affiliations

may lead to administrative works in a capitalist vision or through public-private partnerships. In light of this framework, let us consider the cases of Demetrio and Ramiro, both of whose motivations were rooted in administrative vision but conceived through distinct political lenses.

Demetrio had been a lifelong militant of the PAN, a right-wing party most analogous to the United States' Republican party due to its emphasis on free market capitalism and job creation. In our interview he spoke about how he had been a militant for the PAN for his entire life. Interview analysis clearly demonstrates that his experience abroad instilled personal administrative efficacy and subsequently caused these free market predispositions to be manifested into an administrative governing agenda of job creation and public-private partnerships. This happened most notably through his claims that he wanted to do a better job of administering 3 x 1 funds in his community. It bears mentioning here that while 3 x 1 is a government program, it emphasizes entrepreneurship and public-private partnerships much more than the similar Ramo 28 and Ramo 33 programs. Indeed, the fact that Demetrio did not talk about Ramo 28 and Ramo 33 in his vision to bring more robust administration to San Pablo Huixtepec can also be interpreted as speaking to his political ideology.

Ramiro's pre-migration political socialization is also salient with regard to what would become his historic governing agenda. As mentioned earlier, we can assume from Ramiro's history of voting for the PRD that Ramiro's understanding of how to improve his community would be rooted in leftist ideals such as redistribution. It is thus not surprising that the administrative knowledge and efficacy which Ramiro gleaned from international migration experience as well as his partnership with the FIOB were manifested in more equitable administration of Ramo 28 and Ramo 33 funds to Silacayoapam's auxiliary communities.

Both programs require significant administrative knowledge to understand given their complex nature, and both require administrative efficacy to carry out given how parties are recalcitrant to relinquish the funds. The difference between Ramiro's use of Ramo 28 and Ramo 33 funds and Demetrio's opting for 3 x 1 is relevant in that it aligns with their political ideologies.

The relationship is less clear-cut when either the administrative activities carried out or the municipal president's partisan affiliation do not reflect such strong ideological predilections. For instance, Alejandro Cruz served as municipal president of San Pablo Huixtepec for the more ideologically moderate PRI. Due to the fact that running with the PRI does not invoke a distinct ideological method such as the PAN being implementing free-market politics or the PRD being redistributive, it is more difficult to ascertain to what extent the administrative efficacy that Alejandro's manifested while municipal president interacts with his pre-migration socialization. It is also more difficult for someone like Antonio Villa who did run with Mexico's left-wing MORENA but whose government priority of diminishing the *cargo* system does not reflect as salient an ideological leaning as that of his party. With these limitations in mind, I find there to be a suggestive, but not conclusive, relationship between political affiliation and return migrant administrative efficacy.

The preceding paragraphs allow for consideration of other, non-partisan and non-ideological aspects of pre-migration socialization on the formation of migrant vision. Alejandro was a teacher for many years and participated actively in section 22 of Oaxaca's teacher's union *Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadoras de la Educación* (National Coordinator of Education Workers - CNTE), from which we can reasonably assume that improving the

educational system in San Pablo was important to Alejandro. We see this preference reflected in how he manifested his migrant vision while mayor for the PRI. He claimed that he was inspired to see how much better funded and implemented the schools were in the United States, and as a result he worked to improve the gardens and cafeteria at the local schools. While this relationship is somewhat intuitive, it is yet to be fully explored. In other words, it is worth considering how Sergio Wals' concept of the 'political suitcase' of pre-migration political socialization could be expanded to provide a theoretical framework for the impact of different variations of pre-migration socialization on their governance as return migrant municipal presidents.

As evidenced in the literature review, the relationship between return migrant political actors and hegemonic parties is conceptualized by extant scholarship as frequently involving co-optation of migrants (i.e., integrating migrants into the hegemonic party to quell their dissent without taking into account their needs), or alternatively, resistance to co-optation that results in political opposition. I encountered a reference to this co-optation in the interviews that fall into this framework. Namely, Bernardo pointed out that the PRI attempts to take advantage of return migrants' administrative approaches to government by working with them to construct development projects that favor their political interests. I was surprised to see that co-optation as the literature characterizes was not reported among return migrant municipal presidents and return migrant municipal presidential candidates whom I interviewed.

All the same, I posit a slight nuance to the scholarship's characterization of return migrant political actor's resisting co-optation. While the description of resisting co-optation given in the preceding paragraph does technically apply to the case of Ramiro (he rejected a

bribe to join the PRI and ran his campaign against the party), I suggest that it lacks subtle nuances. Ramiro could have allied himself with either of the community's opposition forces, the PRD or the PAN. I suggest that the fact that Ramiro chose to run for the municipal president with the party that aligns with his left-leaning ideological preferences signifies that he had agency over the process by which he opposed the PRI. This is important because it signifies that characterizing the rationale for Ramiro's municipal candidacy as exclusively to unseat the PRI is incomplete. Instead, Ramiro's ideologically-aligned party preference suggests that he additionally considered the partnership as a way through which he could implement his own constructive vision of local politics that emerged from and was catalyzed by international migration and transnational migrant organizations.

Given the structure of municipal funding and the political relationships between state and local governments that resulted from decentralization, it is conceivable that *all candidates*, not only return migrant candidates, require administrative knowledge and vision to run for office. While this argument is compelling, the effect of migration appears to be particularly salient, if not unique, in fostering administrative vision. Firstly, return migrants consistently explained that their desire to bring an administrative vision to their community of origin through the position of municipal presidency arose as a specific and direct consequence of their experience as a migrant. Furthermore, numerous interviews carried out with Oaxacan academics and members of San Pablo Huixtepec and Silacayoapam who are not municipal presidents or migrants but are nonetheless knowledgeable about their community's electoral affairs pointed to a specific link between attitudinal changes gained through international migration and the desire to institute administrative change in their communities. For instance, analysis of conversations with Pedro

and Bernardo make unequivocal the contention that Ramiro's administrative government was related to his time as a migrant.

Still, further research is needed to better understand precisely which migration experiences, either in the US or involving collaborations with NGOs, like the FIOB, produce this vision and how they interact with pre- and post-migration political socialization. Moreover, a full account of the role of migration in shaping administrative vision would involve a comparison of return migrant versus non-migrant mayoral candidates.

Given the limited nature of my research sample, these findings should be circumscribed in other ways too. Due to the nature of the snowball sampling method I used, many of my interviews in each community were with people of similar ideological backgrounds who were part of the same social and political circles within the community. For instance, Ramiro, Bernardo, Rafael, and Pedro have all worked with or are strong supporters of the left-wing FIOB, and half actually worked with Ramiro in his administration. It is possible that someone who did not know Ramiro or was not a fan of his politics might characterize his municipal presidency differently. These four interviews also represent a smaller sample size of interviewees than I employed in San Pablo Huixtepec, and out of these four only Ramiro has had migration experience. I similarly find that my argument about how partisan logic and political ideology influence developmental vision and administrative capacity would benefit from more evidence. In order to corroborate this finding, I would need to carry out interviews with more candidates from opposition parties (i.e. not the PRI) on both the ideological left (e.g. MORENA, PRD) and right (e.g. PAN).

## **7. Conclusion**

My principal purposes were to uncover how and why return migrants run for the municipal presidency, why political parties seek to create partnerships with return migrants, and what the effects of these partnerships are on Oaxaca's indigenous local political context. My thesis has established that attitudinal shifts which emerge during international migration as well as reputational increases which result therefrom facilitate relationships between return migrants and political parties which create distinctly administrative governing agendas.

I first set out to understand why parties seek return migrants as municipal presidential candidates despite their having transgressed against the fundamental privilege given to intra-community unremunerated service. Interviewees collectively outlined the notion of migrant prestige - the reputational increase that arises from international migration - and suggested that parties perceive association with return migrant prestige to be a way to increase their odds of electoral success. In the interviews, return migrant prestige arose from a wide variety of communal perceptions: that returning to the community after having migrated is prestigious in and of itself; that return migrants are part of important migrant social networks abroad; that they contribute to the community's customary life and infrastructure.

I then proceeded to study why return migrants seek the municipal presidency. I found that among those I interviewed, the experience of international migration interacted with pre-migration socialization to instill a knowledge of new forms of administration as well as a perception of personal administrative efficacy to institute these new administrative knowledges, which concertedly caused migrants to seek the municipal presidency. I additionally found that Mexican political decentralization increased the extent to which administrative vision can be

carried out through the municipal presidency, thereby catalyzing the administration-focused reasons I posit why return migrants seek the municipal presidency. I found that this administrative vision of governance aligns to some extent with political parties' approaches to development and, relatedly, can lead return migrants to seek to diminish the dominance of traditional norms.

These findings contribute to the underdeveloped scholarship on return migrant political participation in several ways. My finding that parties seek electoral advantage through association with return migrants' bolstered reputations suggest that the literature may benefit from considering parties' interests in return migrants beyond co-optation of financial remittances. By finding that new administrative knowledge and attitudes gained abroad may be a primary reason why return migrants seek the municipal presidency, I suggest that return migrants are significant but understudied carriers of social remittances in and of themselves. Furthermore, by contextualizing return migrants' political and administrative visions in their specific pre-migration political socialization, I suggest that the literature on return migrant attitudes would benefit from a more rigorous study of the lives of migrants prior to emigration. I also add nuance to the current literature's characterization of return migrant political actors opposing entrenched local parties by showing how return migrants exhibit agency and party choice. Relatedly, I suggest that return migrants running for municipal president against a local hegemonic party should not only be studied on the merits of its oppositional nature; and rather that it can additionally be a way in which return migrants carry out their own administrative vision.

Despite these significant contributions, my research has limitations that open up questions for future research. For instance, the scope of my analysis on return migration is limited to the Oaxacan indigenous experience. Further research might explore a similar set of questions in any of Mexico's States where local politics is rooted in a specific traditional context. If this project were not limited to one academic year, I would continue this research by completing interviews in communities that are formally governed by *Usos y Costumbres*. Such comparative case studies might illuminate if and how the relationship between return migrants and political parties may change as a result of parties' purported absence from the electoral process. If I had more time to continue this study I would attempt to conduct interviews with party leaders in Mexico at the State level, as having these perspectives would allow me to bring significant nuance to the narratives of co-optation I present, and additionally could make more precise my attempt to disaggregate the multiple reasons for which parties might seek partnership with return migrants. Further research might carry out a comparative study between non-migrants and migrants to verify my thesis' claims that international migration has significant effects on traditional local governance and return migrant relationships to parties.

I conclude by briefly touching on the implications of the connections between my thesis' two fundamental ideas of return migrant prestige and return migrant administrative vision. One area of commonality between the two is "the ability to get things done." I found this to be essential to communities of origin's positive perception of return migrants (i.e. prestige) as well as a central aspect of why return migrants seek the municipal presidency (i.e. administrative vision). I find this combination to be essential to entrenched political parties, but for different reasons. Insofar as return migrant prestige facilitates migrants occupying positions of local

power and, additionally, that return migrant administrative vision may impact a candidate's political courage and ability to use local power in ways that create significant change, we can understand that political parties stand to gain immensely from alliances with return migrant actors. I suggest that candidates and parties' different rationales concerning return migrant prestige and vision are thus a useful framework for future studies of the relationship between migrant local political actors and entrenched political parties.

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