



Migrant Voting in Argentina and throughout Latin America: A Disputed Right

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Abstract: Political participation is often a difficult threshold for migrants to cross in their adopted countries. The 2023 Argentinian elections showed their engagement is fundamental to deepening democracy and public debate. It is worth examining obstacles, myths and truths of a disputed right.

Patricia Mendoza was born in Táchira, Venezuela. Since 2018 she has lived in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA). This is the first election in which she is eligible to vote. After waiting for three people to decide on their candidates, she enters the dark room of the last table at the voting centre set up at the Faculty of Law of the University of Buenos Aires. She comes out almost immediately with the envelope in one hand and rests it on the ballot box with her long, sculpted nails painted in pink and light blue. Then she greets her husband and smiles. This is her first election in the country: 'One of my daughters said to me: Mom, we live here now. You have to vote! So here I am.'

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The political rights of migrants, and in particular the exercise of suffrage, are perhaps the last threshold in the process of recognition and integration in their host communities. Even the countries with the most advanced legislation in terms of migrant recognition show reservations when it comes to placing electoral participation on an equal footing.

In Argentina, the immigrant population amounts to [3,033,786 people](#), according to a November 2022 study by the National Population Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior. The most significant communities are Paraguayan (29.7 percent), Bolivian (21.7 percent), Peruvian (9.5 percent) and Venezuelan (7.3 percent). Although the country is internationally recognised for its Migration Law 25.871, which is characterised by a human rights perspective, when it comes to guaranteeing the right to vote, it presents various obstacles to its effectiveness. In fact, migrants can only elect but not be elected - and they cannot vote for national positions. Despite this, the last general elections in 2023 showed that their presence, far from being limited to their status as workers and their economic contributions, makes a substantive contribution towards strengthening democracy.

The migrant vote at the political heartland of the country

In Argentina, migrants are entitled to vote at municipal and provincial levels. To do so, in addition to having permanent residency, they must have been uninterruptedly resident for between one and five years, depending on the district. In all of [the country's provinces](#) - with the exception of Formosa - they can elect municipal posts. Meanwhile, migrants are authorised to elect provincial representatives in La Rioja, Tucumán, the Province of Buenos Aires (PBA), the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA) and Córdoba. These last three districts, in turn, are key protagonists of national politics and the ones in which the largest number of migrants are concentrated. While 46 percent of the foreign population live in PBA, 28 percent and 3 percent live in CABA and Córdoba respectively. Despite their weight on the electoral rolls, the main political parties lack specific proposals aimed at this sector of the population. This lack translates into their invisibility in public debate, which is a significant absence if one takes into account that the foreign population in Buenos Aires represents 8 percent, and in CABA, 12 percent. It is in the PBA and CABA, the political heart of the country, where the migrant vote has left the deepest mark in the last elections. While in the first district there were 950,000 foreigners registered to vote - 7.5 percent of the electoral roll -, in the second district 485,000 - 16 percent of the electoral roll - were eligible to vote. Despite the fact that in both cases [registration is automatic](#), absenteeism is the most prominent statistic from the last elections. In PBA, only 25 percent of the electoral roll voted, while in CABA it was just 21 percent; significantly lower than the 69 percent at the national level. [The obstacles](#) that explain a large part of this absenteeism, however, are repeated throughout the length and breadth of the country: shortcomings in the

preparation of the electoral rolls, lack of knowledge and poor dissemination of the right of foreigners to vote, differences in the political cultures of their countries of origin. It was perhaps in the [Province of Buenos Aires](#) that the migrant vote played a key role. There, 54.59 percent of the vote went to *Unión por la Patria* - the centre-left ruling party - up from 36.4 percent in the general elections. Undoubtedly, this performance was one of the keys to understanding the victory of this party in the first round. This momentum was even more evident in various municipal elections, where the narrow margins between the parties made the migrant vote a key factor. On the other hand, migrant voters were much more evenly divided between right and left in the Federal Capital where the centre-right ruling party *Juntos por el Cambio* received 31.5 percent of the vote and *Unión por la Patria*, 34 percent, the former winning overall by 49.6 percent to 32.2 percent.

The political rights of migrants in Latin America

South America is currently home to [10,887,474 migrants](#). Argentina, Chile and Brazil are the countries that attract the majority of migrants in the region, mainly from the Andean countries and Paraguay. However, Venezuelan migration is now playing a leading role in the Americas, as a result of the political, social, economic and humanitarian crisis it is currently undergoing. As of May 2023, there were [7.32m Venezuelan](#) refugees and migrants worldwide, 84 percent of them living elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean. Despite the fact that the migration issue has been placed on the agenda of regional priorities and recognised by various international bodies as a powerful driver of [sustainable development](#), the political dimension of the phenomenon has been relegated to the background. Although [most countries in South America](#) allow foreigners to vote at some electoral level, there are some nuances that should be reviewed. Chile, Uruguay and Ecuador allow participation at all levels; Argentina, Colombia and Venezuela do so at the provincial and municipal levels; Paraguay, Bolivia and Peru allow voting at the municipal level; Brazil, on the other hand, does not allow participation at any level. The requirements for exercising the right to vote vary, although they all share the common criteria of permanent residence and proof of uninterrupted residence in the country: Uruguay - 15 years; Venezuela - 10 years; Chile, Colombia and Ecuador - five years; Peru and Bolivia - three years.

The migrant future is a political issue

Deterritorialisation of belonging and rethinking conditions of citizenship are fundamental issues where, according to the IOM, of a global population of 7.4bn, 281m (3.6 percent) are international migrants.

[Participation](#) should be encouraged, not only because the International Bill of Human Rights establishes it. Recognising this right also means strengthening international relations between countries. In turn, advancing legislation that

favours migrant inclusion means recognising the economic and developmental contributions migrants make in their host countries, but above all, the political dimension of their existence. To this end, the participation of resident foreigners in local and national elections must be expanded, not only through legislative measures but also through policies that give practical effect to this right. Finally, in order to go beyond the effective exercise of suffrage, it is also necessary to enable representation of migrants in elective office.