

Mexico's Migrants Profit From Dollars Sent Home

By GINGER THOMPSON

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ALPARAÍSO, Mexico, Feb. 22 - Less than two months after he was elected, Mayor Alberto Ruiz Flores climbed in his truck and set out on a 26-hour road trip across the border to Southern California, carrying a wish list of public works projects to a backyard barbecue in Oxnard.

The reason? To solicit money from some of the 400,000 Mexicans who abandon their country each year for work in the United States, including half his town in Central Mexico. Those who have left Valparaíso send home an estimated \$100,000 a day, as much money in one month as the municipality will spend all year.

A week later, Mr. Ruiz was at a restaurant in Aurora, Ill., for a meeting with a Mexican factory worker and billboard painter who has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for Valparaíso. The week after that, he invited migrant leaders from Dallas and Las Vegas to join him at home for the annual crowning of the municipal beauty queen.

"I consider myself the mayor of Valparaíso, and the mayor to those, like you, who had to leave Valparaíso in search of a decent life," Mr. Ruiz said at the start of each encounter. "You have shown with your generosity that you are still a part of Mexico. Without you, who knows where we would be."

For Mr. Ruiz, politics does not stop at the United States border. The same is true across Mexico, the Caribbean and Latin America, where more and more officials like him answer to cross-border constituencies made up of the people at home who cast ballots and the ones abroad who pull the purse strings.

Today more than ever, the remittances sent home by immigrant workers, both legal and illegal, are translating into political clout, and their communities in the United States, better organized and more vocal than before, have become social and political forces too important to ignore.

It is a phenomenon that has made Washington a principal battleground to lobby support among Salvadorans for the Central American Free Trade Agreement; New York a crucial state in elections in the Dominican Republic, which allows its citizens to vote from the United States; and Chicago a mandatory campaign stop for Mexican politicians.

On Tuesday, in Mexico City, migrant power was further consolidated when the lower Chamber of Deputies passed legislation allowing the migrants to cast absentee ballots from the United States, which will allow Mexicans with American citizenship to vote in both places.

The measure opens the way for an estimated 10 million Mexicans and Mexican-Americans to vote in presidential elections next year, in a potential tidal wave that could have significant impact on this country's fledgling democracy. Other countries including Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil and Honduras also allow their migrants to cast absentee ballots.

For Mexico, the logistics of the huge endeavor remain unclear; legislators estimated that operating polls in the United States could cost at least \$50 million. The measure, which was passed by an overwhelming majority and is expected to win easy passage by the Senate, also provides money for Mexican political parties to campaign in the United States. However, it prohibits them from receiving foreign campaign donations.

Already, the economic influence of the migrants is undeniable. The Inter-American Development Bank estimates that migrants sent more than \$45 billion to Latin America and the Caribbean last year, exceeding foreign investment and official development assistance for the third year in a row.

Mexico - where people compete with oil as the country's chief export - received some \$17 billion in remittances, almost twice the amount of just four years ago. Óscar Chacón, of the immigrant advocacy group Enlaces América, calls the phenomenon a quiet revolution led by an expanding network of more than 500 mom and pop organizations that are filling in where more than a decade of free trade and foreign investment has failed to narrow the gap between the rich and poor.

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Today those immigrant groups are using the power that comes with their remittances to place ever greater demands on politicians at all levels. Their leaders have met with advisers to President Bush to push for sweeping immigration reform, and with presidents across Latin America to demand everything from the power to cast absentee ballots and run for office in their homelands, to universal health insurance and college scholarships.

"Once the voices of immigrants were weak," said Efraín Jiménez, a former auto mechanic who now oversees multimillion-dollar infrastructure projects in Zacatecas, financed by immigrants in California. "We had money, but we had no organizations.

"Now we have hundreds of organizations," he said. "No president can ignore us."

So far, migrants have lost more of those political battles than they have won, especially in the United States, where Mr. Bush's plans have stalled for a guest worker program. It would offer temporary legal status to an estimated three million Mexican laborers.

Still, says Mr. Chacón, migrants are raising money for public works, forming political action committees to support candidates at home and, in small but growing numbers, returning home to run for public office themselves.

Some are serving as mayors, city council members and state legislators, bringing fresh perspective and ideas from their time spent in the United States and new demands for accountability from governments long regarded as corrupt or ineffective.

Like Mexico, most countries prohibit political parties from receiving foreign campaign donations. But in recent years, migrants in the United States have formed political action committees to sponsor campaign trips to America for candidates from their home countries. And they send delegations of campaign workers back home to help candidates press the pavement, more and more of which they have paid for.

Few places understand the changes better than Zacatecas, the Central Mexican state where Mr. Ruiz serves as mayor. More than a century of migration has inextricably linked Zacatecas to the United States. Today more than half of the state's people live north of the border, mostly in California, Illinois and Texas.

The Political Process Expands

While the rest of Mexico debates whether to give migrants the power to cast absentee ballots, Zacatecas is already allowing its migrants to come home and run for office.

Two migrants, including Andrés Bermúdez, a wealthy California grower known as the Tomato King, won mayoral races. Two other immigrants won seats in the state legislature.

The governor of Zacatecas, Amalia García, has traveled to the United States at least four times since she was inaugurated in September. She spent a weekend in November in Los Angeles, listening to migrant complaints at the Mexican Consulate, discussing investment opportunities with Mexican business leaders, and helping to crown the new Miss Zacatecas at the annual Zacatecano Ball.

When asked during her whirlwind visit to explain why she gives so much attention to Mexicans thousands of miles away, Ms. García said: "I consider Zacatecas as a binational state. Although the reasons our people have migrated are painful, these people have guaranteed our social stability."

Southern California is the capital of the Mexican diaspora, and a hotbed of Mexican politics, led by the Federation of Zacatecan Clubs and men like Guadalupe Gómez.

The federation meets in a drab gray building in the City Terrace section of East Los Angeles that looks more like an abandoned warehouse than a transnational seat of power. And its leaders are auto mechanics, postal workers, hospital administrators, real estate agents and tax consultants.

Nearly everybody who wants to be anybody in Zacatecan politics has walked through its doors. Presidential agreements have been signed there. Political campaigns have been started.

The federation proclaims that it is apolitical. But it is precisely its close ties to the government of Zacatecas that have helped it grow out of its members' garages into one of the most successful migrant fund-raising groups in the United States - and helped men like Mr. Gómez change from a mild-mannered tax consultant to a high-powered, cross-border political operative.

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Today in his lobbying efforts, he rubs shoulders with President Fox as well as President Bush. To spend time with the 44-year-old father of four is to glimpse a world without borders, where Spanglish is the first language.

One day he is in Los Angeles addressing a ballroom full of Guatemalan mayors seeking his advice on how to get their own migrants to invest in public works projects back home. The next, he is giving the same advice to a room full of Mexican mayors in Zacatecas.

In 1998, Mr. Gómez established a migrant political action committee that was key to electing the first opposition governor of Zacatecas, helping the state break free of nearly seven decades of authoritarian rule by the Institutional Revolutionary Party. Two years later he helped Mr. Fox win the support of Mexican migrants in his historic bid to become this country's first democratically elected opposition president.

In an agreement negotiated by Mr. Gómez and other federation leaders, every dollar sent home was matched by three more dollars from the local, state and federal governments in a program called Tres por Uno, or Three for One.

Mr. Gómez then negotiated with President Fox to nationalize the program. For the first time, Mexican migrants were not only sending money home, but also had a say in how the money was spent.

"We do not want anyone deciding for us what our communities need," Mr. Gómez said. "We are not going to Mexico asking for help. We are offering help. We want to play a key role in the future.

"If Mexico is ever going to get out of the third world," he said, "then we need to be a part of that."

Balancing Needs and Wants

All it takes is one night at a federation meeting to understand that the relationship between Mexican elected officials and the migrants is not all love and happiness. Negotiations are far from easy.

The street outside at a recent meeting was packed with sport utility vehicles. Inside, the meeting hall looked like a small sea of cowboy hats. Seated on the dais was a federal senator, two state legislators and at least seven members of Governor García's cabinet, including the ministers of economic development and agricultural industry, and the director of migrant affairs.

In the audience sat at least 16 mayors from municipalities across Zacatecas. Each one got up to address the crowd. And they seemed to have one common plea.

"Many clubs have come to us offering to build rodeo arenas or to renovate churches in areas that do not have electricity or potable water," said Mayor

Rodolfo Monreal of the municipality of Fresnillo. "We are asking you to consider projects with greater social impact.

"I understand that the migrants should have a voice in what we do in Mexico," he went on. "But we know better than anybody what our communities need, and those needs should come first."

The room began to grumble. Some of the migrant leaders whispered that the mayors did not care so much about "projects with greater social impact" as they did about projects aimed at making the government look good to voters.

Other mayors argued back that the migrants had fallen out of touch with Mexican realities, and that they wanted to remake Mexico in the image of the United States.

"The migrants want to have here the lives they have over there," Mr. Monreal said. "They do not listen to what we want."

Mr. Jiménez, who manages the federation's public works spending, stepped to the microphone with a diplomat's demeanor. It is true, he told the mayors, that migrants might start out renovating churches. Many of them want to show thanks to God for their success in the United States.

But if local authorities support their churches, the migrants will come around and support local authorities to build roads and schools and clinics.

Mr. Gómez watched from the back of the room. He said he had been listening to this debate since the federation began. For a while, he said, the staunchly secular government refused to contribute public funds to help renovate churches - almost all of them Roman Catholic - or build recreation facilities.

But when migrants threatened to withdraw from Tres por Uno, the government relented, and in the last four years it has helped renovate more than 100 churches in Zacatecas alone.

"Those are the projects that inspired us to organize," Mr. Gómez said. "And if the government says no to what we want, then we are not going to support the projects the government wants."

Hardships and Homecomings

Christmas in Valparaíso is one of the best times and places to get a look at what drives immigrant politics, and at the hardships and homecomings that make this cross-border phenomenon what it is.

In November, villages like Boquilla del Refugio were almost empty. By the first weekend of December, they had come back to life as immigrants came home from the United States for the holiday.

Lights turned on in houses that are vacant the rest of the year. Expensive sport utility vehicles with license plates from Arizona, Oklahoma, Colorado, Texas, California and Illinois roared through the streets. Local stores extended their hours and doubled their prices.

Lines of people wearing American-style T-shirts and baseball caps crawled up the aisles of a nearby chapel and the walls around the sanctuary were sprinkled with photos of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the United States armed forces, who had returned safely from duty in Iraq.

Almost every night there was a dance, flowing with beer and tequila. And when there was no dance, the immigrants hired street musicians to follow them as they paraded, swigging tequila, through town.

There were success stories among the throngs who had come home. Román Cabral, the state legislator from Valparaíso, lived 30 years in California and Oregon. He started out as a dishwasher, and when he left last year to run for office, he was earning millions from his construction company and used-car lots.

But more common were men like the president of the hometown club from Boquilla del Refugio, a 54-year-old metal worker named Rosendo Rivera. The club was started by a dozen working-class immigrants in the Chicago area, and in the last three years it has raised more than \$350,000 for projects in a town where the population has dropped to nearly 600 people from 2,000.

In Aurora, Mr. Rivera lives a working-class life, supplementing the income from his factory job by selling expensive cowboy attire. In Boquilla del Refugio, he is received like a hero.

Mayor Ruiz said: "If you listen to the migrants, all you will hear are success stories. They never talk about how hard their lives are in the United States. All of them say they have made it, and they spend money as if they are rich.

"So people here admire them," Mr. Ruiz said. "They have tremendous influence."

But after decades of watching the phenomenon up close, Mr. Ruiz said he saw immigrants and their remittances as more of a mixed blessing.

The more people go, the more money flows back. But the more money that flows back, the more people go. And once everyone is gone, he said, immigrants will not have any reason to send more money.

There are already places in Zacatecas, he said, where remittances have peaked and are beginning to decline. Boquilla del Refugio seems headed toward the same fate. Florencio Herrera, treasurer of the village's hometown association and a resident of Elgin, Ill., says the elementary school buses in children from other communities so the government will keep it open. There are so few people left to worship in the village's church, lovingly renovated with remittances from the United States, that Mr. Herrera calls it an "empty palace."

Still, the club raises money. On the first Saturday night of December, it held a dance that would help pay to install a sewage system in Boquilla del Refugio.

When asked why he keeps raising money for a ghost town, Mr. Rivera seems stuck at first for an answer.

"I ask myself that sometimes," he said. "I guess because I lived here and suffered here, and I want to make things better. But no matter how much we try to make things better, it's not going to stop people from leaving."

"I guess it's just a matter of pride," he concluded. "It's our way of making something of ourselves, and making a difference in the world."



Luis J. Jiménez for The New York Times

BACK HOME Remittances sent to Zacatecas State have financed the building and renovation of places including a rodeo arena in Valparaíso.



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ON THE ROAD Mayor Alberto Ruiz Flores of Valparaíso, left, at a meeting in Oxnard, Calif., with migrants from Zacatecas.