Voting from Abroad: A Researcher’s Personal Experience

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Über Politik aus der Wissenschaft

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[This Blog also has a Spanish language version at https://adrianacassis.com/votar-desde-el-extranjero-la-experiencia-personal-de-un-investigadora/]

Yesterday, I voted in my home country’s elections from abroad. In fact, I am one of more than 446,000 Ecuadorians registered to do so. But in my case, as a researcher of transnational political practices, I found myself at a crossroads between theory and practice. I was living the very experience that is a key topic of my dissertation project.

In this blog post, I reflect on my personal experience – what it means to vote from afar, the obstacles involved, and the deeper emotional and political significance of this act.

The challenges of voting from abroad

One of the key themes in research on transnational political engagement is the balance between obstacles and opportunities. In theory, voting from abroad allows migrants to continue to influence the politics of their home country. In practice though, it is often an uphill battle.

For me, the biggest challenge has been mobility: I live in Cologne, but there is no Ecuadorian embassy or consulate in North Rhine-Westphalia. There are only three election offices in Germany: Hamburg, Berlin and Bonn. However, since Bonn is not an official consulate, information about voting there was difficult to find.

I do not have a driver's license (Germany does not recognize mine), nor do I own a car. My best option was public transportation. Luckily, as a student, I have a semester ticket that covers all my travel within Germany. Otherwise, a single return ticket to Bonn would have cost about 30 euros. The round trip itself took about two hours.



In addition to logistics, another major obstacle was registration. When I registered to vote abroad, I carefully researched each step of the process, constantly thinking about whether I'd come across this procedure in the literature I'd reviewed for my dissertation. Most likely, yes. The digitization of the registration process had its own peculiarities: I had to download documents, print them, sign them, scan them, and then upload them again. In many cases, the website failed – I had to try for several days. I consider myself fairly tech-savvy, but I wonder how much harder this was for those without strong digital skills. It thus made sense, that candidates for the National Assembly seats reserved for expatriates were setting up „registration hotspots" as part of their campaigns.

I had previously tried to vote in Ecuadorian elections, but was unable to do so. The elections were brought forward unexpectedly, and although I successfully registered, the system still did not count me because there was „not enough time" to process my

registration. Such type of issues are common. This year, Germany's Bundestag elections were preponed up due to the collapse of the governing coalition, in turn creating a tight deadline for citizens abroad to receive and submit their ballots on time.

But beyond these logistical hurdles, a deeper problem became apparent: the lack of political outreach. I never received any political advertisements for these elections – at least not from the candidates running for emigrant representation. I attribute this to the fact that I am not in a country with a significant Ecuadorian population.

In Spain alone, there are about 189,000 Ecuadorians registered to vote. If you look at the campaigns of emigrant representation candidates in Europe, Asia and Oceania, much of their activity takes place in Spain or Italy. Watching their videos on social media, I recognized the familiar markers of migrant political campaigns-the rhetoric of „immigrant brothers and sisters," the stories of sacrifice, the emphasis on working abroad to provide for those back home. It's a narrative that appears all over the world. But this time I was the target.

I must admit that I was not familiar with any of the candidates for the expatriate seats in the National Assembly. Nor did I know any of their specific proposals. Since I received no direct contact, I had to actively research them myself on Ecuador's national electoral website. Their platforms reflected recurring themes: facilitating remittances, making it easier for expatriates to invest in Ecuador and improving consular services.

This election also made me reflect on how Ecuadorian political parties have long recognized the importance of emigrant voters. Parties in all countries have now begun to operate with the clear understanding that the expatriate population is an important electoral constituency – something that is also actively discussed in the academic literature.

The ritual of voting from afar

On election day, I decided to cook an Ecuadorian breakfast. It was my small attempt to replicate the rituals of voting in Ecuador. Back home, it's common for families or friends to go to the polls together and share a meal before or after voting.

I arrived at the polling station, but it took me some time to find the exact location. The actual voting process, however, was over in less than ten minutes. I had studied the candidates beforehand. I knew that I would receive four ballots – one for president and vice president, one for national representatives, one for emigrant representatives, and one for the Andean Parliament. I turned in my passport, received my ballots, marked my votes, and that was it.



While in Ecuador long lines at the polls are the norm, here I barely had time to process the moment before it was over. Before I left, I chatted with someone from the Ecuadorian embassy. They told me that the number of Ecuadorians registered in the Bonn area was growing rapidly. They were expecting about 140 people to vote that day. If they reached 200, it would be considered an unprecedented success.

During those few minutes, I watched whole families enter the polling station, including parents with small children, groups of young people, and people like me, alone.

Belonging and distance

Some scholars argue that voting from abroad is a symbolic act of belonging. Many of the people I interviewed for my dissertation expressed this sentiment as well – voting is a way to reaffirm that they are still part of the country. And indeed, I felt it. For a few minutes, I was „in Ecuador“. I was voting in Ecuadorian elections, surrounded by other Ecuadorians, speaking my native language.

It felt almost surreal – to step out of that small room, so deeply Ecuadorian, and into the very German environment outside. Knowing that the people walking by had no idea what had just happened inside these four walls. A parallel reality.

But at the same time, this experience made it painfully clear that I was far from home. For example, when I returned to Cologne, the polls had just opened in Ecuador. The rituals of voting with my family were also missing. Likewise, in Ecuador, crowded polling stations are surrounded by street vendors selling food, drinks, and services-like laminating the small voting certificate that every citizen receives. This document is crucial because voting is compulsory in Ecuador, and proof of voting is required for dozens of procedures, such as opening a bank account or applying for a loan. Of course, none of these vendors were outside the polling station in Bonn. Most importantly, I would not get the results at the same time as people in Ecuador – unless I decided to stay up all night.



This experience bridged my personal and academic worlds, strengthening both my Ecuadorian identity and my understanding of transnational political engagement. It gave new depth to the literature I work with, turning sometimes abstract discussions into tangible realities. And these reflections are not over – because no candidate received more than 50% of the vote, Ecuador will hold a runoff election in April. Soon I will be voting again from abroad.

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