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## Migrants' remittances and economic voting in the Mexican countryside



Roy Germano

P.O. Box 3736, New York, NY 10163-3736, USA

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### ABSTRACT

This study advances and tests hypotheses about the effects of migrants' remittances on political behavior. Analyzing new survey data from Mexico, I find that despite being very poor, respondents who receive remittances tend to view their income as more stable than neighbors who do not receive this money. As a result, remittance recipients have relatively fewer economic grievances and tend to feel more optimistic about economic matters than neighbors who do not receive remittances. According to the economic voter thesis, citizens who are more satisfied with the economy are also less likely to pressure and oppose politicians, particularly incumbents. Analyses indicate that respondents in this sample who receive remittances are indeed less likely to lobby local officials for economic assistance. They were also less likely to mobilize against and punish the incumbent party in the 2006 Mexican presidential election.

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### 1. Introduction

Totalling at least \$22 billion annually, the money that Mexicans abroad send home to family members and friends has become a leading source of foreign exchange for Mexico, second only to oil revenues (World Bank, 2013). Not surprisingly, the Mexican government has gone to greater lengths to engage the emigrant community since migrants' remittances began to surge in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Iskander, 2010). After decades of neglect, Mexican politicians now refer to migrants as heroes and speak of remittances as if they were manna from heaven (Martínez-Saldaña, 2003). In speeches, they pledge to pressure banks and companies like Western Union to reduce the fees they charge for international wire transfers.<sup>1</sup> They have created an impressive recordkeeping system that measures remittance inflows more accurately than ever (Cañas et al., 2007;

Orozco, 2002). And they have endeavored to keep expatriates attentive to Mexico's economic needs through an array of policy initiatives, including dual citizenship rights, overseas voting rights, a remittances matching funds program, and state institutions that attend to migrant affairs (Goldring, 2002; Iskander, 2010).

When I asked a high-ranking official at the Ministry of Rural Development in Michoacán, Mexico what he thinks would happen if the flow of remittances suddenly stopped, he was strikingly open and to the point. 'It would be a very complicated situation for us,' he said with a hint of regret (Author Interview, April 2008). A middle-aged corn farmer, whom I interviewed in a rural Mexican town, seemed to agree. 'Remittances are what sustain the people here,' he explained as we chatted in his field. 'If money wasn't coming in from the US, I don't know [what would happen], people would have to find a way. Do like they did in the old days: start another revolution? That's why the government wants us to migrate.' (Germano, 2010). A cattle rancher I spoke with argued that remittances have made people in his town less inclined to hold politicians' feet to the fire. 'We don't depend on the government,' he told me. 'We depend more directly on our brothers in the United States,

E-mail address: [rg@roygermano.com](mailto:rg@roygermano.com).

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., 'Illegal Immigrants Wiring Money Have an Amigo: the Fed' (*Los Angeles Times*, 27 Feb 2007), 'U.S. Banks Woo Migrants, Legal or Otherwise' (*Wall Street Journal*, 11 Oct 2006), and 'Mexico Seeks Lower Fees On Funds Sent From U.S.' (*New York Times*, 3 March 2001).

so we aren't so concerned with what our government officials do and don't do' (Germano, 2010).

Is there anything systematic about these statements? Do remittances translate into less pressure on politicians and government officials? Early evidence from Goodman and Hiskey (2008) suggests that they do. While data limitations prevented tests of the direct impact of remittances on political behavior, Goodman and Hiskey found that Mexicans who live in municipalities with high levels of outmigration tend to be less politically engaged than the average Mexican citizen. Their explanation for this finding is that formal political institutions lose their appeal when citizens are able to meet their economic needs more effectively by engaging with the Mexican diaspora. Just as the cattle rancher told me, what is the point in turning to a slow, bureaucratic political system when one is able to count on family members abroad to help them make ends meet?

This article argues that we can further refine our thinking about remittances' effects on political behavior by looking through the lens of the economic voter thesis. A vast literature on Mexican voting behavior and public opinion shows that Mexicans tend to behave as economic voters, punishing incumbents in bad economic times and rewarding them when economic conditions are stable or improving (Buendía Laredo, 2001; Singer, 2009; Greene, 2009; Poiré, 1999; Magaloni and Poiré, 2004; Buendía, 1996). Mexican politicians, in other words, tend to face less pressure when households experience or expect fewer disruptions to consumption. In general, households are less sensitive to economic vicissitudes when they have access to a safety net. Many studies therefore indicate that subsidies, social welfare programs, and other social safety nets can help politicians maintain public support or avoid political punishment (Cameron, 1978; Katzenstein, 1985; Rodrik, 1998; Pacek and Radcliff, 1995; Hays et al., 2005; Eloy Aguilar and Pacek, 2000; Radcliff, 1992).

I argue that something similar occurs when households receive remittances. Remittances essentially function as a private safety net for millions of poor households in Mexico and other developing countries. Like social welfare benefits, they are compensatory transfers that come with no expectation of repayment (Johnson and Whitelaw, 1974; Lucas and Stark, 1985; Chami et al., 2005). They tend to increase when economic crisis strikes in migrants' homelands, insulating recipients from the pain of macroeconomic shocks, foreign competition, droughts, hurricanes, and life-course risks (Kapur, 2005; Ratha, 2003; Lucas and Stark, 1985; Gubert, 2002; Yang and Choi, 2007; Clarke and Wallsten, 2003). Remittances are also relatively stable, even when times are tough for those sending money home. As a consequence of the global financial crisis, for instance, foreign direct investment to developing countries dropped by about 36% between 2008 and 2009 and only recovered to 80% of its 2008 level by 2010. Remittances, on the other hand, only dropped off by 6% and recovered to 99% of their 2008 level by 2010 (World Bank, 2013). Finally, study after study throughout the developing world shows that households generally use remittances to fund the most basic goods and services (see e.g., Massey et al., 1998: 257–62). Eighty-six percent of the nearly \$27 billion

remitted to Mexico in 2007, for example, was ultimately spent on food, clothing, shelter, and healthcare, with another 6.3% spent on expenses related to education (Banco de México, 2007: 17).

When remittances are a significant, reliable, and enduring household safety net, individuals will be less sensitive to economic vicissitudes and experience fewer disruptions to their consumption. Remittance recipients (even those living in very poor communities) should therefore have fewer economic grievances than neighbors who do not receive this money. All else equal, then, politicians should expect relatively less pressure from their remittance-receiving constituents in day-to-day governing and less opposition from them on election day. In this regard, the political disengagement that Goodman and Hiskey (2008) observed in high-emigration communities may be little more than the logic of economic voting at work.

The remainder of this article explores the effects of remittances on economic stability and political behavior using new survey data that I collected from a sample of 767 households in the Mexican state of Michoacán. Before presenting my analyses and findings, a brief discussion about measurement and methodology is necessary.

## 2. Measuring remittances

What does it mean to be a remittance recipient? Is receiving remittances an either-or proposition? If not, how do we go beyond a dichotomous measure to account for variation among those who receive this money?

Individual-level data are needed to investigate the effects of remittances on individuals' economic assessments and political behavior. Available survey datasets, however, do not permit the development of a very nuanced measure of what it means to be a remittance recipient. When public opinion surveys include questions about remittances, they generally ask the following: (1) 'Do you or anyone in this household receive money from a family member or friend who is working in the United States?' (2) 'How much money does the household receive from a family member or friend who is working in the United States?' Responses to the first question can be used to create a dummy variable that identifies respondents who receive any amount of money from a family member abroad. Responses to the second question can be used to create a categorical or continuous variable that, with varying degrees of precision, measures respondents' remittance income in arbitrary increments or currency units.

Among other drawbacks, the most critical problem with these measures is that they do not tell us anything about remittances' significance as a safety net to the household. This point is best illustrated with an example. Imagine that two households reported \$1200 last year in remittance income. Household A, however, has only received remittances for one year and transfers were somewhat unpredictable: \$100 arrived in February, another \$400 was sent in October, and finally \$700 was sent in December as a Christmas gift. Household B, on the other hand, has consistently received \$100 every month from a family member in the US for the past ten years. Furthermore, imagine that Household A and Household B have

domestically-earned incomes of \$12,000 per year and \$3600 per year, respectively.

These two households appear indistinguishable if we only observe their annual income from remittances. But it is not difficult to imagine that the implications of the \$1200 each of these households receives are very different once we take a closer look at the degree to which remittances are a *substantial, reliable, and enduring* form of income to each. For Household A, remittances are a new and occasional gift that amounts to only one-tenth of regular income. For Household B, remittances have been a significant and dependable income supplement that has helped to soften the blow of poverty for a decade. If remittances have any impact on economic assessments and political behavior, it seems they would have a much more significant impact on the members of Household B. It is therefore necessary to develop a variable that measures remittances' significance as a form of social insurance so that we may observe difference between households like these.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. The Remittances Index (RI)

Developing this more nuanced and sophisticated measure of what it means to be a remittance recipient required the collection of original survey data. The dataset used in this article comes from a face-to-face survey of 767 households. The survey was conducted during the month of January 2008 in ten rural communities in the Mexican state of Michoacán. The sampling strategy was largely motivated by our desire to interview a significant number of remittance recipients on a small budget. To achieve this goal, we followed the example set by the Mexican Migration Project (MMP), a well-respected survey directed by Douglas Massey of Princeton, by selecting households from communities with high rates of out-migration in a single state.<sup>3</sup> Besides being one of Mexico's most significant labor-exporting states, Michoacán was selected for logistical rather than theoretical reasons. The probability proportionate to size method was used to randomly select ten communities in Michoacán that are known to have high rates of emigration to the US.<sup>4</sup> The communities that were

selected had populations ranging from 200 to 10,000 people. A team of Mexican interviewers, supervised by the author and a field coordinator from the Mexican Migration Project, then drew maps of every block in each of the ten communities in order to obtain the most accurate count of households. From these censuses, 767 households were chosen by simple random selection, with the number of interviews per community determined by each community's relative size and the total number of interviews determined by our project budget. Interviews were conducted face-to-face with a randomly-selected adult member of the household. The response rate was 79.44%.

To measure remittances, the survey asked respondents whether or not they currently receive money from a family member or friend abroad and used open-ended questions to ask for the specific amount sent and the frequency with which this amount is normally transferred, giving respondents the option of reporting in US dollars or Mexican pesos. The survey also asked three questions to measure the extent to which remittances are a *substantial, reliable, and enduring* source of income to the household. First, respondents were asked to think about and compare remittances to total household income. If respondents reported that remittance income was 'small' compared to normal income, they received a score of 1. If remittances were reported to be an 'intermediate' or 'substantial' share of normal income, scores of 2 or 3, respectively, were assigned.<sup>5</sup>

Second, respondents were asked to report the degree to which they could count on migrants to send money home. A score of 1 was assigned when respondents reported that remittances were 'only sometimes sent' in times of need, a score of 2 if remittances were 'almost always sent when needed,' and a score of 3 if remittances were 'always sent when needed.' This question was developed to understand respondents' feelings about migrant members' attentiveness to the economic needs of the household and therefore obtain a measure of the *reliability* of remittances as a household safety net. Finally, respondents were asked to report the number of years their household has consistently received remittances. The actual number of years was recorded. This question measures the degree to which remittances have been a temporary or *enduring* source of social insurance to the household.

Scores on these three measures were used to create the *Remittances Index (RI)*. The *RI* was constructed by first assigning a score of 0 on each of the three component variables to respondents who did not receive remittances at the time of the survey ( $n = 505$ ). Then, for those who reported receiving remittances ( $n = 262$ ), scores on

<sup>2</sup> Although most remittances flow directly to households, a small proportion is pooled and invested in community development and beautification projects—see Iskander (2010). Since 2004, the Mexican government has attempted to leverage these collective remittances through a national matching funds program called the Three for One Program for Migrants (or "3 × 1," as the program is commonly known). The survey this article is based on asked respondents about participation in 3 × 1 in hopes that we might be able to ascertain any effects of collective remittances on political behavior. We found, however, that only one of the respondents we interviewed had ever had any contact with the 3 × 1 program. Therefore, this article focuses only on the individual level effects of remittances sent to households, not those sent for collective uses.

<sup>3</sup> The Mexican Migration Project (MMP) has been conducted annually since 1982 by Douglas S. Massey of Princeton University and Jorge Durand of the Universidad de Guadalajara. The author worked on the MMP's January 2007 field study in Morelos, Mexico in preparation for this survey. For more information about the MMP, see <http://www.mmp.opr.princeton.edu>.

<sup>4</sup> See CONAPO, 2002 and CONAPO, 2012 for lists of Mexican municipalities and their level of emigration intensity.

<sup>5</sup> After being immersed in the field with the Mexican Migration Project and my own field team, I am convinced that asking respondents to make a quick assessment about whether remittances are a small, medium, or substantial share of total income is more reliable than using reports of remittances and domestically-earned income to make this calculation after the fact. This approach (1) saves respondents from having to recall specific financial information that they may not know offhand; (2) is much less invasive; and (3) makes it clear to the respondent that their income from remittances should be distinguished from their other income sources.

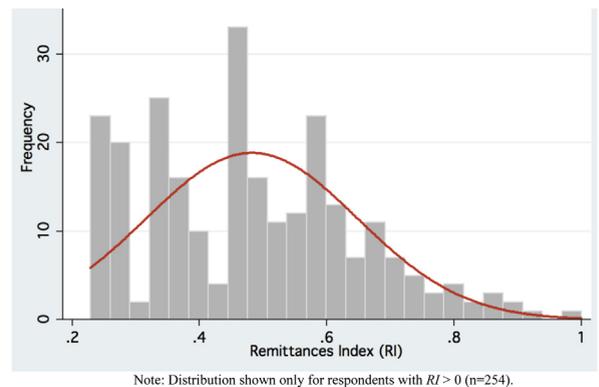
questions about the degree to which remittances are a relatively substantial, reliable, and enduring source of income were combined. So that all three variables carried equal weight, the number of years a household reported receiving remittances was divided by a constant to adapt the series to a three-point scale. The three measures were then summed and divided by nine to create a continuous index that ranges from 0 to 1.<sup>6</sup>

Summary statistics for the *Remittances Index (RI)* and all other variables used in this article are provided in the [Appendix](#) and a frequency distribution for all respondents receiving an *RI* score greater than 0 is presented in [Fig. 1](#). Without sacrificing parsimony, the *RI* provides a much richer and more nuanced measure of what it means to receive remittances than a simple dichotomous variable or continuous data on total dollar amounts in that it provides us with a continuum for understanding the degree to which remittances are a *substantial*, *reliable*, and *enduring* source of income to the respondent. I believe these three variables capture remittances' significance as a household safety net better than a dichotomous variable or continuous data on annual amounts received. In the remainder of this article I use the *Remittances Index (RI)* to analyze the effects of remittances on political behavior.

#### 4. The effects of remittances on income stability, economic grievances, and economic outlooks

Poverty and economic risk are a way of life in the communities we surveyed. Remittance recipients and non-recipients in these communities live on an average of \$4.07 and \$3.16 per day, respectively. Nearly half of households in these towns rely on small-scale agriculture as their primary income source, with 90% of farmers producing grains on an average of seven acres of rain-fed land. Their low yields, lack of capital, and antiquated technologies make them particularly vulnerable to poverty and risk. Most non-agricultural households depend on revenue from family-owned retail stores, domestic services, public services, construction, small-scale manufacturing, and crafts. Seventy-four percent of respondents said that they consider their income either 'somewhat unstable' or 'very unstable.'

<sup>6</sup> To test the validity of the *RI*, I compared it and its component parts to similar constructs. I find statistically significant correlations in the correct directions, which suggest that the *RI* is indeed measuring the constructs that we are interested in. First, I find that the correlation between the *RI* and a continuous variable measuring households' annual income from remittances is 0.6452 (statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ ). Respondents' answers about whether remittance income was a small, medium, or substantial when compared to domestically-earned income was strongly and positively correlated with a variable that divided annual income from remittances by total household income ( $r = 0.7160$ , statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ ). Reports about the reliability of remittances as a source of social insurance is strongly and positively correlated with data collected on a very objective question about whether migrants remit once a week, once a month, once every two months, etc. ( $r = 0.6615$ , statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ ). Data on this question, on the other hand, is not correlated with self-reported levels of income stability ( $r = 0.0751$ , not statistically significant). The implication, then, is that this variable is more effectively measuring the degree to which migrants are attentive to the household's needs, not how needy the household is in general.



**Fig. 1.** Frequency distribution: Remittances Index (*RI*). Note: Distribution shown only for respondents with  $RI > 0$  ( $n = 254$ ).

I expect that remittances make some households less vulnerable to economic shocks. When remittances are a more significant safety net, families should enjoy greater financial stability, have fewer economic grievances, and feel more optimistic about their financial circumstances and the health of the economy. According to the economic voter thesis, citizens with these characteristics are less likely to make claims on the state and less likely to mobilize against and punish incumbents.

In the first place, do remittances contribute to greater financial stability and make individuals feel less vulnerable to economic crisis? To explore this question, I regressed a measure of respondents' perceived *Income Stability* on the *Remittances Index (RI)*. To measure perceptions of *Income Stability*, the survey asked the following question: 'Income is considered stable if you can trust that it will be the same or nearly the same month-to-month or year-to-year. Income is considered unstable if it changes frequently and is difficult to predict month-to-month or year-to-year. Would you consider this household's income to be very unstable (=0), somewhat unstable (=1), neither stable nor unstable (=2), somewhat stable (=3), or very stable (=4)?' (Numerical scores for each potential response are in parentheses.)

My analysis controls for a number of factors. First, I expect citizens who have access to the health insurance and pensions from government institutions like the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) and the Institute for Social Security and Services for State Workers (ISSSTE) to characterize their incomes as more stable since coverage helps to insulate them from economic shocks and life-course risks. The *IMSS* and *ISSSTE* variables measure the share of household members who participate in and benefit from these programs. I also expect wealthier households to be less vulnerable to economic shocks and therefore more likely to report 'stable' or 'very stable' incomes. The *Income* variable is a continuous variable measuring households' income from local labor activities. Households that rely on agricultural production, on the other hand, should be particularly vulnerable to market vicissitudes and thus view their income as less stable. *Farmer* is a dichotomous variable that distinguishes respondents from households whose incomes come primarily from agriculture (=1) and those whose incomes come from some other type of work (=0).

Results from an ordered probit analysis are presented in Table 1. As the *RI* increases in magnitude—i.e., as remittances become a more significant household safety net—respondents become more likely to report ‘stable’ or ‘very stable’ incomes. Signs and levels of statistical significance on the other independent variables lend credibility to this finding. *Income Stability*, for instance, is positively correlated with *Income* and more extensive coverage from *IMSS* or *ISSSTE*. *Income Stability* is furthermore negatively correlated with dependence on agriculture, as predicted.

Because they are less sensitive to adverse economic change, remittance recipients should have fewer economic grievances compared to neighbors who do not receive remittances. Since we collected data in very impoverished areas, it is not surprising that the majority of respondents (68%) cited some economic issue like unemployment, poverty, or inflation as ‘the most important problem facing Mexico today.’ In second place, one-fifth of respondents cited a domestic security issue like organized crime, drug cartel violence, or kidnappings as Mexico’s biggest problem. The remaining 12% claimed to be most dissatisfied with an array of other problems, like political corruption, the educational system, and pollution.<sup>7</sup> If remittance recipients have fewer economic grievances, they should be less inclined to identify an economic issue as the most important problem facing the country. Results from binomial logit analyses presented in Table 2 confirm this prediction, indicating that respondents were less concerned about economic issues when remittances are a more substantial, reliable, and enduring source of income.

Because they are less sensitive to economic adversity and have fewer economic grievances, I expect respondents with higher *RI* scores to also make more positive *Pocketbook* assessments and *Sociotropic* assessments, both retrospectively and prospectively (Stokes, 2001). The survey collected data on pocketbook and sociotropic assessments by asking respondents to report the extent to which their personal economic situation and the national economy had greatly worsened (=0), worsened somewhat (=1), stayed the same (=2), improved somewhat (=3), or greatly improved (=4) over the previous five years. Similarly, the survey asked respondents to report the extent to which they expected their personal economic situation and the national economy to greatly worsen (=0), worsen somewhat (=1), stay the same (=2), improve somewhat (=3), or improve greatly (=4) over the next five years. Ordered probit results presented in Table 3 indicate that respondents tend to be more optimistic about their financial circumstances and the state of the national economy as remittances become a more significant source of social insurance to the household, controlling for relevant demographic and economic factors.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that this survey was conducted in January 2008, before drug cartel violence escalated in Michoacán and the rest of Mexico.

<sup>8</sup> Similar results (not reported due to space constraints) were obtained in analyses that included *Income Stability* as the key independent variable in place of the *RI*. Respondents who enjoy a higher level of income stability, in other words, tend to be more optimistic about their financial circumstances and the state of the national economy.

**Table 1**

Determinants of income stability among respondents (Ordered Probit).

Dependent Variable	Income stability
<i>RI</i>	0.6245*** (0.1952)
<i>IMSS</i>	0.6980*** (0.1596)
<i>ISSSTE</i>	1.1206*** (0.3138)
<i>Farmer</i>	−0.2805*** (0.0895)
<i>Income</i> (log)	0.05337*** (0.0138)
<i>N</i>	749

Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

## 5. The effects of remittances on political behavior

My analyses to this point suggest that the safety net provided by Mexicans abroad helps insulate some households from economic adversity. As a result, members of remittance-receiving households tend to have fewer economic grievances and tend to be more optimistic about their financial situations and the state of the national economy. According to the economic voter thesis, politicians and government officials should face less pressure and opposition when citizens are more satisfied with the economy. When fewer citizens have economic grievances to express, the state will have fewer petitions, complaints, and requests to process. When more citizens are satisfied with their economic situation and optimistic about the future, fewer will be motivated to mobilize against and punish those in power for a poor economy. As remittances become a more significant form of social insurance to households, politicians and government officials should come under less pressure on a day-to-day basis and the incumbent party should face less opposition from voters in elections.

Although rare in developed countries, it is common for the economically aggrieved in small Mexican communities to line up at their town hall to express dissatisfaction with their economic situation, inquire about social programs and subsidies, and request the help of government officials. In an attempt to measure public pressure on sitting politicians and government officials, the survey asked respondents whether (=1) or not (=0) they have ever approached a local official to personally lobby or apply for ‘aid, funds, or economic cooperation from the Mexican government.’ Results from a binomial logit analysis presented in Table 4 show that respondents with higher *RI* scores were less likely to apply this kind of pressure on their officials than neighbors who do not receive remittances. Insured by their family members abroad, in other words, remittance recipients are less likely to politicize economic grievances, thus reducing the volume of demands that politicians and government officials must attend to.

Do the effects of remittances on income stability, economic grievances, and economic optimism translate into systematic voting patterns? Are remittance recipients less likely to mobilize against and oppose incumbents in elections? I explore these questions by analyzing survey respondents’ reported turnout and vote choice in the 2006 Mexican presidential election. The frontrunners going into this election were Andrés Manuel López

**Table 2**

Likelihood a respondent reported an economic issue when asked to identify 'the most important problem facing Mexico' (Binomial Logit).

Dependent variable	Economy as most important problem
<i>RI</i>	−1.1797*** (0.3816)
<i>Income</i> (log)	−0.01613 (0.0223)
<i>Age</i>	0.0005761 (0.0064)
<i>Female</i>	−0.4153** (0.1834)
<i>Education</i>	0.05196* (0.0285)
<i>Farmer</i>	0.3856** (0.1755)
<i>Constant</i>	0.6282 (0.4632)
<i>N</i>	759

Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Obrador of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and Felipe Calderón of the incumbent National Action Party (PAN). These candidates proposed two very different visions of Mexico's economic future (Bruhn and Greene, 2007). On the right, Calderón called for a continuation of the market-oriented approaches that his party had pursued and deepened since winning power from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 2000. On the left, López Obrador called for more social spending and wage increases to help Mexico's poor, favored tariffs on grain and bean imports to protect Mexico's most vulnerable farmers from American competition, and opposed the PAN's proposal to privatize PEMEX, the national oil company—all popular proposals in the impoverished communities where the survey was applied (see Fig. 2). Trailing Calderón and López Obrador was Roberto Madrazo of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), who ran on a more centrist platform that was both critical of neoliberalism and supportive of the PAN's proposal to privatize PEMEX.

López Obrador's populist message earned him a healthy lead over Calderón and Madrazo in polls conducted during the winter and spring of 2006. As the

campaign wore on, however, Calderón began to gain on López Obrador, in part due to a negative ad campaign that portrayed López Obrador and his economic proposals as 'a danger to Mexico.' Comparing him to Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, the ads argued that López Obrador was a populist demagogue whose statist approaches and attempts to redistribute wealth would repel investors and cause an economic crisis. Calderón argued that voters knew what to expect from the PAN and that they were taking a significant risk by electing López Obrador and the PRD (Moreno, 2007; Singer, 2009).

Although the presidential election of July 2, 2006 was initially too close to call, Calderón led the preliminary results with a razor-thin advantage over López Obrador. López Obrador accused the PAN of fraud and pressed for a recount. For weeks, López Obrador's supporters occupied Mexico City's central square and blocked traffic on the Paseo de la Reforma, a main thoroughfare. After a legal battle and partial recount that lasted through August 2006, the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary declared Calderón the winner by about 234,000 votes out of over 41 million cast. Although López Obrador continued to protest, the tribunal's ruling stood and Calderón was inaugurated on December 1, 2006.

Whether or not López Obrador's allegations of fraud have any validity, many factors played to Calderón's advantage. One factor that has yet to receive any attention is how remittances may have attenuated economic grievances and made poor voters more forgiving of the PAN. Throughout this article, I have argued that as remittances become a more significant household safety net, citizens should experience greater economic stability, have fewer economic grievances, and have a more optimistic economic outlook. Those who have access to insurance from a family member abroad may therefore see less reason to vote in an election because the relative absence of economic grievances makes them less motivated to mobilize against the incumbent (Lau, 1985; Weyland, 1998). If they do vote,

**Table 3**

Remittances as a key determinant of economic optimism (Ordered Probit).

Dependent variable	(1) Pocketbook (retrospective)	(2) Pocketbook (prospective)	(3) Pocketbook (prospective)	(4) Sociotropic (retrospective)	(5) Sociotropic (prospective)	(6) Sociotropic (prospective)
<i>RI</i>	0.3765* (0.2074)	0.5725*** (0.1739)	0.4456** (0.1916)	0.2318 (0.2108)	0.6672*** (0.1947)	0.4887** (0.2107)
<i>Income</i> (log)	−0.006458 (0.0123)	−0.0001441 (0.0121)	0.006294 (0.0125)	−0.01128 (0.0112)	−0.004819 (0.0131)	0.001663 (0.0133)
<i>Age</i>	−0.006686** (0.0028)	−0.01355*** (0.0032)	−0.01137*** (0.0034)	−0.002689 (0.0030)	−0.006695** (0.0032)	−0.004631 (0.0033)
<i>Female</i>	0.02187 (0.0900)	0.001148 (0.0936)	−0.03066 (0.0982)	0.01248 (0.0922)	−0.07135 (0.0924)	−0.1341 (0.0984)
<i>Education</i>	0.006089 (0.0116)	0.006870 (0.0143)	0.006548 (0.0148)	−0.007174 (0.0121)	−0.006333 (0.0130)	−0.006780 (0.0134)
<i>Pocketbook</i> (retrospective)			0.3415*** (0.0652)			0.1961*** (0.0636)
<i>Sociotropic</i> (retrospective)			0.2631*** (0.0535)			0.4811*** (0.0608)
<i>N</i>	754	681	649	720	668	642

Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Table 4**

Likelihood a respondent has attempted to solve an economic problem by asking for 'aid, funds, or cooperation from the Mexican government' (Binomial Logit).

Dependent variable	Have asked for government aid
<i>RI</i>	-1.6569*** (0.4901)
<i>Income (log)</i>	-0.05323** (0.0242)
<i>Age</i>	0.007605 (0.0083)
<i>Female</i>	0.4818** (0.2247)
<i>Education</i>	-0.07522* (0.0408)
<i>Constant</i>	-1.1543** (0.5791)
<i>N</i>	757

Standard errors in parentheses.  
\**p* < 0.10, \*\**p* < 0.05, \*\*\**p* < 0.01.

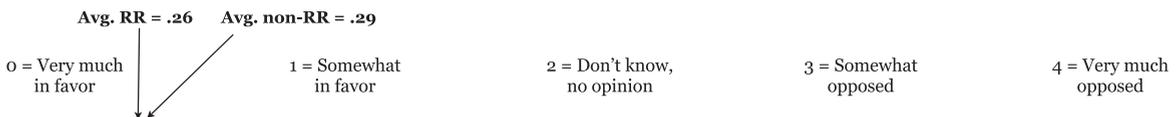
remittance recipients should be less inclined to punish the incumbent with a vote for the opposition since they are more satisfied with the economy.

To explore the voter turnout hypothesis, I ran a binomial logit analysis, where the dependent variable distinguished respondents who reported casting a ballot in the 2006 Mexican election (=1) from respondents who reported staying home on election day (=0). The key independent variable is the *RI*, which I expect to be negatively

correlated with the dependent variable. A shortcoming of this analysis and the vote choice analysis that follows is that my survey was applied about eighteen months after the 2006 presidential election. I have attempted to compensate for this timing issue by subtracting eighteen months from the component of the *RI* that measures how long respondents have received remittances. Moreover, any respondent who reported receiving remittances for eighteen months or less received a score of zero on the *RI*. Since the survey only collected data on the three components of the *RI* for families that received remittances at the time of the survey, twenty-one respondents who received remittances in 2006 unfortunately do not have an *RI* score. These twenty-one respondents must be treated as missing values in the remaining analyses since no *RI* data is available.

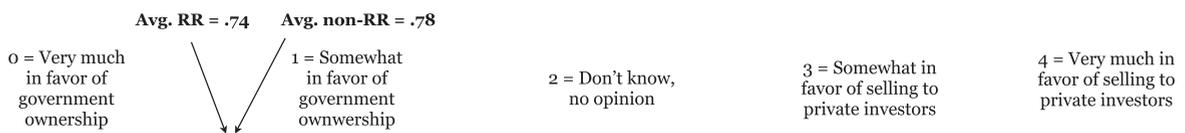
My model controls for the following variables. First, Mexicans become more likely to vote as *Age*, *Education*, and *Income* increase (Powell, 1986; Klesner and Lawson, 2001). Additionally, Mexicans who are registered to vote (*Registered*) and who have greater interest in politics (*Political Interest*) should be more likely to vote (Klesner and Lawson, 2001), while respondents who claim not to identify with a political party should be less likely to vote (*No Party ID*)

**(a) Government Spending**



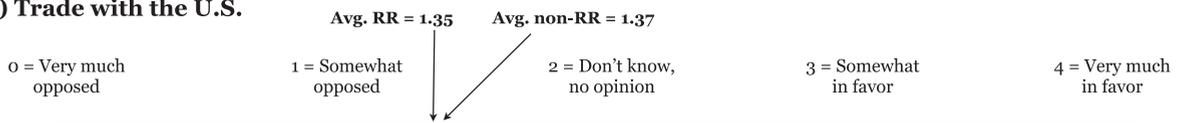
QUESTION: "There is currently a debate about government spending. Some politicians say that the government should spend more on subsidies and social benefits to help farmers. Other politicians say that it is a mistake to spend more because it lowers economic competitiveness. How do you feel? Are you in favor or opposed to expanding programs that subsidize farmers?"

**(b) Privatization**



QUESTION: "There is a debate between politicians who want to sell all or some of PEMEX to private investors and politicians who believe that PEMEX should remain a government company. Do you believe the government should sell PEMEX to private investors or do you believe that PEMEX should remain a government company?"

**(c) Trade with the U.S.**



QUESTION: "During the past 15 years, the governments of Mexico and the United States have fostered more trade between our two countries. Some Mexicans are in favor of free trade because it brings new products from the US. Other Mexicans are opposed to free trade because US competition can sometimes result in lower wages for Mexican producers. How do you feel? Are you in favor or opposed to free trade with the US?"



**Fig. 2.** Average positions of respondents who receive remittances (RRs) and respondents who do not receive remittances (non-RRs) were much closer to the PRD on major economic issues.

(Powell, 1986).<sup>9</sup> Results presented in Table 5 support the hypothesis that citizens become less likely to vote when remittances are a more substantial, reliable, and enduring source of income to their household. The simulations presented in Table 6 indicate that the effect of remittances is not only of statistical significance, but also of great substantive significance. Among registered male voters, for instance, the probability of voting decreased by 15% as the *RI* increased from its minimum value to its maximum value.

I have argued that remittance recipients will be less likely to turn out to vote because they are less motivated to mobilize against the incumbent for poor economic performance. In this respect, I expect that citizens who receive remittances tend to stay at home primarily at the expense of the opposition. If they do vote, their relative lack of economic grievances and more optimistic economic outlook should leave them less motivated to punish the incumbent party with a vote for the opposition. To explore these hypotheses, I ran a multinomial logistic regression where the dependent variable is a respondent's self-reported vote choice in the 2006 election. My model treats the voting decision as a choice between Calderón of the PAN, López Obrador of the PRD, Madrazo of the PRI, or an abstention. Statistical results are very similar when only the three major party candidates are included as choices. I present only the model where an abstention was included as a fourth choice for clarity of presentation and discussion.

In all models, the key independent variable is the *RI*. Again, the *RI* was recoded to reflect the fact that the data was collected eighteen months after the election. I expect that as remittances become a more substantial, reliable, and enduring source of household income, citizens will be less likely to punish the incumbent (the PAN candidate) with a vote for either of the major opposition parties (the PRD and PRI candidates). I furthermore expect that the reduction in voter turnout that results as a consequence of remittances will come at the expense of opposition candidates, as having fewer economic grievances means that more voters will stay home when they may have otherwise mobilized to punish the incumbent with a vote for the opposition.

My model controls for factors that previous studies on vote choice in Mexico have shown to be important: demographic factors (*Age*, *Education*, *Income*, *Female*); party identification (*PAN Party ID*, *PRI Party ID*, *PRD Party ID*); approval of the job done by outgoing president Vicente Fox, a member of the PAN (*Approval of Fox*); approval of the job done by Lázaro Cárdenas Batel, a member of the PRD who served as governor of Michoacán between 2002 and 2008 (*Approval of Gov*); and voters' retrospective and prospective assessments of the economy (*Pocketbook*, *Sociotropic*). Baker (2009) furthermore argues that Mexicans' immediate social environments affect vote choice. Community-level

<sup>9</sup> Citizens who had a valid voting credential at the time of the survey (and who were thus very likely to have been registered at the time of the 2006 election) received a score of '1' on the *Registered* variable, while those who did not received a score of '0.' The *Political Interest* variable is the survey interviewer's assessment of the respondent's interest in politics. The variable measures whether the respondent seemed to have no interest in politics (=0), very little interest (=1), some interest (=2), or a lot of interest (=3).

**Table 5**

Likelihood a respondent voted in the 2006 presidential election (Binomial Logit).

Dependent variable	Voted in 2006 election
<i>RI</i>	-0.9094** (0.4560)
<i>Income</i> (log)	0.0379 (0.0238)
<i>Age</i>	0.0405*** (0.0073)
<i>Female</i>	0.323 (0.199)
<i>Education</i>	0.091*** (0.0268)
<i>Registered</i>	1.1409*** (0.3439)
<i>Political Interest</i>	0.4654*** (0.1051)
<i>No Party ID</i>	-0.5973*** (0.1985)
<i>Constant</i>	-3.341*** (0.5636)
<i>N</i>	738

Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

influences should be particularly pronounced in the kinds of isolated, rural villages and towns where I collected this data. I control for local influences by including dummy variables that distinguish respondents from each of the ten communities where the survey was applied. Prior work on Mexican voting behavior has also emphasized the importance of campaign effects (Domínguez and Lawson, 2004). Specifically, voters' perceptions of candidates' character and competency (Greene, 2009) and exposure to media and television news (Lawson and McCann, 2005) appear to have been important factors in Mexico's 2000 and 2006 presidential elections. Unfortunately my survey did not ask respondents about their impressions of candidates' traits or their exposure to campaign ads or television news. As a result, these factors could not be controlled for in my analysis.

Table 7 presents results from the vote choice model. The first party listed in each statistical matchup is the base category. Observe in Column 1 and Column 2 that voters were more likely to vote for the incumbent PAN over the PRD or the PRI as their score on the *RI* increased. In addition, Column 3 shows that respondents were more likely to stay home on election day than turn out for the PRD. Remittances may have therefore benefited Calderón and the PAN in two respects. First, voters who may have been compelled to punish the PAN with a vote for the PRD did not mobilize because remittances made them less sensitive to economic adversity and left them with fewer economic grievances, therefore advantaging the incumbent party indirectly. Second, among those who went to the polls, remittances may have discouraged citizens from punishing the PAN with a vote for the PRD or the PRI. With fewer economic grievances and a more optimistic economic outlook, remittance recipients may have seen less reason to support the economic policy changes that the PRD and, to a

**Table 6**

Simulated probability that a registered voter reported casting a ballot in the 2006 presidential election, by gender and the *RI*. All other variables held at their means.

	Males	Females
<i>RI</i> = 0	0.68	0.75
<i>RI</i> = 0.41	0.62	0.7
<i>RI</i> = 1	0.53	0.61

Note: Among remittance recipients, 0.41 is the mean value of the *RI*.

**Table 7**

Determinants of vote choice in the 2006 presidential election. Abstention included as a choice (Multinomial Logit).

Dependent variable	Note: First party listed below is the base category			
	(Column 1) PAN vs PRD	(Column 2) PAN vs PRI	(Column 3) PRD vs abstain	(Column 4) PRD vs PRI
<i>RI</i>	−2.941*** (0.8296)	−1.450** (0.7407)	2.260*** (0.7541)	1.491 (0.9288)
<i>Education</i>	−0.0755 (0.0503)	−0.2168*** (0.0621)	−0.1267*** (0.0434)	−0.1414*** (0.0637)
<i>Age</i>	0.0160 (0.0127)	−0.0180 (0.0164)	−0.0625*** (0.0118)	−0.034** (0.0169)
<i>Female</i>	−0.6274* (0.3536)	−0.5373 (0.4311)	0.1644 (0.3116)	0.0901 (0.4473)
<i>Income (log)</i>	−0.0874* (0.0494)	−0.0082 (0.0686)	0.0061 (0.0387)	0.0792 (0.0693)
<i>PAN Party ID</i>	−2.327*** (0.700)	−2.124*** (0.7676)	0.9282 (0.7583)	0.2027 (0.957)
<i>PRD Party ID</i>	3.368*** (0.5720)	0.8961 (0.8723)	−1.858*** (0.3595)	−2.472*** (0.7101)
<i>PRI Party ID</i>	−2.081* (1.095)	1.648*** (0.5138)	1.327 (1.205)	3.728*** (1.147)
<i>Approval of Fox</i>	−0.4912*** (0.1373)	−0.6121*** (0.1824)	0.1584 (0.128)	−0.121 (0.1907)
<i>Approval of Gov</i>	0.3474** (0.1482)	−0.1948 (0.1655)	−0.3931*** (0.1328)	−0.5420*** (0.1699)
<i>Pocketbook (retrospective)</i>	0.1437 (0.1947)	0.0209 (0.2486)	0.0927 (0.1823)	−0.1226 (0.2544)
<i>Pocketbook (prospective)</i>	0.266 (0.2307)	−0.0060 (0.2489)	−0.2483 (0.1993)	0.2720 (0.2547)
<i>Sociotropic (retrospective)</i>	−0.5875*** (0.2027)	−0.0017 (0.1903)	0.5621*** (0.1863)	0.5858*** (0.2217)
<i>Sociotropic (prospective)</i>	−0.0852 (0.1784)	0.0203 (0.2355)	0.0606 (0.1648)	0.1055 (0.2404)
<i>Constant</i>	0.2348 (1.3097)	3.4645** (1.459)	4.572*** (1.222)	3.23** (1.629)
<i>N</i>	540	540	540	540

Standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < 0.10$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Community-level dummies included in regressions but not reported to save space.

lesser extent, the PRI were proposing, thus benefiting the incumbent party directly. It is also important to note that the *RI* had no effect in the matchup between the PRD and the PRI (the fourth column), which further corroborates my argument that remittances benefit incumbents most.

To be sure that a few outlying cases were not dictating these results, I reran the analyses, treating respondents with extreme values on the *RI* ( $>0.75$ ) as missing values. Signs and levels of statistical significance on the coefficients remained the same. The signs and significance levels of control variables lend further credibility to these findings. Party identification is a consistently reliable predictor of one's vote choice in the expected direction. More educated respondents were more likely to turnout to vote. They were also more likely to vote for the PAN or the PRD over the discredited PRI. Logically, voters who approved of outgoing president Vicente Fox, a member of the PAN, were more likely to vote for the PAN over the PRD or the PRI, and voters who supported Governor Lázaro Cárdenas Batel, a member of the PRD, were more likely to vote for the PRD presidential candidate. Finally, voters who made more positive retrospective sociotropic assessments tended to reject the PRD in favor of the PAN, PRI, or an abstention. The logic here is that voters who looked back on the state of the economy in a favorable light also tended to support a continuation of the center-right proposals offered by the PAN and the PRI over the more social democratic or populist departure advocated by the PRD. Retrospective sociotropic assessments seemed to matter more to respondents than prospective sociotropic assessments and retrospective and prospective pocketbook assessments, a finding that has been reported elsewhere (Buendía Laredo, 2001; Magaloni and Poiré, 2004; Greene, 2009).

But might remittance recipients have voted for the PAN because they identified more with the party's usual positions on major issues? At least when analyzing respondents' positions on major economic issues, I find that the answer is very much to the contrary: as residents of rural communities that have largely suffered from market-oriented reforms,

both remittance recipients (RRs) and those who do not receive remittances (non-RRs) alike were overwhelmingly opposed to the PAN's positions on hotly debated economic issues like social spending, the privatization of PEMEX, and free trade with the United States (Fig. 2). Difference of means tests (not shown) indicate no statistically significant difference between RRs and non-RRs on these pressing economic debates. When it came to economic matters, then, RRs and non-RRs in these communities should have been heavily inclined to vote for López Obrador of the PRD, and to a lesser extent, Madrazo of the PRI. By virtue of being less sensitive to economic adversity and more optimistic about the economy, however, RRs appear to have been less motivated to punish the incumbent.

Clearly, my results in this section cannot suggest (and certainly do not prove) that remittances were the deciding factor in Calderón's 2006 victory. But taken in combination with my other findings—i.e., that remittances are associated with feelings of income stability, fewer economic grievances, and more optimistic economic assessments—I think these results provide interesting support for my claim that remittances make citizens less likely to mobilize against and punish incumbents for poor economic performance. Are these results generalizable to other parts of Mexico and other elections? At present, it is impossible to know because no other dataset that I am aware of allows us to develop the more nuanced concept of a remittance recipient that I developed in this article. For future research on this topic, public opinion surveys should include questions about how substantial remittances are compared to normal household income, how reliably household members abroad send money home, and how long respondents have consistently received remittances.

## 6. Conclusion

By conceptualizing remittances as a safety net that insulates poor households from economic instability, this study has advanced one of the first systematic explanations

about the distinctly political advantages of these critical monetary flows. Analyzing new survey data collected in ten communities in the countryside of Michoacán, Mexico, I found that despite still being very poor, respondents who receive remittances tend to view their income as more stable than neighbors who do not receive this money. As a result, remittance recipients appeared to have relatively fewer economic grievances and reported feeling more optimistic about their economic circumstances and the state of the Mexican economy. According to the economic voter thesis, citizens who are more satisfied with and optimistic about the economy are less likely to pressure and oppose politicians. Analyses of survey data indicated that respondents in this sample who receive remittances are indeed less likely to lobby local officials for economic assistance. It also appears that they were less likely to mobilize against and punish the incumbent party in the 2006 Mexican presidential election.

A drawback of this study is that funding constraints limited my survey to ten rural communities in Michoacán. To assess the generalizability of my findings, future research must explore the extent to which these relationships hold up in national and urban samples, in other regions of Mexico, in other parts of the developing world, and in other elections. In order to conduct suitable tests of the hypotheses advanced here, however, data on the extent to which remittances are a substantial, reliable, and enduring form of household income should be collected in order to measure this money's significance as a household safety net.

In addition to shedding light on the political effects of remittances, this study provides new direction to questions about how the governments of poor countries weather economic instability when public spending on safety nets is low or in decline. As a new material resource that reduces the pain of economic dislocations, remittances leave their recipients with fewer economic grievances. As a result, politicians are freed from the public opposition they may otherwise be forced to manage when the welfare state is weak or in decline. My theory and findings imply, in other words, that remittances could have comparable effects on political behavior and implications for political stability that other studies have credited to government spending on subsidies and social welfare benefits in wealthy countries. There is some risk here, however. Remittances may be bad for both democracy and economic development if they simply allow politicians to neglect the development needs of poor communities that have high rates of emigration.

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### Appendix. Summary statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max
Age	767	43	17.609	18	95
Approval of Fox	764	1.78	1.269	0	4
Economy most imp problem	767	0.63	0.483	0	1
Education	766	5.53	4.259	0	18
Farmer	767	0.458	0.499	0	1
Female	767	0.6949	0.461	0	1
Have Asked for Government Aid	765	0.19	0.393	0	1
IMSS	767	0.073	0.239	0	1
Income	726	4689.28	5403.042	0	62,600
Income Stability	757	1.13	1.306	0	4
ISSSTE	767	0.032	0.168	0	1
No Party ID	767	0.58	0.494	0	1
PAN Party ID	767	0.116	0.32	0	1
Pocketbook (prospective)	688	1.99	0.938	0	4
Pocketbook (retrospective)	761	1.82	0.964	0	4
Political Interest	767	1.34	0.983	0	3
PRD Party ID	767	0.158	0.365	0	1
PRI Party ID	767	0.061	0.239	0	1
Registered	767	0.928	0.258	0	1
RI	759	0.16	0.247	0	1
RI (for 2006 analyses)	738	0.15	0.241	0	1
Sociotropic (prospective)	676	1.84	1.039	0	4
Sociotropic (retrospective)	728	1.65	1.064	0	4
Voted in 2006 election	766	0.667	0.472	0	1

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