



El Rey del Tomate Migrant Political Transnationalism and Democratization in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

The highly publicized transnational political campaign of Andrés Bermúdez, who ran for mayor of Jerez, Zacatecas, is considered in terms of a continuum of theoretical frameworks on democratic theory and practice. Grounded in intensive qualitative interviews with key participants in the campaign, the study addresses the following questions: To what extent does the Bermúdez candidacy contribute to opening up the Mexican political system to the electoral participation of migrants? What implications do the political processes revealed here have for full-scale dual citizenship, including absentee voting and transnational campaigning by Mexican migrants living in the United States? What does the Bermúdez story contribute to our theoretical understanding of the character and significance of migrant political transnationalism at the present moment? Answers to these questions make it possible to determine the role of the Bermúdez campaign in the ongoing saga of democratization in contemporary Mexico.

Keywords: 1. international migration, 2. political transnationalism, 3. dual citizenship, 4. Andrés Bermúdez, 5. Jerez, Zacatecas.

RESUMEN

La ampliamente publicitada campaña política transnacional de Andrés Bermúdez, que contendió como candidato para alcalde de Jerez, Zacatecas, es analizada en términos de un *continuum* de marcos teóricos sobre teoría y práctica de la democracia. Con base en intensivas entrevistas cualitativas con participantes importantes de la campaña, este estudio considera las siguientes cuestiones: ¿Hasta qué punto la candidatura de Bermúdez contribuye a la apertura del sistema político mexicano hacia la participación electoral de los migrantes? ¿Qué implicaciones tienen los procesos políticos aquí mencionados para una implementación a gran escala de la doble ciudadanía, incluyendo el voto en el extranjero y las campañas transnacionales de migrantes mexicanos que viven en los Estados Unidos? ¿En qué contribuye el caso de Bermúdez para nuestro conocimiento teórico sobre el carácter y significado del transnacionalismo político de los migrantes en el momento presente? Las respuestas a estos cuestionamientos hacen posible determinar el papel que tuvo la campaña de Bermúdez en el proceso actual de democratización del México contemporáneo.

Palabras clave: 1. migración internacional, 2. transnacionalismo político, 3. doble ciudadanía, 4. Andrés Bermúdez, 5. Jerez, Zacatecas.

A variety of approaches have characterized debates on the significance of migrant political transnationalism for democratic theory and practice. At one end of the spectrum, analysts have noted that transnational political practices tend to be the domain of a subset of well-educated, wealthy men, whose motivation stems from a desire to be incorporated into elite strata in both the sending and receiving countries rather than from an interest in challenging the unequal power relations sustaining those elite groups (Guarnizo, 1997, 2001; Itzigsohn, 2000). At the opposite end, other analysts have highlighted the transformative potential of migrant political transnationalism. They note the democratizing effect that migrants can have on their countries of origin because of their increased economic clout, relative independence from the coercive apparatuses of the state, and positive experiences with democracy in the receiving countries (Portes, 1999, 2001; Laguerre, 1999; Shain, 1999).

In regard to Mexico's transition to democracy, these two frameworks may be termed an "emergent transnational elite" approach and a "transnational democracy" perspective. They represent poles on a continuum of perspectives on the democratic potential of migrant political transnationalism, which is discernible through a close examination of the burgeoning literature on the relationship between transnationalism and the democratization of contemporary Mexico. The literature on the politics of migrant hometown and home-state associations, in particular, suggests a wide range of agency driving these transnational migrant associations, running from highly state-centered to autonomous and even oppositional (compare, for example, Fitzgerald, 2000; Goldring, 1996; Kearney, 1995).

We begin with an explication of the major approaches salient to Mexican migrant political transnationalism. We then examine the highly publicized transnational political campaign of Andrés Bermúdez, the so-called El Rey del Tomate, in his bid to become mayor of Jerez, Zacatecas. We also assess transnational political developments in Zacatecas and California following the election. A central purpose is to situate the political transnationalism of El Rey del Tomate within the current debates on the relationship between transnationalism and democracy in Mexico.

To what extent was Bermúdez motivated by a desire to open up the Mexican political system to the electoral participation of migrants? Does he support full-scale dual citizenship, including absentee voting and transnational campaigning by Mexican transmigrants currently living in the United States? Who were his allies and opponents? What does the Bermúdez story contribute to our theoretical understanding of the character and significance of migrant political transnationalism at the present moment of Mexican political development? Answers to these questions should allow us to explicate the social forces crystallized around Bermúdez'

highly controversial political campaign and determine the extent to which the campaign was a sign of transnational political democratization.

The field data we use here include three extended ethnographic interviews and several follow-up telephone conversations with Bermúdez. The authors jointly conducted two interviews in Davis, California in March and November 2002. Each was tape recorded and fully transcribed. A third ethnography was reconstructed from field notes taken following extended conversations in February 2003 between Matt Bakker and Bermúdez while they traveled from Davis to Los Angeles where Bermúdez was scheduled to participate in a conference on the voting rights of Mexican citizens living abroad. These ethnographies focused on Bermúdez' reasons for running for office, his experiences in dealing with local Zacatecan political culture, his responses to efforts to invalidate his election, and his future plans once he gave up trying to keep the mayoral office.

In August and September 2002, Bakker gathered additional data in Jerez, through twenty open-ended, qualitative interviews with local residents and political elites. Interviews with local elites focused on their perspectives on the Bermúdez campaign and the larger question of transnational citizenship and migrant political participation. Interviews with local residents focused on factors explaining Bermúdez' popularity with the electorate and popular opinions about the political rights of transnational migrants. These qualitative research materials were supplemented by the authors' comprehensive review of Mexican and U.S. press accounts of the campaign and its aftermath, as well as a close reading of documentary materials, including Bermúdez' internal campaign materials and the legal decision of the Mexican court invalidating his electoral victory.

Perspectives on Migrant Transnational Politics

Much of the literature exploring migrant transnational political practices has noted that the transmigrants who maintain the most active transnational ties and interests in politics tend to represent an *emergent transnational elite* (Itzigsohn, 2000; Guarnizo, 1997, 2001). Members of this new elite tend to be better educated and economically secure migrants, usually entrepreneurs, long-time U.S. residents, often naturalized citizens, and overwhelmingly male (Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller, forthcoming; Fitzgerald, 2000:105). These transnational political actors are said to be uninterested in transforming the unequal power structures and social hierarchies in their countries or communities of origin. Instead, they seek their own personal incorporation at the top of such structures and hierarchies (Guarnizo, 1997, 2001).

In terms of on-the-ground political practices, we would expect members of this emerging elite to operate through the traditional channels of political power distribution in the sending countries. Thus, we might expect the emerging migrant elite to organize and administer chapters of established homeland political parties in immigrant communities, to promote candidates abroad, and, when allowed by law, to seek political office representing migrant interests. A prominent example of this emerging elite type is Manuel de la Cruz. This former dissident Zacatecan club leader became the official representative of the Zacatecan governor Ricardo Monreal in the United States and was recently named the sole migrant candidate on the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD) list for proportional representation in Congress.

In contrast, the *transnational democracy* approach envisages an emerging transnational citizenry interested in participating in the transformation of their communities and countries of origin. From this perspective, the transnational democrats' experiences in the United States have given them a glimpse of the possibilities in the "developed world," and they want to transmit these to their homeland. Migrants as transnational democrats seek to bring more democracy, less corruption, and increased respect for civil and human rights to the political system in their communities and countries of origin (Portes, 1999; Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller, forthcoming). They describe their experiences within the U.S. political system to friends and family and help to begin imagining an alternative for Mexico (Levitt, 2001). They utilize their increased economic clout not for personal gain but to create spaces for popular political participation (Laguerre, 1999).

We would expect the transnational democrat to be critical of the efforts of ruling political elites, blaming them for the poverty and economic instability driving many to migrate. Transnational democrats can be expected to make an explicit link between development and democracy, attributing the failure of development in their communities of origin to the engrained corruption in government institutions and bureaucracies that are slowly emerging from undemocratic rule. They would explain underdevelopment as much by the corruption of government officials and institutions as by structural features of the world capitalist economy.

An important theme in many studies of migrant political transnationalism has been the implications of transnational political practices for reconstituting our notions of membership and citizenship. Addressing this is what we might term the *substantive citizenship* perspective, a third ideal-typical position, near the middle of the democratization continuum. It focuses on the emergent role of migrant hometown associations (HTAs) and home-state associations (HSAs) as interest group claimants for substantive citi-

zanship status at the regional and local levels of Mexican political life. In her work on Zacatecan HTAs, Luin Goldring, for example, argues that the interaction between “state-led” and “migrant-led” transnationalisms creates a context in which transmigrants can exercise “substantive citizenship” and make claims to membership in the Mexican nation (Goldring, 1999, 2001, 2002). She claims that this “substantive participation represents a challenge to the limited and symbolic market membership offered by the Mexican state, although it is not always framed in oppositional terms” (2002:92).

A fourth perspective on migrant political transnationalism in Mexico might be termed the *communitarian autonomy* perspective. Researchers operating from this perspective regard democratization more in terms of the constitution of spaces where autonomous collective rights can be maintained than in terms of the expansion of migrant electoral power, interest group bargaining strength, or elite succession. For example, based on fieldwork with migrants from Sahuayo, Michoacán, David Fitzgerald (2000) has dealt with the interaction between states and migrants, and the distinction between citizenship and membership, in a manner quite different from that of Goldring. Fitzgerald sees citizenship as a subset of membership that, beyond simply making claims pertaining to a particular community, entails the expression and acceptance of claims to the rights held by other community members. Fitzgerald found that Sahuayan migrants tended to make “extra-territorial citizenship” claims based on moral rather than legal grounds, that is, migrants sought recognition from fellow community members rather than the state (Fitzgerald, 2000:12). This non-state recognition of membership and citizenship is also evident in the sociopolitical spaces being constituted in the Oaxacan transnational indigenous communities studied by Gaspar Rivera (1999, 2000). In these communities, “traditional” practices are being strengthened and transformed by transnational migration and active participation in a resurgent national indigenous movement demanding autonomy and respect for indigenous “*usos y costumbres*” (uses and customs). The community itself extends membership and citizenship to its migrants dispersed throughout northern Mexico and the United States.

These four perspectives—alternative power elite, substantive citizenship (interest-group-based bargaining), communal autonomy, and popular democratic participation—can be conceived as a continuum of positional practices offering the least to the most promise for democratizing state and society in Mexico. On this democratization continuum, where might we place the transnational political practices of Andrés Bermúdez, before and since his transnational campaign? Which modes of politics does his candidacy express and with what effects?

Bermúdez' Transnational Political Campaign

Andrés Bermúdez was certainly not the first migrant to become an elected official in Mexico. In many migrant-sending regions, the economic clout and improved social status acquired by successful migrants have led them to prominent positions in local politics upon their return to their home communities (Alarcón, 1988; Fitzgerald, 2000). In at least one case during the Bracero program (1942-1965), a *presidente municipal* governed his community from across the border in the United States (Electronic communication with Frank Bardacke, June 6, 2002). However, the campaign and election of Andrés Bermúdez were markedly different from earlier examples of migrant political and electoral participation for two reasons. First, Bermúdez was not a successful “return migrant.” Instead, he actively operated from the United States, maintaining a home, family, and business in Winters, California and otherwise carrying out a transnational life. Second, Bermúdez garnered an extraordinary amount of national and international press coverage because of his fiery personality and his self-portrayal as a “binational candidate” seeking to transform Jerez into “a little United States” (Quiñones, 2001).

Just how did this binational candidacy emerge? What historical and contemporary contextual factors help explain the timing and character of this particular mode of transnational electoral politics? The historical antecedents of the Mexican state's efforts to maintain a relationship with its diaspora in the United States can be traced from the outset of the U.S. annexation of parts of Mexico in 1848 until well into the twentieth century. The Mexican state, through the activities of its consulates, intermittently deployed revolutionary nationalist discourses to encourage continuing allegiance to the *patria*. The state also developed formal channels to encourage migrants to transfer resources home and, eventually, to return to Mexico.

However, as Luis Guarnizo (1998:57-63) has shown, since the 1980s, various Mexican state agencies have institutionalized the collage of ad hoc policies and practices used in earlier decades to instill nationalism and secure remittances from Mexican migrants. These agencies have pursued a coherent framework for action, one best characterized as a transnationalization of the traditional corporatist strategy of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI, the sole ruling party in Mexico for 70 years). Revolutionary nationalist impulses and a premise that migrants will eventually return home no longer operate. Instead, the state's new strategy accepts many of the key premises of neoliberal globalization and conceives of the Mexican diaspora as an integral part of a “transnational Mexican nation.” Thus, through a series of policy and program initiatives, migrants—once regarded as lost to the

fatherland and not entitled to Mexican citizen rights—are now actively promoted as “extraterritorial citizens” beneficial to the nation (for elaborations of this concept, see Fitzgerald, 2000; Smith, forthcoming).

What form did these new policy initiatives take? First, the Programa para las Comunidades Mexicanas en el Exterior (Program for Mexican Communities Abroad, PCME), run by a division of the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (Mexican Foreign Affairs Ministry), promotes the formation of migrant associations by state of origin and develops social and economic projects in Mexico with the collaboration of groups of transnational migrants. Second, during the latter half of the 1990s, the administration of Ernesto Zedillo explicitly articulated the notion of a “trans-territorial Mexican nation.” This new formulation led to two important legislative initiatives that removed obstacles to the extension of voting rights to Mexican citizens residing abroad and made birthright Mexican nationality irrevocable, thus permitting dual nationality. These latter initiatives were especially important in establishing the institutional and legal framework that would make possible the extraterritorial candidacy of Andrés Bermúdez.

On July 1, 2001, Andrés Bermúdez Viramontes was elected *presidente municipal* in the community of Jerez in the Mexican state of Zacatecas. Bermúdez, who works in Northern California, is nicknamed “El Rey del Tomate” because of his success as a tomato grower, labor contractor, and inventor of a tomato transplanting machine. Bermúdez’ positioning as a binational candidate caused consternation among his political opponents. Their legal actions eventually led a federal electoral court to disqualify Bermúdez. Ruling on a complaint filed by the PRI party, the court determined that Bermúdez was ineligible to hold the post of *presidente municipal* because he had not maintained uninterrupted residence in the municipality for one year. This defeat, publicized widely in the Mexican and U.S. press, highlighted a principal legal obstacle preventing transmigrants from participating in Mexican politics. Bermúdez and allies in the Frente Cívico Zacatecano (FCZ), a political arm of the Zacatecan migrant organizations (see Goldring, 2002), have since sought state-level constitutional reforms to recognize “binational residency” in order to facilitate transmigrant candidacies for popular elections.

These political developments raise intriguing questions regarding the nature of Mexican state-transmigrant relations. Are we seeing the emergence of a social movement of transnational actors challenging their partial membership in the “global” Mexican nation? Or are these new transnational political actors simply seeking, for their own benefit, to open up elite spaces within local and regional power blocs? In either case, who stands to benefit from the migrants’ emergent transnational socioeconomic and political practices? What is the significance of these

grassroots practices for the larger state-initiated project of U.S.-Mexican economic integration and managed migration flows? After a brief description of the campaign and its aftermath, this article assesses the significance and impact of Bermúdez' transnational political practices. We aim to explain his objectives in seeking office and the reasons for his popularity with the local electorate. Through this analysis, we seek to determine the role of the Bermúdez campaign in the ongoing saga of democratization of contemporary Mexican state and society.

The Campaign Trail and Beyond

In the main plaza of Jerez during a December 2000 event that he had organized to donate Christmas gifts to low-income children, Andrés Bermúdez publicly announced his campaign for the PRD candidacy. Although a political unknown, he gained popularity among the electorate and slowly began to generate support from PRD activists (author interview with Raymundo Cárdenas, Bermúdez advisor, Jerez, Zacatecas, September 10, 2002). Bermúdez focused his campaign strategy on addressing the needs, and capturing the vote, of the residents in most of the agricultural communities surrounding the city. His overwhelming victory in the party's primary election demonstrated the success of that strategy.

Throughout his campaign, Bermúdez highlighted his experiences as a transnational migrant, openly portraying himself as a binational candidate. In a clear example of the extent to which the campaign, and Zacatecan politics in general, have become transnational, the only debate of the major candidates was held in Montebello, California (in metropolitan Los Angeles). During that debate, Bermúdez solidified his candidacy and demonstrated the seriousness of his campaign by presenting the only formal outline of campaign proposals (author interview with Dr. Miguel Moctezuma Longoria, Professor Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas and Bermúdez advisor, Zacatecas, Zacatecas, September 3, 2002).

Bermúdez eventually won the July 1, five-party election with 47% of the vote, with the PRI's candidate, Alma Avila, capturing just 33%. Unfortunately for the winner, well before the July election, the PRI president for Zacatecas had publicly declared that Bermúdez had failed to meet the residency requirement (Mena, 2001), and following the victory, the PRI presented its legal challenge. Moreover, the outgoing *presidente municipal* refused to certify the required residency document and only agreed to do so after dozens of angry Bermúdez supporters occupied city hall.

The PRI lawsuit was based on three allegations: 1) Bermúdez was not a Zacatecan citizen; 2) he did not possess full political rights; and 3) he did

not maintain “effective and uninterrupted residency” in Jerez during the year prior to the elections. Bermúdez won that initial lawsuit, and the subsequent round in the appeals court, but the Tribunal Federal Electoral (federal electoral court, Trife) stripped him of his victory and granted the post to Ismael Solís, Bermúdez’ alternate in the election. (In the Mexican political system, candidates for public office choose “alternates,” who are to serve in their place if for any reason they are unable to assume, or continue in, office.)

The Trife found Bermúdez ineligible based on the third PRI allegation, that he was not a legal resident of Jerez for the year prior to the election. This determination was strongly supported by the evidence, including media reports placing Bermúdez in the United States at various times during the year in question and, most convincingly, a sworn declaration Bermúdez had made on November 21, 2000, in which he stated that his home was Winters, California (Trife, 2001:68-69).

Immediately following the announcement of the Trife decision, Bermúdez blamed President Vicente Fox for the decision, claiming that nothing had changed in Mexico with the arrival of Fox, whose oppositional electoral victory had been heralded by many as representing a true transition to democracy. Bermúdez also threatened to convince migrants to stop investing in Mexico. His initial disappointment led him to give up the fight and return to his business in California (Sullivan, 2001). Within a few days, however, Bermúdez was energized by the outpouring of support he received from migrants, which included being an *invitado de honor* (honored guest) at Mexican Independence Day celebrations in Los Angeles (author interview with Andrés Bermúdez Viramontes, Davis, California, March 15, 2002). Rejuvenated, Bermúdez committed himself to fighting for the post he had won.

By September 10, Bermúdez was back in Jerez threatening to jump scales by internationalizing the conflict (for a theoretical discussion of the politics of jumping scales, see Brysk, 1996). Demanding that President Fox intervene to overturn the Trife decision, Bermúdez threatened to take his case to the United Nations on the grounds that Mexico had violated the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. He continued his attack on President Fox, arguing that “on one hand, he says he is going to push for legal reforms regarding the right to vote of Mexicans abroad, and on the other, he denies us full political rights” (Becerra, 2001).¹ In addition, some of Bermúdez’ supporters even threatened that an armed resistance was forming to defend his cause. Bermúdez soon backed away from those references, claiming that he was sup-

¹ This and all other translations in the text are our own.

ported by 15,000 Jerezanos ready to “rise up in arms, but [arms] of arguments and reason” (Vacío, 2001).

In an effort to break the deadlock, PRD officials brokered a deal on September 18 between Bermúdez and alternate Solís, calling for a public opinion poll to determine who should hold the office. Under the terms of the deal, if the majority of those polled wanted Solís to step down, then the state legislature would choose his replacement from a list that would include Bermúdez. The timing of the poll was intended to ensure that one year had elapsed since Bermúdez had signed the declaration certifying his residence in California. In reality, the timing did not matter since given his numerous trips to California, he still had not maintained a full year of *effective and uninterrupted* residency in Jerez.

Nonetheless, the deal seemed to pave the way for Bermúdez to take office despite the Trife decision, and he won with 51%. However, by mid-December, the agreement began to rupture: Solís complained that state-level PRD leaders had pressured him into signing it, and he would not step down because, as *presidente municipal*, he must obey the law (Vanegas, 2001). Officials from the Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party, PAN) offered their support to Solís and criticized the governor for trying to impose a solution contrary to the law (Vanegas and Torres, 2001).

At this point, even his own party jumped on the anti-Bermúdez bandwagon, with state-level PRD president Luis Medina conceding that there was “no legal possibility” that Bermúdez could become *presidente municipal* (Valadez, 2001b). Medina announced that the party’s position was to “respect the law, with or without the poll,” arguing that there was no way for the party to force Solís to step down (Valdez, 2002). In response, on January 13, 2002, Bermúdez published a letter in Zacatecas newspapers announcing his break with the governor and the state PRD, but saying he would not leave the party but would, instead, form an internal “Bermudista” faction.

During the following year, Bermúdez returned to his home in California and avoided direct participation in Zacatecan politics. While reconsidering his political options, he wavered between extensive participation in transnational Mexican politics or a complete turn to ethnic politics in the U.S. context. The specific options Bermúdez considered included: *a*) the formation of a new migrant-based political party; *b*) preparing the terrain for his eventual run at the Zacatecan governorship; or *c*) dedicating his energies to educational, economic, and political advancement of Mexicans in the United States (author interview with Andrés Bermúdez, Davis, California, March 15, 2002 and November 1, 2002). He made clear that the key determinant of his political future was the potential passage of legal reforms in Zacatecas that would permit migrant political participation independent of the place and length of residency.

In December 2002, Bermúdez made his public return to Zacatecan transnational political life. In Los Angeles, he and representatives of the Frente Cívico Zacatecano (FCZ) presented a proposal for an amendment to the state constitution, “La Ley Bermúdez.” If this amendment were passed, Zacatecan law would recognize “binational residency” and allow migrants to hold elected office in Zacatecas. Within days, he returned to Jerez where he reconciled with Governor Monreal and brokered a deal in which the governor committed to developing a campus of the state university in Jerez and building a highway better connecting Jerez to the capital city. In exchange, Bermúdez agreed to act as Monreal’s presidential campaign coordinator in the United States for the 2006 Mexican presidential election (Hernández, 2002).

These actions indicate that Bermúdez has chosen the second of the three options he was considering. Indeed, he explained to us his reconciliation with Monreal as the price he had to pay to prepare the ground for his own 2004 gubernatorial campaign. The logic behind this reconciliation is understandable from the perspective of Bermúdez, who acts as a pragmatic and calculating future electoral contender. However, it ran directly counter to the nonpartisan political logic of his FCZ allies and the Federación de Clubes Zacatecanos del Sur de California (“Federation”). These groups had taken the lead in attempting to construct a cross-party consensus in support of the “Ley Bermúdez.” The clash generated by these conflicting logics resulted in the FCZ and Federation leaders publicly breaking with Bermúdez, accusing him of being a traitor because he had not consulted with the FCZ before taking a partisan position (González, 2003).

In their press release announcing the constitutional reform initiative, FCZ and Federation leaders distanced themselves from Bermúdez, stating: “In the political whirlwind unleashed in 2003, some actions and events could attempt to identify the ‘Initiative to Reform the Political Constitution of Zacatecas,’ known as the ‘Ley Migrante,’ with a certain candidate or with some political party. From this point on, we distance ourselves from such a possibility... Among ourselves, we call it the ‘Ley Migrante,’ not any other name, because it brings together the demands and experience of a plural and diverse social movement that exists and of which we are a part” (FCZ, 2003). From the perspective of these social-movement actors, this distancing from Bermúdez seems reasonable given their desire to gain a wide consensus on constitutional reform. However, it is also notable that intimations in the Zacatecan press of a possible gubernatorial candidacy for the Federation’s current president, Guadalupe Gómez (González, 2002), suggest competition among rival “pre-candidates,” Bermúdez and Gómez, as an additional explanation for this political shift.

*The Political Logic(s) of El Rey del Tomate*

What might explain why Andrés Bermúdez, a successful immigrant entrepreneur with no political experience, would decide to put aside his business operations and take on the challenge of running for office in his Mexican hometown? Furthermore, what accounts for his extraordinary success in attracting media attention and popular support on both sides of the border?

Bermúdez' impressive rags-to-riches story, his direct, no-nonsense style, and his trademark look—dressing daily in a black outfit, cowboy hat, and boots—offered plenty of material for the national and international press to publicize this “first” binational candidate. During campaign interviews, Bermúdez often referred to his humble beginnings, described his journey across the border in the trunk of a car, and his quick rise from farmworker to supervisor in the agricultural fields of California's Central Valley (Valadez, 2001a; Mena, 2001). As the story goes, he would eventually become a successful tomato grower and labor contractor in Northern and Central California and invent a tomato-transplanting machine that, he claims, is used by over 90% of California growers. These efforts have evidently made him a rich man, with an annual income of over \$300,000 (Mena, 2001).

This story parallels nicely the Horatio Alger myth of mobility in U.S. society, and this might easily explain its popularity in the American mainstream press. The novelty of the story is that Bermúdez came to be seen as a migrant who had fulfilled the “Mexican-American dream,” exemplifying the possibilities available to Mexican migrants in the United States, yet he had returned “home” to help those left behind. Bermúdez' own discourse and campaign appeals legitimated that interpretation. The campaign's defining slogan, “*Vengo a dar...*,”² embodies just such a representation of a successful man who has returned to give back to “his people.” In addition, he often claimed that he realized that he wanted to help when, after returning to Jerez, he found that nothing had changed.

In our ethnographic interviews, Bermúdez explained why he chose to run for office:

Once I got my green card, I'd go once in a while, maybe once every three years or maybe every year, you know, sometimes go back and forth and see that everything was the same. The only difference I'd see was that the governor had a new car, a new house, that's all that was different. And I'd say, “Somebody has got to

² Meaning “I've come to give...,” this slogan distanced Bermúdez from previous officials by implicitly alluding to the corrupt practices through which they got rich from the public coffers once in office.



do something here.” I said, “Well, I’m in the U.S., I make a little bit of money, I can bring my equipment, I can do this, I can do it. Let’s go and do it” (author interview with Andrés Bermúdez, Davis, California, March 15, 2002).

He then said that he had been employing Mexican migrants for 26 years, knew their feelings, and the reasons why they had come to the United States, and that they were fed up with the government in Mexico. Reflecting on his contention that “somebody has got to do something,” Bermúdez decided that he was the person to do it, choosing to return to Jerez to attempt to change things at the local level.

The passage quoted above nicely captures Bermúdez’ self-portrayal as a migrant genuinely desiring to give back to his natal community. Along with his campaign slogan, it also suggests that an important factor motivating his politicization was a desire to stamp out corruption. For example, when discussing the need to reorder priorities on the political agenda, Bermúdez underlined the need to move away from visible public works projects, for which the government can take credit in future campaigns, but which are easily subject to corrupt contracting. He described this process in the following words, “Okay, [assume] I am the contractor. The governor says, ‘You do this street for how much? One million dollars? Ok, I’ll pay you two million dollars. When I pay you two million dollars, you take your million dollars and give me back my million dollars.’ That means the money is already washed” (author interview with Andrés Bermúdez, Davis, California, March 15, 2002).

Bermúdez’ emphasis on fighting corruption needs to be analyzed in the context of contemporary political transformations in Mexico, which culminated with Vicente Fox of the opposition PAN party campaigning as the “candidate of change” and defeating the ruling PRI in the 2000 presidential election. In our interviews, Bermúdez did not seem to have much faith that Fox or any other opposition party politician would successfully transform Mexico’s corrupt and authoritarian political culture(s). Instead, echoing remarks he heard the U.S. consul in Monterrey make, Bermúdez argued that Mexico would only change if its emigrants were to return from the United States and make change by introducing a different, uncorrupt way of doing things (author interview with Andrés Bermúdez, Davis, California, March 15, 2002).

With this argument, Bermúdez allied himself with a number of local and regional actors who had been working on the ground, often within the PRD party in Zacatecas, to incorporate migrants into the democratization movement. These included the local party militants, who eventually emerged as the local “Bermudista” faction in Jerez, as well as the public intellectuals, including Miguel Moctezuma Longoria and his colleagues from the Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, who

have both studied and participated in the transnationalization of Zacatecan political life (for a good example of this activist scholarship, see Moctezuma Longoria, n.d.).

The national political context and the popular desire for “change” helps to explain why Bermúdez captured such significant popular support in Jerez, as the electorate there was becoming increasingly anxious to overthrow the PRI, the party that had controlled local politics since its inception some seven decades earlier. In field interviews with local elites and citizens in Jerez, the desire to oust the PRI was repeatedly mentioned as a main factor explaining Bermúdez’ victory. Even the losing PRI candidate, Alma Ávila, suggested this:

Well, if we analyze our proposals, I think that the proposal that I presented was the stronger one. Also closer to the needs of the people. But let me tell you, I belong to a party, one that is discredited. The citizenry no longer believes in the party. And with Andrés Bermúdez, an expectation arose that he could accomplish what he proposed to do (author interview with Alma Ávila, Jerez, Zacatecas, September 10, 2002).

Governor Ricardo Monreal apparently sparked Bermúdez’ campaign when, during a public event in Napa, California, the governor joked, “I’m going to take Andrés back as mayor” (Madera, 2001); however, neither Monreal nor local PRD officials supported the campaign initially. Luis Medina, the party’s state-level leader, claimed that the PRD officials did not support Bermúdez in the primary election because they did not believe that he could win when facing the other parties’ contenders (Cano, 2001).

What then explains Bermúdez’ ability, as a political novice, to overcome the resistance of his own party’s apparatus to win the primary election and go on to defeat the candidate of the PRI, the party that had ruled Jerez for over 70 years? An important factor explaining his victory in the primary election was Bermúdez strategic “get-out-the-vote” planning, as summarized in this interview excerpt:

Bakker: What do you think explains your ability to win the primary election in the PRD if the governor was opposed, the governor did not want you to win? How did you do that?

Bermúdez: Okay, in the first election, the only people that can vote [are] the people registered in the party, plus 20% of the town, no more than 20% of the town. You know, I don’t have anybody to register for me, but I have the 20%, you know. And the day of the vote, I got the schedule and the voting booths, the places, and I say, “Right here, they got about a thousand, I need 200 of them.” With no credentials, just people to vote. I check the other one, “500, I need 100 right here.” But the other guys think the same, you know. And I get together all of my people in the village, and I say, “In order to have Andrés win,

you have to do this.” And I say, “You have to do this the *consul[ate]* way.” You’ve seen [it] there in Mexico. Three o’clock in the morning [the people are] right there in front of the consulate. Well, the day of the vote, at 12 o’clock midnight, 200 people [were] waiting right there to get in to vote for Andrés.

Smith: So you were well organized? You knew who supported you and you got them out...

Bakker: It was kind of strategic, you know, “you’ve got to be the first ones there because...”

Bermúdez: That’s the only way you can win...

Bakker: “...there are only going to be allowed 200, the other candidates are going to try to do the same thing, so we need to be there early.”

Bermúdez: Early. Early. And I told them, “the second thing is: 200 votes for me, but you have to stay there to watch the votes. Because if nobody is there...”

Smith: So you had like poll watchers?

Bermúdez: The same people that vote, right there, nobody moved until they were done counting. (Author interview with Andrés Bermúdez, Davis, California, March 15, 2002.)

Bermúdez was thinking carefully about how to win under the existing rules of the game. An examination of his campaign tactics further demonstrates that. Far from offering an alternative to traditional corporatist and clientelistic politics and a truly democratic alternative to the local PRI regime he sought to overthrow, Bermúdez lured voters through the successful use of traditional methods of Mexican patronage. Bermúdez’ campaign strategy included organizing parties, *charreadas*, and concerts as well as offering gifts, including refrigerators, stoves, and other household appliances, to supporters at campaign rallies (Salazar and Berrones, 2001). This tactic brought consternation from PRI candidate Ávila, who complained about how Bermúdez carried out his campaign (Cano, 2001). This position is particularly ironic given her party’s role in perfecting these techniques during its 70-year reign.

In addition to his extensive use of conventional patronage, Bermúdez gained significant support because of his role as a large-scale employer in the United States. With this economic clout, Bermúdez was able to claim that he could provide up to 300 temporary visas to fellow Jerezanos (Mena, 2001), thus offering them the possibility of tapping into the income-generating capacity of the U.S. economy and engaging in transnational social reproduction.

However, this reliance on material incentives does not mean that Bermúdez failed to offer the electorate a political alternative to the PRI. In addition to the successful use of clientelist tactics, Bermúdez presented novel political and policy positions that also help explain his success. First, Bermúdez placed the issue of migration at the center of the campaign, projecting himself as a binational candidate (Quiñones, 2001) able to bring together the resources of two countries and vaguely claim-

ing that he planned to “Americanize” the municipality. (For an early elaboration of the relationship between international migration and “Americanization,” see Alarcón, 1988.) To underline his binationality symbolically, Bermúdez announced that he would invite California governor Gray Davis, U.S. ambassador to Mexico Jeffrey Davidow, and U.S. President George W. Bush to his swearing-in ceremony on September 16, Mexican Independence Day (Aguirre, 2002).

This attempt to “Americanize” Jerez seems an especially risky campaign proposal given Mexico’s historically antagonistic relationship with the United States and the importance to the nationalist project of opposition to foreign, especially U.S., meddling in Mexico’s national affairs. While government officials have made an abrupt break with this traditional antagonism by adopting a policy of *acercamiento* (Guarnizo, 1998), it is not clear that this has been effective in changing popular nationalist sentiments. However, it is likely that nationalist antagonism towards the United States is weaker in traditional migrant-sending regions with historic ties to the *el Norte*. The success of the Americanization theme thus probably arises from the characteristics of Jerez itself as a “binational town,” half of whose “residents” live in the United States.

In another policy thrust, Bermúdez addressed the concerns of the municipality’s struggling agricultural producers. Here, his background as a child of rural Jerez who had made his fortune in the commercial agriculture of *el Norte*, certainly explains part of his attraction to the electorate. Beyond capitalizing on the electorate’s identification with his experience and their admiration for his success, Bermúdez made several concrete proposals for improving the welfare of agricultural producers. These included infrastructure improvements to facilitate their access to existing markets as well as efforts to expand those markets by producing more profitable cash crops, like bell peppers and tomatoes, for which he claimed to have already lined up buyers from among his contacts and associates in California (Grover, 2001).

Bermúdez combined his agricultural proposals with other economic and community development plans, which aimed at providing educational and employment opportunities for community residents and slowing emigration.³ In terms of economic development, he claimed to have attracted Taiwanese and Japanese investors to create jobs in Jerez (Grover, 2001). His educational proposals included the eventual creation of a Jerez campus of the state university and the reduction of transportation

³ These proposals parallel policy visions promoted by both the U.S. and Mexican governments, which see economic development in Mexico as a potential antidote to continued large-scale migration from Mexico to the North. This may explain why Bermúdez’ transnational political campaign and his binational political identity did not draw the ire of the U.S. government and drew only limited criticism from anti-immigration activists.

costs for current university students traveling daily to the capital city, a proposal that he had initiated even before the election. Discussions with Bermúdez about this suggest that he envisioned using municipal power to intervene in the market and obtain results for the public good. He explained that, once elected, he was able to negotiate reduced bus fares for university students. He did this by promising to subsidize the operations of bus companies if they complied, while threatening to initiate municipally funded bus service, which would reduce those operators' market share and profitability, if they did not (author interview with Andrés Bermúdez, Davis, California, February 8, 2003).

El Rey del Tomate: Elitist or Democrat?

Our discussion suggests contradictions in the relationship between Bermúdez' professed objectives and the campaign tactics he utilized. He presents himself as an alternative to the corrupt politicians of the PRI—a “candidate of change”—yet he reproduces the PRI's traditional, undemocratic campaign practices. This highlights the embeddedness of electoral politics in social structure and political culture, and the severely limited range of campaign tactics available to any candidate in the Mexican political system. It also opens the possibility for a various conflicting interpretations about the significance of Bermúdez' intervention in the politics of Jerez. So where does all of this leave us?

In assessing the interpretive frameworks discussed at the beginning of this article, we find that none of the four perspectives consistently fits the dynamics of the transnational electoral politics of El Rey del Tomate.

Bermúdez resembles a transnational democrat in a number of ways. First, his political discourse aimed largely at challenging reigning political practices and distinguishing his own practices and proposals from the corrupt practices of traditional politicians. Second, he sought to transfer to Jerez the positive aspects of the political and economic systems he had experienced as a long-time U.S. resident. His proposal to “Americanize” the community exemplifies this. In interviews, Bermúdez repeatedly expressed his absolute mistrust of politicians, and he consistently claimed that the only way for Mexico to progress would be for successful migrants to return from the United States and replace today's politicians, effectively linking development with democratization.

However, Bermúdez' reproduction of traditional clientelist campaign methods casts doubt on his full commitment to participatory democracy. As his supporters in Jerez repeatedly emphasized in interviews, they excuse those clientelist practices as a political necessity in a competition against a ruling party that utilizes the same tactics. Nevertheless,

Bermúdez' use of these tactics suggests he may have been less intent on democratizing the political culture than on replacing the existing local authoritarian regime with his own.

The clientelist practices discussed above also provide evidence supporting the emergent transnational elite perspective: Rather than challenging existing political structures, Bermúdez utilizes them to achieve his electoral victory. Two additional factors also support this interpretation. First, in interviews, Bermúdez explains that governors rebuffed his early offers to assist in developing Jerez, and that provided one of his main motivations for entering politics. His current activities may then partially respond to having his access to elite circles blocked. Moreover, Bermúdez repeatedly emphasized the importance of—indeed the necessity for—having successful migrants, like him, return to govern their hometowns, while he simultaneously showed only limited concern for extending political rights to all Mexicans in the United States. This elitist conception of directed change can be interpreted as monopolizing the benefits of increased democratization for migrant elites.

Our evidence, however, suggests the limitations of strictly applying an elitist interpretation to this case. For example, following the Trife decision, Bermúdez received offers from a number of federal and state officials to take high-level positions in the state bureaucracy, including offers from Secretario de Gobernación (Secretary of the Interior) Santiago Creel to assume the post of federal Agriculture Secretary, and from Governor Monreal to become director of the Zacatecas Migration Department (author interview with Andrés Bermúdez, Davis, California, March 15, 2002). Yet, he declined these offers. Had Bermúdez been primarily interested in his own incorporation into Mexico's elite strata, accepting one of these posts would have fulfilled that objective. His rejection of the offers suggests that his calculations and assessment of changing opportunities and constraints in Zacatecan politics were far more complicated than simply achieving elite incorporation.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that the interaction of Bermúdez' individual agency, his on-the-ground connections to local democratizing forces, and the structural context in which his transnational political practices were embedded created a much more complex outcome than would be expected from either extreme of the democratization continuum. Do either of the other two ideal-typical perspectives we identified in the literature provide a useful interpretation of the El Rey del Tomate case?

This case must be distinguished from the substantive citizenship approach because, rather than bargaining with state officials to bolster informal claims to membership and citizenship, Bermúdez took advantage of newly created structural opportunities for migrant political participation (in particular, the 1997 dual nationality reforms) to formally chal-

lenge limitations that state officials sought to place on migrants' political role. The formal challenge that Bermúdez made to the "limited and symbolic market membership" offered by the Mexican state presents more democratic possibilities than does interest-group-based substantive citizenship exercised by HTA leaders. The former could result in legally recognized citizenship rights for all migrants not just those migrant leaders capable of leveraging significant financial resources in their negotiations with state officials.

The broad formal-legal claims to membership and citizenship driving Bermúdez' transnational campaign also limit the applicability of the communitarian autonomy approach. By supporting him at the ballot box, a plurality of the Jerez electorate implicitly recognized Bermúdez' claims to community membership and citizenship, but his experience demonstrates the inherent weakness of migrants' informal or moral claims to membership and citizenship. His case suggests that, once migrants begin to exercise the rights emanating from those moral claims in ways that challenge entrenched political power structures, the elites that those structures sustain will surely respond with legal challenges that undermine community-supported membership and citizenship claims without state sanction.

Although neither of these other two ideal-typical perspectives seems to fit the Bermúdez case neatly, their more nuanced interpretations offer important insights for developing an alternate interpretation. In the end, the Bermúdez case tends to fall towards the transnational democrat side of the continuum. His objectives, and those of the activists he linked up with on the ground, were aimed at transforming the local political culture characterized by engrained corruption.

However, we cannot explain the meaning and consequences of this campaign solely by the professed intentionality of Bermúdez and his collaborators. We must also be attuned to the political context(s) in which this campaign played out. On a very local level, Bermúdez encountered a political culture that significantly limited his strategic alternatives because potential election-day supporters expected to see the fruits of effective patron/client relations from any serious political contender. His campaign team's decision, or perceived obligation, to utilize the traditional campaign tactics of the PRI regime they sought to overthrow—far from offering a truly democratic alternative—served to reproduce culturally the same structures they aimed to transform politically.

In addition to its constraints, the political context also offered Bermúdez some significant opportunities to promote change. Perhaps most significantly, his candidacy came on the heels of Fox's historic defeat of the PRI and midway through the relatively successful term of PRD governor Monreal. These political events at higher scales certainly challenged the local PRI regime's grip on power and provided the opportunity for a charismatic "can-



didate of change” to triumph. The increasing importance of migrants in official state discourses and policy making, at all three levels of government, also benefited Bermúdez because his political opponents, cognizant of the fundamental economic role of migrants in the local economy, were deterred from using his status as a migrant to challenge overtly his right to participate politically.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the diverse factors converging in the Andrés Bermúdez campaign for *presidente municipal* in Jerez points to the inadequacy of explanations from any single theoretical perspective on a democratization continuum. Bermúdez’ diverse political practices led to multiple contradictions that make it difficult to place him squarely at any static point on that spectrum. To the extent that all political action, particularly within the electoral arena, is fraught with contradictions, our analysis of the Bermúdez case suggests that any attempt to generalize about the nature and significance of migrant political transnationalism without taking into consideration the social and historical context is problematic. Politics is an inherently multi-dimensional and continually shifting process, and it is thus impossible to capture the significance of political action in binary, either/or terms. Nor is it useful to restrict interpretations to particular fixed points along a continuum of possibilities. In short, politics is a process of becoming rather than being. The same is true for the process of democratization. Evidence exists that under particular historical circumstances the democratizing tendencies of the communitarian autonomy orientation of Oaxacan migrant organizations has shifted into a mode of politics more closely resembling interest-group bargaining. This has been visible as some of these organizations turn to the HTA model and seek a more collaborative relationship with the Mexican state (see, for example, Rivera Salgado and Escala Rabadán, 2002).

Likewise, the presence of elites as players in the process of mass democratic politics is unavoidable, but the nature of their relationships with mass publics, ranging from authoritarian control to democratic accountability, is historically and contextually contingent, not structurally given. Accordingly, rather than seeking fixed generalizations about the character and significance of migrants’ transnational political practices at the present historical juncture, it is more fruitful to focus our analysis on the continuing interplay among states, elites, interest groups, social movements, and mass publics in specific sites of politics as local, national, and transnational political spaces and relations are being negotiated, constructed, and reconstituted. In assessing the democratic possibilities of transnational political practices, focusing on contextually specific loca-

tions or spaces where these political ties are constantly *in the making* promises to yield much more than do context-free classificatory schemes.

Several intersecting scales of politics, from local to transnational, came together in Jerez during the Bermúdez campaign. In Jerez, the candidacy of Andrés Bermúdez, understood in terms of trans-local political influences (on the politics of trans-locality, see Smith, 2001), seemed to offer real possibilities for transforming local political culture and contributing to grassroots democratization. While Bermúdez may have utilized traditional methods of patronage in the campaign, tactics that would not suggest political transformation, he brought with him an orientation and image of efficient and business-like problem solving, derived from his successful incorporation into the agribusiness industrial sector in California. The timing and character of the self-presentation of El Rey del Tomate fit remarkably well with the multi-level political context in which his campaign was embedded, which was characterized by a generalized local, national, and transnational popular disdain for “politics as usual” and traditional politicians. In this context, the electoral appeals that he made were incompatible with continuation of corrupt and authoritarian rule. The “Americanization” proposal can be understood as reflecting this widespread popular discontent with politics as usual. Its vagueness notwithstanding, “Americanization” was aimed at neatly capturing the positive experiences or comprehension of the U.S. political and economic systems, as experienced by transmigrants and their networks in Jerez. It thus condensed popular longings for greater economic opportunities and governmental efficiency and transparency.

The transnational character of Bermúdez’ persona was clearly essential to his success. His status as a transmigrant made him a political “outsider,” a benefit in this political context, given the electorate’s generalized mistrust of politicians, as he was not seen as corrupted by national or local political structures. Yet, given the long history of transmigration in Jerez, Bermúdez was also seen as a transmigrant “insider,” as “one of us.” Bermúdez’ rags-to-riches story was compelling to Jerezanos, who have either dreamed of meeting with such success in the United States or who have vicariously lived such dreams through friends and relatives. The fact that his success was gained in the United States was important because it left him less susceptible to accusations that his wealth had been generated through corruption or illicit business activities. Had he gone from rags to riches within Mexico, he would have been suspect. Finally, only by having personally lived the “American dream” could Bermúdez credibly offer to “Americanize” Jerez.

Ironically, had Bermúdez assumed office, changes in the political context at the national and international levels would likely have created daunting obstacles to the implementation of his ambitious proposals for

local change. These obstacles, derived in part from the overall economic downturn in the United States and the U.S. government's turn away from increasing integration with Mexico in favor of tighter internal security following the September 11 attacks, would have posed difficult conditions under which to carry out Bermúdez' economic development and agricultural market expansion proposals.

Bermúdez might have also faced local challenges emanating from these wider changes. The popularity of his "Americanization" proposal, symbolically representing popular desires for political and economic empowerment, would have likely declined as U.S.-Mexican relations became more difficult and, especially, after the U.S. government asserted increasing geopolitical and military unilateralism in defying the United Nations structure in regard to Iraq. The maturity of Jerez migrant networks and the large number of Jerezanos living in the United States may have mitigated against a surge in anti-American sentiment. However, recent survey national-level data show that public opinion regarding the United States declined sharply following the war on Iraq (Consulta Mitofsky, 2003). In light of the high expectations Andrés Bermúdez generated among the electorate and the daunting contextual challenges that he would have faced had he been allowed to take office in Jerez, it now appears that the Trife decision, rather than killing his political fortunes as a transnational actor, may have kept them alive.

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