Interview – Victoria Finn

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Dr. Victoria Finn is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science at University of Oslo, Norway. She researches migrant political participation, (non)citizenship, and migration governance, primarily in Latin America. For "Migrant Rights, Voting, and Resocialization: Suffrage in Chile and Ecuador, 1925-2020," she received the 2022 Best Dissertation Award from the Migration & Citizenship Section of the American Political Science Association (APSA). As service to the academic community, Victoria has reviewed for over a dozen journals, reviews proposals to the annual conference of the International Migration Research Network (IMISCOE), and has served a three-year post as an elected Co-Convener for the Standing Group on Migration and Ethnicity of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR). You can find her publications in, for example, *Citizenship Studies*, *Latin American Policy*, *Territory, Politics, Governance*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, and *Politics and Governance*, as well as in Spanish in *Colombia Internacional* and *Revista Andina de Estudios Políticos*. See her full list of publications here.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

Moving to many countries over the past 15 years has certainly directed my research lines and stirred relevant research questions related to international migration. My previous work on migration topics in the fields of labor economics and international development redirected me to examine policy and laws on paper versus in practice. In addition, I have spent countless hours and resources on my own visa processes, background checks, medical records, education verifications, translations, fingerprinting, affidavits, and much time in immigration bureaus, notaries, and other legal offices. This naturally gives me an insider perspective of the complexity of legal procedures, which has led to most of my research on migration governance and my interest in migrants' access to rights, including voting. Latin America, particularly South America, was a natural fit, given its extensive rights and my lengthy residence in Chile, which served as the primary location for my fieldwork and doctoral studies.

There have been numerous influential people along my path, such as Dr. Luicy Pedroza. Now based at El Colegio de México, she spent a decade at GIGA, a research center in Germany, where I was fortunately accepted for a research stay under her guidance in 2017. Those months greatly shaped how I approached research, seeing it not only as systematic but also as a creative and collaborative process. She has encouraged me over the years and her rigorous and insightful work continues to inspire my research. Two others who come to mind are Dr. Maarten Vink, for his ability to strategically pinpoint and fill knowledge gaps, and Dr. Diego Acosta, for his presentation style and networking skills, as well as his book on citizenship laws, which expanded my thinking on how social constructs and normative views shape borders and categories of people.

Another significant shift in my thinking was learning how to navigate two unavoidable aspects of academia: *failure* and *critique*. These are especially strong during applications—for positions, grants, projects, conferences, promotions—and the publication process. I learned that constant success means the aim is too low. I committed to my research and realized that failure and critiques can improve my work and help me find suitable publication outlets

for it.

How would you describe the current state of migrant enfranchisement around the world?

Most countries around the world offer at least some migrants the right to vote in some elections. By migrants, I mean nationals who live outside their origin country (emigrants), and non-nationals who live in a residence country (immigrants). The latest data show that about 140 countries allow for some external voting and about 50 for immigrant voting, according to the EVRR dataset and the GLOBALCIT ELECLAW indicators. This means a variety of political regimes offer such rights, ranging from liberal democracies to competitive authoritarianism (states holding elections that are not free and fair).

Based on regions, migrant suffrage is most prevalent across Western Europe and the Americas, followed by Africa, and it is most rare across Asia. The EVRR data shows that more African states have external voting on paper, than in practice; as Wellman has analyzed across Sub-Saharan Africa, some incumbents reverse rights or block them in practice, if they estimate they will lose an upcoming election. So again, rights on paper versus in practice can greatly differ.

Considering the Americas and most European countries (EU 28, plus Iceland and Norway), emigrants are typically able to vote in national-level elections of the origin country whereas immigrants can vote in local-level elections in the residence country. Since the 1990s, most EU states grant only other EU nationals local-level rights, but 14 countries extend this also to other long-term residents. Broad trends must be presented with caveats and inter-state differences.

The expansion of migrant voting rights goes alongside changes in citizenship and nationality laws. For instance, in the 1960s only about one-third of countries allowed dual nationality, but about three-quarters of countries in the world allowed it in 2019. Allowing dual nationality means that states have formed a legal mechanism to recognize dual belonging; legal status in more than one country means higher access to rights in more than one political community—what would have been an odd scenario just 50 years ago.

As scholars of transnationalism have been studying for decades, people can live in and between more than one country. They now more often hold a passport to show this dual connection, as well as can more often exercise political rights in two countries. These changes reflect the more interconnected and dynamic contemporary world in which we live. Accordingly, it has attracted more academic research, as colleagues and I survey and analyze in the *Journal of Migration and Ethnicity* in the Introduction to our 2023 Special Issue on migrant enfranchisement.

Which Latin American country provides the best insight into the complexities of migrant suffrage, and why?

There is an excellent article on migrant enfranchisement in Latin America by Cristina Escobar from 2015 that lists when each country enacted both immigrant and external voting rights. The former phenomenon started as early as the 1920s and 30s and the overall trend is that until the 1980s, strong often non-democratic rightwing leaders made these changes, which were mostly driven by national-level reasons. This shifted in the 1990s onwards after more extensive democratization, when more regional and global reasons influenced leftwing leaders to enfranchise immigrants as well as nationals living abroad. These changes occurred alongside shifting discourses and migration governance approaches revolving around national security to more about human rights.

Within these countries, Chile, Ecuador, and Uruguay stand out as the most inclusive for immigrant voting, as I have examined in my work. All three—along with only New Zealand and Malawi—offer universal voting rights to non-citizen residents. This means all immigrants who meet the normal requirements to vote and reach a residence period can participate in all elections: local, intermediate and national. Altman, Huertas, and Sánchez have published a comparative analysis of these 5 countries. However, in Uruguay, the requirements are rigid, such as the 15-year residence period. In Chile and Ecuador, it is 5 years and both of these also offer external voting: Chile restricts it to only nationals who have lived in Chile for at least a year, but Ecuador allows all nationals to not only vote but also

elect special representatives to the national legislature.

Of these, Chile and Uruguay provide intriguing insights into the complexities of migrant suffrage. While they were amongst the first countries in the world to let immigrants vote, given their democratic levels, the theoretical expectation is to have implemented external voting long ago. Yet Uruguay still does not allow nationals abroad to vote, despite years of debate; however, nationals abroad can travel back to the country to vote on election day, which shifts the likelihood of voting for those more well-off who live close. With restrictions, Chile enacted overseas voting in 2014, regulated it in 2016, and implemented it in 2017—after 10 failed proposals over 40 years. These surprising cases demonstrate the strength of normative views toward who should have the right to vote, which can clash with notions of territory and citizenship.

Looking forward, Latin American migration has shifted, especially within the last decade, not least due to the forced displacement of millions of people from Venezuela. As I touched on in an interview last year, this means many Venezuelans already have, and more will have, the right to vote in various residence countries throughout the region. Some people are wary about if and for whom they will vote. But in my work, I have found that people generally adapt and can be ideologically flexible because they recognize the new context has different political parties, systems, and institutions. It will be important to monitor such voter participation and vote choice since, unfortunately, forced displacement continues around the world not only from conflict but also due to political and economic crises.

What challenges does migrant voting present to the concept of citizenship, and how can these challenges be addressed?

Voting has traditionally been portrayed as a right, or privilege, reserved for national citizens. In a simplified form, this idea consolidated with state-making and while drawing boundaries around territories to mark who belongs, thus determining who the state will protect and who gains which rights. But post WWII, and even more so since the end of the Cold War, belonging to more than one place is not a threat of confused loyalty. Such international borders do not define the bounds of ethnicities, religions, and other groups, and human mobility and trade also frequently cross borders in our contemporary interconnected world. From this viewpoint of intertwined economies, supranational organizations, and global cooperation, it is no surprise that the concept of citizenship has also shifted.

As tricky as it is to change one's mindset, given the contemporary world, I do not view migrant voting as a challenge to citizenship, or a challenge to be addressed. If one views participation and involvement as active citizenship, then a "good citizen" is not defined by place or passport. This is what Pedroza means with her book,*Citizenship Beyond Nationality*. And this is why, I believe, rights have expanded to allow dual nationality and migrant voting for foreign residents and for nationals abroad. States still dominate power and control over who gains which rights. The fact that granting migrant voting rights is prevalent and growing throughout the world reflects the process of states and societies changing their minds about how voting relates to territory and nationality.

What are you currently working on?

You can find my most recent publication of 2023, co-authored with Juan Pablo Ramaciotti, in *Politics and Governance*. It explains why emigrant voting was rejected 10 times in Chile before it passed; by examining failure to pass voting rights, it questions some theoretical explanations for the more often studied cases of success. Our findings nuance explanations such as democratic norms and ideology. Much political disagreement stemmed from normative stances over "proving" national belongingness to gain voting rights. While some 130 countries allow their nationals to vote from abroad, our analysis speaks to the around 75 countries that do not.

In addition to various articles, I am finishing my book manuscript, *Why Im|Emigrants Vote: A Theory of Political Embedding*. It outlines the ways migrant voters differ from other voters and why it matters for where and why they vote. At the individual level, people who live abroad are both emigrants of the origin country and immigrants in the residence country; they hold simultaneous relations to both countries. When they have electoral rights in two countries, they face additional options for political participation. In the empirical chapters, I use survey and interview data to demonstrate political embedding, or the dynamic process of creating and adjusting ties to countries and the

people within them. The book analyzes migrant voter behavior in this dual scenario and voting in national-level elections. The mid-level theory of political embedding can also be applied to other types of political participation and levels, such as the local level.

What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?

Work hard and network. Good research comes from training, learning by doing, and an insatiable quest for knowledge. But it also takes a lot of dedication: reading, writing, and editing every day. And to get your research "out there" requires sending it to journals (for PhDs: no need to run everything by your supervisor), using reviewers' comments to improve your work, and having trusted contacts to share your drafts with. From my experience, and especially if you lack experts in your research topic in your department, you can meet such contacts at workshops and conferences, as well as apply for short research stays at other institutions. These are excellent venues to practice presenting, get inspired, and meet potential collaborators. But beware: being there is not enough! Rather, be sure to introduce yourself and, in advance, invite people for a quick one-on-one chat. You can also join organized networks relevant for your work; for instance, I am part of the Red De Politólogas, #NoSinMujeres. Building a network opens countless avenues to expand your research reach, from being invited to be on future panels, to co-authoring and applying for joint projects. Hard work builds a strong CV for the job market and your network will not only send you job opportunities, but they can also review your applications and recommend you to colleagues.