



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Comparative Economics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jce

Do return migrants transfer political norms to their origin country? Evidence from Mali

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 April 2013

Revised 19 December 2013

Available online xxxx

JEL classification:

D72

F22

O15

O55

Keywords:

Return migration

Elections

Mali

Norms transfer

ABSTRACT

Chauvet, Lisa, and Mercier, Marion—Do return migrants transfer political norms to their origin country? Evidence from Mali

This paper explores the link between return migration and political outcomes in the origin country, using the case study of Mali. We use electoral and census data at the locality level to investigate the role of return migration on participation rates and electoral competitiveness. First, we run OLS and IV estimations for the 2009 municipal election, controlling for current emigration and using historical and distance variables as instruments for return migration and current emigration. Second, we build a panel dataset combining the 1998 and 2009 censuses and the electoral results for the municipal ballots of those two years to control for the potential time-invariant unobservable characteristics of the localities. We find a positive impact of the stock of return migrants on participation rates and on electoral competitiveness, which mainly stems from returnees from non-African countries. Finally, we show that the impact of returnees on turnout goes beyond their own participation, and that they affect more electoral outcomes in areas where non-migrants are poorly educated, which we interpret as evidence of a diffusion of political norms from returnees to non-migrants. *Journal of Comparative Economics* xxx (xx) (2014) xxx–xxx. IRD, UMR DIAL, PSL, Université Paris-Dauphine, LEDa, France; Paris School of Economics, IRD, UMR DIAL, IZA, France.

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the link between return migration and political outcomes in the origin country, using the case study of Mali. Before the March 2012 coup d'état, Mali was referred to as one of the most successful democratization stories in Africa since the beginning of the process in the nineties. Mali also has a long-lasting history of migration, both within West Africa and to the rest of the world. Malian migrants are actively involved in the economic development of their country. Besides sending remittances to their families at home, they also gather in hometown associations which contribute to financing public goods in their villages of origin. In this paper, we investigate the political implications of return migration.

Recently, new research has emerged on the political consequences of migration for the country of origin. Following Albert Hirschman's Voice – Exit – Loyalty terminology, Li and Mc Hale (2006) define four channels through which emigration is likely to

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affect the quality of political institutions at home: (1) the ‘absence’ channel: skilled emigration removes the most productive individuals from the country, those who are most likely to advocate for good governance (reduces ‘voice’); (2) the ‘prospect’ channel: the possibility to emigrate (‘exit’) offers the most productive individuals more bargaining power (increases ‘voice’); (3) the ‘diaspora’ channel: emigrants can support political groups or social movements from abroad; (4) the ‘return’ channel: returnees come back with new ideas and are likely to promote specific political objectives (such as accountability, transparency, etc.).

Most studies use a cross-country approach to explore the impact of migration on the quality of political institutions. Li and Mc Hale (2006) look at the impact of the stock of skilled emigrants in 1990 on the quality of the political and economic institutions of the origin country in 2000, and find that skilled emigration is associated with higher quality political institutions. Docquier et al. (2011) find a positive impact of unskilled migration on democracy in developing countries. Beine and Sekkat (2013) also find that migration tends to improve political institutions in the sending country, with the notable exception of “voice and accountability” which is reduced by emigration, consistently with the voice/exit hypothesis. Their results are shown to hold for skilled migration and with a higher impact. Interestingly enough, the impact of migration on political institutions seems to depend on the characteristics of the destination country, advocating for an interpretation of the results in terms of transfer of norms. In the same vein, Lodigiani and Salomone (2012) show that international migration to countries with a higher female political empowerment significantly increases the share of women in the origin countries’ parliaments. Similarly, Spilimbergo (2009) shows that foreign-educated individuals tend to promote democracy in their origin country if foreign education is acquired in democratic countries. Finally, in a recent paper, Mercier (2013) puts forward a positive impact of political leaders having studied abroad on the level of democracy in their country during their tenure.

Micro-economic evidence of the political impact of migration for the origin country is even more recent. Batista and Vicente (2011) investigate the impact of migration on the demand for political accountability in the home country, relying on a “postcard voting experiment” in Cape Verde. They find that migration intensity in general, and the presence of returnees in particular, have a positive impact on the demand for political accountability and better governance. Again, the characteristics of the destination country seem to matter: the impact of migrants on the demand for political accountability in their origin country is higher when the destination country has a better level of governance. In a recent paper on Mexican municipal elections, Pfütze (2012) shows that migration significantly increases the probability that a party in opposition to the former state party will win a municipal election. Finally, Omar Mahmoud et al. (2013) find that support for the Communist party in the parliamentary elections in Moldova is lower in localities with more migration to Western countries.

In this paper, we explore the relationship between return migration and electoral outcomes in Mali, controlling for emigration intensity. We focus on participation and on two indicators of electoral competitiveness, the fragmentation of the votes and the winning margin. So far, no analysis has ever looked at the direct impact of return migrants on political outcomes, most studies focusing on emigration rates. Moreover, with the exception of Batista and Vicente (2011), Africa has never been the field of study to look at the political consequences of migration. We use census data collected in 1998 and 2009 by the *Institut National de la Statistique Malien* (INSTAT). These census data provide a lot of information regarding education, ethnic characteristics, and infrastructures that allow us to control for various potential determinants of electoral behavior. The data at hand allow us to build two different and complementary identification strategies: first, we implement an instrumentation procedure in order to take into account the potential endogeneity in the relationship between return migration and voting behavior. Second, we run fixed-effect estimations over a two-period panel to control for the time-invariant unobservable variables that may be correlated both with electoral outcomes and return migration intensity.

First, we find a positive influence of returnees from non-African countries on electoral participation, suggesting that return migration can affect the political involvement at home. The effect associated with returnees coming back from African countries is found to be less robust. Second, we explore the impact of returnees on electoral competitiveness, measured by the index of fragmentation of the votes between the different lists involved in the race, and by the difference between the share of votes obtained by the first and the second list. We put forward evidence that returnees from non-African countries are associated with stronger electoral competitiveness, but this result appears to be more sensitive than the results on participation, in particular regarding the variable chosen to measure competitiveness. Finally, we examine whether there is a phenomenon of diffusion of electoral norms from returnees to non-migrants. We find in particular that the impact of returnees (both on turnout and on electoral competitiveness) is stronger in poorly educated localities, suggesting that the presence of return migrants may substitute for the education of non-migrants.

The following Section briefly presents the economic literature on the transfer of political norms by migrants and return migrants. Section 3 describes the Malian context. The econometric strategy and data used are presented in Section 4. We discuss the impact of return migration on participation in Section 5. In Section 6, we investigate the effect of return migration on electoral competitiveness. Section 7 explores the existence of a transfer of norms from returnees to non-migrants. Finally, Section 8 summarizes the results and concludes.

2. Returnees and the transfer of political norms to the origin country

2.1. Return migrants and the development of the origin country

Most of the literature on return migration has focused on the occupational choice of migrants upon their return, and on the determinants of their entrepreneurial activities. Dustmann and Kirchkamp (2002) explore the determinants of return

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