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WHO MIGRATES AND WHERE? INSIGHTS INTO GLOBAL MIGRANT SELECTIVITY THROUGH SOUTH AMERICAN MIGRATION

¿QUIÉN MIGRA Y DÓNDE? PERSPECTIVAS SOBRE LA SELECTIVIDAD MIGRATORIA GLOBAL A TRAVÉS DE LA MIGRACIÓN SUDAMERICANA

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Abstract

International migrants, especially those migrating for economic reasons, typically differ from non-migrant co-nationals in both observed (e.g., education) and unobserved characteristics (e.g., motivation). However, knowledge about such migrant selectivity, particularly from the Global South, remains limited. South America is a key region for studying this issue, as half of South American migrants live in another South American country, while the other half reside in Europe or the US. Using harmonized census data from IPUMS, we explore how migrant educational selectivity varies by origin and destination, and how it evolves over three decades (1990s–2010s). We show that South American migrants are selected in general but are more selected when moving to more distant or challenging locations, such as the US. At the same time, intraregional moves can also be highly selective, and at times resemble those directed toward Europe (where selectivity remains lower than to the US).

Keywords: migrant selection; education; South America; South-South migration; South-North migration.

Resumen

Los migrantes internacionales, especialmente aquellos que migran por razones económicas, suelen diferenciarse de sus connacionales no migrantes tanto en características observables (como la educación) como no observables (como la motivación). Sin embargo, el conocimiento sobre la selectividad migratoria en el Sur Global sigue siendo limitado. América del Sur ofrece un contexto propicio para su análisis, dado que la mitad de sus migrantes se trasladan dentro de la región y la otra mitad migra hacia Europa o Estados Unidos. Utilizando datos censales armonizados de IPUMS, este estudio analiza la selectividad educativa de los migrantes sudamericanos según el origen, el destino y su evolución entre las décadas de 1990 y 2010. Los hallazgos muestran una selectividad positiva general, más acentuada hacia destinos lejanos o exigentes como Estados Unidos. No obstante, ciertos flujos intrarregionales también presentan altos niveles de selectividad, comparables en ocasiones a los dirigidos hacia Europa, donde la selectividad es relativamente menor.

Palabras clave: selección migratoria; educación; América del Sur; migración Sur-Sur; migración Sur-Norte.

Introduction

South America is a world region with a long-standing history of intra-regional migration. Having historically been a destination for immigrants from Europe and other continents, it now sends large numbers of migrants to North America and Europe, alongside smaller numbers to other extra-regional destinations (Durand and Massey 2010). Across the region, net migration has been negative (emigration has outstripped immigration) since at least the 1960s (Prieto-Rosas and Bengochea 2023), though it has become positive for some South American countries in more recent years, indicating the convergence of patterns of emigration and immigration. Large exoduses at certain periods have had long term impacts in terms of establishing migrant networks and enhancing the impact of migration on origin country economies, whether through remittances, brain drain, or return migration. Migration between South American countries has been fuelled by longstanding bilateral relationships, vicinity, and favourable migration laws (Brumat and Vera Espinoza, 2024), with Argentina and Venezuela (until the crisis), being the two key immigration poles (Cerrutti and Parrado 2015). Emigration has generally had economic and political conditions in the origin countries as its drivers, alongside the "pull" of potential earnings and job niches at destination. Historical relationships with Spain—and, for Brazil, Portugal—also shape movements between South American countries and these destinations. Overall, the region has a history of increasing intra-regional emigration (Espinoza 2024) alongside substantial extra-regional (IOM 2020) emigration.

While there is a large and increasing literature on the nature of migration from poorer to richer countries (e.g., Mayda 2010; Clemens and Mendola 2024), there is much less that focuses on migration within the Global South and which compares intra-regional to South-North migration. This is despite the fact that around a third of cross-border migration takes place within the Global South (UN DESA 2019). Research has covered both the determinants of international migrant flows (e.g., Mayda 2010), and the characteristics of migrants compared to non-migrants (their selectivity): for bilateral flows (e.g., Chiquiar and Hanson 2005), those migrating to OECD countries (e.g., Belot and Hatton 2012), and those from multiple origins (Clemens and Mendola 2024). We have also seen recent studies of the relationship between migration and inequality in destinations within South America (Prieto-Rosas and Zapata 2024). But, with few exceptions such as Spörlein (2015), we have limited understanding of how selection differs for those migrating within and out of given regions, such as South America.

In this article, we provide further insight into this issue by studying the educational selectivity of emigrants from 10 South American countries to three key destination regions (North America, Europe, and South America) from the 1990s to the 2010s. Theoretically, migrants who are positively selected are expected to migrate to a larger extent (Chiquiar and Hanson 2005; Hanson 2010) –even if theoretical arguments can also predict negative migration under certain conditions (Borjas 1987). At the same time, those who are more selected should also be attracted to somewhat different destinations than those who are less selected—namely, destinations where they can gain the best returns for their skills. The question of what drives overall flows is, therefore, distinct from the question of how the composition of emigrants is related to their destinations. It is this latter question that is our interest.

South American migration patterns are distinctive for men and women: not only do the numbers of women emigrants slightly outnumber those of men (at around 52% compared to 48% globally), but they follow somewhat different migration routes. A body of work attests to the specific features of South American women's migration (e.g., Cerrutti 2023); but the relationship of these distinctive migration patterns to the relative selectivity of male and female migrants has received less attention. It remains an open question whether the relationship between selectivity and migration routes differs (or not) for male and female migrants.

Educational selectivity is important from two perspectives. First, those who are more positively selected are assumed to fare better in terms of integration in destination country settings and in the economic rewards they reap from migration (Feliciano 2020). Second, from a development perspective, the extent of selectivity among migrants constitutes a "brain drain" from the origin country, with potential negative impacts; but it also has the potential to enhance the origin country economy, through stimulating educational attainment, increasing remittance flows, and through return migration of the selected population (Chen et al. 2022; Wahba 2021). For a better understanding of these important issues, we need to address the prior questions of how far migrants are selected and what the patterns of movement of those more or less selected are.

We therefore ask:

1. How educationally selected are emigrants from South America; and does that differ by region of destination?
2. How do men and women's patterns of selection vary by country of origin and by destination?
3. How does educational selectivity of migrants vary over time?

We draw on harmonized IPUMS International (Ruggles et al. 2024) census microdata for both origins in South America and destinations of South American migrants to calculate the educational selectivity of migrants in different settings and to estimate trends. In line with multi-sited approaches in migration studies (Beauchemin 2014), we adopt a combined origin and destination perspective that considers both intra-regional migration and emigration to high-income countries. A key contribution is our ability to compare selectivity of migrants to other South American countries, the US and Europe. We relate observed patterns to existing literature on the drivers of more or less selected migration flows and to contextual data on key characteristics of origin and destination countries. In this way, we add to the literature on migrant selectively by looking at a Global South region as *both* destination for *and* origin of migration, bringing together the development literature that focuses on emigration from the Global South with the immigration literature focused on the selectivity of migrants in high-income countries.

BACKGROUND

Both the flows and the characteristics of international migrants are of substantial research and policy interest. Understanding who travels from where—and why—has implications both for understanding and responding to the demand for migration, the implications for reception, settlement and integration, and the likelihood of return. But beyond the broad characteristics of such migrant flows, there is interest in identifying the selectivity of migrants—that is, how far they differ from their co-nationals who do not migrate. A long-standing staple of economic research and theory (e.g., Borjas 1987; Chiswick 1999), there has been increasing work across disciplines on measuring, and assessing the consequences of, migrant selection. Such work has, to date, largely focused on high-income receiving countries, examining those who have migrated to those contexts (Feliciano 2020). This may lead to inferences about migrant selectivity that are in fact highly localized and dependent on those who actually migrate to that country. Examining a region, such as South America, where countries both receive and send migrants, allows us to a) extend insights on migrant selectivity to those migrating in the Global South, to ascertain whether the general assumptions about immigrant selectivity and its drivers hold, and b) to compare the selectivity of those who migrate both within and beyond the region to ascertain if it reveals systematic patterns.

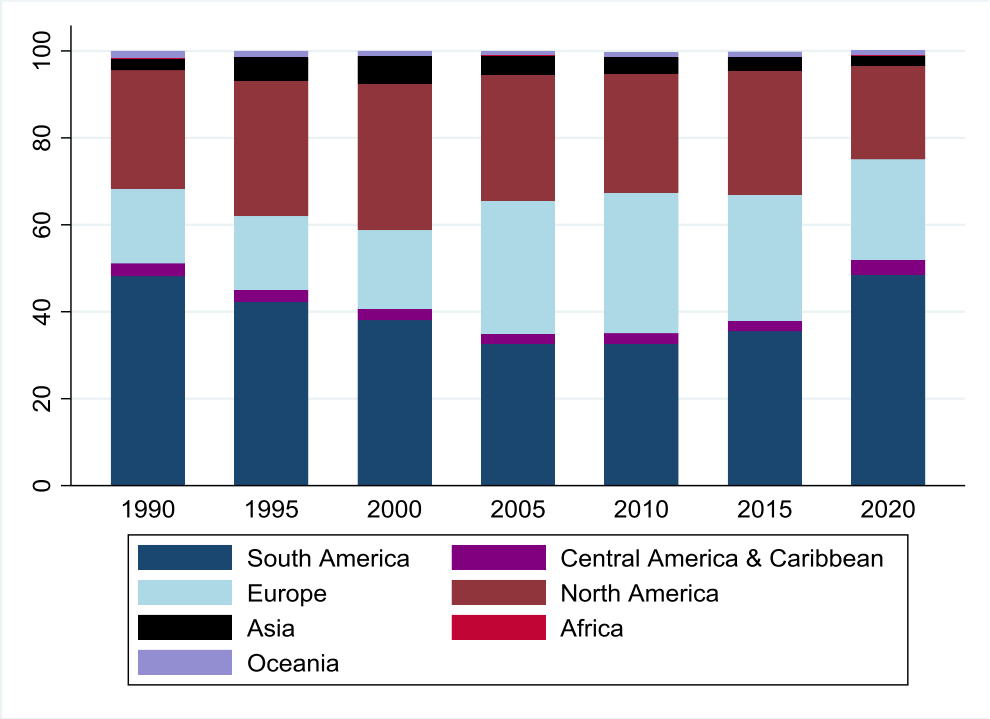
The 10 countries of South America that we study—Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela—represent a diverse set of migration contexts. At the same time, they share a common economic area, MERCOSUR—with free movement and residence and the right to work for its citizens—that eases intra-regional migration (Cerrutti and Parrado 2015). There are also longstanding historical migration patterns within the region, as well as strong links to Europe, both through colonial history and through previous immigration waves to that region (Prieto-Rosas and Bengochea 2023), as discussed in the next section.

Trends in South American emigration

Historically, South America has been a region of immigration, mainly of European emigrants. But since the mid-twentieth century, it has increasingly become a source of international emigrants (Alcaraz, 2012; Durand and Massey 2010). Between 1990 and 2020, the share of the South American population who lived outside their country of birth increased from 1.5% to 4%—or around 17.6 million people—outstripping global growth in immigrants, which went from around 2.9% to 3.6% over the same period (McAuliffe and Oucho 2024). While the increase since 2015 was strongly affected by the crisis in Venezuela, the numbers of South Americans living outside their country of origin had already grown from around 5.3 million in 1995 to nearly 12 million by 2015 (UN DESA 2020). At the same time, South America remains a region of substantial immigration: over the period we study (1990–2017), immigrant stocks in South America increased from 4.2 million to 6.1 million, of whom 2.3-4.2 million came from within South America (UN DESA 2020).

Most South American migration is directed towards three regions: South America, with Argentina and—up until recently—Venezuela being the main destinations; North America, mainly the US; and Europe, with Spain being the most popular destination. As can be seen from Figure 1, these three regions contain more than 95% of all South American migrants. The relative importance of South America as a destination decreased from the early 2000s in favor of Europe, even following the Great Recession of 2008, which decimated employment opportunities in Spain (Finotelli and Rinken 2023) and generated return migration (Cerrutti and Maguid 2016). From 2015 onwards, however, this pattern changed again as a result of the mass intra-regional emigration of Venezuelans.

Figure 1. Distribution of South American emigrants across regions (%), 1990–2020



Source UN DESA data, authors' analysis

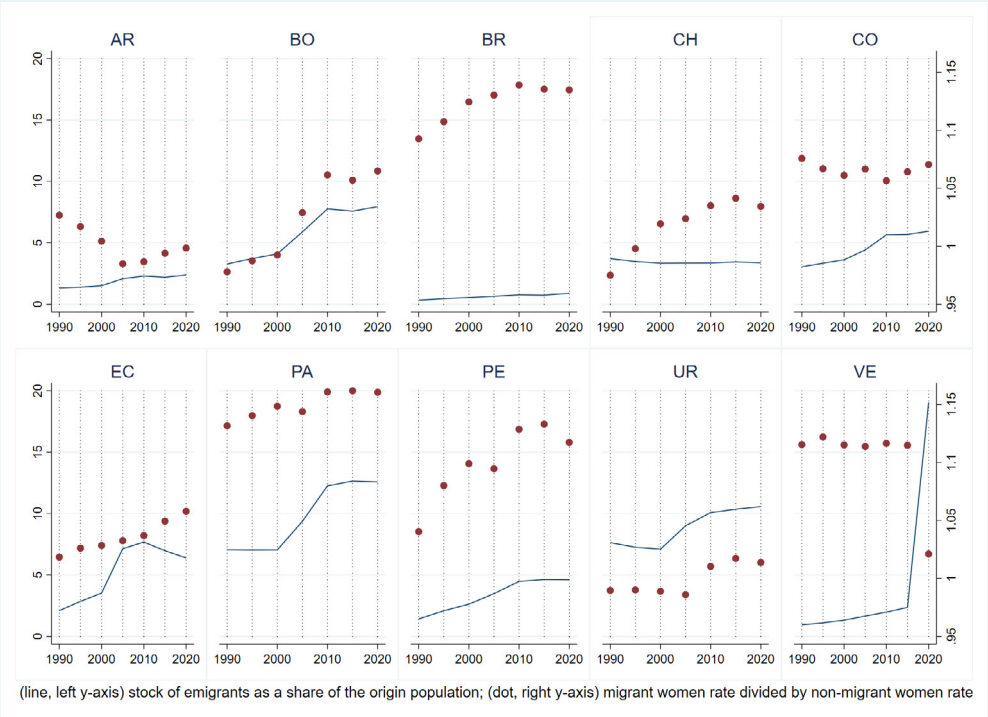
Figure 2 illustrates how the share of emigrant stocks relative to the total population at origin has evolved over time for each of the 10 origin countries in our study. The trend in the shares of nationals living outside their country of birth is shown by the blue line. The red dots reveal the distinctive gendered aspects of migration: each dot represents the ratio of migrant women to migrant men over the ratio of non-migrant women to non-migrant men in that country. Values above 1 indicate that the share of women is higher among migrants than among non-migrants. Paraguay and Uruguay have the greatest proportion of emigrants, followed by Bolivia, Ecuador, and Colombia (particularly more recently). Conversely, Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela (up to 2015) stand out as countries with the lowest shares of emigrants. While for all countries there is an upward trend, some countries experienced a peak in the 2000s, associated with increasing migration to Spain. As for the relative ratio of migrant women, we see that in most cases the share of women at destination surpasses the share of women at origin. There is nevertheless some variation by country and year, and there was a reversal for Venezuela following the crisis.

Underlying these differences in emigrant stocks over time are the push and pull factors that stimulate and sustain migration flows. These countries demonstrate substantial variation in economic context, labor demand, and historical relationships fostering specific migration flows, especially—but not solely—between contiguous countries. For example, Bolivians have traditionally constituted a major migration flow to their higher-income neighbor, Argentina, and there was substantial Colombian migration to neighboring Venezuela stimulated by the 1970s oil boom (Prieto-Rosas and Bengochea 2023), though that has now reversed. Political conditions prompted northward moves, for example from Chile and Argentina; but in these countries—in Chile more recently—that pattern reversed following the end of the dictatorships and increases in prosperity. Meanwhile, the Spanish boom of the 1990s stimulated substantial immigration from across the region, with relative lack of restrictions facilitating such longer-range moves. The demand for domestic labor promoted the migration of women in particular.

Table 1 enumerates the destinations of emigrants from the 10 countries. It shows the distribution across those destinations that are available for our analysis. These destinations comprise the other nine South American countries as well as the US, Spain, Portugal and Switzerland. Our data do not allow us to cover all destinations, but, as Table 1 shows, for most of the South American countries the destinations for which we have information cover where the large majority (over 70%) of emigrants from these countries live. The exception is Brazil where nearly 45% are settled in other countries, particularly Italy and East Asia, which do not have relevant data in IPUMS. Table 1 shows that emigrants from Bolivia and Paraguay are mostly found within the region,

particularly in Argentina. By contrast, those from Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela have largely migrated outside the region. Note that these average emigrant stocks combine the settlement of Venezuelans outside the region prior to the crisis with the large movements to predominantly neighboring countries after 2015. Migrant stocks from Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay are more evenly divided between intra- and extra-regional destinations. Figure A1 in the Appendix illustrates the distribution of migrant shares across the three broad destination zones over time, hence bringing together some of the insights from both Table 1 and Figure 2. There are also variations in terms of gender composition. In general, the emigrant population living outside South America is more feminized, but with some deviations from this overall pattern: Uruguayans in Europe and Ecuadorians in the US are, for example, no more feminized than their counterparts in South American destinations (See further Appendix, Figure A2).

Figure 2. National shares of emigrants (%) (LH axis) and relative ratio of women emigrants (RH axis) for 10 South American countries



Country labels: AR=Argentina; BO=Bolivia: BR=Brazil; CH=Chile; CO=Colombia; EC=Ecuador; PA=Paraguay; PE=Peru; UR=Uruguay; VE=Venezuela.
Source: UN DESA data, authors' analysis

Table 2 provides additional context by illustrating selected push and pull factors that have featured in the study of migrant flows, and of migrant selectivity. Drawing on World Bank Development Indicators, we calculated mean values for each of the decades covered in our analysis for the following features: GDP (in 2021 constant PPPs, international $s); inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient; female labor force participation (LFP, %); and political volatility—a rank measure from 0–100, where more stable countries have a higher score. Other things being equal, we would expect lower GDP to be associated with greater out-migration, given the potential of enhancing income elsewhere (Mayda 2010). We would also expect inequality to promote migration (Stark 2006); and political instability to be associated with greater migration (Czaika and Reinprecht 2022).

There are substantial differences in GDP per capita across South American countries as well as between South America and Europe / the US. These create incentives for labor migration across the countries of the region, for example out of Bolivia and into Argentina, as well as to the higher-income countries of the Global North. Table 2 also shows that GDP per capita has increased strongly across the countries of the region, particularly for Uruguay, which in the 2010s had values comparable to Argentina, and for Peru. GDP per capita remained markedly lower in Bolivia and somewhat lower in Ecuador, Paraguay, and Peru, making continuing pressure to migrate more likely. Just as GDP per capita was rising, inequality as measured by the Gini fell across the period for all countries for which we have full information, reducing incentives for migration. Declines were greatest in Chile and Peru (from a relatively high base) and more modest in Colombia, from a similar

starting point. The smallest reduction was in Uruguay, which nevertheless retained the lowest Gini for the region across the period. Uruguay also stands out for its degree of political stability, by regional standards, which also increased across the period. Yet Uruguay has one of the largest shares of emigrants as seen in Figure 2. It is also a predominantly male-driven migration, suggesting a rather specific migrant profile. Colombia stands out for its poor ranking on political stability, which drove substantial migration to Venezuela. These flows have since reversed, with the political stability measure for Venezuela reaching the same (low) levels over the 2010s. Paraguay and Peru, meanwhile, saw improvements in stability. Not included in the table are remittance incomes. Figures from the World Bank Database, suggest, however, that migration as a remittance strategy might be actively promoted only in Bolivia and to some extent Paraguay. This aligns with the predominantly intra-regional migration of these two countries.

Turning to pull factors, it is expected that women migrants will be more attracted to destinations with higher female LFP rates, given that this will be conducive for their own work and implies a greater need for substitute workers for women's domestic work. Table 2 shows that female LFP rates have been increasing across destinations, with the exception of Argentina and the US. For migration in general, the share of jobs that require only basic education are likely to prove a draw for migrants, who often end up in such jobs. Shares of the workforce with basic education are high in Latin American destinations and lower in other destinations, promoting intra-regional migration for those with lower skills.

While these characteristics of South American countries and their migrant destinations can help us to understand the existing patterns of, and trends in, migration, our main aim is not to explain overall migration patterns, which have been discussed elsewhere (e.g., Feldman et al. 2023), but to provide the broad contours for our exploration of the *selectivity* of the flows feeding these distributions across the period. It is to this issue that we now turn.

Table 1. Destination country composition of emigrants from 10 South American origin countries (%)

Destination	Origin									
	Mostly intra-regional		Mostly extra-regional					Mixed		
	BO	PA	AR	BR	EC	PE	VE	CH	CO	UR
Argentina	56.3	81.7		3.8	0.3	11.5	1.0	37.8	0.2	43.7
Bolivia		0.6	4.6	1.7	0.1	1.2	0.1	0.8	0.1	0.2
Brazil	5.8	6.4	4.4		0.2	1.4	1.2	3.4	0.3	8.9
Chile	5.2	0.4	7.1	0.8	1.9	8.0	3.4		1.5	1.2
Colombia	0.2		0.5	0.2	2.5	0.5	14.5	0.4		0.1
Ecuador	0.2	0.0	0.4	0.1		0.8	2.1	1.3	5.9	0.2
Paraguay	0.2		8.7	9.4	0.0			0.4	0.0	1.1
Peru	1.6	0.1	1.6	0.5	0.7		3.1	1.4	0.3	0.2
Uruguay	0.0	0.2	3.3	1.2	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.0	
Venezuela	0.5	0.1	1.4	0.5	5.5	5.0		3.1	40.7	1.8
In region %	70	89.5	32	18.2	11.2	28.4	25.6	48.8	49	57.4
Portugal	0.0	0.0	0.1	6.8	0.0	0.0	5.1	0.0	0.0	0.1
Spain	11.9	4.3	21.2	5.2	25.0	10.1	19.0	6.9	9.0	15.5
Switzerland	0.5	0.1	1.0	2.5	0.6	0.9	0.7	1.1	0.5	0.4
USA	12.4	3.6	21.1	22.7	51.3	37.4	28.0	15.1	29.7	12.3
Total share covered	94.7	97.5	75.3	55.5	88.1	77.0	78.4	72.0	88.1	85.6

Country labels: AR=Argentina; BO=Bolivia: BR=Brazil; CH=Chile; CO=Colombia; EC=Ecuador; PA=Paraguay; PE=Peru; UR=Uruguay; VE=Venezuela.
Source: UN DESA data, average of distributions (1990–2020), authors' analysis

Table 2. Key selected features of origin and destination country contexts, 1990s, 2000s and 2010s

	GDP p/cap (PPPs, $)			Gini			Political instability rank			Female LFP			Share of work-force with only basic education		
	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3	T1	T2	T3
Argentina	21029	23285	28478	47.9	48.7	42.2	N/A	38.8	48.2	56.5	56.4	56.0	N/A	53.8	49.9
Bolivia	5655	6605	8837	51.8	55.9	45.4	39.4	25.8	33.4	59.9	62.1	61.2	59.7	66.9	64.0
Brazil	13034	15109	18049	58.9	56.1	53.0	36.4	42.2	35.9	50.2	58.4	59.0	67.3	66.7	59.5
Chile	14564	20701	27414	55.8	49.9	46.1	57.4	68.4	59.8	39.1	44.7	54.5	48.5	47.5	50.0
Colombia	10920	12241	16425	54.5	55.5	51.9	6.6	4.3	13.0	55.9	55.5	58.9	N/A	60.7	60.4
Ecuador	9450	10423	13481	53.1	52.6	46.0	30.1	22.5	37.2	50.2	52.4	53.9	N/A	65.3	60.0
Paraguay	10405	10437	14160	52.1	52.9	48.5	26.1	22.2	36.8	55.1	55.8	59.8	66.0	66.8	64.4
Peru	7262	9083	14074	54.4	50.2	43.6	22.6	18.2	29.1	50.7	66.7	73.7	70.0	75.0	75.2
Uruguay	16807	19092	28085	41.4	45.2	40.6	70.7	73.4	80.7	55.6	62.8	68.9	56.6	59.5	63.9
Venezuela	N/A	N/A	N/A	46.3	47.6	N/A	27.7	13.5	13.9	51.3	51.7	51.4	N/A	63.8	61.2
Portugal	29895	35940	36751	N/A	37.5	35.1	92.8	84.0	77.7	60.4	67.1	70.7	56.1	60.8	54.3
Spain	33547	42571	43011	34.8	33.5	35.4	52.7	44.7	51.4	45.7	57.9	68.4	44.3	45.9	48.8
Switzerland	63232	70843	77279	33.9	33.1	32.6	98.9	94.7	95.5	67.4	74.3	78.0	51.8	48.5	50.5
USA	47552	58144	64065	39.6	40.7	41.0	77.1	56.7	61.7	68.3	68.3	66.5	36.9	41.3	41.3

Notes: T1=average of 1990–1999; T2=average of 2000–2009; T3=average of 2010–2019; GDP per capita (PPPs in international $ held constant at 2021); Political stability is a rank measure where higher=more stable; N/A=not available
Source: World Bank Database, World Development Indicators, https://databank.worldbank.org/databases, authors' analysis

Migrant selectivity and the South American context

Migrant selectivity, that is, that those who emigrate differ from non-migrants in countries of origin in economically relevant ways, is one of the staples of migration research. There are two fundamental questions that shape the literature: *whether* migrants are (positively) selected in specific destinations or from particular origins; and whether *the degree* of selectivity (positive or negative) has implications for migrants' and their children's outcomes at destination (Feliciano 2020). A further issue of interest is the extent and implications of selective return migration (Chen et al. 2022; Cerrutti and Maguid 2016); and of particular concern to countries in the Global South (Hanson 2010) is whether return migrants are selected relative to *origin*.

Much existing literature on selection focuses on educational selectivity, since educational attainment represents a largely stable individual outcome by early adulthood that can be measured across countries in a consistent way, enabling comparison between emigrants and their non-migrant counterparts at origin. There have been mixed findings on whether the degree of (educational) selectivity matters for immigrant outcomes in high-income countries (Ichou 2014; Feliciano 2020; Luthra and Platt 2023); but existing literature has generally found, in line with theoretical expectations, that on average migrants are educationally selected (Feliciano 2020; Clemens and Mendola 2024). While refugees are generally considered to be less positively selected than labor migrants, some research has found they that, too, are similarly selected (Spörlein and Kristen 2019).

Nevertheless, systematic comparison of where and why (types of) migrants are more selected is partial. Belot and Hatton (2012) assessed factors associated with selection across OECD countries; but there has generally been much less attention to patterns of selectivity, their drivers, and consequences within the Global South (Zuccotti 2024). In addition, conclusions about migrant selectivity are typically based on those migrating to a given country, rather than through comparison of migrants to different destinations.

Potential emigrants in the Global South have the choice of whether to move locally / within the region or to a higher-income country in the Global North. Standard migration theory would predict that migrants go to where the wage differentials are greatest and where they can gain the greatest economic returns (Borjas 1987). It also recognizes that this is modified by the costs, which include distance, cultural dissimilarity, the barriers to migration at destination, the accessibility of the labor market, and the extent of institutional embeddedness to ease migration. Migration to higher-income countries might thus typically be preferred, but only where the returns outweigh the costs (Chiswick 1999). Migrants to higher-income countries are therefore expected to

be more selected, since they have better capacity to overcome barriers and greater potential to reap (higher) economic rewards. This is particularly the case for those from the poorest countries—a prediction substantiated in Clemens and Mendola's (2024) study of those preparing to migrate. However, within lower- and middle-income countries, specific high-paying niche occupations may still attract (and reward) more selected migrants.

Existing literature largely focuses on those migrating, or intending to migrate, permanently (Belot and Hatton 2012; Clemens and Mendola 2024). But selectivity is likely to differ with proximity and for circular migration, factors salient in South American migration (Prieto-Rosas and Bengochea 2023). These imply a different calculus for the migrant planning a move in terms of the trade-offs between costs and rewards. Despite increasing attention to return migration as part of the relationship between migration and development for lower-income countries (Wahba 2021), the implications for the extent of selectivity for more local, time limited, or more flexible flows, which are more likely to enable or encourage a planned return, are unclear. While proximity of destination has been associated with both lower selectivity and higher rates of migration (Belot and Hatton 2012; Mayda 2010), it is still a moot question whether such flows are selected.

The size of the migrant stock, which is often positively associated with proximity (as observed, e.g., for several migrant groups in Argentina) is also a relevant factor when exploring selection. Research shows that those moving to countries where the concentration of migrants from their origin is small tend to be more selected. Conversely, those moving where there are substantial settled populations tend to be less selected on education (Beine and Salomone 2010).

As for the relationship between educational selectivity and gender, (spousal) migration among women, is associated with being less selected (Ferrara et al. 2025); and those migrating for family reunification tend to have poorer economic outcomes (Kanas and Steinmetz 2020). However, some migration routes are highly feminized (Donato and Gabaccia 2015; Cerrutti 2023), with skilled and less-skilled women engaging in care work and nursing at destination, as with many South American women in Spain and Italy (Cerrutti 2009; Anderson and Shutes 2016). How far such gendered migration pathways are differentially selected merits further attention. Beine and Salomone (2010) found that sensitivity to the size of the network—i.e., that the less educated are attracted by a higher diaspora—is the same for men and women, which may suggest similar patterns of educational selection for men and women.

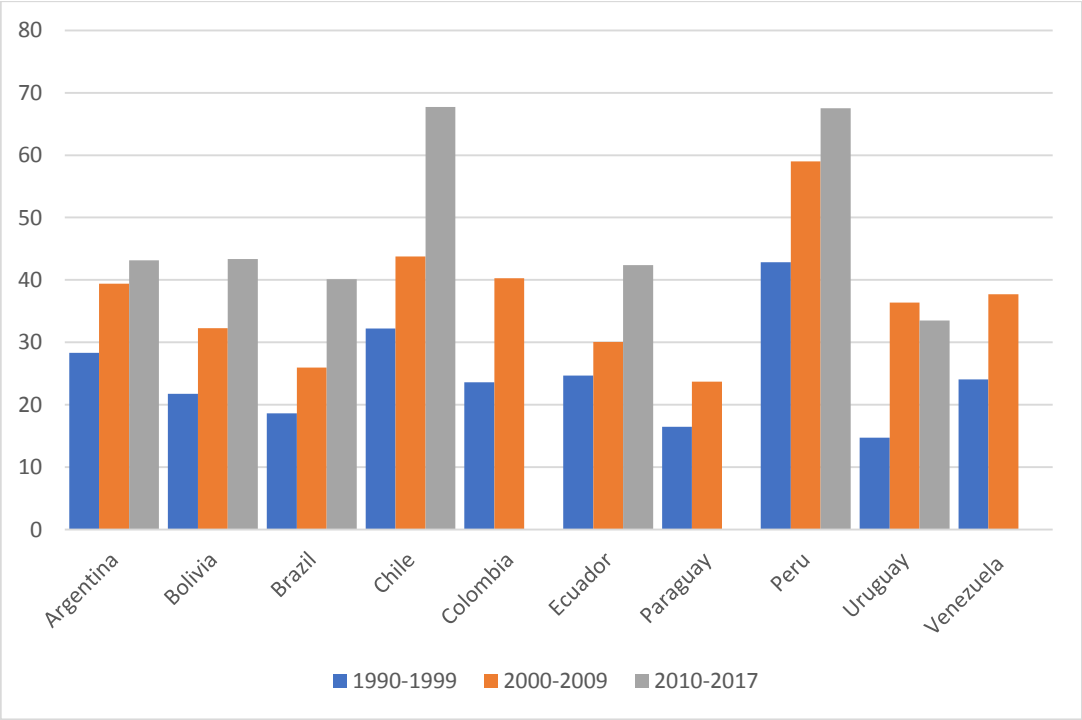
From this literature, we therefore expect those migrating to higher-income countries, those migrating to countries that are further away, and those migrating to countries which have more restrictive entry requirements to be more selected. This should be particularly evident among those who move from lower-income, more unequal and more troubled contexts. Conversely, those migrating within South America, where circular migration and larger settlements are prevalent and associated with lower migration costs should be less selected. We do not have strong expectations regarding gendered differences in selectivity. Finally, to the extent that these origin and destination contexts change over time, we would expect selectivity of new flows to track those changes.

Educational distribution of migrants from the 10 South American countries

Before presenting our selectivity analysis, we illustrate the educational profile across our 10 South American origin countries, as derived from the IPUMS data, and how it varies over time. For simplicity, Figure 3 focuses only on the share of those with secondary education and above for the three broad periods: 1990–1999, 2000–2009, and 2010–2020. Figure A3 in the Appendix shows the full set of educational categories. distinguishing: less than primary, primary, secondary, post-secondary and tertiary. Bolivia, Paraguay, and Brazil have the highest shares with less than primary qualifications (see Figure A3), while, as Figures 3 shows, Chile and Peru have higher and increasing shares with post-secondary and university education—though for all the countries there has been educational upgrading over the three decades.

The different educational composition over countries and time implies the educational rank for a given level of education will vary by country and birth cohort. In order to respond to our research questions, we therefore need to create a measure that will allow us to consistently capture the relative educational position of flows from different periods and countries. We also need to approximate migration flows rather than stocks. We explain our empirical approach in the next section.

Figure 3. Shares of those with secondary education and above (%), 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s.



Source: IPUMS data, populations aged 18–65 resident in each of the countries, authors' analysis

DATA AND METHODS

Data and sample

We use the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, International (IPUMS International) (Ruggles et al. 2024). IPUMS International is a data harmonization initiative that makes census data from over 100 countries and multiple census points available to researchers for analysis. Our analysis covers three decades: 1990s (1990–1999), 2000s (2000–2009), and 2010s (2010–2017). A list of all IPUMS data used for calculations, and those included in the final sample of migrants, are provided in Table A1 in the Appendix. Given that this is an ad-hoc compilation, census-years vary across countries. Furthermore, the availability of data often depends on each country and their rules. For example, in Italy, where there is a substantial share of South Americans, we cannot identify single country-of-birth nationalities. Similarly, we were unable to use the 2010 Argentinean census, given that it lacks information on period of arrival in the IPUMS compilation.

We restrict our sample to individuals who either arrived in the destination country within the past five years or declared that they were living in another country five years ago. This thus captures recent migrants and enables us to approximate flows for each of the three decades captured by the census data available in IPUMS. Given the five-year window for migration, age at migration is either current age or up to five years younger. We therefore restrict the age range to 23–65 to ensure that we are only capturing those who migrated as adults (at least 18) and when they were likely to still be economically active. For those aged in their 20s in our data, our measure of relative education (see below) may capture tertiary qualifications acquired at destination rather than origin. However, few students from South America migrate for undergraduate study (and the educational categories in the data do not separate undergraduate from post-graduate). Moreover, even those few who migrated for education can be considered educationally selected at origin, in that they were on a path to the acquisition of tertiary qualifications when they left. They are thus fittingly compared with those at origin who went on to gain tertiary qualifications. We exclude those country-years where migration flows between an origin and a destination country were smaller than 100 people. This leaves us a total sample of 111,146 migrants across 14 destinations. The 10 migrants' nationalities are measured with individuals' country of birth.

Table A2 in the Appendix shows the samples for each origin-destination country combination. The final sample of migrants does not fully reflect the distribution of each migrant group across countries according to UN DESA data. However, when dividing stocks by the three periods (1990s, 2000s, and 2010s) and by main

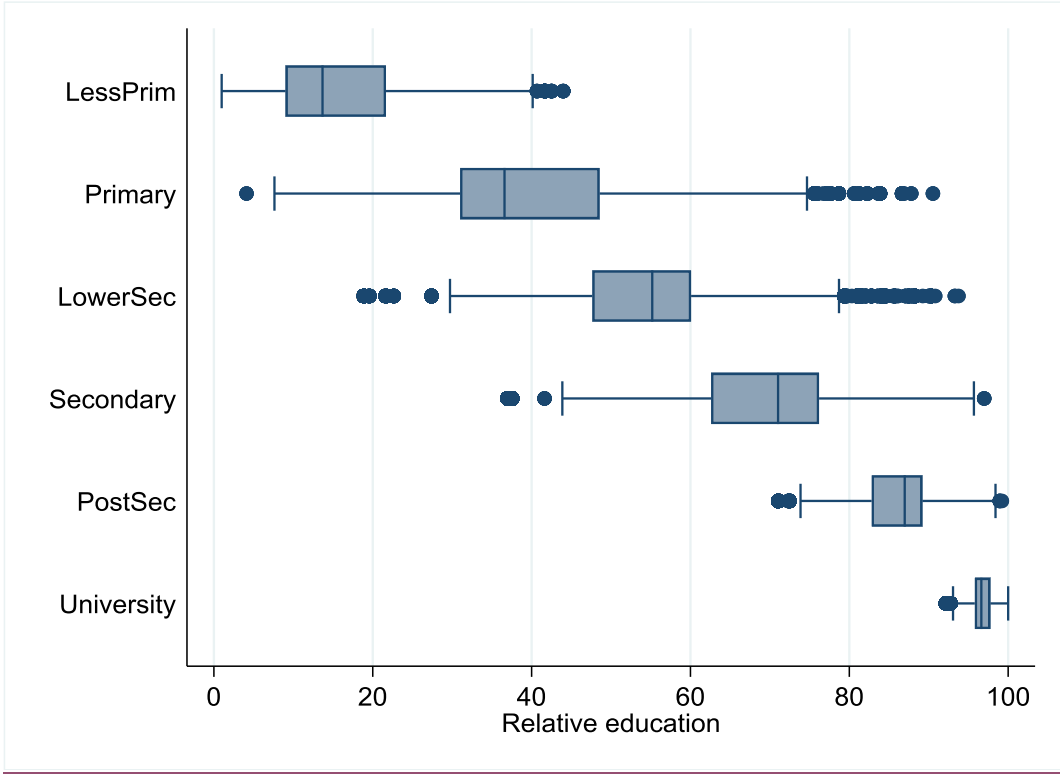
regions (North America, Europe, and South America) distributions reflect quite closely the main destinations found in the UN stock data, the relative importance of different stocks across destinations, and their trends over time. When we conduct our main analysis on origin-destination pairs, we are only looking at selectivity within these sub-samples and so any differences in the distribution across destinations are no longer relevant.

Measures

Relative education (educational selectivity)

Using harmonized measures of education within the IPUMS data, we calculated a measure of relative selectivity using Ichou's approach (2014) and as operationalized to study migrant selectivity elsewhere (e.g., Luthra and Platt 2023). That is, for each migrant respondent of a certain sex and 10-year birth cohort, we compute the relationship between their own education and that of the educational distribution of their peers (of same sex and cohort) at origin. This measure is expressed as a percentile representing the share of all those who have a lower educational level plus half of those with the same level of education as the migrant. For example, if the migrant was educated to post-secondary level, and 60% of their co-nationals of the same sex and birth-cohort were educated to a lower level, while 20% were educated to this level (and the remaining 20% to tertiary level), their relative education rank would be 60+(20/2)=70. This gives a value of relative education lying on a distribution from 0–100, with values above 50 indicating that they are positively selected relative to their non-migrant counterparts. Our measure thus takes account of changes over birth cohorts in the attainment of education. It offers a common metric of selectivity that we can compare across different periods and countries with different educational profiles, anchored as it is in their origin country position. Figure 4 shows the distribution of relative education over educational levels for migrants in our sample. We can see that, especially in the middle educational categories, there is considerable variation in terms of how selected migrants are for a given level of absolute education.

Figure 4. Distribution of relative education by levels of education; South American migrants



The vertical line in the box identifies the average; the outer limits of the box identify, respectively, the 25th and 75th percentiles; the external limits identify the adjacent upper and lower numbers; points identify non-adjacent values.

Source: IPUMS International, authors' analysis

Other measures

Our census data come from three time periods, though differing by precise year—around the middle of the 1990s, around the middle of the 2000s, and around the middle 2010s. We therefore distinguish flows according to three time points capturing each decade. We control for broad age band to take account of any systematic differences in selectivity by age: 23–29 (migrated age 18–29—young migrants; 33% of cases); 30–49 (migrated age 25–49—mid-life migrants; 56% of cases) and 50–65 (migrated age 45-65—older working age migrants; 11% of cases). We also control for sex (54% are female).

Analytical approach

We first provide an overview of selection patterns. We describe the distributions of relative education across the 10 origin countries and three main regions. We then estimate linear regression models of educational selection in each destination region for each origin, including controls for sex, age band, and time period. We report marginal effects with an interaction between country of origin and region of destination. Next, we repeat the estimation, but this time distinguishing the specific country-destination patterns, which allows us to explore the diversity within South America. We again report marginal effects with an interaction term between country of origin and country of destination. Finally, we estimate the evolution of selectivity over time for each main region and then each destination by origin country, controlling for age band and sex. We report the marginal effects from linear regression models with an interaction term between country of origin, region / country of destination and time period. We undertook separate analyses disaggregated by sex, but as the findings were, in fact, highly comparable for men and women (as illustrated in the Appendix, Figure A4), we focus on the pooled analysis.

In estimating these models, we are not estimating the differential probabilities of attending a given destination; but simply, from among those we have information on, how selectivity varies given the country of origin (c.f. the approach in Polavieja et al. 2018). We report all our results graphically for ease of interpretation.

RESULTS

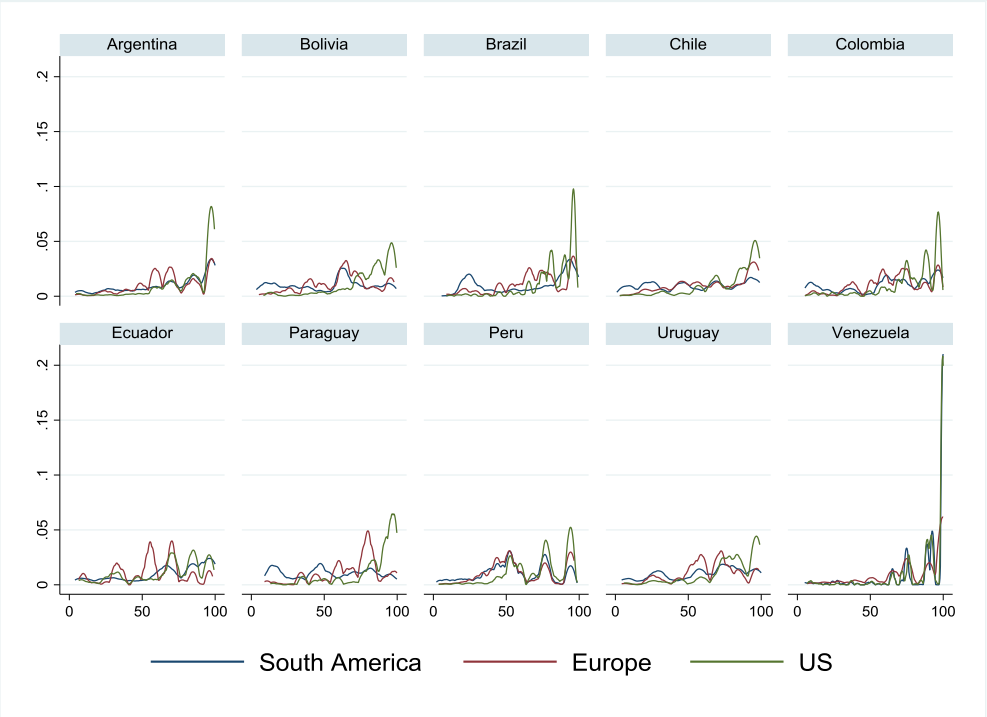
An overview of selection patterns

Figure 5 illustrates selectivity across the 10 origin countries and three main regions. It shows that emigrants tend to be positively selected—i.e., they are concentrated above the 50% mark—not only in the US and, to a lesser extent, Europe, where we might expect this to be the case, but also in South America.

Figure 6 shows estimates for mean levels of selection for each country and main region of destination, (with controls). We see, again, a tendency for migrants in the US to be more selected, while those in Europe occupy an intermediate position. This reflects not only the greater returns migrants may gain in the US but also the more challenging migration regime compared to Spain, where migrants are not especially highly selected. Indeed, it would seem that in line with the conclusions on colonial links in Belot and Hatton (2012), the longstanding relationship between many South American countries and Spain is reflected in lower selectivity among migrants to Europe not only than to the US but in some cases than to other South American countries.

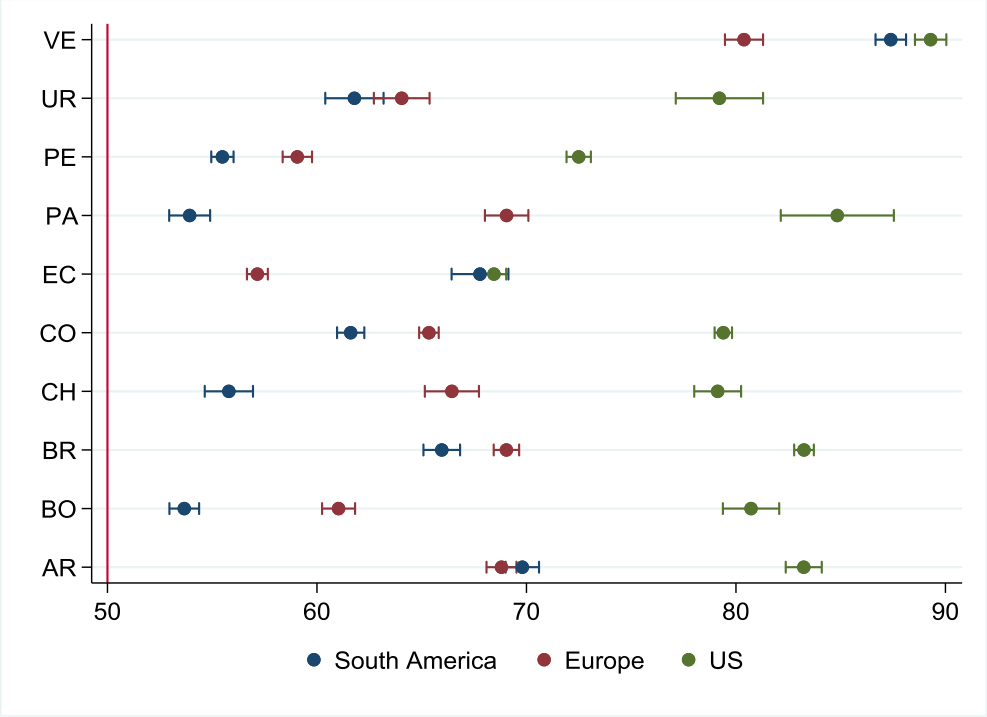
We identify some distinctive patterns: Bolivia, Chile, and Paraguay tend to follow the "expected" pattern of greater selectivity of those migrating to the US, followed by Europe. For emigrants from these countries (and Peru), those migrating within South America are the least selected. For another group of countries, selection of those migrating to Europe is only slightly higher (Brazilians, Colombians, and Peruvians) or even equal (Argentina and Uruguay) to that of those migrating to South America. Finally, for Ecuadorians and Venezuelans selection is highest for those migrating to both the US and South America (in the case of Venezuelans this is driven by the recent post-crisis migration trends). These initial patterns reveal the wide variation in migrant educational selectivity. While the US remains an area of very high selection, Europe resembles South America more than the US, even if the costs of migrating there rather than intra-regionally are higher. This could potentially reflect differences in job opportunities that the different contexts offer, since selectivity is likely to reflect both opportunities and capacities at origin and the fit with opportunities at destination. Interestingly, despite the differences we saw in Figure 2 in terms of the patterns of women's migration, the extent of selectivity by origin and region of destination are largely consistent for men and women (see Appendix Figure A4).

Figure 5. Relative education by origin country and main region of destination (kernel density)



Source: IPUMS International, authors' analysis

Figure 6. Estimation of relative education by origin country and main region of destination (average marginal effects; CI 95%)



Controls: sex, time period, and categorized age. Reference line at 50%.

Country labels: AR=Argentina; BO=Bolivia: BR=Brazil; CH=Chile; CO=Colombia; EC=Ecuador; PA=Paraguay; PE=Peru; UR=Uruguay; VE=Venezuela.

Source: IPUMS International, authors' analysis

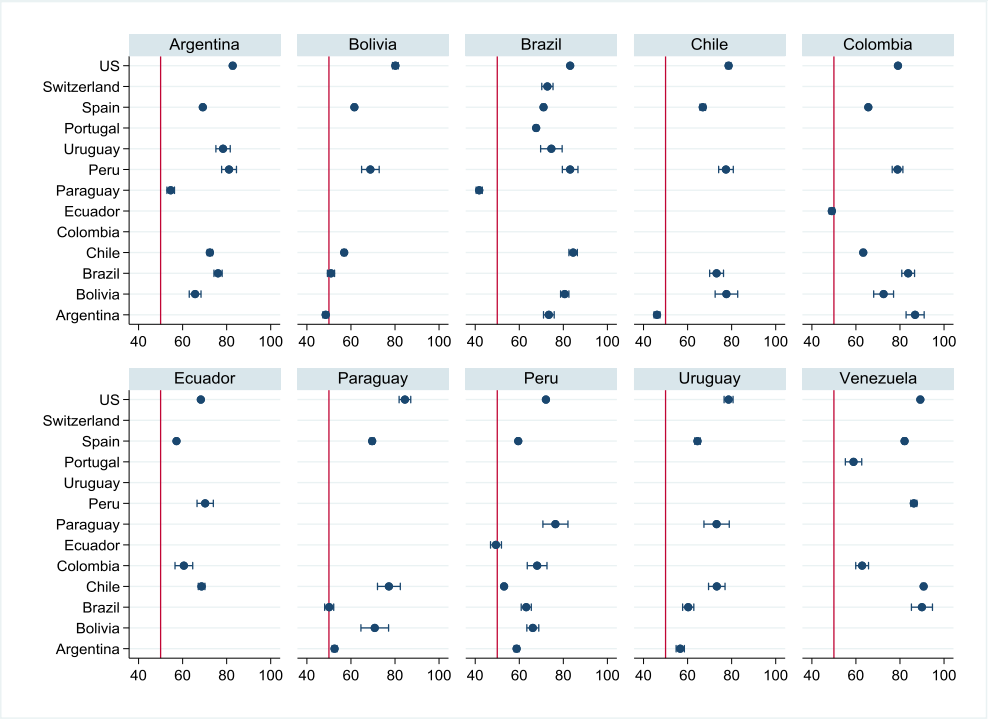
Selectivity within migration corridors

In order to better identify how selection operates across specific migration corridors, we next look directly at levels of selection in the different destinations for each country of origin (Figure 7). We focus on diversity within South America, given most of the effect for Europe is driven by migration to Spain.

In all cases there are deviations from the aggregate regional patterns described above. Bolivians, Chileans, and Paraguayans, the migrant groups showing the more standard or expected pattern of lower selectivity within the region, nevertheless have some instances of high selectivity: Bolivians in Peru, Chileans in South American countries other than Argentina, and Paraguayans in Bolivia and Chile. In countries where selection appeared equal in South America and Europe (Argentina and Uruguay), we also observe lower selectivity of Argentineans in Paraguay and Uruguayans in Argentina. In countries where the selection patterns appeared equal in the US and South America (Ecuador and Venezuela), we see that Venezuelans in Colombia are less selected. Finally, in cases where the general trend holds, but less strongly, we see greater variety in terms of destinations and patterns of selectivity.

These observations suggest that certain bilateral routes are dominated by those migrating to specific occupational niches that offer higher returns to those more selected. Given the relevance of selection for both migrant outcomes and impacts on origins (Platt 2025), these specific routes merit further future investigation. Such bilateral routes with higher educational selectivity are generally of lower volume, as can be seen from Table 1; but may nevertheless provide interesting insights into selective migration. Conversely, lower selectivity within South America is often observed in neighboring migration corridors where relatively larger volumes of populations have moved: Bolivians, Chileans, Paraguayans, and Uruguayans in Argentina; Brazilians and Argentineans in Paraguay; or Venezuelans in Colombia.

Figure 7. Estimation of relative education by origin country and country of destination (average marginal effects; CI 95%)



Controls: sex, time period and categorized age. Reference line at 50%.

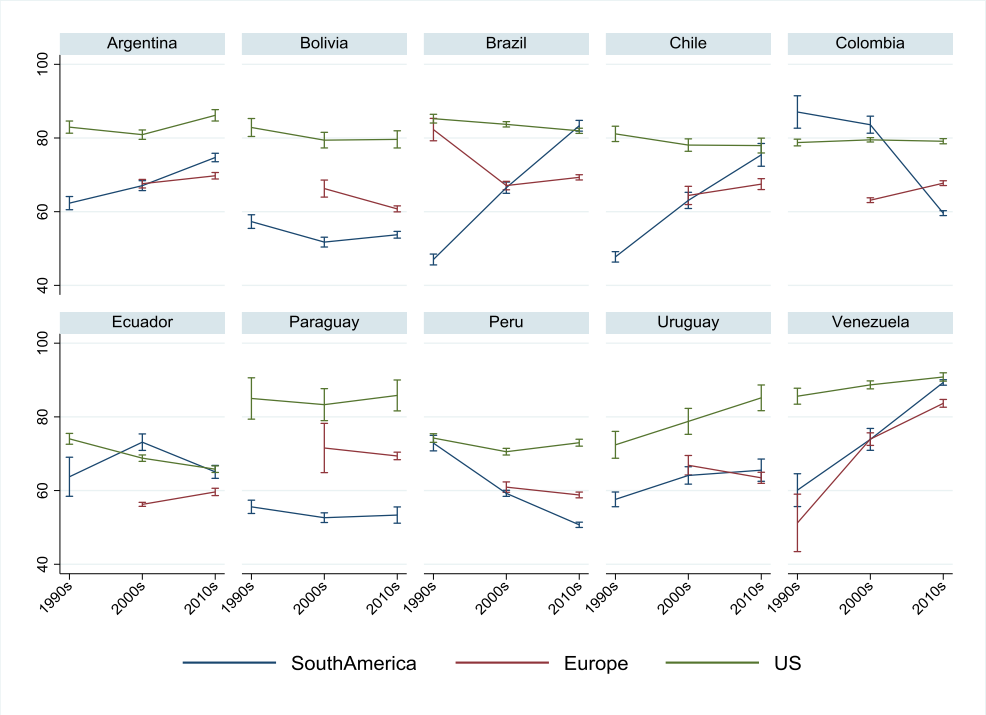
Source: IPUMS International, authors' analysis

Changes in selectivity over time

In this final section, we explore the evolution of patterns of migrant selectivity over time. We might expect migration to generally become less selected over time, as migration corridors are established and communities at destination facilitate network migration (Massey 1990; Fussell 2010). Concurrently, as educational attainment

rises at origin, especially the share of those educated to secondary level or above (see Figure 3), educational selectivity should reduce. At the same time, migration patterns may also respond to economic and policy changes, such as financial crises and evolving migration policies. Spain is an interesting case here as the dramatic impact of the Great Recession on employment of both Spaniards and migrant workers reduced its attractiveness both as a destination and as a place of settlement for many migrants, particularly those in insecure employment (Cerrutti and Maguid 2016). At the same time, Spanish policies moved towards regularization of irregular migrants and streamlined routes to citizenship (Finotelli and Rinken 2023), enhancing the probability of settlement for those who stayed and establishing more settled communities from Latin America. This is likely to have had mixed effects on selectivity over time, easing the situation for those living there, and thus decreasing selectivity, but reducing the immediate post-recession attractiveness of the destination, leading to only the more selected migrating. To see which pattern dominates—and where—we again first provide an overview by region (Figure 8) and then explore specific migration corridors, focusing on South American destinations (Figure 9).

Figure 8. Estimation of relative education by origin country and region of destination (average marginal effects; CI 95%)



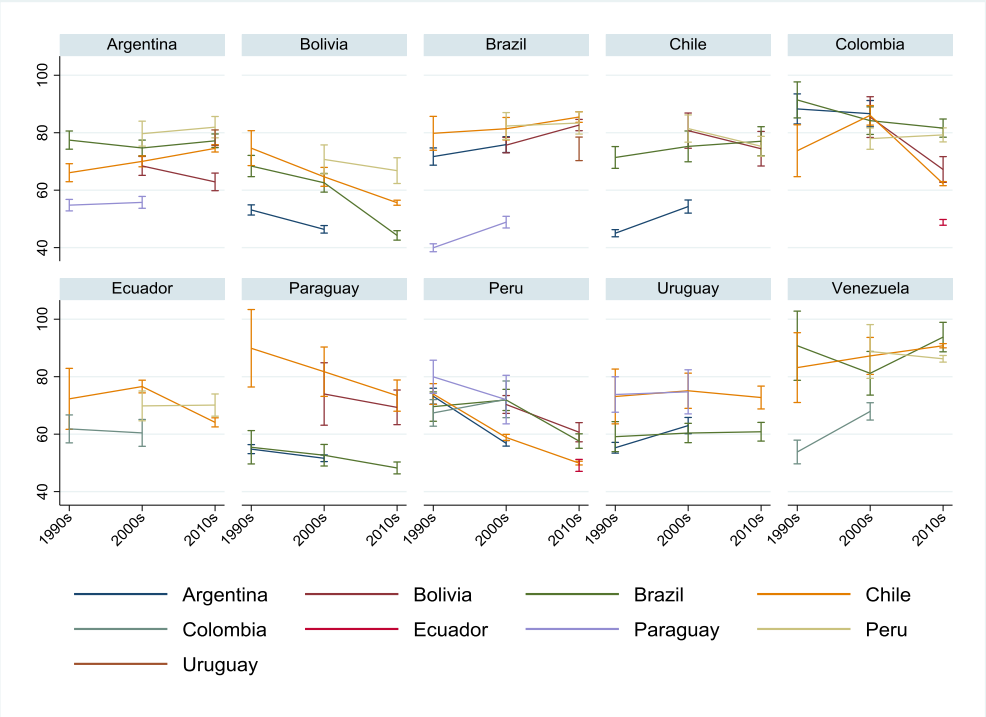
Controls: sex and age bands.

Source: IPUMS International, authors' analysis.

Figures 8 and 9 show mixed trends across origin countries and destinations, with selection decreasing in some cases, while increasing in others. First, there are those following a more predictable pattern of reducing selectivity. This is generally the case for Bolivians and Paraguayans migrating within South America, and especially those moving to their richer neighbor, Argentina, where they have had a long-term presence. We also see this pattern among Bolivians in Spain, their second main destination, and also among Peruvians, especially those in Europe and South America. These nationalities also share the experience of a substantial increase in the number of emigrants since the 2000s.

Second, there are countries such as Argentina and Venezuela, which have been important immigrant-receiving countries in the region, but which have also experienced changing political and socioeconomic circumstances. This combination of scenarios would suggest selective emigration of Argentineans and Venezuelans (with an important share of extra-regional migrants). Selectivity has also tended to increase over time, in search of opportunities unavailable at home. It is likely, however, that selection will decrease in Venezuela after 2015, given the mass emigration taking place there.

Figure 9. Estimation of relative education by origin country and intra-regional country of destination (average marginal effects; CI 95%)



Controls: sex and age bands.

Source: IPUMS International, authors' analysis

Third, there are those countries which have seen specific increases in selectivity within the region but not beyond, as with Brazil and Chile. These countries have also seen substantial increases in GDP and declines in inequality over the period. As Figure 9 shows, for Brazil, the increases in intra-regional selectivity apply to most destinations: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Paraguay. Given the linguistic difference between Brazil and these countries, this may suggest that specific skilled occupations are becoming open to Brazilians across the region. For Chile, by contrast, greater selectivity in the region is driven by migration to neighboring Argentina. Uruguayan emigrants to Argentina are also increasingly selected, a pattern which corresponds to the increasing similarity with their previously richer neighbor in terms of GDP.

Finally, there are those which have seen greater selectivity in migration to Europe (Spain) such as Colombia and Ecuador, with a concomitant reduction in the selectivity of within-region migration. Interestingly, the greater presence of these migrant groups in Europe—which is even bigger than the shares of Bolivians or Peruvians—has not been accompanied by a reduction in educational selectivity, even if selection remains relatively low for them.

Not all the countries directly fit one of these stylized patterns, but the very diversity of trends reveals both the value of taking a more fine-grained approach to regional patterns of migration and the light it can shed on how specific explanatory factors and conditions may play out for those seeking to optimize their opportunities through migration.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The study of migration trends of South American migrants within and outside of South America occupies an important place in the literature on migration flows. The long-standing presence of the US as a key destination, enduring migration corridors within South America, and the emergent presence of Europe as an important destination, especially for female migrants, are well-known in the literature. However, we know less about the composition of different waves. The role of selectivity, more specifically educational selectivity, in driving particular migration flows and shaping outcomes at destination—and potentially, via return migration, at origin—is of substantial interest among migration scholars (Feliciano 2020; Wahba 2021). Selectivity is expected to influence both the decision to migrate and the choice of destination (Clemens and Mendola 2024; Spörlein

2018). Educational selection is assumed to capture, via placing people within the rank distribution in their country of origin, a range of attributes and resources beyond educational level itself (Ichou 2014; Feliciano 2020; Luthra and Platt 2023). Being more selected should facilitate moving in the first place and support moves to more distant or challenging locations such as those with greater restrictions on entry or cultural distance. In return, more selected migrants expect higher returns to their (additional) skills and capacities. While our results are partly in line with these expectations, they also reveal a more complex scenario that invites further investigation. We note five main findings.

First, the US emerges as the destination where educational selectivity is highest. This applies to all the South American migrant origins we studied. The high selectivity is likely related not only to the difficulties associated with entering the country (Belot and Hatton 2012), but also with the potential returns to selection in a country characterized by high GDP and high inequality (Borjas 1987; Chiswick 1999; Stark 2006).

Second, although European countries share some of the challenges the US presents, especially in terms of immigration restrictions and distance, educational selectivity, although positive, is not as high among migrants to these countries, and is not consistently higher than that of those moving within South America. Migration to Spain is affected by both push factors—a weakening economic situation in Argentina and restrictions on entry to the US; and pull factors—Spain's high labor demand, the desire to attract migration from countries beyond Morocco, the need for caring services, legislation that gave migrants rights to education and health, and several regularization programs, which promoted migration but not necessarily more selective migration (Finotelli and Rinken 2023). Like Argentina in South America, Spain makes a desirable destination for South American migrants due to long-term historical relations, similar cultural traits, and a common language, as well as higher GDP and political stability. Substantial settlement has eased network migration to Spain, and the nature of available jobs is attractive to those with moderate skills, assuming sufficient resources to migrate. This is expressed, for example, in the cases of Ecuadorian and Colombian migrants in Spain, who on average are not more selected that their counterparts in South America.

Third, the diversity of selection levels and trajectories within the region is striking. In line with our expectations, the common economic area and historical migration patterns, alongside contiguity, have fostered marginal—and declining—selectivity for those from certain countries, such as Bolivia and Paraguay. Yet, in other cases, destinations within the region attract highly selected migrants, who, given the returns they might expect from their higher levels of selection, alongside the greater resources these imply, will only be moving intra-regionally for returns to these skills. While this tends to apply to the smaller migration flows within the region, it is still useful to demonstrate how intra-regional migration within the Global South can be highly selected under certain circumstances. The precise nature of those circumstances merits further attention. In addition, we saw that countries could be both senders and recipients of more selected migration depending on the destination or origin. This indicates that there is not a single attractive or avoided destination across the region. Even in the case of Argentina, which tends to attract relatively less-selected migrants, those moving to Argentina from Colombia and Brazil are relatively highly selected.

Fourth, despite the distinctive, feminized nature of migration flows from and within the region, there were only minor differences in the selectivity patterns of the male and female emigrants in our sample. Even if women are moving in greater numbers to particular destinations, the relationship between level of selectivity and specific migration corridors and their evolution over time barely differs between the sexes. This finding, though somewhat counterintuitive, aligns with Beine and Salomone's (2010) earlier study and requires further scrutiny and explanation.

Finally, by taking into account a 20–30-year window of migration flows, we were able to illustrate how the selectivity of flows has evolved over time and the fruitfulness of the temporal approach, not only in revealing diversity in the trends across the region—with some flows becoming more and some less selective—but also in reflecting how variation in push and pull factors affect them. This is illustrated, for example, in the contrasting changes in selectivity patterns of Bolivians and Ecuadorians in Spain, both exposed to the 2008 economic crash.

Our study is not without its limitations. It is largely exploratory. Beyond broad expectations, we did not set out to test specific propositions about patterns of selectivity. We were also unable, with these data, to elucidate the mechanisms behind selection patterns, or the presence of the specific occupational niches we posit in our account of highly selected intra-regional flows. Nevertheless, we believe we have established a basis for further work on this topic and have demonstrated the potential of bringing selection research to regions of the Global South and adopting a multiple-origin, multiple-destination and longitudinal approach to expand our understanding of this salient topic.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors of this article declare that they have no financial, professional or personal

conflicts of interest that could have inappropriately influenced this work.

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Authorship contribution statement:

Lucinda Platt: Conceptualization, Research (supervision, literature review, formal analysis, secondary data analysis, fieldwork, formal analysis), Methodology (design and implementation), Writing (original draft, review, and editing).

Carolina V. Zuccotti: Conceptualization, Research (supervision, literature review, formal analysis, secondary data analysis, fieldwork, formal analysis), Methodology (design and implementation), Writing (original draft, review and editing).

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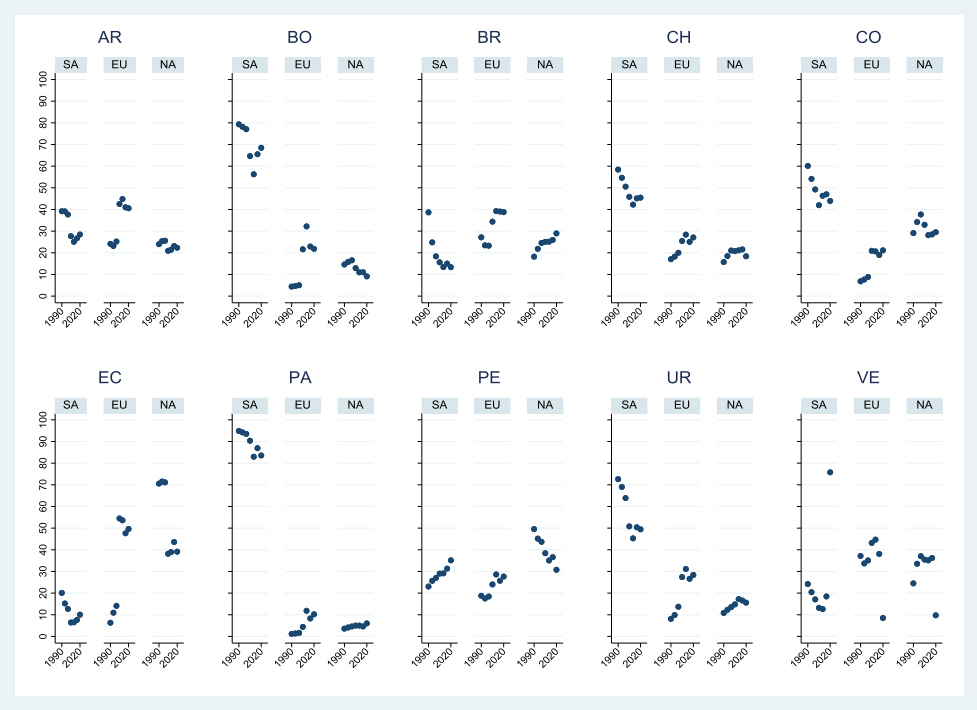
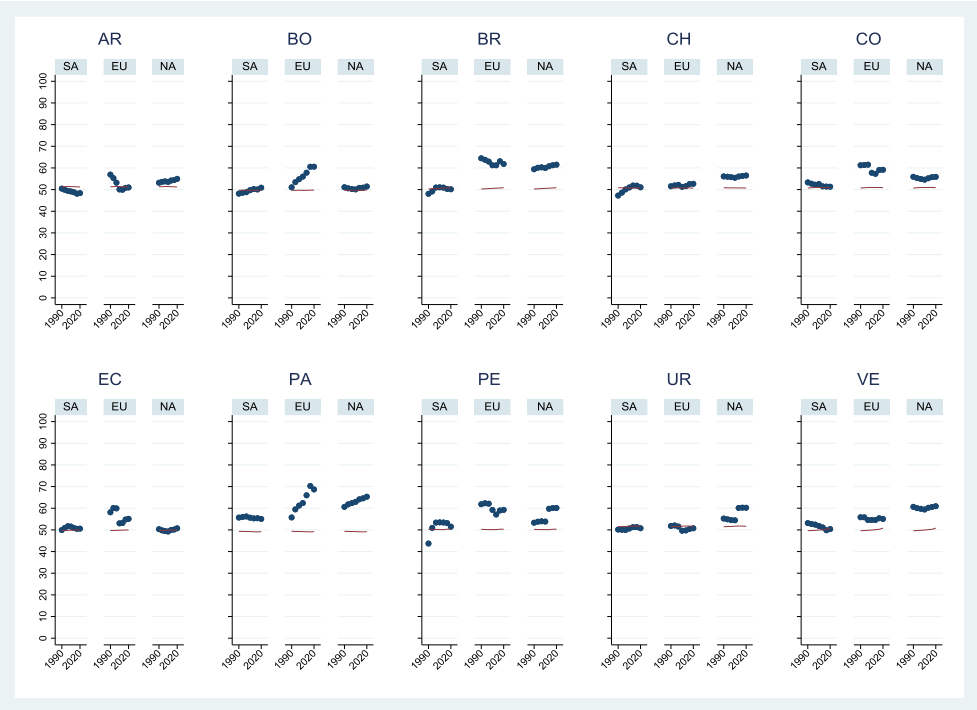
WHO MIGRATES WHERE? APPENDIX FIGURES AND TABLES

Figure A1. Shares of migrant stocks (%) by region of destination (South America, add parentheses to SA; Europe (EU); and North America (NA)) and by time (1990–2020)



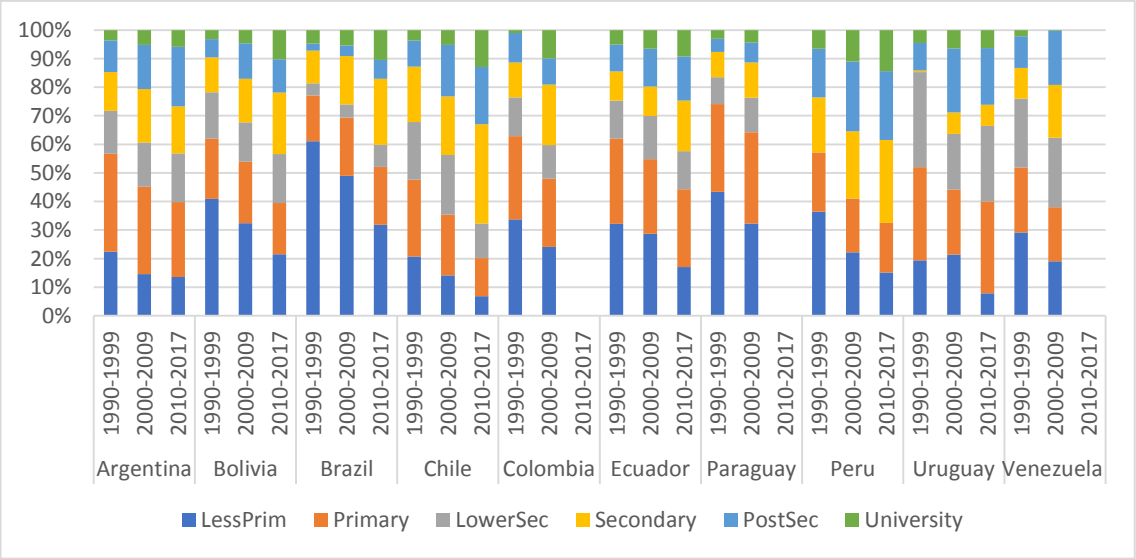
Country labels: AR=Argentina; BO=Bolivia: BR=Brazil; CH=Chile; CO=Colombia; EC=Ecuador; PA=Paraguay; PE=Peru; UR=Uruguay; VE=Venezuela.
Source: UN DESA, authors' analysis

Figure A2. Shares of women migrants (%, dots) by region of destination (South America, add parentheses to SA; Europe (EU); and North America (NA)) vs. share of women at origin (lines, %) over time (1990–2020)



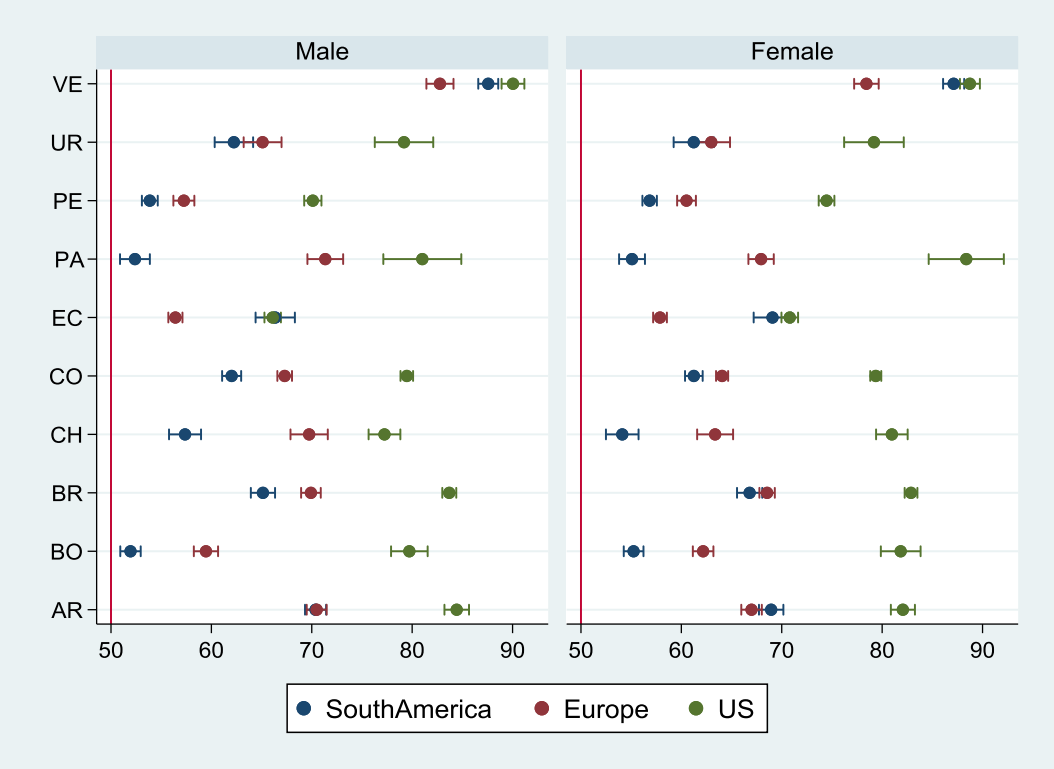
Country labels: AR=Argentina; BO=Bolivia: BR=Brazil; CH=Chile; CO=Colombia; EC=Ecuador; PA=Paraguay; PE=Peru; UR=Uruguay; VE=Venezuela.
Source: UN DESA, authors' analysis

Figure A3. Educational distributions, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s.



Source: IPUMS data, populations aged 18–65 resident in each of the countries, authors' analysis

Figure A4. Estimation of relative education by origin country, main region of destination, and sex (average marginal effects; CI 95%)



Controls: sex, time period, and categorized age. Reference line at 50%.

Country labels: AR=Argentina; BO=Bolivia: BR=Brazil; CH=Chile; CO=Colombia; EC=Ecuador; PA=Paraguay; PE=Peru; UR=Uruguay; VE=Venezuela.

Source: IPUMS International, authors' analysis

Table A1. List of IPUMS datasets for calculations and for final sample of migrants (underlined only)

	1990s	2000s	2010s
Argentina	1991	2001	2010
Bolivia	1992	2001	2012
Brazil	1991	2000	2010
Chile	1992	2002	2017
Colombia	1993	2005	
Ecuador	1990	2001	2010
Paraguay	1992	2002	
Peru	1993	2007	2017
Portugal	1991	2001	2011
Spain		2001	2011
Switzerland			2011
United States	1990	2000	2010
Uruguay	1996	2006	2011
Venezuela	1990	2001	

Source: IPUMS International

Table A2. Sample sizes (unweighted) for origin country combinations in sample

	Argentina	Bolivia	Brazil	Chile	Colombia	Ecuador	Paraguay	Peru	Uruguay	Portugal	Spain	Switzerland	US	Total
AR		470	918	2,345			1,145	306	318		3,101		1,568	10,171
BO	1,913		989	3,386				217			2,437		639	9,581
BR	502	941		914			1,816	276	141	2,528	1,944	172	4,550	13,784
CH	1,721	128	325					315			920		932	4,341
CO	186	165	332	4,916		2,348		590			7,766		6,729	23,032
EC				1,454	191			255			7,521		2,927	12,348
PA	2,640	85	878	125							1,420		153	5,301
PE	2,725	458	551	7,712	163	548	104				3,389		3,289	18,939
UR	940		594	239			102				889		245	3,009
VE			119	4,452	345			1,915		121	1,889		1,799	10,640

Country labels: AR=Argentina; BO=Bolivia: BR=Brazil; CH=Chile; CO=Colombia; EC=Ecuador; PA=Paraguay; PE=Peru; UR=Uruguay; VE=Venezuela.

Source: IPUMS International, authors' analysis