



Diaspora engagement mapping

PANAMA

Facts & figures

Terminology: There is no reference to the concept of diaspora in official documents, or institutional communications guiding the state's relationship with its nationals living abroad. The Ministry of External Relations uses the term "Panamanians Overseas/Abroad" (*Panameños en el exterior*) to define in broad terms non-resident Panamanian nationals or citizens.

Political rights



Dual citizenship¹



Right to vote in national elections for citizens residing abroad²



Voting from abroad



Postal and electronic voting

Remittances



Remittances as a share of GDP: **0.62%**

Remittances inflow (USD million): **515,68**

Data disclaimer

As diaspora definitions vary widely, we have chosen to use comparable data on emigration as a proxy. This does not include all who consider themselves diaspora and is not necessarily aligned with national definitions of diaspora. Emigration data comes from UNDESA (2024) and remittances from the World Bank (2023).

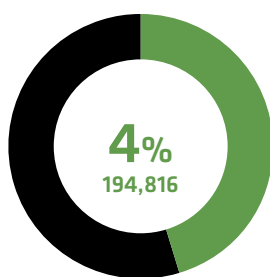
Emigration



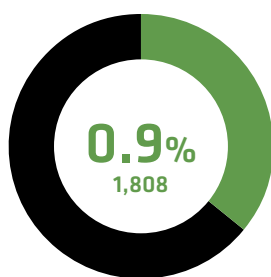
% of emigrants in total population



% of which in the EU



♂ 45.3%
♀ 54.7%



♂ 36%
♀ 64%

Top countries of destination



United States of America	161,903
Costa Rica	16,546
Colombia	3,506
Mexico	2,241
Italy	1,170

1 The Nationality Law governed by the 1972 Constitution does not recognise dual citizenship, except for a child born abroad to Panamanian parents, who may retain dual citizenship until adulthood (18). Document available online at: <https://pdba.georgetown.edu/Parties/Panama/Leyes/constitution.pdf>. According to a report on dual citizenship, Panama distinguishes between nationality (nacionalidad), and citizenship (ciudadanía), "which is a condition required to exercise political rights to elect, be elected and hold public office, (...) Panamanian citizens are all adult Panamanian nationals entitled to exercise such rights". Birthright nationals of Panama cannot legally lose or renounce their nationality. However, naturalised Panamanians can lose their nationality by renunciation, obtaining another nationality or by serving an enemy nation. See, Nicolas Rodriguez Serna (2016). Report on Citizenship Law: Panama (European University Institute). Available online at: [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/41746/EUDO_CIT_CR_2016_08\(2\).pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/41746/EUDO_CIT_CR_2016_08(2).pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

2 The right to vote is not restricted based on residency status, but rather on citizenship and electoral registration. Non-resident Panamanian citizens have voting rights in the election of President and Vice-President, but certain conditions must be met. To participate in elections, individuals must be Panamanian citizens, possess an identity card, be registered in the electoral roll (*Registro de Electores Residentes en el Exterior - RERE*), and have full civil and political rights. For the 2014 elections, electronic voting was introduced as an alternative to standard postal vote. The Electoral Code and detailed information available online on the Electoral Tribunal portal: <https://www.tribunal-electoral.gob.pa/publicaciones/codigo-electoral/>.

Overview of the policy and legislative framework



- 1995** ● **1995** (revised), Title III of the **Labour Code** (articles 98 to 125) stipulates certain protection mechanisms for Panamanians working abroad, focused on labour rights. In virtue of Article 99 under the *Special Labour Protection Standards*, “the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare shall commission the Panamanian consul nearest to the place where workers are to render their services, or the consul of a friendly nation, to exercise the greatest possible vigilance with regard to the fulfilment of these contracts, authenticated copies of which shall be sent to him.”
- 2010** ● **2010** **The Agreement between the Kingdom of Spain and the Republic of Panama** entered into force in 2011 and established provisions to avoid double taxation on income and wealth taxes and to prevent tax evasion. It applies to businesses and individuals. Similar agreements are in place with multiple countries including the Czech Republic, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Portugal, and the United Kingdom.
- 2019**
⌵
2030 ● **The National Strategy of Cultural Diplomacy for 2030** (NSCD) mentions the concept diaspora by its Greek etymology signifying a “dispersion of seeds”, to highlight “the contribution of diasporas towards the emergence and consolidation of the [Panamanian] nation,” and to engage in a broader dialogue with Panamanians of various descents (i.e.: Afro-Caribbean, Chinese). Since Panama “is a country known to receive historic diasporas, (...) cultural diplomacy helps broaden the repertoire of national identity.”

» Trends

Panama’s emigration flows are relatively low compared to neighbouring countries, with overseas Panamanians constituting less than 8% of the total population. Emigrants are mainly educated cohorts with professional qualifications, the majority opting to settle in the US, followed by Costa Rica, and Spain. As such, the government does not refer to Panamanians living abroad as a diaspora, although it did recognise the contribution of historic diasporas to nation-building, part of a broader cultural diplomacy strategy.

Panama has been one of the fastest-growing economies in the Western Hemisphere, stimulated by incentives that target foreign capital, investment, and skills. Both resident and non-resident Panamanians benefit from an advantageous legal system, enabling privileged access to the domestic labour market, significant protections as well as political enfranchisement, on the backdrop of a relatively stable political climate. Under bilateral and multilateral agreements, Panamanians living abroad also experience a more predictable and permissive fiscal framework, preventing double taxation, complemented by access to a vast infrastructure of public services and transferable social security benefits. Though not transposed into a consolidated engagement policy, the state has created favourable conditions to nurture connections between its overseas citizens and the home country, both pragmatically and through cultural heritage.

The Electoral Tribunal has simplified the mandatory electoral procedures for non-resident Panamanian citizens, with online registration and vetting via a dedicated portal. Moreover, there are three options available for casting a vote, on-site, if the citizen is in Panama on election day, by post, or via the internet. Overall, Panama has enfranchised its citizens living abroad, by enabling alternative voting mediums and simplified enrolment.

Due to Panama’s economic growth being propelled by a surge in investment, labour input and an infusion of foreign wealth, the country’s migration regime primarily leverages the skilled and financially potent human capital. However, safeguarding (temporary) labour migration has gained more traction, particularly for indigenous populations and other groups deemed vulnerable to exploitation. For instance, the Ngäbe-Buglé, indigenous to

Western Panama, have historically migrated to Costa Rica for seasonal employment in coffee plantations but lacked adequate labour protections. In 2015, Panama and Costa Rica signed a bilateral agreement affording temporary migrants access to healthcare and the portability of social benefits on an equal basis with nationals. The Labour Code also makes provisions for safeguarding the labour rights of Panamanian nationals abroad, and to this end, the Ministry of Labour is closely coordinating with consulates to ensure contractual legality and appropriate working conditions.

Access to employment, in numerous professional sectors, including medicine, healthcare, law, economics, architecture, and engineering, is reserved for Panamanians by birth or naturalised citizens, a legal protectionism that compounds exclusionary implications for skills transfers, especially for second-generation overseas Panamanians.

Moreover, the levels of engagement of Panamanians living abroad with their home country and their response to government initiatives can be particularly challenging to gauge, as there are no institutionalised consultation mechanisms in place. The main interface for structured, albeit one-sided exchange remains the Ministry of External Relations through cultural diplomacy initiatives and the network of diplomatic missions providing assistance and relevant information.

Obstacles



- **Low political participation/interest:** Despite electoral inclusivity and an overall high turnout, voter participation from abroad has been low in the previous elections. For the 2019 presidential rounds, of 7,725 registered citizens only 17.8% cast a ballot either electronically or by post.³
- **Limited recognition:** Panama lacks an institutional framework that actively engages Panamanians living abroad, who may perceive their grievances, causes, and aspirations as underrepresented in national political discourse.
- **Lack of coordination:** Institutional coordination on the overall engagement of non-resident nationals is relatively low, with competencies and attributions dispersed among several ministries.
- **Trust:** Despite substantial progress in certain areas of development and economic growth, corruption remains an entrenched practice, therefore eroding public trust. Despite numerous benefits and incentives, non-resident Panamanian citizens may prove reluctant to invest, return, or engage more determinedly.

³ Based on statistics published by the Electoral Tribunal, available online at: <https://www.tribunal-electoral.gob.pa/eventos-electorales/plan-general-elecciones-plagel/>.

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RETURN MIGRATION, INVESTMENT

Incentives for non-resident Panamanian nationals

According to regulations, Panamanian citizens can import household goods, furniture, and personal belongings free of import tax, upon proof of living outside Panama for at least two years. The Retirement Programme (*Panama Pensionado*) targeting foreign nationals also produces fiscal exemptions and access to benefits for Panamanians living overseas, or any eligible person wishing to retire in Panama. Moreover, to encourage in-country savings, the Fiscal Code stipulates that Panamanian citizens, foreigners and non-residents are not taxed on exempt income (i.e. interest on Panamanian government securities, interest on savings accounts, and time deposits maintained with banks established in Panama).

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY, COMMUNICATION, AND INFORMATION

Panamanians Abroad

The Ministry of External Relations publishes on its website profiles of Panamanians residing abroad, showcasing their contributions across various sectors (both in Panama and the host countries). Part of Panama Coopera and aligned with the *National Strategy for Cultural Diplomacy 2030*, the initiative also emphasizes heritage, intercultural dialogue, and cultural diplomacy for sustainable development.

CONSULAR SERVICES

Registry for Non-Resident Panamanian Nationals

Panama's diplomatic missions operate an online registration system for Panamanians living overseas, in the provision of consular services and assistance, such as registration of births, marriages and deaths, legalisation of documents, visas, import of goods, or access to social security benefits and pensions. Moreover, Panamanian diplomatic missions are tasked with assisting nationals abroad during and after disasters, specific measures being outlined in the MFA's Procedure Manual.

Annex: List of Actors

Diaspora related institutions

- **National institutions**
 - At ministerial level

Ministry of Public Security, MINSEG

Tasked with guaranteeing internal security and the protection of fundamental rights, the Ministry also oversees the migration agenda, in coordination with the National Security Council, other institutions and subordinate agencies.

Ministry of External Relations, MIRE

According to its official website, the Ministry directs international relations and establishes the country's foreign policy, promoting regional integration, as well as defending the interests of the Panamanian nation and its nationals abroad, in accordance with constitutional norms, international laws and treaties. Its network of diplomatic missions provides consular services to nationals residing abroad and various forms of assistance which require coordination with other agencies and institutional bodies, for instance, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. The Ministry also engages in outreach through cultural diplomacy and promotion activities.

- At sub-ministerial level

National Migration Service, SNM 2008

Operating under the remit of MINSEG, the agency controls, regulates and supervises the migratory movement of nationals and foreigners, in accordance with migration policies issued by the Executive Branch and in compliance with the Political Constitution of Panama, migration laws, conventions, agreements and international treaties.

Migration Consultative Council 2008

The Migration Consultative Council Is an Inter-ministerial coordination mechanism aimed at advising the executive branch on migration policies.

Diaspora organisations in Europe

Asociación de Panameños en Barcelona

Works to “visibilize their culture” and build a strong community among expatriates.

Read more about diaspora organisations
in “[Starting guide: What is a diaspora
organisation](#)”

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