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LADB Staff

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Panel Recommends Voting Rights for Mexicans Living Abroad

by LADB Staff

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In a controversial report, a panel of electoral experts has recommended that Mexican citizens living abroad be granted the right to vote in the 2000 presidential election. The recommendation is based on a six-month study commissioned by the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE). The recommendation, announced in mid-November, applies only to Mexicans who have not become naturalized citizens of another country.

The panel estimates more than 7 million Mexican citizens could be eligible to participate in the next presidential election in June 2000. According to IFE estimates, overseas votes could represent as much as 15% of the total votes in that race. The IFE estimates that approximately 99% of the potential voters live in the US, with the rest scattered throughout Canada, Paraguay, Bolivia, Spain, Germany, Guatemala, and Venezuela.

Of the Mexicans in the US, 90% reside in just four states: California, Texas, Arizona, and Illinois. Opposition parties could benefit from overseas vote The IFE is scheduled to recommend to the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate in November how to proceed with the results of the survey. Legislators are not expected to take a final vote on the controversial recommendation for several months. Legislators from the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) are expected to present the strongest opposition to the initiative, since informal polls show many Mexican expatriates would support opposition parties.

But some electoral experts suggested that the overseas votes could mirror those within Mexico, with similar proportions of voters supporting the PRI, the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), and the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). "Nobody has proven that this could become an anti-PRI vote," said IFE member Emilio Zabada, who coordinated the initiative. "In any case, you can't exclude constitutionally entitled and valid voters because of how you think they might vote."

Interior Secretary Francisco Labastida Ochoa has voiced the strongest concerns about the initiative. In a letter to IFE president Jose Woldenberg Karakowsky, Labastida questioned whether the government could afford to spend as much as US\$1 billion to open the vote to Mexicans living overseas. But the IFE study said the costs would be much lower, ranging from US\$76 million to US\$356 million. The experts put forward six possible methods, ranging from voting by mail or even by phone to setting up ballot boxes at Mexican consulates.

Under the most restrictive plan, about 1 million people could be eligible to vote in the 2000 election. The broadest plan would potentially include all 7 million. The strongest argument by opponents against allowing the overseas vote is the risk of undue influence by foreign interests. Former

attorneys general Diego Valades and Jorge Carpizo oppose the measure, which they called "contrary to the goals of maintaining our national sovereignty."

Another major opponent of extending the vote overseas is Jorge Bustamante, an influential researcher at the Tijuana- based Colegio de la Frontera. Bustamante cited an example in which key players in the US could influence the election by providing funds and other support to a candidate who supports their position.

Similarly, prominent political scientist Luis Rubio argues that many Mexicans who have moved to the US have not kept up with developments in Mexico enough to cast an informed vote. "The majority of voters in the US no longer have close personal links with Mexico," Rubio told the Los Angeles Times. "They would not have to live with the consequences of their decision." (Sources: The News, 08/12/98; Proceso, 08/09/98, 08/16/98, 09/13/98; El Nacional, 09/14/98; El Universal, 09/15/98; Siempre, 10/15/98; Excelsior, 09/14/98, 10/13/98, 10/27/98; Novedades, 08/13/98, 09/14/98, 11/13/98; La Jornada, Spanish news service EFE, Los Angeles Times, 11/13/98)

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