

7-14-1999

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Senate Fails To Pass Election Reform, Leaving Overseas Citizens in Limbo

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1999-07-14

In early July, Senate members of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) refused to consider a package of electoral reforms advanced by opposition parties, effectively killing a proposal for Mexicans living outside the country to participate in the 2000 presidential election. In November 1998, the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) recommended that Mexicans residing overseas be extended voting privileges (see SourceMex, 1998-11-18). The vast majority of these Mexicans reside in the US, particularly in California and Texas. By law, the Senate had to approve any electoral reforms by July 2, 90 days before the official start of the election campaigns in October 1999.

The inaction by PRI senators ensures the overseas-voting initiative along with other measures that would have allowed parties to form coalitions and increase the transparency of elections will not be implemented in time for the 2000 presidential election. PRI senators said the bill was complex and contained "very serious technical and legal errors." Reforms would have benefitted opposition parties. Opposition leaders said the ruling party was afraid to approve reforms that could affect the PRI's chances in the 2000 election. "The PRI is trying to avoid a historical responsibility to create advances in electoral reform," said PAN leader Luis Felipe Bravo Mena.

The PRD expressed a similar sentiment. "The only thing stopping our compatriots living abroad from voting in 2000 is political will," said PRD Sen. Mario Saucedo. Political observers concurred with the opposition parties. "The PRI didn't have many incentives to support the reforms," said political scientist Jose Antonio Crespo of the Centro de Investigacion y Docencia Economica (CIDE). Arturo Santamara, a sociology professor at Universidad de Sinaloa in Mazatlan, said the PRI especially had no interest in extending the vote to Mexicans residing overseas. "The predictions are that the election will be very close," said Santamara. "If 1 million or 1.5 million Mexicans, those with voter-credential cards, vote, you have to figure that somewhere around 80% or 85% of them would vote against the PRI."

PRI president Jose Antonio Gonzalez Fernandez denied opposition assertions that the governing party opposes extending the vote to Mexicans overseas. Gonzalez told reporters guidelines had not been defined sufficiently to allow overseas voting in the 2000 election. The California-based Coalition of Mexicans Abroad, which represents Mexican citizens in the US, pledged to campaign against the PRI in the upcoming election. Coalition director Jesus Martinez Saldana said the organization, which has 10.7 million members in the US, would work to fund the campaigns of PAN and PRD candidates in 2000. "We will back, any way we can, the political parties that supported us," said Martinez Saldana. (Sources: The Dallas Morning News, 07/01/99; Associated Press, 07/01/99; Copley News Service, 07/02/99; Novedades, 07/02/99; The News, 06/02/99, 07/02/99; San Diego Union-Tribune, 07/03/99; Reuters, 07/01/99, 07/08/99; El Universal, 06/01/99, 07/09/99; La Jornada,

06/24/99, 07/02/99, 07/09/99; Excelsior, 06/28/99, 07/02/99, 07/09/99; Los Angeles Times, 07/02/99,
07/13/99)

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