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Zacatecas State Grants Unprecedented Electoral Rights to Expatriates

by LADB Staff
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In what could become a model for similar federal legislation, the Zacatecas state legislature voted unanimously to amend the state constitution to give expatriates from the state the right to vote for candidates in statewide and municipal elections. The bill has some important far-reaching provisions, including a plan to allow Zacatecans to launch their campaigns from the US and another that lets children of former Zacatecas residents seek state and local offices even if they were not born in the state.

The state legislature, dominated by the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), went as far as to reserve at least two seats in the state legislature for expatriates. The initiative, however, does not allow Zacatecans residing overseas to run for governor. There is some precedent for Zacatecas expatriates serving in public office in Mexico. One former resident of the state, Manuel de la Cruz, was awarded one of the PRD's at-large seats, which are allocated in the federal Congress based on the percentage of votes a party receives in the election.

Zacatecas PRD Gov. Ricardo Monreal Avila said the changes in the state constitution were necessary to ensure the protection of the rights of all Zacatecans. He said about 1.5 million Zacatecans live in the US, a number equal to the state's current population. "There are no longer any borders between here and there," said Monreal Avila. "We are the first state to recognize the political rights of the emigrant."

The move by the Zacatecas state legislature gives the PRD a leg up on the Fox administration, which has pledged to seek the vote for expatriates but has been unable to deliver on its promise. The administration renewed that pledge shortly after the 2003 mid-term congressional election, promising to push for changes in time to give expatriates the right to vote in the 2006 election (see SourceMex, 2003-06-23).

As expected, the initiative was well received by Zacatecas expatriate groups in the US. "Migrants want to be part of the solution to the problems that afflict our state. We Zacatecanos who are here have not forgotten our homeland and we want to contribute in greater ways to making our state better," said Guadalupe Gomez, president of the Federation of Zacatecano Clubs of Southern California.

Monreal also has support among one of the largest immigrant-rights organizations in the US, the Coalicion por los Derechos Politicos de los Mexicanos en el Extranjero. "The right to vote is not an option, or even a choice," said coalition president Primitivo Rodriguez. "Rather, it's a right mandated by the Constitution. It doesn't matter whether one or a million Mexicans turn out to vote."
**Other states could follow Zacatecas model**

The Zacatecas vote could give Monreal an advantage in his bid to gain the PRD's nomination in the 2006 presidential election. The Zacatecas governor is expected to face stiff competition for the nomination from popular Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and from ex-presidential candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas. "Our initiative could have implications [in decisions of state legislatures] all over the country, especially in states like Michoacan, Guanajuato, Coahuila, Oaxaca, Puebla, and Veracruz, which account for the largest number of emigrants," Monreal told the Mexico City daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy.

Monreal said he will support any effort by Fox to grant all expatriates the right to vote in recognition of their importance to the Mexican economy. "We need to recognize the right of expatriates to vote for the president of the republic," said the governor.

In a report published in early August, the Banco de Mexico (central bank) said expatriates sent back US$6.1 billion to Mexico in the first six months of the year, an increase of 29% from the same period in 2002. Remittances are Mexico's second-most-important source of foreign exchange, surpassed only by oil-export revenues. This year's remittances could well exceed the level of direct foreign investment in Mexico, which totaled US$13.6 billion in 2002 and could decline this year because of the exodus of some companies to lower-wage countries like China, Honduras, and Guatemala.

Some Mexican politicians support the concept of granting expatriates the right to vote but worry about the logistics and cost of implementing a voting plan, especially in 2006. "We wouldn't even know where to start," one political leader told The Dallas Morning News. "We face a potential logistical nightmare." The newspaper said some Latino leaders are worried about the implications of the plan because it would dilute their political power in the US and inflame anti-immigrant sentiment.

**Immigration becomes key political issue in Arizona, California**

Immigration has risen to the top of the agenda in the policymaking in some states with large populations of expatriates. In Arizona, for example, Democratic Gov. Janet Napolitano said she will propose a pilot program to allow the use of guest workers in the state. Under the program, foreigners would receive temporary work visas granting them the same labor rights as US workers. The governor said she would take into account proposals submitted at the federal level by members of Congress. Among these is a plan by Arizona lawmakers Sen. John McCain and Reps. Jeff Flake and Jim Kolbe, all Republicans, to create new categories of temporary worker visas.

This plan is endorsed by the Fox administration. "This proposal can be seen as a light at the end of the tunnel," Interior Secretary Santiago Creel said during a stop in San Diego. In Texas, Republican Sen. John Cornyn has introduced an initiative that would give workers a limited "blue-card" visa and expedited consideration of permanent residency.

The immigration issue has also gained prominence in the special election on Oct. 7 to decide whether Democratic Gov. Gray Davis is removed. Some immigrant groups have initiated campaigns.an.
to oppose actor Arnold Schwarzenegger, one of the Republican candidates to replace Davis in case the governor is removed from office.

One organization, Voluntarios de la Comunidad, in San Jose, California, is leading a statewide campaign to convince California citizens of Mexican origin to oppose Schwarzenegger because he gave financial support to the anti-immigrant initiative Proposition 187 in 1994. The proposal, put forth by then Gov. Pete Wilson, would have removed access to education, health care, and other basic services for undocumented immigrants (see SourceMex, 1994-11-02). "We will try to put out information in San Jose, Los Angeles, Sacramento, and all of California about the animosity of this Hollywood personality toward immigrants," said Jose Sandoval Lopez, a director of the organization, which he said represents 600,000 California residents.

Some observers say Schwarzenegger has given strong evidence that his position has not changed since the mid-1990s. Jorge Ramos, an anchor and commentator for the US-based Latino network Univision, said Schwarzenegger's position became evident when he hired Pete Wilson as his campaign chief and then spoke proudly of his support for Proposition 187. (Sources: The Christian Science Monitor, 08/11/03; The San Diego Union-Tribune, 08/02/03; The Dallas Morning News, 08/13/03, 08/22/03; Univision Online, 08/25/03; The Washington Post, 08/26/03; El Sol de Mexico, 08/01/03, 08/27/03; La Cronica de Hoy, 08/01/03, 08/13/03, 08/26/03, 08/27/03; The Herald, 08/26/03, 08/27/03; Milenio Diario, Reforma, El Universal, 08/27/03)

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