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LADB Staff

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Electoral Institute Seeks Expatriate Voting Rights for 2006 Election

by LADB Staff

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Mexico's federal electoral agency (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE) has endorsed a proposal by President Vicente Fox's administration and the various political parties to extend voting rights to several million expatriates residing in the US and other countries in time for the 2006 election. The Fox government sent the new voting-rights proposal to Congress in June in the hope that the measure would be debated during the next regular session of Congress. Any vote in Congress would serve to clarify legislation approved in 1996, which technically granted expatriates the right to vote. Fox sent the bill to Congress just before departing for a tour of US cities in June to promote the initiative.

The bill that Fox presented to Congress this year is similar to one that was introduced in 2003 but which did not reach the floor for a vote (see SourceMex, 2003-07-23). This year's proposal differs from the 2003 proposal because it takes into account elements from 14 other expatriate voting-rights plans presented by the various political parties in Congress. The measure also empowers the IFE and not Congress to establish the procedures for expatriate voting. Congress has traditionally been slow to approve this type of initiative.

In 1999, the Senate refused to consider a package of electoral reforms that would have included a plan to extend voting rights to expatriates because the initiative contained "serious technical and legal errors" (see SourceMex, 1999-07-14).

The measure was turned down despite an earlier recommendation by the IFE that expatriates be granted voting rights (see SourceMex, 1998-11-18). Zacatecas state has already developed a model for federal authorities to extend the vote to expatriates. In 2003, legislators in that state approved reforms to the state constitution that allow expatriates from the state to vote for candidates in statewide and municipal elections (see SourceMex, 2003-08-27).

The changes also reserved two seats for expatriates in the Zacatecas legislature and gave citizens who reside overseas the right to seek elected local or state offices. This provision was tested successfully in the Zacatecas elections in July, in which expatriates Andres Bermudez and Martin Carvajal each won a mayoral election (see SourceMex, 2004-07-14).

Congress willing to consider bill before end of year

Several legislators say Congress is willing to consider an expatriate voting-rights bill this year if they are satisfied that the IFE has developed a viable plan that would not bankrupt the federal Treasury.

Key legislators like Deputy Manuel Camacho Solis of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and Roberto Pedraza Martinez of the of the former governing Partido

Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) had raised concerns that the initiative would be costly. "Although my party agrees that Mexicans abroad should be able to vote, we have to make sure that there are resources to implement the [voting] mechanisms and that there are security measures in place to prevent interference from foreign organizations, parties, and money," said Pedraza Martinez.

IFE officials have reassured legislators that the agency is ready to proceed with overseas voting if approved by Congress. IFE president Luis Carlos Ugalde, who was summoned to testify before three committees in the lower house that have jurisdiction on the matter, said the agency must first ensure that all eligible voters have the appropriate credentials, which would cost about 1.3 billion pesos (US \$113 million). This step would be completed during 2005.

The IFE's task would be to set up the infrastructure for the actual vote on July 2, 2006, which would involve establishing more than 5,300 voting booths in the US and other countries, primarily in large cities. He estimated the cost of this step at about 2.7 billion pesos (US\$236 million). Ugalde said some voters without access to the voting stations would be allowed to vote via computer, but he said this option would be limited. "My preference is for the vote to take place in booths," said Ugalde. "This way we would meet the principles established in our Constitution of a independent and legal vote."

Ugalde's testimony appears to have swayed members of the lower house, which released a statement saying it expected to consider a voting-abroad measure before the end of the legislative session. "We only have until the end of December to make a decision," said PRI Deputy Julian Angulo Gongora, who chairs the interior affairs committee (Comision de Gobernacion). "Otherwise, expatriates may not get the right to vote in a presidential election until 2012."

Some legislators see the urgency of approving an expatriate voting-rights bill because Congress and the administration agreed to move up approval of the 2005 budget. "The issue could become lost in the negotiations regarding the budget," said Camacho Solis. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Sep. 29, reported at 11.42 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: El Financiero, Associated Press, United Press International, The Dallas Morning News, 06/16/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 06/16/04, 06/18/04; Milenio Diario, 06/18/04; The New York Times, 06/16/04, 07/05/04; Spanish news service EFE, 06/15/04, 07/06/04, 09/22/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 06/16/04, 06/17/04, 09/23/04; La Jornada, 06/16-18/04, 09/23/04; Unomasuno, 06/16/04, 06/28/04, 09/15/04; El Universal, 06/16/04, 06/17/04, 07/07/04, 09/20/04, 09/23/04)

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