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Legislative Panel Approves Plan to Allow Mexican Expatriates to Vote in 2006

by LADB Staff

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A special subcommittee in the Chamber of Deputies has approved a limited plan to give expatriates the right to vote in the 2006 election. The plan falls short of the comprehensive proposals sent to Congress by President Vicente Fox in 2003 and 2004 (see SourceMex, 2003-07-23 and 2004-09-29), but does represent the first formal step by Congress to extend the vote to expatriates.

The Congress already extended expatriates the right to vote through an initiative approved in 1996. That law was vague and confusing and unworkable without a plan to clarify its provisions. The problems could easily be corrected by Congress, but legislators have been very slow to pass enabling legislation.

In mid-December, the Subcomision para el Voto de Mexicanos en el Exterior approved a plan that allows those expatriates who are already registered to vote in Mexico to cast ballots in 2006. The plan differs from more comprehensive proposals offered by Fox because it only applies to expatriates residing in the US, allows a vote only for the presidential race, and is limited to voters who are already registered. This means that the government would make no major effort to register voters in the US.

Full Congress could vote on measure in February

The full Congress is expected to vote on the subcommittee's recommendation in the upcoming ordinary session that begins in February. The subcommittee proposal is supported by the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which had blocked previous efforts to extend the vote to expatriates.

In 1999, the PRI-dominated 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).

PRI legislators are confident that discontent with the Fox government could send a large percentage of the vote in 2006 to the PRI, offsetting support for the president's conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD).

Still, political parties are not fully certain how expatriates would vote in 2006. "The emigrants could be a decisive factor if we see a close race in 2006," said PRI Deputy Heliodoro Diaz Escarraga, who serves on the population, borders and migrant affairs committee (Comision de Poblacion, Fronteras y Asuntos Migratorios). "Or it could be that they don't feel involved with Mexico and won't feel like voting, or that only 200,000 or so will vote and it won't be decisive."

The 2005 budget approved by Congress in December allocated about 200,000 pesos (US\$17,900) for the federal electoral watchdog (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE) to begin to lay the groundwork for expatriate voting in 2006. IFE officials, however, say this amount is only a fraction of the 2.7 million pesos (US\$241,000) needed to cover all the tasks that need to be completed to guarantee expatriates the right to vote.

IFE director Luis Carlos Ugalde said any electoral reforms approved by Congress in the coming year "should be accompanied with the appropriate financial resources to guarantee the right to vote [for expatriates.]" [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Jan. 12, reported at 11.17 pesos per US\$1.00] (Sources: The Dallas Morning News, 12/12/04; Notimex, 12/13/04; Spanish news service EFE, 12/15/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 12/14/04; Reuters, El Universal, The Arizona Republic, 12/15/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 12/14/04, 12/17/04; La Jornada, 12/13/04, 12/15/04, 01/10/05)

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