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LADB Staff

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Expatriate Vote, Redistricting Could Affect 2006 Elections

by LADB Staff

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Mexico is moving forward with a couple initiatives that could affect the 2006 presidential and congressional elections. One initiative, approved by the Chamber of Deputies in late February, creates mechanisms for expatriates to participate in presidential elections. The measure is expected to gain easy approval in the Senate.

A second measure, approved by the electoral agency (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE) in early February, redraws the boundaries for many of Mexico's 300 congressional districts. Expatriate vote wins easy approval in Chamber of Deputies The vote in the lower house that would allow expatriates to vote in presidential elections was approved by an overwhelming margin of 391-5, with 22 abstentions. A special legislative subcommittee on expatriate voting approved the initiative at the beginning of the year (see SourceMex, 2005-01-12).

Expatriates were given the right to vote in 1996, but Congress has been slow to approve legislation that would put that right into practice (see SourceMex, 1999-07-14, 1998-11-18 and 2004-09-29). The initiative approved by the full Chamber of Deputies directs the Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) to create a voting region for each 15,000 eligible expatriate voters. Each region would comprise 20 polling places, or one for every 750 voters.

The measure, introduced by the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), opens the door for as many as 10 million expatriates, the vast majority of them in the US, to participate in the 2006 presidential election. Legislators from all parties said they viewed the initiative as another way to demonstrate that Mexico is committed to an open and democratic system. "In 2006 the eyes of the world will be upon us," said Deputy Adriana Gonzalez Carrillo of the center-right (Partido Accion Nacional, PAN). "We have to show...we're sincerely committed to consolidating democracy."

Redistricting plan eliminates three Mexico City seats

The redistricting plan also gained easy approval in the IFE after objections raised by representatives from the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) and the PAN were ironed out. Last summer, the two parties had raised concerns about some of the formulas proposed to change the district boundaries. "I find it very healthy that electoral authorities and the political parties were able to work together on a transparent redistricting scheme," said IFE president Luis Carlos Ugalde.

The plan creates a more equitable distribution of the population among the country's 300 electoral districts. Under the rules used in the 2003 election, some districts had only 200,000 inhabitants and others 500,000. The population data was based on the 2000 census. The changes apply only to the seats that are elected directly by citizens. Another 200 of the 500 seats in the lower house will continue to be allocated based on the percentage of the vote received by the various parties during each congressional election.

Most districts will see only small to moderate shifts in boundaries, but a handful will experience dramatic changes. For example, the plan eliminates three congressional districts in Mexico City, two in Veracruz, and one each in Guanajuato, Durango, Guerrero, Michoacan, and Zacatecas. The changes would most benefit Mexico state, which would gain four new seats in the lower house. Baja California would receive two additional seats, while Morelos, Nuevo Leon, Quintana Roo, and Puebla would each gain one new seat.

IFE counselor Arturo Sanchez said another major benefit of the new plan is that many districts will be more compact, which will help candidates better organize their electoral campaigns. "They will no longer have to travel large distances within the district," said Sanchez. The increase in the number of congressional districts in Mexico state reflects the rapid growth in the population in the Mexico City suburbs, which came partially at the expense of the Federal District.

The Federal District, which in recent years has become a stronghold for the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), will now have only 27 federal congressional districts. In contrast, Mexico state will have 40 congressional seats by the 2006 election. The IFE emphasized that the changes have no political undertones and respond exclusively to demographic criteria and the migration from large urban centers to areas surrounding the cities. Redistricting to help some indigenous communities

There was some grumbling about the changes in some of the states that lost congressional seats. "We are not in agreement about the loss of a congressional district," said Alejandro Mendez Lopez, president of the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM) in Michoacan state. Michoacan will lose a district near the community of La Piedad, which will be merged with the nearby district in Zamora.

Mendez also raised concerns that the change in boundaries will create a lot of confusion among voters in at least four of the 12 congressional districts in Michoacan. Objections from Mendez and others were in the minority, with the redistricting effort gaining broad support. Xochitl Galvez, who heads Fox's special commission on indigenous affairs (Comision para el Desarrollo de Pueblos Indigenas), said the redistricting plan could boost indigenous representation in Congress.

Under the plan, districts in Mihauatlan, Veracruz state, Solidaridad, in Quintana Roo, and Ixmiquilpan, Hidalgo, will now have at least 40% indigenous population, joining 26 other districts with a similar makeup. "The new plan will encourage the political parties to recruit an indigenous candidate to represent them in the election in each of those 29 districts," said Galvez. The electoral map was also redrawn in the state of Aguascalientes.

In February, the state legislature approved a plan that changes boundaries for directly elected seats. The Aguascalientes plan increases the number of seats in Aguascalientes City at the expense of rural areas, effective with the 2007 state legislative election. The proposal, advanced by the PAN majority in the state legislature, was supported by the PRD, the PVEM, and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD).

The PRI opposed the changes, accusing the PAN and its supporters of giving an unfair advantage to Aguascalientes City, which will now have 13 of the 27 directly elected seats. This is five more seats than during the 2004 election.

Reelection proposal fails in Senate

While redistricting was easily approved, a proposal to allow re-election failed in the Senate after the PRI overwhelmingly voted against the plan. The initiative proposed an amendment to the Mexican Constitution to allow senators to serve 12 consecutive years, or two six-year terms. The Senate vote actually ended in a 51-51 tie, but this was far short of the two-thirds majority needed for constitutional amendments.

Eighty-nine senators had expressed support for re-election as recently as 2004, but many members of the PRI changed their position during the recent vote. "The reform failed because PRI senators, whose votes were needed to attain the needed majority, changed their minds at the last minute," said political analyst Jose Antonio Aguilar Rivera of the Centro de Investigaciones y Docencia Economica (CIDE).

A handful of PRI senators, particularly Genaro Borrego Estrada and Emilio Gamboa Patron, supported re-election, arguing that senators with some experience would bring more professionalism to the legislative work of the upper house. The issue also gained support from the PRD and PAN delegations. They were countered by PRI Sen. Dulce Maria Sauri Riancho, who said the main concern among opponents of the proposal was that re-election would create an opening for outside groups to influence the elections. "These groups could use their economic muscle to support senators who endorse their interests and eliminate those who do not think as they do," said Sauri.

A similar plan has been circulated in the Chamber of Deputies, which has yet to take a vote. Deputy Francisco Barrio, who heads the PAN delegation in the lower house, said the center-right party would support the plan because it would take away some of the control from the parties. "This would give us an opportunity to get closer to the citizens," said Barrio. Deputies have a term of three years, and they cannot be re-elected.

Deputy Pablo Gomez, leader of the PRD delegation, said other reforms should be approved before re-election is considered. "We first have to ensure that Congress becomes more efficient," said Gomez. As was the case in the Senate, the PRI does not appear to support the measure in the lower house. Still, PRI Deputy Manlio Fabio Beltrones, the floor leader in the Chamber of Deputies, said the issue would inevitably come up for floor debate in the near future. "There are clearly strong positions in favor and against legislative re-election," said Beltrones. (Sources: Notimex, 07/14/05, 07/15/05, 02/11/05; The Herald-Mexico City, El Financiero, 02/11/05; Cambio de Michoacan, 02/11/05, 02/12/05; El Siglo de Torreon, El Sol de Zacatecas, El Siglo de Durango, 02/12/05; Spanish news service EFE, 02/22/05; La Jornada, 07/14/04, 02/09/05, 02/11/05, 02/23/05; El Universal, 07/14/04, 02/11/05, 02/14/05, 02/23/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 01/25/05, 02/23/05; La Crisis, 01/26/05, 02/11/05, 02/23/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 01/27/05, 02/10/05, 02/11/05, 02/17/05, 02/23/05; El Financiero, Knight-Ridder Newspapers, Associated Press, Bloomberg news service, The Dallas Morning News, 02/23/05)

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