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Expatriates Slow to Register for 2006 Presidential Election

by LADB Staff
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Mexican expatriates have responded very slowly to the government's new initiative to allow overseas voting in the 2006 presidential election. As of mid-November, fewer than 1,300 expatriates had submitted ballot requests to the federal electoral institute (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE), a drop in the bucket compared to the 2 million forms distributed initially through Mexican consulates and other locations overseas.

The IFE estimates that 4 million of the 10 million Mexicans citizens residing overseas could be eligible to participate in the election. The Mexican Senate opened the door for overseas voting with the approval of an initiative to allow expatriates to participate in the election through the use of mail-in ballots (see SourceMex, 2005-05-04).

The Chamber of Deputies later endorsed the Senate plan, which was a compromise to a more ambitious and more costly scheme proposed by the lower house (see SourceMex, 2005-01-02, 2005-02-23 and 2005-07-27). Expatriates will be allowed to vote only in the presidential election in 2006, but the vote could be extended to congressional races in subsequent years. The congressional decision to approve the mail-in ballots is the first concrete step toward giving expatriates the opportunity to vote.

Electoral institute’s plan called restrictive

The congressional legislation directed the IFE to create the mechanisms to promote and facilitate the overseas vote. The institute, which is also charged with preventing voter fraud, set up a plan by which only those expatriates who had previously obtained a valid voter-identification card would be allowed to participate in the voting process. Under the plan, expatriates who wished to participate in the 2006 election would be required to submit an application via certified mail along with a photocopy of their voter identification.

The IFE’s strict requirements are certain to limit the number of expatriates who vote, since many either lost their voter-registration cards or did not bring them with them to the US, Canada, or other countries. Some immigrant-rights groups also questioned the estimates provided by the IFE on the number of immigrants who could be eligible to vote, particularly the number of those in the US. "I don’t know where the IFE came up with the estimate that there are more than 4 million Mexicans in the US with voting credentials," said Jose Luis Gutierrez, president of the Frente Binacional de Michoacanos. "The agency itself has said that eight of every 10 Mexicans in the US lack this document."
Advocates say the number of expatriates in the US who have voter identification is closer to 300,000 or 400,000. Immigrant-rights advocates also question the lack of a program to register expatriates to vote outside of Mexican territory. "Many people who are interested in voting will not be able to do so because they lack the IFE photo identification," said Candido Morales, director of the Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior (IME). The IFE plans to set up 15 special voter-registration sites, most of them in major cities near the US-Mexico border. The sites will be in Tijuana and Mexicali in Baja California state; Nogales and Agua Prieta in Sonora state; Ciudad Juarez in Chihuahua state; Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuna in Coahuila state; and Matamoros and Nuevo Laredo in Tamaulipas state.

Voter-registration centers for migrants will also be established in Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey. These centers, which will be ready in time to serve expatriates returning to Mexico for the Christmas holidays, will expedite applications for voter-registration cards, in order to have them ready before migrants return to the US. IFE officials acknowledged, however, that some expatriates could still end up waiting several days to receive a card.

The institute is running against a Jan. 15 deadline for expatriates to submit their applications. IFE officials and advocates worry that the application process could be further delayed by the US Thanksgiving holiday and by the Christmas celebrations in both countries. Some immigrant-rights advocates are pushing for the IFE to extend the deadline beyond Jan. 15, but the change would have to come from Congress, which established the deadline.

IFE counselor Rodrigo Morales said the period of 105 days, between Oct. 1, when the requests forms first became available, and the Jan. 15 deadline, gives interested voters sufficient time to submit their paperwork. Still, the IFE is working hard to promote the vote, providing information through the agency's Web site, the Spanish-language news media in the US, and through consulates, said IFE spokesperson Pilar Alvarez Laso. Alvarez Laso is visiting US cities with large numbers of Mexican citizens to provide information about IFE services and to promote the vote. The IFE initially received 244 million pesos (US$22.8 million) to set up the overseas vote, but in mid-November it requested another 80 million pesos (US$9.3 million) to help with promotion efforts.

Ban on overseas campaigns said to deter voters

Critics argue that a lack of information about the candidates may also deter voters, especially since the political parties have been prohibited from conducting campaigns overseas. The prohibition on campaigning in the US and other countries is related to the need to control campaign donations, which would be difficult to trace in the US and other countries. "This is something the Congress decided," Alvarez Laso told SourceMex during a visit to Albuquerque.

IFE director Luis Carlos Ugalde concurs with the decision of Congress to prohibit overseas campaigns, saying it is preferable for expatriates to get limited exposure to the candidates than to open the door for campaign-finance violations. "We are aware that allowing campaigning overseas could open the door for foreign donations, which are illegal," said Ugalde. "Our duty is to guarantee conditions of legitimacy and transparency."
Alvarez Laso said the decision has sometimes divided members of the same party, with legislators
strongly behind their decision to prohibit overseas campaigning and party officials pushing for the
restriction to be lifted on the grounds that they violate the constitutional right to free speech. "How
can we bring information to Mexicans who live outside national territory?" asked Rogelio Carbajal,
the representative for the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) in the IFE.

Election observers say the discontented party officials and activists have a point. "There is a
contradiction of logic here," said Daniel Lund, director of the MUND Americas polling firm in
Mexico City. "Mexicans who can legally vote abroad need information like any other citizen.
Without the benefit of a campaign, the only way [to inform themselves] is to listen to relatives back
home."

Party officials brought the issue before the federal electoral court (Tribunal Electoral del Poder
Judicial de la Federacion, TEPJF) earlier this year. The tribunal sided with the IFE in a unanimous
ruling issued in late October. "The lack of control of donations could give some candidates an
advantage over their adversaries, especially if expenditures cannot be accounted for and itemized,"
the TEPJF said.

Expatriates will still be able to obtain information about the presidential candidates, as the IFE has
been authorized to disseminate information about the various positions presented by the political
parties and their representatives. The strict rules against campaigning on foreign soil forced Andres
Manuel Lopez Obrador, the candidate for the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), to cancel a meeting with Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa in September. Aides urged
the PRD candidate to forego his planned trip to California after election officials warned that his
visit could violate the law.

"It's a shame," said Sergio Martinez Chavarria, a spokesman for Roberto Madrazo, who will
represent the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in the 2006 race. "We
believe that candidates should travel and present their proposals directly to the people, face to face,
that the people over there express their questions and demands, that there be rapprochement. But it
won't be."

IFE officials agree there is some contradiction in the laws governing the overseas vote. "It's a
dilemma," IFE official Patricio Ballados told the Los Angeles Times. "We are supposed to have
an informed electorate abroad, but we have legislation that restricts what Mexicans can learn
about the election." Congressional leaders and IFE officials acknowledge that the number of
expatriates participating in the 2006 election could be relatively small, probably having little
impact on the outcome of the 2006 race. PRI Deputy Manlio Fabio Beltrones told an audience in
San Diego, California, that he expects the expatriate vote to make more of a difference in the 2009
midterm elections and the 2012 presidential race. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are
based on the Interbank rate in effect on Nov. 16, reported at 10.67 pesos per US$1.00] (Sources:
www.IFE.org.mx; Associated Press, 09/21/05; Los Angeles Times, 09/22/05; The Dallas Morning
News, 09/23/05; Notimex, 09/25/05; Spanish news service EFE, 09/21/05, 09/28/05, 10/17/05; El
Financiero, 09/22/05, 10/28/05, 11/01/05; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 09/21/05, 09/22/05, 10/12/05,
10/17/05, 10/31/05, 11/02/05, 11/03/05; La Crisis, 09/22/05, 09/23/05, 11/05/05; Reforma, 11/06/05,
11/07/05; El Universal, 09/20/05, 09/22/05, 09/23/05, 09/26/05, 09/28/05, 09/31/05, 11/01/05, 11/07-09/05; The Herald-Mexico City, 09/22/05, 09/29/05, 10/18/05, 11/02/05, 11/04/05, 11/09/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 09/20/05, 10/27/05, 11/01/05, 11/02/05, 11/08/05, 11/10/05; El Economista, 10/28/05, 11/02/05, 11/07/05, 11/11/05; La Jornada, 09/20/05, 10/03/05, 10/18/05, 10/28/05, 10/31/05, 11/04/05, 11/07-09/05, 11/11/05, 11/14/05, 11/16/05)

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