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The Mexican government’s initial effort to extend voting rights to expatriates fell flat, with only a fraction of eligible voters requesting ballots. The Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) had estimated that as many as 4 million of the 10 million Mexicans residing in the US would be eligible to vote, with many early predictions suggesting that as many as 2 million expatriates would participate (see SourceMex, 2005-11-16). As of the Jan. 15 deadline, the IFE had received fewer than 19,000 requests, although some IFE officials said the total could be as high as 30,000 when the final count is complete.

The IFE will continue to accept ballot requests through Feb. 15, but they must have a postmark of Jan. 15 or earlier. The initiative to extend voting rights to expatriates was approved by the Mexican Congress in July 2005, but the measure only allowed mail-in ballots (see SourceMex, 2005-07-27). The Chamber of Deputies had earlier proposed a much more ambitious and complicated plan, but the Senate voted against the measure because of its cost and difficulty to implement (see SourceMex, 2005-05-04). The voting effort was directed primarily to expatriates residing in the US. The IFE estimates that 98% of Mexican expatriates reside in the US and Canada.

Low turnout blamed on strict, cumbersome regulations

Some political observers had predicted a low turnout because of the strict requirements imposed by the new voting initiative, including the need for a valid voting card.

Many Mexicans residing overseas either did not bring their cards along with them or lost them in transit. Rather than allow expatriates to obtain voting credentials at Mexican consulates, they were required to travel to Mexico to acquire these documents. This could have been one of the strongest deterrents to participation, critics said.

Mexican legislators, however, defended the strict requirements as a necessary step to give the vote integrity. "What is important is to make sure that all the votes that are cast are valid," said Deputy Jose Gonzalez Morfin, the floor leader of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) in the lower house. "We have to analyze, together with the IFE, a way to generate greater participation. But I don’t see it as a failure," said Deputy Heliodoro Diaz Escarraga, a member of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), who presides over the lower house. "The right to vote is there for all Mexicans. From that point of view, it is a success."

Some critics questioned the millions of pesos spent by the IFE to promote the vote, including the cost to buy television spots in Spanish-language broadcast media in the US. "They are giving priority to the vote," researcher Rodolfo Cruz Pineiro of the Colegio de la Frontera Norte told Copley News Service. "But you also have to help the population with other issues, like protecting the rights of Mexicans in the US."
Supporters see initial voting effort as first step

Some observers said overseas voting could be successful if the government continues to build on the initial effort. "If the results are measured against the expectations, the bottom line is discouraging," said Jose Woldenberg Karakowsky, a former IFE official who writes a column for the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. "But if you measure the results against the previous situation, when no overseas voting existed, then you can see this experience as the first step toward a long-term goal."

Some advocates of overseas voting criticized authorities as "demagogues" for raising expectations beyond what they could deliver in a very short period. "You can't put together a football team in three-and-a-half months, not even a mariachi band, much less an election abroad, on five continents and in every state of the union," said Primitivo Rodriguez Oceguera, a leader with the Coalicion por los Derechos Politicos de los Mexicanos en el Extranjero.

Others said the IFE failed to take sufficient steps to facilitate the voting process, including outreach. "Thousands of expatriates who live in rural areas lacked information about the voting initiative," said Carlos Villanueva, who heads the California-based Asociacion Mundial de Mexicanos en el Exterior (AMME).

While many Mexican expatriates are employed as migrant agricultural workers, the lack of information in rural areas does not appear to be a significant factor in the low turnout. Statistics by the US State Department indicate that the vast majority of Mexican citizens residing in the US live in 15 cities: Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Dallas, San Francisco, Phoenix, San Antonio, Brownsville, Fresno, San Diego, Sacramento, El Paso, Denver, New York, and Austin. The Los Angeles area accounts for about 24% of the total.

Woldenberg also attributed the low participation in part to the inability of some expatriate groups in the US to motivate Mexicans in the US to vote. "These groups have a relatively weak social base," said the ex-IFE official. Additionally, said Woldenberg, the major political parties failed to make the necessary inroads among expatriates to motivate them to vote. "The organization efforts of these parties overseas were less robust than they had proclaimed," he said.

IFE officials acknowledged that the short amount of time to create and implement a voting plan for overseas voters also hampered participation. "If this very same information had been out there for nine months, the turnout would have been different," said Pilar Alvarez Saso, one of the IFE's coordinators for the overseas-voting effort. The officials asked, however, that the results not be judged on the actual numbers but on their implications for the future. "If we hadn't started modestly now, we'd be six more years behind on this long-awaited project," said Alvarez Saso.

Other observers said the final figures are respectable when measured against the success of other countries in promoting overseas votes among their expatriates. Many of these countries allow citizens to vote at consulates, which helps boost the vote. "Let's get real. Typically, worldwide, only 1% of foreign-residing residents vote absentee. In Mexico, the decision to limit eligibility to those who left the country with a voting credential in hand limits the pool to an estimated 4 million (an
absurdly high estimate, many contend)," said Kelly Arthur Garrett, a columnist for the Mexico City English-language newspaper The Herald. 

One percent of 4 million is 40,000. Given the newness of the program, the difficult registration requirements, and the irregular status of most Mexicans abroad (which makes doing anything a chore), reaching just more than a quarter of that is about what should have been expected." Effort also hurt by ban on overseas campaigning The IFE was also hampered by the congressional decision to prohibit parties and political candidates from campaigning overseas. One reason, argued legislators, was that overseas campaigning would be difficult to regulate and could open the door for illegal contributions from overseas donors.

Still, some countries like the Dominican Republic credit overseas campaigns by its candidates for increasing interest among expatriates to participate in the election. In 2004, more than 24,000 Dominican expatriates in New York City cast their ballots, in an election that was won by Leonel Fernandez (see NotiCen, 2004-05-20). The election drew about 68% of Dominicans who had registered to vote, laying the groundwork for future successes. "Now we have hundreds of people calling every day to come and register," said Jose Fernandez, president of the board of elections for the Dominican Republic in New York.

Some critics suggested the low turnout might be a symptom of a greater problem, the growing skepticism about the Mexican electoral system. "There is going to be a huge debate about whether the result meant that the people here just didn't care about politics in Mexico or if it was the process," said Roberto Suro, executive director of the Pew Hispanic Center, which conducted research suggesting that many Mexicans in the US would vote if allowed. Jose Santibanez Romellon, president of the Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, agreed that the expectations raised by Mexican officials were too high, especially since many Mexicans at home do not consider the vote as the answer to their problems.

Others recommended that Mexican authorities take a broader approach in how they develop a voting strategy for future elections. "The emigrants themselves are far from unified. Some feel deep involvement with their native country. Others are more concerned with what's going on in the community where their kids go to school than with who will be Mexico's next president," said Garrett. "Most are just trying to survive from day to day." (Sources: Notimex, 01/03/06; El Universal, 01/04/06; The New York Times, 01/12/06; The Chicago Tribune, The Arizona Republic, 01/13/06; The Dallas Morning News, 01/13/06, 01/14/06; Los Angeles Times, The San Diego Union-Tribune, 01/14/06; Copley News Service, Associated Press, 01/15/06; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 01/16/06; The Herald-Mexico City, 01/09/06, 01/17/06; La Crisis, 01/17/06; Reforma, 01/04/06, 01/16/06, 01/19/06; El Economista, 01/03/06, 01/05/06, 01/10/06, 01/11/06, 01/13/06, 01/20/06; La Jornada, 01/02/06, 01/04/06, 01/11/06, 01/23/06; La Cronica de Hoy, 01/04-06/06, 01/17/06, 01/23/06)

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