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State Legislatures Overwhelmingly Approve Election Reform Legislation

by LADB Staff

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The legislatures of almost all of Mexico's 31 states ratified the electoral reform approved by Congress in September, ensuring that initiative will become law. The vote reforms, which among other things intend to reduce the influence of paid television advertising on the elections, contributed to increasing tensions between the Congress and the Mexican broadcast industry.

In early October, TV Azteca, Mexico's second-largest television network, broadcast a spot criticizing the electoral reforms while at the same time questioning the pay of senators. The spot prompted major criticisms, with one party-the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD)-threatening to push for the withdrawal of TV Azteca's concession. The election-reform initiative received overwhelming support at the state level because the three major parties endorsed the initiative.

The measure, which was approved overwhelmingly in both houses of Congress, required the approval of 17 of Mexico's 31 state legislatures because it involved a change to the Mexican Constitution. As it turns out the electoral reform received overwhelming support in the state legislatures, with only Coahuila voting against the measure. The Coahuila legislature followed the lead of Gov. Humberto Moreira Valdez, a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), who had sharply criticized the legislation in September (see SourceMex, 2007-09-19).

Govs. Luis Reynoso Femat of Aguascalientes and Marcelo de los Santos of San Luis Potosi, both members of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), also opposed the measure as "anti-federalist," but their respective legislatures still approved the initiative. In many cases, legislators from the smaller parties voted against the measure in the state legislatures, following the lead of their national parties. Provisions that allocated a large percentage of free television advertising to the PRI, the PRD, and the PAN angered the small parties, especially the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD) and the Partido Verde Ecologista Mexicano (PVEM).

Television network runs controversial spot

While the electoral-reform votes at the state level were relatively free of controversy, the television spot broadcast by TV Azteca on Oct. 4 attracted national headlines and drew strong protests from the Congress. The spot, produced by the TV Azteca staff, primarily criticized the high salaries earned by Mexican senators in comparison with the working class. But the spot also took the opportunity to question the Senate's support for electoral reform.

According to the Mexico City daily newspaper La Cronica de Hoy, the advertisement intended to win the minds of the public. "Here at TV Azteca, we are on your side. For a long time, you have complained about the salaries of the Senate, and you are right," said the spot. "Every month each

[senator] costs us about 125,988 pesos (US\$11,640). A teacher earns 5,978 pesos (US\$552) each month. Do you think this is just?"

The TV Azteca spot then runs footage of the Senate vote on electoral reform and proceeds with the second part of its voice-over. "What does cost you are the senators. If we multiply the salary of the 128 members of the upper house, the senators cost you 16 million pesos (US\$1.47 million). With that money, we could pay the monthly salary for 2,697 teachers or 4,031 firefighters or 4,743 police officers. Here at TV Azteca, we are on your side."

The spot caused a lot of grumbling among Senators, including legislators like PCD Sen. Dante Delgado, who voted against the electoral reforms. "This is an act of aggression that we cannot tolerate," said Senate leader Santiago Creel of the PAN.

In a prepared statement, the Senate condemned the TV Azteca advertisement. "The relationship between Congress and the concessionaires of the media has to involve dialogue and understanding and should not be based on pressure or acts of aggression. There should be an environment of mutual respect."

The Chamber of Deputies, although not named in the TV Azteca spot, also weighed in with its opinion. Deputy Javier Gonzalez Garza, who heads the PRD delegation in the lower house, threatened to bring a resolution to the floor to cancel TV Azteca's concession. The other delegations stopped short of supporting this measure but issued a stern warning to the television network. "In modern Mexico, there should not be these types of attack on a branch of government, which in this case is the legislative branch," said PRI Deputy Emilio Gamboa Patron. When asked if he supported the PRD threat to retire the concession for TV Azteca, Gamboa responded: "I would not put it in those terms. But we have to engage in a sensible discussion."

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