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Groups: Limit public funds in campaigns

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MEXICO CITY - Mexico will earmark nearly \$500 million in public funds for the political parties competing in next summer's presidential elections. It's a key reason why the race could cost up to three times as much as President Bush's win last year, academics and civil leaders say.

Federal Electoral Commission officials won't approve the final amount each party will receive in taxpayer funds for campaigning until Nov. 30. Still, a steep increase from the amount dolled out to parties in 2003 helped three political watchdog groups determine its estimate.

The groups have begun a campaign to collect 1 million signatures by April, a symbolic measure they hope will prompt Congress to reduce by half the amount of public funds going to political parties before the vote on July 2, 2006.

"It's really an excessive cost that's outraging the population," activist Rafael Reygadas said of public spending on political parties. "Especially one where 80 million people are poor."

At the federal level, lawmakers would have to approve any change in campaign law. But in 17 states and Mexico City, popular support in the form of thousands of signatures can generate "citizens' initiatives," that may force legislatures to consider reducing public funding to political parties.

Jose Antonio Crespo, a noted Mexican political scientist, said at a news conference that from 1991 to 2006, the amount of public spending on political parties increased 4,500 percent.

"It's really crazy," said Crespo, adding that each vote cast during a non-presidential election cycle in 2003 cost taxpayers 94 pesos - nearly \$9.

Electoral officials have claimed that lofty public spending is necessary to generate credibility for democratic elections held in a country controlled by one party for seven decades.

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