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## Mexican expatriates' vote: How powerful?

**By Lourdes Medrano**  
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For the first time in history, Mexicans living outside Mexico will be able to vote in their native country's presidential election next year without having to return home.

Recently approved changes in Mexico's election law mean Mexican expatriates can help choose a successor to President Vicente Fox, who, like all Mexican presidents, is limited to a six-year term.

Whether Mexicans abroad will be motivated enough to vote in numbers large enough to swing what could be a close three-way July 2006 presidential election remains to be seen. Tucsonans promoting the law say Mexicans here could be left in the dark because of a legal ban on campaigning in the United States imposed by the Mexican Congress to avoid tainting the election.

The Mexican government estimates that 11 million of its citizens live outside the country, 98 percent of them in the United States. About 4 million of them are registered to vote in Mexico.

By comparison, 6 million U.S. citizens are living abroad, including 2.7 million servicemen and servicewomen and their families. The U.S. Department of Defense's Federal Voting Assistance Program, which promotes voting abroad, does not have a number of registered voters.

Florencio Zaragoza, who pushed efforts to grant voting rights to Mexican nationals in this country through his Fundacion Mexico organization, said voters will have to rely on the foreign news media to learn about the presidential race once candidacies become official.

Another point of uncertainty is the number of Mexican citizens living in the United States who want to but cannot vote. Only those who already hold a valid voting credential issued in Mexico will be allowed to cast a ballot.

Tucsonan Maria Laura Durán, 30, said the requirement will keep many from voting, including many people who live in this country illegally.

"Many of them don't have the economic means to go to Mexico for their credential," said the Mexico-born Durán, who plans to vote.

Tucsonan Juan Reyes, 52, who along with his wife, Blanca, also plans to vote, said granting Mexicans the right to vote abroad was long overdue.

Reyes, an asbestos remover, left his hometown of Obregón, Sonora, for the United States 20 years ago.

"The migrant vote can influence the outcome, definitely," he said. "Most of our families are there. For their sake,

### The details

- For the first time, Mexican expatriates living outside their native country will be able to vote in Mexico's presidential elections in July 2006.
- About 4 million of an estimated 11 million Mexicans abroad are registered to vote.
- Voters must be 18 and have a Mexican voting credential.
- Voting credentials can be obtained through December in all the Mexican states.
- This Saturday through Jan. 15, Mexican nationals living in the United States and other countries can register to receive a ballot.
- From April 15 to May 20, 2006, voters will receive mail-in ballots.
- Mexican consulates will provide registration forms but are forbidden by law to get involved in the election process. Find more information at [www.ife.org.mx](http://www.ife.org.mx), or for local activity, call 406-0096, send an e-mail to [votoportucson@msn.com](mailto:votoportucson@msn.com) or go to [votoporlapatria.blogspot.com](http://votoporlapatria.blogspot.com)

many of us want to help bring about change in Mexico."

As a top official from Mexico's federal elections tribunal visited Tucson recently to promote the new law, a newly formed local committee kicked off plans to get the word out ahead of the election. As of this Saturday, Mexican voters will be able to register to receive a ballot by mail.

In June, after years of lobbying from Mexican migrants, the Mexican Congress gave citizens abroad the right to vote. The prospect of voting in Mexican elections has broad appeal among Mexicans in the United States, according to a Pew Hispanic Center survey of 5,000 people released in March.

As Mexico's government debated whether to grant its absent citizens the right to vote, nearly nine out of 10 people who were surveyed at Mexican consulates in major U.S. cities said they would vote if they could.

Mexican nationals north of the border - whether recent or longtime immigrants - have high hopes that their votes not only will help choose the right president for Mexico, but also that they will translate into added clout for migrants.

"The pressure that can come from millions of new voters - it can mean that a lot more can be accomplished in Mexico," said Diana Montaña, a University of Arizona graduate student. She coordinates the nonpartisan Tucson committee pushing for a strong voter turnout.

The Mexico-born Montaña, 23, and other Tucsonans are among the first to join a fledgling U.S. campaign to encourage Mexican nationals to vote.

Montaña, who has dual citizenship, has voted in U.S. elections but never in a Mexican election. She and Tucson friend Lucía Ornelas, a 25-year-old permanent legal resident, traveled to Nogales, Sonora, on Friday to apply for Mexican voting credentials. They will return to pick them up in a month so that they can vote next year.

Montaña said being able to make a difference in their homeland has deep meaning for Mexican expatriates.

"It doesn't matter if migrants are already established in this country or if they come and go," Montaña said. "We have the right to elect people who will work to improve communities and create jobs so people don't have to migrate to the United States."

On this side of the border, Montaña said, a strong migrant vote could prove critical in the debate over illegal-immigration policy. The U.S. government finally could start taking seriously Mexico's efforts to put the long-dormant matter on the front burner, she said.

Until Fox carved his own place in history by breaking the 71-year rule of the Institutional Revolution Party in 2000, migrants rarely merited public mention on the part of the Mexican government. Fox, a National Action Party member, has instituted various programs for migrants, has called them heroes, and has lauded their contributions to Mexico's economy in the form of the more than \$13 billion a year they send to family members in Mexico.

Primitivo Rodriguez, legal counsel for Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute, said during his Tucson visit that Mexicans in this country already have gained stature in Mexico because of their dogged persistence in securing the vote abroad.

"This victory was achieved thanks to the movement generated in the United States," Rodriguez told a crowd at a recent Mexican Independence Day celebration. The migrant vote can be powerful enough to change the political spectrum in Mexico, he said.

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