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Mexican parties warned to curb U.S. campaigners

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MEXICO CITY - Americans who promote a candidate for Mexican political office could wind up hurting their own cause, the head of Mexico's election agency warns.

Mexicans will have the right to vote from abroad for the first time in the June 2006 presidential election, and absentee voters have until Jan. 15 to register.

But laws strictly ban parties from campaigning beyond Mexico's borders. Foreign money also is forbidden.

Luis Carlos Ugalde, the head of the Federal Electoral Institute, told a news conference last week that parties could even be punished if foreign sympathizers give unwanted promotion.

A Mexican political party "is responsible not only for the conduct of its members, but for the conduct of others" who support it, he said.

Ugalde posed a hypothetical situation: "What happens if John Smith buys air time on the ABC network because he really likes candidate Perez or candidate Gomez?"

Under Mexican election law, he said, "the party can face sanctions because in electoral terms, the party has to do everything in its power" to prevent supporters from campaigning abroad.

"The party is the one we would sanction," Ugalde said. "We cannot sanction John Smith, of course."

Ugalde did not specify what sort of sanction parties could face. The institute in the past has imposed heavy fines for campaign law violations, effectively cutting back a party's ability to finance campaigns.

About 4.2 million Mexicans abroad have voting credentials, and electoral institute officials say 98 percent of those are in the United States.

The institute itself is in charge of informing voters abroad about Mexican candidates, though Ugalde noted that people will also hear about Mexican politics via relatives, friends, news media and the Internet.

Ugalde, who holds a doctorate in political science from Columbia University in New York, said he agreed with the restriction.

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