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Mexicans abroad show scant interest in voting

By Lourdes Medrano

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The historic, hard-fought right to vote that Mexico granted its expatriates last summer was touted as one that could transform Mexican politics and give migrants clout as they cast their ballots in this year's presidential election.

But with a two-week deadline looming, Mexican nationals living north of the border are showing little interest in helping to elect Mexico's next president on July 2.

So far, only about 8,200 of an estimated 4 million Mexicans abroad who are eligible to vote have requested a ballot, according to Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute, known by the Spanish acronym IFE. Voters have until Jan. 15 to mail in requests.

To boost participation, the agency recently opened special centers along Mexico's border, including in Nogales and Agua Prieta, to pass out ballot-request forms to the thousands of expatriates going home for the holidays. It also has enlisted musicians and athletes to do Spanish-language TV and radio spots in key U.S. cities.

Mexico-born Angel Silva, a naturalized U.S. citizen who has lived in Tucson for 20 years, said he finds it difficult to muster enthusiasm for the presidential election.

"I may still try to vote, but not because I think it will benefit me in any way," said Silva, 55.

If he can briefly pull away from his six-day-a-week job delivering produce to supermarkets, Silva said, he might cast a ballot for a candidate who seeks to improve conditions for the country's poor. Silva still has relatives in several Sonoran towns.

Florencio Zaragoza, who pushed for extending voting rights to Mexican nationals living outside the country through his Fundación México in Tucson, said the low registration numbers are disappointing but not unexpected.

"It is a new process with some limitations," he noted.

The inability of presidential candidates to campaign in the United States, Zaragoza said, coupled with the requirement that voting credentials be issued only in Mexico and the roughly \$8 cost to mail in certified registration forms all have kept away potential voters.

Despite the low numbers, he said, the July election will be a historic event to

The ballot process

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- The deadline to request a mail-in ballot is Jan. 15.

- From April 15 to May 20, voters will receive the ballots. The ballots must be received by Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute by Election Day.

- At 10 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 7 and Jan. 14, interested voters can get help filling out registration forms for a ballot at the Quincie Douglas Neighborhood Center, 1575 E. 36th St.

- Mexican consulates will provide the forms but are forbidden by law to get involved in the election process:

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be celebrated. "Opening the doors to migrants, who are so important to Mexico, will never be a failure," he added. "We won the right to vote, and that in itself is a triumph."

In June, after years of lobbying from migrants, Mexico's Congress granted Mexicans abroad the right to cast mail-in ballots only in presidential elections.

In this year's race, the three main candidates vying to succeed President Vicente Fox are Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party, Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Democratic Revolutionary Party, and Roberto Madrazo of the Institutional Revolutionary Party. The law allows Mexico's president to serve a single six-year term.

Some say the apparent lack of excitement about the election in this country — despite a Hispanic Pew Center survey in March showing that the prospect of voting in Mexican elections held broad appeal among Mexican voters — means that there is much more education to be done.

Manuel Palacios, a Tucson geologist originally from Mexico City, said many Mexicans left their homeland because they lost faith in the ability of the government to take care of its people, and now in the United States, they question why they should bother to vote.

"Most of those who have come to this country from Mexico lived in misery, and the last thing they want to do is deal with political parties," said Palacios, who plans to vote. "They're only interested in putting food on their table."

Palacios, 57, said that in time, migrants through their vote can become a force in Mexican politics that could help give a voice to the disenfranchised both in Mexico and in the United States.

It will be up to people like him, Palacios said, to "little by little convince the public that it is for their benefit to cast a ballot even if they are absent from their country."

Diana Montaña, a University of Arizona graduate student, said she hopes the number of registered voters will grow as the deadline gets closer.

"What bothers me is that the process already is being labeled a failure, even though every vote counts," said Montaña, 24, who already has requested a ballot. "This is new for all of us, and we are learning together. What really matters is that the vote abroad is being recognized."

The Tucsonan is among those promoting the vote through workshops where people can fill out applications.

At a mid-December soccer game in Phoenix between Mexico and Hungary, Montaña said, she and others passed out more than 30,000 registration forms so people could send for ballots.

Pilar Alvarez, an IFE spokeswoman in Mexico City, said most of the ballot requests are coming from the United States, followed by Canada, Spain and France. Altogether, the number of registered voters represents more than 50 countries.

If the history of nations that allow voting abroad is any indication, she said, Mexican voters are unlikely to tip the scale in favor of any given candidate in this year's presidential election.

"No country has ever had dramatic numbers in votes abroad in its first election year," Alvarez said, noting that the IFE had only since Oct. 1, when the law took effect, to promote the election.

The agency will mail out ballots in March, Alvarez said, along with information on the platform of each of the presidential candidates. Voters' ballots must be received in Mexico City by Election Day.

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- *Contact reporter Lourdes Medrano at 573-4347 or lmedrano@azstarnet.com.*

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