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## Mexico politicians can't stump in U.S.

*Nation's Electoral Institute forbids it*

**Sam Enriquez**

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MEXICO CITY - The Federal Electoral Institute has ruled that the same law granting Mexicans living abroad the right to vote in the 2006 presidential election also forbids contenders from traveling to the United States to campaign.

The Electoral Institute was given the responsibility to set guidelines for the law, passed by Mexico's Congress in June. Its decision means that none of the estimated 10 million Mexicans in the United States will get a chance to see candidates in person.

"We believe the law is clear: You cannot ask for the vote on foreign soil," said Patricio Ballados, the institute's general coordinator for the vote abroad.

Although Congress forbade candidates from campaigning outside Mexico during election season, several contenders had planned appearances in Los Angeles and other immigrant-rich U.S. cities, arguing that they were free to visit as private citizens before parties selected their official candidates later this year.

Former Mexico City Mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador canceled a meeting with Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa recently, as well as an appearance at a popular Mexican Independence Day celebration in Huntington Park, Calif. Aides urged the presidential front-runner to stay out of the United States after election officials warned that his visit could violate Mexican law. The Federal Electoral Institute, known by its Spanish initials as the IFE, is an autonomous government agency with the authority to levy fines or disqualify candidates.

In June, Congress gave the IFE the dual task of encouraging Mexicans abroad to vote by mail while insulating Mexico's presidential election from foreign influence.

Its guidelines forbid candidates, party leaders or party members from organizing any campaign activities outside Mexico, including registering voters. The guidelines also forbid any campaign spending abroad.

At the same time, IFE members agreed that Mexico has the responsibility of delivering campaign and party information to its expatriates.

"It's a dilemma," Ballados said. "We are supposed to have an informed electorate abroad, but we have legislation that restricts what Mexicans can learn about the election."

The contradictions were built into the law and reflect the ambivalence by Congress about granting the vote to Mexicans living in the United States, said Raul Ross, one of the longtime organizers of the vote abroad movement.

"We wanted the freedom to register voters, to allow Mexicans to contribute

financially, and we wanted candidates to be able to campaign here," said Ross, a Mexican living in Chicago. "But those three actions were explicitly prohibited. The reason was that the political parties couldn't find a way to keep control outside of Mexico."

From 300,000 to 400,000 Mexicans living in the United States are believed to hold valid voter registration cards, only a small fraction of the 37 million or so voters who cast ballots in the 2000 presidential election that carried National Action Party candidate Vicente Fox into office.

Fox's victory broke the rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, known as the PRI, and among his promises was the right to vote abroad.

In the five years since, the influence and reach of Mexicans living in the United States has grown, with banks estimating they will send home nearly \$20 billion this year to friends and family in Mexico. In addition, a loose confederation of hometown clubs in the United States is reshaping hundreds of tiny villages, building roads, schools and other projects. As a group, they have demanded more say in how their local towns are run.

No one is certain how many Mexicans abroad will cast ballots in July's election. But many here and in the United States believe they will exert their influence in telephone conversations with family members back home.

Primitivo Rodriguez, a Mexico City activist, said the campaign restrictions signal a missed opportunity to bring migrants into Mexico's political system before losing them to the United States.

"If Mexican citizens in the United States want to support a candidate, what is wrong with that?" he said. "A given right of any democracy is that people will have basic information about the issues and about the personal qualities of a candidate."

Ballados said the IFE may provide party or candidate pamphlets to voters by mail.

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