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Mexican House supports voting in U.S.

Polling stations would be for presidential race only

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MEXICO CITY - Mexico's House of Representatives approved a bill Tuesday that, for the first time, will allow Mexicans to vote for president at polling stations set up in the United States and other countries.

The measure highlights the growing political and economic power of Mexican migrants, and will likely set off a furious race to collect votes in Arizona and other U.S. states for the July 2006 presidential election.

Representatives from the United States applauded loudly from the visitors gallery as the measure passed. Mexicans in Arizona said they felt they were regaining their political rights.

The bill was approved 391-5 with 22 abstentions. It is expected to pass the Senate within weeks and be signed into law by President Vicente Fox.

"This vote is giving rights to people who, until this moment, were not allowed to be complete citizens," said Hector Flores, president of the League of United Latin American Citizens. "It's something positive and important, and they deserve it."

The bill would allow an estimated 10 million Mexicans in the United States to register to vote at polling stations set up in consulates. Currently, citizens must return to Mexico to vote.

The measure applies only to the presidential vote. Mexicans in the United States still would not be able to vote in legislative or local races.

"Everybody should have the right to vote for the president. The foreign relations that government will apply . . . can affect my life and the life of my family," said Raúl Patricio O'Farrill Lozano, 41, a Mexican attorney who has lived in Phoenix for eight years.

O'Farrill said he flew to Mexico City in 2000 to cast a vote for Fox.

Elias Bermudez, a Sonora native living in Phoenix, said the foreign voters could change Mexico's political landscape.

"Most of the votes in Mexico are conditioned on what party you belong to and who is giving you some benefits personally," Bermudez said. "I think those of us who are in the United States will have a better perspective as to who will be the best candidate . . . because I believe we don't feel the pressures as people in Mexico."

Indeed, the foreign vote is seen as a major gamble for Mexico's political parties, because no one is exactly sure how the emigrants will vote.

"For us, this moment is as important as the vote that gave women the right to vote in 1953," said the bill's author, Rep. Laura Elena Martínez Rivera of the Institutional Revolutionary Party. "It is simply the just and right thing to do."

In 2000, Fox's National Action Party wrested the Mexican presidency away from the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, for the first time in 71 years. It will likely be looking for votes in Arizona, Texas and other border states where workers may share Fox's enthusiasm for free enterprise.

The PRI hopes to win votes among recent emigrants, people unhappy with Fox's government. It is likely looking toward New York City, which has many migrants from its traditional southern strongholds in Puebla, Oaxaca and Chiapas states.

The leftist Popular Democratic Party has been lobbying to win the absentee vote since 1988. It has pockets of support in California and Chicago. Last year, migrants in the United States sent back more than \$16 billion to Mexico in money transfers, making them a powerful political force.

"In the last decade the demographics have changed considerably," said Jose Lerma, a Tucson attorney who attended the legislative session with other members of the Advisory Council of the government's Institute of Mexicans Abroad. "It's not just a pocket of Michoacans in Chicago, a pocket of Oaxacans in California. You are going to see very active campaigns in all areas where there are votes."

Staff reporter Susan Carroll contributed to this article.

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