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# Clock ticking on immigrant vote for Mexico

## President Vicente Fox expects to hear about the status of an absentee balloting proposal for 2006 during his Midwest tour this week

By Hugh Dellios, Tribune foreign correspondent. Tribune staff reporter Oscar Avila contributed to this report from Chicago

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MEXICO CITY -- During President Vicente Fox's visit to Chicago this week, he will be greeted by many immigrants who no longer see their relationship with Mexico as just sending money home each year with no voice in their native country's affairs.

From Chicago and elsewhere in the United States, they expect to be voting for Fox's successor in 2006.

On the eve of a three-day visit to the Midwest, Fox on Tuesday signed a long-demanded proposal to approve absentee voting for Mexicans abroad. The initiative now goes to Congress, where its passage would be, in Fox's words, "an enormous step in the construction of a truly democratic Mexican society."

Yet many immigrant leaders fear that time has nearly run out to make the vote happen by 2006 as the idea has languished in the hands of Mexico's divided lawmakers despite being one of Fox's campaign promises in 2000.

### Overcoming fears

Critics worry about compromising Mexico's sovereignty, electoral fraud and voters being vulnerable to powerful U.S. interests. But some think the real reason for the delay is less about legalities and logistics than partisan fears over who will receive the immigrant vote.

For years, the former ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, opposed the idea, fearing that those who left would punish them at the ballot box. Now some believe Fox's National Action Party has the same fear as migration has continued apace since he took over.

"I hope this isn't an illusion being sold to us," said Maria Felix, president of Casa Guanajuato, a Chicago immigrants' group. "This should have happened a long time ago."

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Other immigrants warn of a rift with Mexico that--while not jeopardizing the nearly \$14 billion a year they send home to their families--could affect their willingness to help in other ways.

"What's going to happen soon when they come and say `Will you invest in your country?'" asked Primitivo Rodriguez, an organizer for the Coalition for the Political Rights of Mexicans Abroad. "People are going to say `To hell with Mexico, man!'"

Fox is sure to hear plenty about el voto this week in Illinois, Michigan and Minnesota.

He will arrive with less fanfare than his last visit to Chicago in July 2001. At that time, the rancher and former Coca Cola executive was basking in glory from his ouster of the corrupt PRI after 71 years in power. Hopes were high for a quick immigration deal to allow more Mexicans to work in the U.S.

Agenda for last 2 years

He arrives this time against a backdrop of frustration with most of his ambitious reform plans stalled, critics saying he turned out to be a better campaigner than manager and Mexico's political class looking ahead to the 2006 election.

In an interview last week, during which he wore loafers rather than his trademark cowboy boots, Fox cited a far less ambitious list of priorities for his last two years in office.

The goals included maintaining Mexico's economic discipline, combating poverty and trying to strengthen the rule of law to help fight what citizens see as an epidemic of crime and impunity.

He did not mention tax reform or energy reform, both of which have stalled. Adding insult to injury, Fox's handpicked negotiator on energy reforms, Felipe Calderon, quit this month after Fox scolded him for openly entertaining the idea of running to replace him in 2006.

In the interview, Fox said he remained confident. He emphasized that, despite facing an "unprecedented" opposition from Mexico's Congress, he still has popularity ratings of 65 percent, "the highest point of approval of any president in all of the Americas."

"The first [priority] is that the [2006] campaign doesn't distract from the activities of the government," Fox said. "We're going to work until the last day of this government."

The right to vote abroad became a possibility in 1996, when Congress swept away a law saying Mexicans had to vote in their home districts. But, since then, lawmakers have refused to determine who could vote and how.

While critics fear the immigrants could determine the outcome of Mexican elections, many analysts figure that only about half a million would vote.

Nevertheless, proponents say the vote would be important as a symbolic recognition of the immigrants' ties and support to Mexico. Some immigrants complain they are victims of a "political apartheid" because they are excluded from the vote.

"It's a debt our country has to these people," said Luis Miguel Rionda, an expert on the vote abroad at the University of Guanajuato.

"The principle obstacle is demagoguery by the parties," he said. "I think Fox has a commitment to this,

but his advisers have a lot of fears."

#### Framework reached

In April, government officials and most Mexican political parties agreed to a framework for a new law that would limit the vote to the 2006 presidential election and recognize only voting cards issued in Mexico. But lawmakers took no action on that, or 13 other proposals.

Fox made the April accord his official proposal Tuesday, when he reiterated his "personal commitment" to the matter and made a direct appeal to lawmakers to correct "an unjust form of political discrimination."

Some, including militants of the leftist Democratic Revolutionary Party, demanded that Mexico allow more immigrants to vote by issuing voting cards in the U.S. But party leaders at the ceremony Tuesday applauded Fox.

"We want more, but this is a very, very important step and no immigrant would pardon us if we are not in favor of taking this forward," said Lazaro Cardenas, governor of Michoacan state, which has almost 3 million residents in the U.S.

PRI officials say they also are on board, and PRI party activists in Chicago are pushing to begin organizing in case the proposal is approved.

"We have nothing to lose now," said Laura Martinez, the PRI legislator handling the issue, who blamed the slow progress on Fox's failure to push it.

"That's the way the president normally acts," she said. "There's this big announcement in the media, and then we wait and wait and nothing happens."

The experts warn that if it ever passes Congress, the vote initiative would need lots of work, not least of all figuring out how and where the vote would take place.

Plans for an Internet vote were hobbled by security concerns, while few Mexicans trust the postal service and some object to the Fox administration overseeing polls at consulates.

#### Clock is ticking

Meanwhile, the clock is ticking. Analysts say the legal reforms must be completed by the middle of 2005, so lawmakers have to act before the end of this year.

"There's very little time," said Carlos Navarro, director of international electoral studies for the Federal Elections Institute.

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