
Commentary; When Votes Cross the Line Between Lands:[HOME EDITION]

Gregory Rodriguez. *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Jun 1, 2004. pg. B.11

Full Text (889 words)

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It's been eight years since Mexico amended its constitution to allow its citizens to cast ballots outside their voting precincts. It's been more than four years since President Vicente Fox first promised to extend the franchise to Mexican nationals in the United States. But still there is no absentee ballot system in Mexico.

In April, however, Mexico's secretary of the interior and the nation's major political parties agreed to work together to create a system that would enable Mexicans living abroad to at least participate in their homeland's presidential elections.

Though the details have yet to be determined, the prospect of millions of migrants voting "transnationally" as early as 2006 has sparked debate on both sides of the border -- and the long-awaited move to re-enfranchise emigrants may wind up being a largely symbolic event.

The Mexican government has yet to determine exactly who would be eligible to vote. Non-U.S. citizens, documented and undocumented, who still possess their Mexican voter identification cards could cast ballots certainly, and perhaps those U.S. citizens who also hold Mexican nationality. The potential Mexican electorate in the United States estimated at 11 million voters.

Eager to acknowledge the significant contributions of its emigrants and extend its young democracy, much of official Mexico is nonetheless uneasy with the prospect of such a big nonresident bloc. "Mexican politicians want to give emigrants the right to vote," says Luis Miguel Rionda, director of the Center for Social Science Studies at the University of Guanajuato. "But most are hoping that they won't."

In fact, there is plenty of worry about the effect of conflicting loyalties on both sides of the border. But in this case, it may be official Mexico that has the most to lose. According to one recent analysis, if the Mexican Congress were to grant emigrants the right to elect their own representatives to the Chamber of Deputies, 24 of the lower house's 300 seats would represent voters north of the U.S.- Mexico border. Californians alone could lay claim to 10 seats in the Chamber, the same number as the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca.

But even if politicians are afraid of nonresident voting power, they are also afraid of not extending the vote to Mexicans abroad.

After decades of trekking north, to the disdain of their countrymen, emigrants are suddenly in fashion in Mexico. Everyone seems to know they send home more money than the entire tourism industry generates, and that their remittances are on the verge of eclipsing the annual earnings of Pemex, Mexico's oil monopoly. It has become politically incorrect to ignore the needs and desires of those who are annually infusing the economy with \$12 billion.

Much of the push for the right to vote abroad has come from Mexican hometown associations in the United States. But it is far from clear how many migrants these groups actually represent. One 2002-03 survey of Mexicans with migratory experience indicates that only 2% participated in such organizations within the previous six months.

"Mexican hometown associations sell the idea that they represent all immigrants in the U.S., and the Mexican government buys it," says Jorge Santibanez, president of El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana. "The government has no way to connect with the millions of migrants in the U.S., so they rely on these groups."

In the 2000 Mexican presidential election, the American press also greatly exaggerated the number of Mexican

migrants who took part in caravans across the border to cast ballots in one of the 15 special ballot boxes set up for nonresidents. A survey conducted at these casillas especiales in Tijuana indicated that only about one-sixth of the nonresidential voters were U.S. residents.

In 1998, Mexico began to allow emigrants who had become naturalized citizens in the U.S. and the U.S.-born children of Mexican nationals to apply for Mexican nationality. But in the first five years, only 67,000 applicants came forward at consulates throughout the United States. In other words, out of the roughly 1.74 million Mexican-born naturalized U.S. citizens and the 2.5 million U.S.-born adult children of immigrants, only 1.6% availed themselves of the opportunity to claim Mexican nationality.

Transnationalism -- the notion that people can simultaneously participate in more than one political system, hold dual citizenship and define their national identities in hybrid terms -- is all the rage among both Mexican and American intellectuals. Generally, the idea thrills the left and scares the right. But the evidence thus far seems to indicate that Mexican emigrants, the largest group of potential transnationals in the contemporary U.S., have yet to truly embrace the idea.

Given the ambivalence of the Mexican government and the relative indifference of many emigrants, the actual number of cross-border voters in Mexico is probably significantly less than the millions predicted. In fact, more sober analysts estimate that only between 300,000 and 600,000 emigrants would participate in the 2006 presidential election. And others even doubt that the government would be able to institute a workable absentee voting system in time for that election.

Still, Mexico's rapprochement with the emigrants it has long disparaged is an historic event. "This proposal may be symbolic," says Rionda of Guanajuato, "but we Mexicans live on symbols."

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[Illustration]

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Section: *California Metro; Part B; Editorial Pages Desk*

ISSN/ISBN: 04583035

Text Word Count 889