

**IN SEARCH OF OUR LOST CITIZENSHIP:  
MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS, THE RIGHT TO VOTE,  
AND THE TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY  
IN MEXICO**

*Jesús Martínez*  
**Political Science Department  
Santa Clara University**

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1156 High Street  
Merrill College  
University of California  
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# **In Search of Our Lost Citizenship: Mexican Immigrants, the Right to Vote, and the Transition to Democracy in Mexico**

**Jesús Martínez**

## **I.- Introduction**

The Mexican government finally began to take significant steps to reconcile its relation with the millions of nationals who are forced to migrate in order to make a living, with the recent adoption of laws recognizing the right to vote for Mexican citizens residing abroad (Summer 1996), and the right to retain the Mexican nationality (December 1996). This judicial recognition took place more than a century after massive migration from Mexico to the United States began. In the opinion of migrants like myself, it took far too long for the Mexican political system to accommodate some of the many specific interests and needs of Mexicans who participate in the process of international migration.

How can we account for this historic delay?

There is good reason to believe that the denial of political rights to citizens who live abroad, for the most part in the United States, can be largely attributed to the authoritarian and presidentialist character of the regime established in the aftermath of the 1910 Revolution. The state-party regime was created in 1929 by forces already in power in order to maintain that power, not to compete for it with other forces through an open electoral process, nor to redistribute it to the masses that had taken up arms two decades earlier.

While never as repressive as its counter-parts in Chile or Argentina, the Mexican state that emerged from the Revolution did punish dissenters when cooptive strategies failed. The massacre of students at Tlatelolco Plaza in 1968 is only one of the many examples of this repressive capacity of the postrevolutionary government.

Perhaps more significant than the repression is the concentration of power that took place over the years, leading to what historian Enrique Krauze has called the *imperial presidency*. Essential to the functioning of this system was the absence of mechanisms to make officials, particularly the president, accountable to society. Without a system of effective checks and

balances corruption flourished and policymaking far too frequently disregarded the welfare of the citizens in favor of those in power. Under such circumstances, if the interests of Mexican society as a whole were not being addressed in an adequate manner by an undemocratic system, there was little reason to expect the concerns of nationals abroad to be treated any differently.

In fact, scholars like Manuel Garcia y Griego have argued that Mexico's policies from 1974-86 were characterized by an unwillingness to specify the national interests in the area of migration, as well as a tendency to merely react to whatever was decided in Washington. Garcia y Griego calls this the policy of not having a migration policy. He suggests that it is a decision made by authorities who evaluated the possible costs and benefits of negotiating migration proposals with the United States. After considering the various alternatives available they concluded it was best to not seek bilateral migration accords due to the nature of the relation at the time and the troubling course of the immigration debate in Washington. Nevertheless, Garcia y Griego argues that the policy of not having a migration policy was no longer viable by the end of the eighties for a nation that continued to send citizens abroad and, simultaneously, faced the challenge of Central American immigration.<sup>1</sup>

A change was evident in Mexico's migration policies during the Carlos Salinas de Gortari administration (1988-94). An assortment of new programs was created to make consulates more active participants in the everyday life of the Mexican American communities, promote migrant investment in the sending regions, and also encourage the formation of home community clubs. However, such efforts raised suspicion that their ultimate objective was to co-opt migrants, undermine the growth of opposition forces that had found support during and after the 1988 presidential election, and promote the establishment of state-party committees (Comités de Apoyo a Compatriotas) in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Further concern was raised when the Salinas government

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<sup>1</sup>Manuel García Y Griego, "Necesidad y Propósito de una Política Mexicana de Emigración", in Manuel García y Griego and Monica Vereá Campos, *México y Estados Unidos Frente a la Migración de los Indocumentados* (México: UNAM, 1988), p. 145. See also The Bilateral Commission on the Future of United States-Mexican Relations, *The Challenge of Interdependence: Mexico and the United States* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989).

<sup>2</sup>A discussion on the relations between the PRI, Mexican immigrant communities, and the Comités de Apoyo a Compatriotas is presented in Martín Torres, "Con los Mexicanos de Allá," *Examen*, January 1994, pp. 8-10. According to Torres, his party began to establish the committees in 1991. To no one's surprise, the article suggests collaboration between the PRI's committees and Mexican consulates.

made the approval of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) its priority, initiated intense lobbying efforts in the U.S. to have the trilateral accord approved by Congress, encouraged migrants and Mexican Americans to follow the example of the Jewish community and become a lobby for Mexico,<sup>3</sup> and agreed with the Bush and Clinton administrations to keep the issue of labor flows out of the NAFTA agenda.

The transplantation of authoritarianism, corporatism, and the PRI to the Mexican communities in the United States is not what many migrants had in mind when they called upon the Mexican government to redefine its policies towards nationals abroad. In particular, it was disturbing that migrant demands for the right to vote in presidential elections encountered the consistent and, at times, virulent opposition of authorities and scholars who adopted positions in defense of the status quo. For example, a favorite argument in response to the right to vote was that it would lead to the massive arrests of the undocumented voters on election day. It was also suggested that it was logistically impossible to hold elections in the United States.

In the aftermath of the approval by the California electorate of Proposition 187 in November 1994, the very same figures who had expressed opposition to the vote for citizens abroad were also among the leading proponents of what came to be known as the non-loss of Mexican nationality law.<sup>4</sup> It was argued that Mexican immigrants should be encouraged to become

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Mexican newspaper reports suggest the first PRI committees were inaugurated in March 1991. The first in Sacramento, California, the second in Los Angeles, and the third in Dallas, Texas. At the start of this process it was expected the PRI would create 50 committees throughout the United States. In the case of Los Angeles, the local group was composed of 50 individuals of "reknown trajectory", received the personal support of party officials visiting from Mexico City, and were granted legal recognition by the city's Mexican consul general, José Angel Pevador Osuna. See Francisco Mendoza, "Constituyó el PRI un comité de apoyo a mexicanos residentes en Estados Unidos", *El Día*, March 13, 1991 and "El priismo y los migratorios", *Excelsior*, March 12, 1991.

<sup>3</sup>In order to ensure the passage of NAFTA by the U.S. Congress, the Salinas de Gortari administration developed an ambitious outreach and lobbying effort in government circles and within the Mexican American community. Prominent Chicano political figures were hired as consultants, special programs were designed to benefit Hispanic businesses, numerous trips to the United States were made by the President and his top advisers, and relations were intensified with migrant organizations. Pro-government mass media also joined in these efforts. For example, the Spanish language Galavision network, an affiliate of Televisa, aired commercial with its top stars urging the Mexicans in the United States to call the congressional representatives and express support for NAFTA.

<sup>4</sup>Jorge Bustamante's consistent opposition to the right to vote contrasts with his protagonist role as a promoter of the nationality law. In one of his newspaper articles, the noted scholar openly proposes a constitutional reform to make dual nationality possible and assigns credit for the idea to Alejandro Carrillo Castro, Roger Diaz de Cossio, and himself. He makes clear the intention of the law is to encourage the naturalization of Mexicans in the United States in order to contribute to the electoral defeat of politicians like Pete Wilson. Further, he reiterates his opposition for the right to vote of Mexicans residing abroad, arguing that it is a completely distinct matter that has serious implications for its "extraterritorial application." Jorge A. Bustamante, "Cómo luchar contra los Wilsons",

naturalized U.S. citizens in order to defend their rights in the U.S. without the fear of losing cultural and economic rights in their homeland.<sup>5</sup> Some proponents in Mexico, such as the newspaper *Excelsior*, editorialized that the dual nationality law had as a “praiseworthy” objective the propagation of the values of the fatherland”.<sup>6</sup> The newspaper and other supporters accepted the government position that the law would allow Mexican in the U.S. to defend their human rights.

However, there are significant flaws in the law and the arguments of the proponents of this reform. By design, the non-loss of nationality law does not include political rights in Mexico and, thus, excludes naturalized migrants from voting and other forms of participation in future Mexican elections. More importantly, the supposed beneficiaries would be undocumented immigrants under attack by laws like Proposition 187. Curiously, undocumented immigrants constitute a group that is in no position to naturalize in the United States or benefit from the non-loss of nationality law.<sup>7</sup>

The non-loss of nationality reform was not approved until December 1996, nearly two years after first being discussed in public and one month after the U.S. presidential election had been held. Its approval was also preempted and overshadowed by the more rapid and unexpected approval in the summer of 1996 of the right to vote law by a Mexican Congress engaged in negotiations over substantive electoral reforms. In this case, Mexican extra-territorial citizenship had arrived before nationality.

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*Excelsior*, March 27, 1995.

<sup>5</sup>In an interview with syndicated columnist Alejandro Carrillo Castro states he came up with the idea of a dual nationality law as a result of the conversations held with Mexican immigrants during his tenure as Mexican consul in Chicago. Reportedly, Mexican immigrants informed him they did not become naturalized U.S. citizens for fear of losing the right to own land in Mexico. Georgie Anne Geyer, “Mexican Policy of Dual Nationality Leads to Confusion,” UPS Syndicate, February 20, 1997.

<sup>6</sup>“Doble Nacionalidad”, *Excelsior*, December 13, 1996.

<sup>7</sup>Despite the impressive government campaigns promoting the non-loss of nationality law, there is reason to believe that few naturalized Mexicans in the United States will file a petition at consulates to recuperate their lost nationality. As a PAN sympathizer residing in Los Angeles declared to the author, when he returns to Mexico to visit or carry out economic transactions, like the purchase of land, no one ever asks him for proof of citizenship, only for the money.

## II.- The Right to Vote and the Political Context

The two recently approved laws may be historically significant but their long-term impact is still difficult to predict at this time, given the novelty of the reforms, their conceptual limitations, the still largely unexamined responses on the part of the potential beneficiaries, and the difficult political context in which they have appeared.

Suffice it to say that the reforms have been adopted at a time in the nation's history distinguished by an apparently eternal economic crisis, the deterioration of a state party system established seven decades ago, an erosion in the legitimacy of the presidency, the survival of various elements of Mexico's versions of corporatism and authoritarianism, economic liberalization policies that exacerbate socio-economic inequalities and cause greater domestic and international migration, the resurgence of armed movements as an option to resolve political problems, and an accelerated militarization of the national territory and everyday life.

As if this were not enough, the reforms were approved partly in response to restrictionist tendencies in the migratory policies of the United States, the principal point of destination for most Mexicans who emigrate, and a nation with which Mexico has had an asymmetrical and often difficult relation. The bilateral relationship has been further characterized by an inability, and all too often an unwillingness, to formulate and implement feasible bilateral accords to deal with Mexican immigration to the north. As a consequence, policies tend to be unilateral decisions that are inappropriate for addressing an issue that is fundamentally transnational. This error, shared by the authorities in each of the two nations, has contributed to the creation in the United States of a political scenario that encourages the proliferation of interpretations in which Mexican immigration is defined as a problem and immigrants are portrayed and treated as a threat to the well-being of the nation.

Despite this problematic situation, there is hope that the two laws approved by Mexican legislators may contribute to a notable modification in the historical relations between Mexico and those citizens who emigrate on a temporary or permanent basis. In particular, a valuable contribution made by the law which grants citizens abroad the right to vote in future presidential

elections, beginning in the year 2000, is that it affirms in an official manner the Mexican citizenship of the men and women who, for the most part, have been forced to leave the national territory in an attempt to improve their standard of living.

The right of emigrants to a full Mexican citizenship, which must include the ability to participate in electoral processes, remained unclear for most of the twentieth century. The Mexican Constitution of 1917 leaves the question open to interpretation, but the right was not explicitly recognized or outright ignored by recently adopted electoral laws.<sup>8</sup> Such laws reproduced the exclusionary authoritarianism which has characterized Mexican politics for most of the twentieth century. This authoritarianism fostered alienation and apathy in Mexican society. It made the nation's electoral processes mere rituals that served the purpose of confirming the hegemony of the forces in power and could not, therefore, be regarded as exercises in the free expression of the popular will.

Elections did not come to represent an effective means for citizens to influence the course of national or even local events until recently. A visible shift took place in the mid-1980s elections in Mexico's north, when the conservative National Action Party (PAN) initiated ambitious campaigns to wrest control from the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) of influential states and cities. The presidential election of 1988, with two formidable opposition party candidates (Manuel Clouthier of the PAN and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the National Democratic Front) running against Carlos Salinas de Gortari of the PRI, further reflected the desires of important sectors of Mexican society to shape both national policies and their everyday lives through the vote.

This concern for Mexico's direction and the revalidation of the electoral process was also evident among nationals in the United States. At the same time as Mexico was undergoing a political realignment, immigrants in California and other states created explicitly political groups, organized campaigns to influence the outcome of the presidential election, and attempted to insert their specific demands into the debate unfolding in their home country. At the top of their list of

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Article 125 of the 1982 Federal Law for Political Organizations and Electoral Processes indicates that Mexican citizens residing abroad may request their inclusion in the Federal Electors Registry. Article 126 allows for this process to be carried out by mail. Subsequent electoral reforms eliminated such references to Mexican citizens abroad.

concerns were the promotion of democracy in Mexico, the elimination of corrupt practices by officials who extorted them when traveling to their homeland, and the demand to vote in presidential elections while living abroad. In addition to these demands, in 1988 and 1994 immigrant groups carried out symbolic elections to make evident the existence of popular interest in such a right. The mock election also highlighted their political creativity, as well as their capacity to successfully organize experiments in immigrant participation.

Perhaps the most interesting of the experiments in symbolic elections was carried out in Chicago on August 21, 1994. On this the date of presidential elections in Mexico, a resource-poor but enthusiastic plural coalition of immigrants (identified as the Consejo Ciudadano Electoral Mexicano) attempted to fully replicate Mexico's electoral process, managed to establish voting booths at eighteen separate locations throughout the city, and drew the participation of 3,243 voters who were asked to show proof of Mexican citizenship.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding the symbolic nature of the exercise, the voters in Chicago and other communities revealed a desire to assume the role of transnational political actors and, thereby, challenged the definitions of citizenship then imbedded in Mexican electoral law.

### **III.- The Right to Vote and the 1996 Reforms**

The recovery of full citizenship for Mexicans within and outside the national territory is an on-going struggle, not an accomplished fact. In the case of Mexico's emigrants, this process took a qualitative leap in the summer of 1996 when the right to vote law was made part of a package of electoral reforms unanimously approved by a national Congress trying to find institutional solutions to the distinct but inter-related crises that then threatened to drag the country into a whirlpool of ingovernability. Thus, in some way, the right to vote for Mexicans residing abroad was considered by the legislators a part of the solution to the nation's problems, as well as an

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<sup>9</sup>As in Los Angeles and Northern California, the PRD won the election, receiving 43 percent of the votes, the PAN 40, and the PRI only 16. (*La Raza*, Aug. 25-31, 1994; *All Chicago City News*, Aug. 24, 1994; *Éxito*, Aug. 25-31, 1994; *El Día*, Aug. 26-Sept. 1, 1994; *La Prensa Adelita*, Sept. 3, 1994)



element of the changes considered necessary to bring about the establishment of a more democratic political system.

The inclusion of the right to vote can be partly attributed to the interest in the issue on the part of the negotiators of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). In 1996 the PRD was one of the political forces represented in Congress and a party whose principal leaders, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, had expressed support for the suffrage rights of Mexicans living abroad at least since 1988, when the dissident movement they created, and that would later become the PRD, began to establish formal linkages with sympathizers in California and other parts of the United States.

As we have argued in other works, the right to vote has been a fundamental element in the agenda of the PRD sympathizers in places, like California, where large concentrations of Mexican immigrants can be found.<sup>10</sup> Over the years, these activists have made this concern known to the party leadership in Mexico and, in response, the PRD has incorporated the issue into the long list of political reforms it has considered and proposed. Nevertheless, the approval of the law in 1996 cannot be solely attributed to the support of this opposition party. To develop a more adequate understanding of the approval and on-going implementation of the law, it is necessary to carry out additional research to identify the reasons that led the other political forces to accept the inclusion of the law in the ambitious package of state reforms.

Having presented this context, it is important to underline two points. In the first place, the remarkable issue is not whether the PRD, in its role as a political party, supported and pushed forth the reform in order to be faithful to its partisan principles or to formally engage in a dispute for the potential electorate residing in the United States. Rather, what appears significant is that the PRD's support for the right to vote can be considered a product of an on-going relation between a national political force (in this case the PRD) and sectors of Mexico's emigrant population (the PRD sympathizers in the United States). As such, the approval of the reform turns out to be an example

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<sup>10</sup>Jesús Martínez Saldaña, "At the Periphery of Democracy: The Binational Politics of Mexican Immigrants in the Silicon Valley", Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1993.

of the many ways in which those millions of men and women who emigrate already participate in the transformation of Mexico.

From this perspective it is possible to appreciate the fact that the right to vote reform contributes to the formalization of one aspect of a profound and lengthy relation between emigres and the Mexican nation. If we were to examine this historical relationship more carefully, we would surely find that there has been a rich history of formal and informal participation of the migrants in the political life of their nation of origin. For example, in a study of the agrarian movement in the Los Altos region of Jalisco state, Ann Craig has found that the "single most distinctive characteristic shared by the majority of first agraristas is that they had worked in the United States before becoming ejidatarios, usually even before joining the agrarian reform movement."<sup>11</sup>

By opening up political spaces to permit electoral participation to emigres, the right to vote law now grants a heretofore denied legitimacy to the involvement of this social group in the political affairs and processes of their home country. Furthermore, the law formalizes and opens doors to the extra-territorial presence of Mexican parties and other political forces. In fact, extra-territorial work may now become a requirement of any political force seeking to influence the nation. This is certainly taking place at present with the gubernatorial election in Zacatecas, as the candidates of the two major political forces in the state, the PRI and PRD, have extended their campaigning to Los Angeles, the principal receiving region of zacatecanos in the United States. It is unlikely that Mexican politics will ever be the same.

Secondly, by being integrated into the 1996 state reforms, the right to vote for Mexicans abroad law became a factor in a process of national political transition that, conceivably, could culminate in the establishment of a democratic regime. With the acceptance of the right to vote the various political forces represented in Congress recognized that the transition to democracy cannot take place if there is a formal exclusion of Mexicans living outside of the national territory. As a

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<sup>11</sup>Ann L. Craig, *The First Agraristas: An Oral History of a Mexican Agrarian Reform Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 178.

consequence, the reform alters the character of Mexican citizenship and modifies the meaning of the Mexican nation itself, giving substance to the declarations of officials, including President Ernesto Zedillo, that the nation he governs is no longer limited to its territorial dimensions. By approving the right to vote law in 1996, contemporary Mexico truly began to recognize itself as a nation of emigrants.

#### **IV.- The Limits of the Reform**

Immigrants like myself who had long been concerned with the right to vote responded with enthusiasm to the congressional decision in 1996. However, the initial euphoria began to be tempered soon after, as we realized that the method of approval had not in itself enhanced the political formation of the affected population. The approval of the law, and the package as a whole, was the result of closed door negotiations between representatives of political parties and the presidency. Thus, while beneficial to Mexicans abroad, the manner in which the reform was approved served to defuse whatever campaigns immigrant groups were carrying out at the time, transforming them from active participants into passive and excluded observers.

Just as important, due to the inefficiency in the dissemination of official information to the migrant communities, confusion reigned everywhere. Even right to vote activists came to believe that their decade-long struggle had been won and that the only real work left to be done was to await the arrival of election day in the year 2000. The situation was further aggravated in December 1996 when Congress passed the reform to permit the non-loss of the Mexican nationality. Passage of this law created greater confusion among migrants, other sectors in Mexico and the United States, and the mass media. Even numerous government officials, including representatives of the Foreign Relations Secretariat, far too frequently referred to the December 1996 reform as a dual nationality or dual citizenship law.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The author viewed numerous television interviews of Mexican government officials making such errors in the months before and after the law was approved.

However, the most serious flaws of the 1996 right to vote law did not draw public attention until 1998, when migrant activists concerned with the reform began to follow up on its implementation and discovered that serious defects in its design, combined with an unwillingness of key government agencies to carry out legal responsibilities, threatened to make emigrant participation in the presidential election of the year 2000 a rapidly vanishing possibility.

One of the most serious errors of the 1996 reform is that it conditioned the vote of Mexicans abroad to the existence of a national citizens registry (Registro Nacional Ciudadano) and the creation of a new national identity card (Cédula de Identidad Nacional),<sup>13</sup> whereas citizens who remain in national territory at the time of the election are permitted to vote with their current voter cards if the registry and the new card are not ready by the year 2000.

A second major mistake was assigning the responsibility of the two previously cited tasks to the Secretaría de Gobernación, the powerful cabinet office in charge of political stability and control, and also the arm of the state that has most strongly resisted substantive advances in democratizing the Mexican political system. Instead of proceeding in its assigned tasks with the reformist spirit of the 1996 plural accords, Gobernación has been actively involved in undermining the power of a national Congress that since 1997 has a majority of opposition legislators in the lower house (Cámara de Diputados). During this time, Gobernación has proceeded at a snail's pace in the formulation of the registry and identification card, resisting public declarations on the issue until the end of April 1998. The worst case scenario has now come true, as the officials responsible for such projects have declared that neither will be completed by the end of the century, thus making it legally impossible for citizens abroad to exercising the recently recognized right to vote.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Instituto Federal Electoral, *Código Federal de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales y Otros Ordenamientos Electorales* (Mexico: Instituto Federal Electoral, November 1996), pp. 301-2.

<sup>14</sup>José Gil Olmos and Víctor Ballinas, "Será hasta el 2002 cuando se tenga la cédula única de identidad: SG", *La Jornada*, May 26, 1998; Salvador García and Carina García, "Inviabile para el 2000, el voto de mexicanos en el extranjero", *La Cronica*, May 26, 1998; Fabiola Guarneros, "Registro Nacional de Ciudadanos hasta el año 2002: Gobernación," *El Universal*, May 26, 1998; Raúl Adorno Jiménez, "Estará lista en el 2002 la Cédula de Identificación Ciudadana: Solís", *El Nacional*, May 26, 1998.

Another key agency, the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), also failed to make significant progress in the responsibilities it was assigned by the 1996 reform. Despite being the national institution in charge of organizing and overseeing all electoral processes, by the end of 1997, a year and a half after the unanimous support by the legislators, the IFE had not carried out much work related to the law, initiated any publicity campaign to inform citizens abroad of the acquired right, nor initiated any contact with immigrant groups to begin to explore solutions to the numerous problems that would arise in the process of organizing elections in the United States. It had not even formed, as mandated by law, a commission of experts that would analyze the challenge of organizing elections outside of the republic and offer concrete proposals.

A Mexican Congress frequently paralyzed by internal disputes, confrontations with the Presidency, and disconnected from the migrant population, also chose to ignore the numerous flaws in the law and did not initiate efforts to modify it, even when it became clear that Gobernación and other entities would not complete their legal responsibilities in time.

Thus, for all practical purposes, the passage of the reform was meaningless, as these existing legal and political obstacles remain present. The transition to democracy in Mexico, stagnated as it was by the conflict in Chiapas and numerous other problems, was also not proceeding in the formal inclusion of emigres.

### **V.- An Experiment in Emigrant Lobbying**

In an attempt to inform ourselves of the status of the law and bring about renewed discussion of the issue, Mexicans residing in Illinois, Iowa, Texas, and California organized a delegation and traveled to Mexico City two in the month of February. The primary task was to meet with IFE authorities, due to their responsibility as organizers of the nation's electoral processes. However, as planning proceeded, it was also possible to arrange meetings with legislators from two of the three major parties (PRI and PRD), representatives of non-governmental organizations, interested scholars, and members of the Mexican press.

Once in Mexico City, the delegation participants began to perceive the need to give continuity and organization to their work. A decision was made to create an organizational vehicle and the result was the formation of the Coalición de Mexicanos en el Exterior Nuestro Voto en el 2000. In addition to those traveling from the United States as representatives of immigrant organizations, immigrant rights agencies, journalists, or in an individual capacity, the coalition became strengthened by the active participation of Mexico-based researchers, NGO representatives, and allies employed in government agencies. The coalition adopted a non-partisan philosophy, created a simple organizational structure, and established a plan of action that would be binational in scope.

The presence and work of the Coalición members in Mexico yielded valuable fruits. Their visit to Mexico and the meetings with authorities received widespread coverage by the mass media. They also generated renewed activity by the IFE, legislators, and other government agencies. Expressions of interest and support from various sectors of Mexican society further convinced coalition members of the value of their work. Without expecting it, the delegation members actually initiated a new stage in the relation between emigrants and the Mexican political system, as they invented a way of carrying out transnational lobbying in their home country.

The major finding of the delegation was that the real problem impeding the exercise of the vote in the next presidential election is the lack of political will on the part of the federal executive. As part of their plan of action in response to this reality, the Coalición agreed to send representatives to Mexico a month later, this would allow them to take advantage of the reinitiation of legislative work by the Mexican Congress and also occur at the same time as the start of the implementation of the non-loss of Mexican nationality law (on March 20). A concerted effort was made to focus energies on the national legislature, where opposition parties hold a majority, as well as in gaining the active support of leaders of the PAN, PRI, and the PRD, in the development of relations with figures likely to run for the presidency in the year 2000, and in the cultivation of positive coverage by the mass media. An attempt was also made to arrange a meeting with the PRI's major figure, President Ernesto Zedillo.

With the exception of the presidential meeting, which did not materialize, everything else worked out reasonably well. Expressions of support were achieved rapidly, often exceeding the expectations of the activists. For example, a productive meeting took place with Vicente Fox, self-declared presidential candidate and PAN governor of Guanajuato state, a region with a long and strong tradition of emigration. However, even before the coalition members had arrived to Guanajuato to meet with him, it was possible to read in the morning news that Fox expressed strong support for the right to vote of Mexicans residing abroad. Similarly, legislators in key positions turned out to be representatives of migrant regions, had personal experiences of migration to the U.S., or held ideological convictions that made them feel it was their duty to make the 1996 reform a reality.

In order to further stimulate the movement of the government machinery, the coalition developed a citizen initiative that was presented to supportive legislators. The initiative called upon the Chamber of Deputies to create a special commission to study the situation of the right to vote law and propose reforms to permit the vote abroad, irrespective of the existence of the citizen registry or the new identity card. The initiative was submitted to the Chamber and, after being modified by supportive congressmembers, led to the creation of a proposal to assign the responsibilities envisioned by the Coalición to three committees (Gobernación y Puntos Constitucionales, Relaciones Exteriores, Población y Desarrollo) whose work is directly tied to the law.

The revised proposal was introduced on March 31 to the Chamber of Deputies with support of 97 members of all parties currently represented in Congress.<sup>15</sup> It has already led to the initiation of legislative work that may result in the modification of the 1996 reform in order to eliminate the legal obstacles that put the fate of the Mexican citizens in the hands of the Secretaría de Gobernación and President Ernesto Zedillo. For example, as a result of the meeting held with Gobernación and IFE, congressional representatives in favor of the right to vote, like Porfirio

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<sup>15</sup>Salvador García Soto and Antonio Arellano Caracas, "Abren diputados la discusión del voto en el extranjero en el año 2000; piden celeridad para concluir a tiempo", *Crónica*, April 1, 1998;

Muñoz Ledo, have begun to consider shifting the responsibility of carrying out the work to produce the national identification card and electoral registry from Gobernación to the IFE.<sup>16</sup> IFE authorities, in turn, have declared that it is within their capacity to organize the work related to the electoral participation of Mexicans abroad for the 2000 presidential election if Congress provides the required resources and eliminates the existing legal barriers currently impeding the vote.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, an additional benefit of the coalition's work is that it has contributed to the deterioration of a presidentialist system by prioritizing its relations with the more representative national legislature and the plurally represented Federal Electoral Institute.

While recent events are promising, the final results remain up in the air. The situation is complicated by the fact that Senate approval will also be required for any reforms and, at present, it has a considerable PRI majority. Hence, the Coalición has followed a strategy of seeking from the distinct parties the same degree of unanimous support that was first expressed in the summer of 1996.

## **VI.- Migrants and the Democratization of Mexico's Migration Policies**

The right to vote may not help migrants solve most or perhaps any of their real life problems in a direct manner. Nevertheless, the right to suffrage is fundamental in a democracy, as it empowers citizens and permits them to have some control over the world in which they live. This right is particularly significant to Mexican immigrants in the United States, a social sector historically excluded from full membership in both of the nations to which they have been linked by the process of international migration.

As suggested earlier, the acquisition of the right to vote in future presidential elections is perhaps best perceived as the start of a new era in the history of the relation between Mexico and its emigrants. Too many other matters remain pending in the relation to consider this right the only

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<sup>16</sup> Fabiola Guarneros (1998).

<sup>17</sup> Manuel Rojas, "Viable que los mexicanos en el extranjero voten en el 2000, dice José Woldenberg", *Excelsior*, May 27, 1998; Salvador García and Antonio Arellano, "El IFE podría instrumentar el voto de residentes en el exterior en el 2000," *La Cronica*, May 27, 1998; "Del Congreso depende que los mexicanos exiliados voten en el año 2000 - señala el presidente del IFE," *El Diario de Yucatan*, May 27, 1998.



significant issue that has or will draw migrant activism. For example, it is readily apparent to anyone even vaguely familiarized with the subject matter that there is a need to extend the democratization efforts to Mexico's migration policies. In particular, to make the authorities in the Foreign Relations Secretariat, the cabinet office in charge of consulates and an assortment of programs, accountable to the population it is supposed to serve. At present, there are no mechanisms or institutional channels permitting migrants to influence policies, consular appointments, budget priorities, or the design of key programs. If there are, I have not met a single migrant who knows about them.

Migrants concerned with these and related affairs will find it difficult to achieve their objectives if they do not make their struggle a part of the broader efforts to establish a democratic regime in their home country. This will create opportunities to increase their influence exponentially, attack the roots of many (but not all) of the problems, and reduce the risk of being coopted or crushed by the authoritarian beast that remains alive and kicking in contemporary Mexico.