The decade-long path to Mexican absentee voting rights

The government of Mexico moved to strengthen ties with its citizens abroad by extending their political rights, most notably the right to vote in Mexican elections. A constitutional reform to this effect was passed in August 1996, but the first absentee voting took place in 2006. The delay arose from a clause requiring the Mexican Congress to reform Mexican Federal Election regulations which established the rules under which voting takes place. It took until June 2005 for the Mexican Congress to pass such legislation.

However, in April 2004, the Mexican Foreign Ministry had voiced fears that instituting absentee voting might lead to anti-immigrant reactions in the USA and warned against placing of voting booths and issuance of voting cards in the USA. Hence, when the Mexican Congress passed the long awaited reform on 28 June 2005, it was the most conservative of all the options. There would be no voting booths abroad, no voting cards issued abroad (rather they would be mailed) and the absentee voting would be limited to the presidential election.

Only 32,632 absentee ballots were received in the 2006 Mexican presidential election, most of which came from the USA. Factors affecting the disappointing results included lack of familiarity with the absentee-voting process, inability or unwillingness to pay for the certified postage required to mail the ballots to Mexico and the unwillingness of unauthorized Mexicans to return to Mexico to obtain the required voter identification document. In the 2012 Mexican presidential election, only 40,714 absentee ballots were received by the 30 June deadline. As in the 2006 election, the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) presidential candidate received most of the votes.

Nevertheless, despite the meagre voting by expatriates in the 2006 and 2012 elections, the introduction of absentee voting was regarded as a milestone. It reflected a profound change in policy towards Mexicans abroad (Delano, 2011: 218–22).