

An Election Watched From Afar

Mexicans in U.S. Show Personal Interest in Homeland Politics

The Washington Post

July 12, 2006

SAN ANTONIO, July 11 -- The ladies at the sewing cooperative run by the nonprofit organization La Fuerza Unida are U.S. citizens by choice but Mexican at heart.

Six years ago, they followed the controversial election in which George W. Bush became president. Now they're reliving presidential electoral drama, but this time it is south of the border.

"It's my country; those are my roots and those are my people," said Petra Mata, 60, a coordinator of La Fuerza Unida who arrived in San Antonio 17 years ago and has been a U.S. citizen for several years.

A seamstress by trade, she now helps run a workers' advocacy group created after Levi Strauss and Co. closed its three factories here in the 1990s and moved its operations overseas, leaving almost 3,000 seamstresses -- mostly Mexican immigrants, like her -- without work.

Following that "trauma," as she calls it, Mata learned the value of becoming involved in civic life, in fighting for workers' rights and in voting in this country. But that does not mean that Mexico's closest presidential election in its history is just a political footnote for her. It is of intense personal interest to her and the seamstresses at La Fuerza Unida because they have parents, siblings and extended family still living in Mexico. Because, as Rebeca Herrera said, "we're divided in two."

"We are interested in what the politicians are offering our families over there and what the politicians are offering us here," said Herrera, 48. "We have to be informed on both."

They are doing that by watching Spanish-language television, reading Spanish-language newspapers and chatting over coffee about the latest details of the formal election challenge filed by presidential runner-up Andrés Manuel López Obrador. López Obrador, the populist former mayor of Mexico City and the candidate of the Democratic Revolutionary Party, has demanded a vote-by-vote recount of the contest that left him half a percentage point behind Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party (PAN).

Top advisers to López Obrador accused election officials, as well as the administration of outgoing President Vicente Fox, a member of the PAN, of election violations that were "systematic and on a grand scale." López Obrador's challenge will be heard by Mexico's Federal Electoral Tribunal, which has until Sept. 6 to decide whether to certify the results of the election. Calderón was declared the winner several days after the July 2 election by about 240,000 votes.

"It's just like what happened in Florida," said Gabriela Gutierrez, coordinator of the sewing cooperative. "The people are ready for a change, but the government there is not."

For the first time, Mexico's presidential election was open to Mexican nationals and dual citizens living abroad, including the women of La Fuerza Unida. But only about 41,000, or 1 percent, of the estimated 4.2 million eligible Mexican voters living outside the country requested absentee ballots. Almost 88 percent of the 32,632 valid absentee ballots mailed to Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute were from the United States.

These women, like many Mexican immigrants, did not vote in Mexico's election. They said they found the voting process burdensome and difficult to understand. Mexicans were required to register to vote months ahead of time, to fill out complicated paperwork and to hold valid voter registration cards that are issued only in Mexico.

"I just don't have the patience for that kind of thing anymore," Mata said.

The Mexican government also prohibited the candidates from campaigning abroad and issued regulations discouraging local Mexican consulates from promoting the vote.

"I really didn't know much about the candidates except my niece, who lives over there and visits me here, didn't like Obrador. I didn't know what to think," said Maria Mendez, 82. "But I do know it hurts us to see how people live over there, especially my cousin, who was a teacher all her life and now lives on a \$90 monthly pension."

Even immigrants who forsook the absentee-ballot process and traveled to the border on Election Day to vote were thwarted. Among them was the Rev. Adolfo Valdivia of Resurrection of the Lord Catholic Church in San Antonio, who drove 2 1/2 hours to the border city of Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas.

He arrived in the late afternoon to find that the two special polling sites for Mexicans living abroad had run out of ballots.

This was the second time Valdivia had lost an opportunity to vote for Mexico's president. In 2000, when Fox was elected, the priest traveled to Nuevo Laredo and was confronted by the same problem. He said that he is disappointed that he could not vote, but that he is watching the news about the aftermath of the election and discussing the situation with friends and parishioners.

"People here are talking about it constantly, and not only Latinos. Everyone is," Valdivia said. "Mexico is our next-door neighbor. As much as [some] may believe that Mexico's situation does not influence the United States, it does definitely because we are living in a global economy."