

Campaigns in Mexico focus on economic fix; Voters skeptical of candidates' job promises

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Body

Mexico City --- In the United States, the debate over illegal immigration has roiled midterm election-year politics and sent thousands of protesters into the streets. But the issue has barely caused a ripple in the bare-knuckle Mexican presidential race, an ultra-tight contest to be decided by **voters** on Sunday.

On those rare occasions when conservative presidential **candidate** Felipe Calderon talks about the subject, he has a saying he likes to repeat: "A kilometer of highway in Michoacan does more to stop migrants than 10 kilometers of a wall along the border."

His point is that the best way to stop would-be Mexican migrants from heading north is to invest in the areas they are fleeing.

The emphasis in the presidential race is squarely on creating **jobs** at home and **focusing** on ways to keep migrants from leaving in the first place.

But proposals by the leading **candidates** --- Calderon, his leftist rival Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and Roberto Madrazo of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) --- lack specificity and would require huge sums of money.

Many Mexicans are doubtful that the **candidates' promises** will come to fruition, let alone reduce the number of their compatriots headed to the United States.

"They have plans, I guess, but once they're elected they'll forget about us," said Erik Alvarez, a 27-year-old fruit vendor and one of millions of Mexicans who operate in a vast informal, non-taxpaying **economy**.

Alvarez said that even if **candidates** succeed in creating **jobs**, if the **jobs** don't pay well they wouldn't keep Mexicans from leaving.

All three major presidential **candidates** have been careful not to make the same mistake as the outgoing administration. President Vicente Fox spent much political capital of his six-year term seeking a migration accord with Washington --- an effort seen by many political observers here as a waste of time.

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"In reality, Mexico can do very little in terms of changing American laws," said Soledad Loeza, international relations expert at the College of Mexico. "The candidates are being cautious. ... The only thing they would achieve [by making political pronouncements about the immigration debate] is to provoke violent reactions among some U.S. senators and representatives."

Calderon, the candidate of Fox's ruling National Action Party (PAN), wants to create jobs by supporting free markets and spurring foreign investment.

Lopez Obrador, the former mayor of Mexico City representing the left-wing Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), has a proposal to create hundreds of thousands of new jobs through massive public works projects like bullet trains to the border and reforestation in Chiapas.

Madrazo, the candidate from the once-dominant PRI who is a distant third in opinion polls, claims he can create 9 million new jobs in six years.

The candidates know that talking about immigration reform won't win the election. After earning the right to vote from abroad in the presidential election, only about 40,000 Mexican immigrants in the United States have registered to cast ballots.

"Foreign policy is a non-issue in the electoral campaign," said Jorge Schiavon, professor of international relations at Mexico City's Economic Research and Teaching Center. "It gets no votes so [the candidates] aren't very interested."

The challenge of halting immigration is a daunting one. An estimated 459,000 Mexicans migrate to the United States each year.

The Mexican economy doesn't create nearly enough jobs to keep pace with its population. According to Mexico City's Center for Economic Studies of the Private Sector, Mexico needs up to 1.3 million new jobs a year to keep pace with its population growth. Fox's government has created less than that in six years.

Graphic

Photo: Felipe Calderon

Photo: Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador

Photo: Roberto Madrazo

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