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EVALUATION

OF EXPERT OPINIONS ON POSTAL VOTING IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

EVALUACIÓN DE LAS OPINIONES DE LOS EXPERTOS SOBRE EL VOTO POSTAL EN LA FEDERACIÓN DE RUSA

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ABSTRACT

On May 13, 2020, V. Putin signed amendments to the Federal Law "On Basic Guarantees of Electoral Rights and the Right to Participate in a Referendum of Citizens of the Russian Federation", which allowed voting in elections at all levels by postal voting. The primary aim of the study is to assess the opinions of experts on postal voting in the Russian Federation. To meet the aim of the study, the research method is a content analysis of the opinions of experts published in the official mass media. Based on the results acquired, the author of the article comes to the conclusion that a number of expert opinions can be attributed to the debatable aspects of the use of postal voting, postal voting in a pandemic has its advantages, this method will allow the voter to take part in elections in any circumstances, however, postal voting requires some of its modifications from the state. Postal voting can increase voter turnout.

Keywords: Elections, electoral process, voter turnout, postal voting, Russian Federation.

RESUMEN

El 13 de mayo de 2020, V. Putin firmó enmiendas a la Ley Federal "Sobre Garantías Básicas de los Derechos Electorales y el Derecho a Participar en un Referéndum de los Ciudadanos de la Federación de Rusia", que permitía votar en las elecciones a todos los niveles mediante voto por correo. El objetivo principal del estudio es evaluar las opiniones de los expertos sobre el voto por correo en la Federación de Rusia. Para cumplir con el objetivo del estudio, el método de investigación es un análisis de contenido de las opiniones de expertos publicadas en los medios de comunicación oficiales. Con base en los resultados adquiridos, el autor del artículo llega a la conclusión de que una serie de opiniones de expertos pueden atribuirse a los aspectos discutibles del uso del voto por correo, el voto por correo en una pandemia tiene sus ventajas, este método permitirá al votante. Para participar en las elecciones en cualquier circunstancia, sin embargo, el voto por correo requiere algunas de sus modificaciones por parte del estado. El voto por correo puede aumentar la participación de votantes.

Palabras clave: Elecciones, proceso electoral, participación electoral, voto por correo, Federación de Rusia.

INTRODUCTION

The authors of the bill are members of the lower chamber committee for control and regulation O. Savastyanova, D. Lameikin, I. Maryash, first deputy chairman of the committee for state building and legislation M. Emelyanov.

The bill provided an opportunity, not an obligation, to establish an additional form of voting in the form of postal voting. New forms of voting are needed “to protect the health of voters” and “to create maximum convenience” for the usage of electoral rights (BBC, 2021). When holding the All-Russian vote on amendments to the Constitution, the possibility of postal voting was not provided.

Prior to the adoption of the amendments, it was envisaged that if a constituent entity of the Federation adopted a relevant law, then it can hold postal voting. Postal voting in Russia was held in 2011, at the elections to the Legislative Assemblies of St. Petersburg and Murmansk Region. In St. Petersburg, 1,564 voters voted, in Murmansk region - 489. To vote, the voter came to the territorial election commission in advance and wrote a statement, or sent it by mail, having notarized the signature. The electoral commission sent a package of materials to the specified address by the Russian Post: an envelope for return sending marked “Postal voting”, a blank envelope for the ballot, the ballot itself, a memo and information materials. The letter is sent free of charge by registered mail. The postal worker checked that the sender’s name matched the name on the envelope, or that the sender must have a power of attorney. The envelopes were opened on election day before the start of voting (INTERFAX, 2021). Postal voting in the Russian Federation was optional. It was used only if the voter did not have the opportunity to vote early, outside the polling station, as well as at the place of temporary residence.

The purpose of the article is to assess the opinions of Russian experts on the introduction of postal voting in Russia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research method: evaluating the opinions of experts using content analysis on the use of postal voting in the Russian Federation.

The issues of using postal voting are studied in scientific works of Russian scientists.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mashina (2019), says that *“the use of postal voting in the Russian Federation in regional and local elections would facilitate the voting procedure for servicemen on*

a business trip abroad, citizens who, for whatever reason, are not able to appear at the polling station”.

Kadlets & Savchenko (2020), believe that *“the process of preparing for postal voting is rather laborious. In order to improve the electoral legislation governing the postal voting procedure and to increase the efficiency of the experiment on its implementation, it is advisable to provide for the right to vote by post in federal elections for voters living in remote areas and abroad; provide for the payment of the costs of mailing letters with ballot papers only by the commission organizing the elections; to consolidate the responsibility of voters who vote for remuneration”*.

Trykanova (2018), says that *“undoubtedly, the experience of postal voting has certain problems in the implementation of this technology in the Russian Federation. These problems include the complexity of the implementation of the voting technology, the need for additional budgetary funding and the possibility of falsifying the voter’s signature confirming the fact that he received a ballot paper for postal voting”*.

Metelkina (2016), considers that *“for a more complete study of the practice of postal voting, it seems rational to agree with the proposal to allow its use at the federal level for certain categories of citizens, speaks of the expediency of further experiments with this method of voting”*.

Thus, scientists highlight the positive and negative aspects of the use of postal voting, talk about the features, difficulties and prospects of its application in the Russian Federation.

Let us consider the positive feedback from experts on postal voting.

Bulaev said that *“postal voting has already been held in the regions of Russia. The current legislation already allowed postal voting, but for this the regions were required to adopt the corresponding regional legislative acts”*.

Bulgakova (Corps “For Clean Elections”, Executive Director of the Association “Independent Public Monitoring”) believes that *“the innovation in the electoral legislation, which provides for postal voting, was aimed primarily at protecting the life and health of Russian citizens. They help to reduce the load on the polling stations and to some extent, perhaps, optimize the entire electoral system”* (RAPSINEWS, 2021).

Kondratyev (2021), noted that *“postal voting will provide an opportunity for all residents to vote. This may be especially true for those at risk. In particular, for older people and for those who have chronic diseases”*.

Some experts believe that postal voting has advantages, but its application requires the completion of certain points on the part of the state.

A. Brod (Member of the Presidential Council for Human Rights and Co-Chairman of the Association of non-profit organizations for the Protection of Electoral Rights “Civil Control”) noted that *“postal voting as a form of voting will develop, since there is international practice. When voting by mail, it is required to ensure the efficiency of postal correspondence, protection from opening, substitution of the letter”* (INTERFAX Human rights activists, 2021).

D. Badovsky (Head of the ISEPR fund) believes that *“postal voting is the result of solving the problem with the legitimacy of the authorities, and the main problem of mail voting is a low level of trust in it, doubts about security from falsification and the lack of reliable methods of observation and control”* (Antiviral electoral reform, 2021).

D. Solonnikov (political scientist) believes that *“it is necessary to use all means to expand the voters’ opportunities to take part in elections and referenda. The disadvantage of postal voting is its high cost, but this is only for now, there is a possibility of falsifying elections in other widely used voting options”*. (Sattarova, 2021).

V. Shapovalov (board member of the Russian Association of Political Science, Deputy Director of History and Politics at Moscow State Pedagogical University) said that “postal voting requires good preparation from the state, since otherwise critics will have strong arguments to doubt democracy holding elections” (International experts assessed the proposal to vote in the elections by mail, 2021).

Some experts believe that postal voting has its drawbacks, but in certain situations it can be used.

The Chairperson of the CEC of Russia E. Panfilova, speaking about postal voting in the United States, said that it “opens up boundless spaces for possible falsifications, including repeated voting, the loss of” objectionable “ballots, the dominance of “dead souls”, the lack of systemic control over the entire voting process by mail” (Panfilova, 2020). Panfilova (2020), considers postal voting to be an outdated method of voting, due to the presence in Russia of the “Mobile Voter” mechanism, which provides an opportunity regardless of the place of voter registration. However, the head of the CEC admits the possibility of postal voting for certain regions of Russia.

D. Vyatkin (a deputy), explained the need for such amendments by the COVID-19 epidemic.

V. Bederson (Candidate of Political Science) believes that “the law was adopted” to ensure the possibility of holding

elections if Russians are not able to come to the polling stations. The declared postal voting is a voting by the Russian Post! How fast will this happen?” V. Bederson is sure that *“it makes sense to introduce such a method of voting where the level of trust in the authorities is greater. The Election Commission of the Perm Territory must provide extended explanations of how exactly Perm citizens can use the right for postal voting”*. (Romanova, 2021).

Let us highlight the opinions of experts who spoke out against postal voting.

S. Ivanov (State Duma deputy from the “Liberal Democratic” party) proposed to withdraw from consideration the amendments on the possibility of postal voting, since this contradicts traditional electoral procedures.

G. Melkonyants (co-chair of the movement for the protection of the rights of voters “Golos”) believes that “postal voting can become a tool for political administrators to manipulate the election results”, as well as if “if postal voting will be widely used, this a very dangerous initiative in the context of general mistrust in the electoral system. It is simply impossible to check that everything went right. Civilian control of voting by mail is minimized. During postal voting, it is impossible to make sure that the voter is voting in person, that he himself sends a letter, that the secrecy of voting is respected, you cannot be sure that all letters will be correctly taken into account, will not be lost, will not be confiscated” (Human rights activists, 2021).

V. Shklyarov (political strategist) believes that “postal voting cannot be anonymous. It can be assumed that it is ostensibly anonymous, but at the same time it will be easy to collect data on who voted and how. Hence the possibility of both pressure on voters and buying votes” (Novaygazeta, 2021).

O. Shein (deputy from the “A Just Russia” party) believes that “the law on postal voting is a law on the elimination of the principle of secret voting”.

D. Krasnyansky (a member of the St. Petersburg Election Commission) does not really believe in postal voting, since only the minimum number of voters used this opportunity before, and also, if voting by mail, the ballot may come after the end of the voting time (Sattarova, 2021).

V. Averin (member of the Council of the “Golos” movement) noted that “it is too early to use postal voting in Russia” (Sattarova, 2021).

I. Ivanova (deputy in the Legislative Assembly of St. Petersburg) is confident that “postal voting will entail massive falsifications” (Sattarova, 2021).

M. Shishkina (Head of the regional branch of “A Just Russia” Party) believes that “postal voting is definitely unacceptable - it is impossible to check anything during it” (Sattarova, 2021).

According to experts, the disadvantages of postal voting include the following: 1) it is a laborious method of voting; 2) the ballot may arrive after the end of the voting time; 3) postal voting can open up new opportunities for fraud; 4) a more outdated voting method compared to remote electronic voting; 5) it cannot be verified that the voter has voted personally; 6) there is no way to keep the secrecy of the vote; 7) a rather expensive way to conduct voting, requires payment of postage for sending letters; 8) requires good preparation from the state; 9) it is required to provide civil control over the conduct of postal voting.

CONCLUSIONS

According to experts, the disadvantages of postal voting include the following: 1) facilitates the procedure for participation in elections for certain categories of citizens (persons with disabilities, military personnel); 2) it is convenient to use in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; 3) this method of voting has development prospects; 4) expands the ways for voters to participate in elections and referenda.

The following expert opinions can be attributed to the controversial aspects of the use of postal voting: 1) Russia is not ready to conduct postal voting, 2) postal voting reduces the workload of election commissions, 3) there is a low level of confidence in this method of voting on the part of voters and experts (Rahman, 2018; Sasongko, et al., 2019; Volkova, et al., 2020; Szydowski, 2019, 2020).

Thus, the work on the creation of new methods of voting continues, the changes made to the electoral legislation, including the expansion of the possibility of expressing the will of voters through postal voting, do not contradict the world development of the institution of elections (Marmilova, 2020). Postal voting can ensure that voting is accessible to all voters, not just people with disabilities or military personnel. Voters may not always have 1) the opportunity to vote in the place where their polling station is located, 2) free time to vote, 3) they may not be at their place of residence on election day. However, it is necessary to work out the very organization of postal voting. Postal voting can additionally draw the attention of voters to participation in elections and increase voter turnout in elections.

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