

Political Reforms: Freedom for Voters?

The idea of promoting voluntary voting in Chile stumbled this week when certain leaders of the Concertación changed their former position and decided to refloat the posture of keeping compulsory voting. This discussion must give up the paternalistic attitude and stop perceiving voting as a burden but rather understand it as a right.

The political reforms' agenda which had been agreed in previous years gave a step backwards this week following the announcement of certain leaders of the Christian Democratic Party (DC) of refloating the idea of compulsory voting.

We should remember that the program of the Concertación's candidate for the presidential election 2009, committed himself to change the current electoral system, which penalizes the registered citizens who do not vote, in favor of voluntary voting.

The latter may have different explanations. It is either an exaggerated measure, in order to better negotiate other substantial points, or rather a political calculation based on the perception that voluntary voting would be contrary to the Concertación's interests, on the grounds that this political group would lack the necessary ability to enlist voters, especially among the young electorate, considering that automatic registration will take place.

This attitude is not consistent with the Concertación's programmatic proposals, which has generated a major debate not only within the DC (as between senators Soledad Alvear and Ximena Rincón), but also –and more vigorously – in other parties of the coalition, particularly the Party for Democracy (PPD) and the Socialist Party (PS). On the other hand, the Radical Social Democratic Party (PRSD) would be receptive to discuss compulsory voting and the Communist Party (PC) is in favor of voluntary voting.

Voting: A Right or a Burden?

The main argument used lately by political leaders who wish to keep voluntary voting deals with the fact that it would adversely affect the participation of the poorest sectors of society. We believe that this position has a paternalist feature and shows little confidence in the capacity of all people, with no social class discrimination, to get politically involved with the aim of changing the society in which they live. Additionally, data do not endorse the assumption on which this preference for voluntary voting is based, that is, that people who are obliged to vote get informed or that, as time goes by, the fact that the vote is compulsory makes them to get better informed.ⁱ

As a matter of fact, according to Aldrich, people who vote in a voluntary voting system are those who see a benefit in participating in an election. On the other side, non-voters are characterized by not being interested in the results.ⁱⁱ Therefore, a compulsory voting system forces politically indifferent people to vote, and those people are not well informed and tend to vote at random.

Thus, in the compulsory voting systems, the votes from citizens who have a high preference concerning the election results are added to the votes of people who feel indifference towards the result. Therefore, compulsory voting, instead of guaranteeing a good representation of the citizen's interests, distorts the election results.ⁱⁱⁱ In this perspective, the obligatory turnout of the people that would refrain in a voluntary voting system hinders those who are interested in a particular election result.

Regardless of this debate, the truth is that the present discussion has contended with two visions of the situation. One of them perceives voting as a burden and not as a right, where the State has the power to oblige a person to cast his vote, even against his/her will. The other one sees the voting exercise as an essentially voluntary act, whose roots conduce directly to the more basic principles of democracy: freedom.

The evidence at global level is not clear in the sense that compulsory systems are necessarily more participative. In Argentina, for example, where there is compulsory registration and voting, 76% voted in the past election, while in Peru, where there is automatic registration and voluntary voting, 81% voted in the past election. The latter reflects that an election contains different factors (ranging from the quality of the discussion and the candidates till the moment's political tension) and a low turnout is not a synonym of institutional failure. On the contrary, it could also reveal social maturity, where people's focus is put on their families, work, contribution to society and the search for spiritual and material happiness, and not necessarily on the short-term partisan politics.

Along with this, participation has its ups and downs, with relatively combined cycles in the long run where – in certain episodes – citizens assist massively to the ballot boxes, as in the last presidential election of the United States which allowed electing Barack Obama. The phenomenon seen in the United States in that election was praised precisely for the winning candidate's capacity to encourage groups who traditionally do not vote. This means a real challenge to politicians, by getting them out of the comfortable situation of having people "obliged to vote", putting demands on their capacity to transmit their message to the electorate, which contributes to a better information when it comes to voting or, if worst comes to worst, to demand explanations from those who do not fulfill their campaign promises. Compulsory voting transforms the electors in a captive market and does not foster quality in politics.

Finally, several studies have shown that, from the public's opinion point of view, Chileans are mostly in favor of voluntary voting; those who approve this system register a solid 78%^{iv} (see Chart 1).

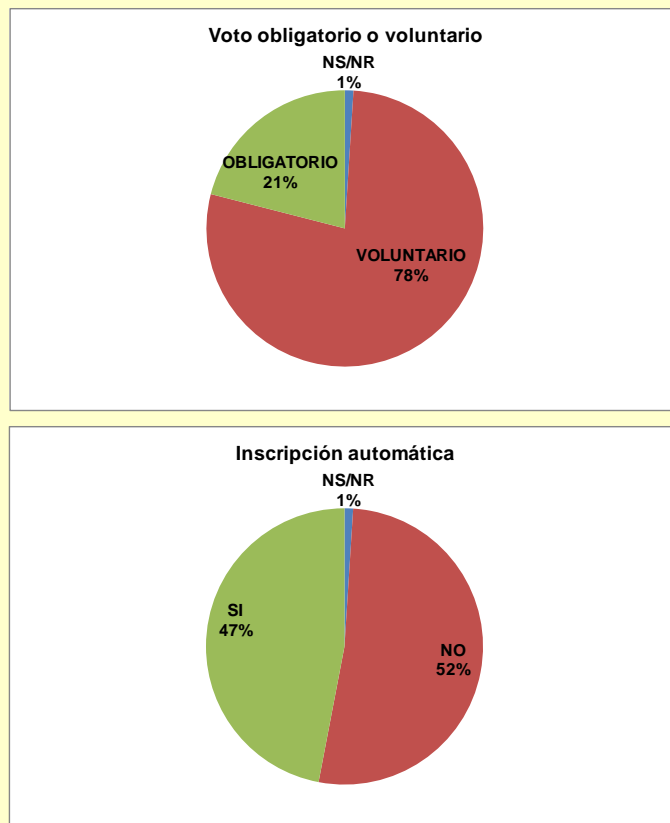
The Vote of Chileans from Abroad

Concerning this point there is no monolithic position based on principles, and the discussion develops more in the intuitive field and the political perception. In general, the Concertación has defended to give Chileans living abroad the possibility to vote – unconditionally and with no requirements – (posture of PPD, PS and PC).

From the public policies' perspective, there are scientific works which indicate that, according to the international experience, the countries which integrate in their legislation the external national vote are, in general, countries which "have a significant number of citizens living abroad, either permanently or temporarily, or countries with recent democratization. In countries which have an important international presence, it is generally considered that its citizens living abroad, such as diplomats, businesspeople, members of the armed forces, international cooperating and public officers, etc., should not miss the possibility to vote. Likewise, in countries having an important migration, the basic consideration is that its citizens have migrated due to the lack of opportunities in their own country."^v

Chart Nº 1

SUPPORT TO THE DIFFERENT AUTOMATIC REGISTRATION AND VOTING ALTERNATIVES ACCORDING TO A PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY



Source: "Demandas por reformas al régimen electoral chileno: la visión desde la opinión pública". Carolina Segovia and Denise Lacroze. Centro de Estudios Públicos. 2009.

In the same way, there are several countries that, despite contemplating the participation of the citizens living abroad, establish a series of requirements for taking part in the different election processes. Although the citizen status constitutes an indispensable requirement to be able to vote while abroad, there are certain restrictions in order to have access to this right.

Another aspect which should be considered in the discussion is that the relationship between democracy and external voting, or between political freedom and external voting, is not always seen as necessary and fundamental, because in those countries considered "free" from the point of

view of civil liberties and political rights, according to the scores of “Freedom in the World” (freedom House, 2010), this relationship does not always exist.

Thus, countries considered “very” democratic, such as Luxemburg or Great Britain, do not include external voting or else establish limitations, and they are therefore not less democratic than other countries such as Eritrea or Guinea, which do have it even if their political processes are “not” considered “very” democratic. Then there is the case of Colombia and Bolivia, considered “partially” democratic, but which have developed the extraterritorial voting. Or cases like Afghanistan, where the ranking of civil liberties and political rights places this country under the item “not free”.

Conclusion

The combination of automatic registration and voluntary voting seems to be a good formula for a political reform in today’s Chile.

We are not only dealing with honoring one’s words in political agreements: we are discussing here essential elements of our democracy and putting a question mark on freedom in the exercise of political rights. To question these elements is a step backwards which harms the quality of our institutional framework, and opens the way for mistrust towards the political groups and their reputation.

ⁱ Jakee, K., Zhen Sun G., Is Compulsory Voting More Democratic? Public Choice 129, 2006, p.61-75.

ⁱⁱ Aldrich, J., Rational Choice and Turnout, American Journal of Political Science, Vol. 81, Nr 2, 1987.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jakee, K., Zhen Sun G., Is Compulsory Voting More Democratic?

^{iv} Segovia, C. y Laroze, D.; Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP). 2009

^v Source: Revista iniciativa, Nr 20. Instituto de Estudios legislativos. Digital Version:

<http://www.cddiputados.gob.mx/POLEMEX/inesle/PUBS/REVS/iniciativa/iniciativa20/articulo6.htm>.