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## Predicting the Outcome of U.S. Election

By Konstantin Sonin

These days it is unfashionable to hold up America as a model for Russia. And the state of electoral democracy in Russia is such that we are more likely to be taking our cue from Ukraine. Nevertheless, Central Elections Commission chairman Alexander Veshnyakov has gone on an election observation mission to the United States to broaden his electoral experience, and it is not too hard to guess what stories he will come back with.

Four years ago, our State Duma expressed concern over possible voting violations in the states of Tennessee and Texas. Why Tennessee and Texas? Because they were the home states of the presidential candidates, Al Gore and George W. Bush. Surely any politician worth his salt will steal votes in his home state, our Duma deputies reasoned. But their reasoning was wide of the mark because in a U.S. presidential election the key thing is to win a majority in any given state, so there was no need to rig the results in Texas, which, in any case, showed a clear preference for Bush (or in Tennessee).

Now Veshnyakov fears a repeat of the "Florida scandal" of four years ago, as he put it. Although, in many ways, the events in 2000 are confirmation of the electoral system's successful functioning. After all, the victor was determined by peaceful means, although the vote count was incredibly close.

What is more interesting, however, is the part of the U.S. elections that Veshnyakov will not see. He will not see that debating controversial and sensitive issues and extremely tough criticism of the incumbent president during an election campaign do not cause the country to collapse or undermine the authorities. He will not see that electoral competition forces candidates to move toward the center and modify their policy positions; or that the four months spent by Bush on the campaign trail, crisscrossing the country and making seven or eight speeches a day, is certainly not a waste of time. (Perhaps, if President Vladimir Putin gave 200 speeches on public administration reform in 50 different regions of Russia, he would realize that the reform has not been sufficiently well thought-out, to put it mildly.) And Veshnyakov will not see that foreign and domestic policy is to a large extent determined in the course of an election campaign and by the outcome of an election.

However, today's election is too serious to be written about completely seriously. It is hard to refrain from making a prediction in a column that is published on the day of the election, although a professional political scientist would have to forgo their principles with all opinion polls showing the two main candidates neck and neck, both in individual swing states and nationwide.

The most professional thing to do would be to toss a coin. Instead, however, I will offer the prediction not of a professional, but of a 3-year-old child. It was made three years ago, so the child was not influenced by short-term (in the grand scheme of things) considerations such as the terrorist acts of Sept. 11, 2001, or the war in Iraq.

In June 2001, I was flying with my son from Washington to Boston, when Senator John Kerry got on the plane. My son turned to me and asked: "Dad, is that the president?" Perhaps he was influenced by the fact that the imposing man was wearing a white shirt and tie, while everyone else was in shorts and T-shirts. In any case, back then no one knew that Kerry would be the Democratic presidential candidate, so half the prediction has already come true. Today we will find out whether my son was right about the other half.

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