

Where are Russia's Republicans?

27 September 2012

By Konstantin Sonin

It is exciting to observe politics in a foreign country because they often show what Russia lacks. That said, I am following the U.S. presidential race not so much to learn useful lessons but simply because it is fascinating to watch. It is like a major soccer match — only much more money is involved, like a chess game — and the moves and countermoves are far more complex. It is like going to the theater, except that nobody knows how the drama will end. In fact, I follow practically all U.S. senatorial and even several gubernatorial races, along with the occasional House of Representatives election. Back when Russia had a form of elections, I used to follow those races as well and even knew the various candidates' platforms.

Russian politics lack many positive elements found in the U.S. system. For example, U.S. presidential candidates have to spend months — and in this race, years — speaking at hundreds of meetings and shaking hands with tens of thousands of voters. This isn't the fault of politicians but of voters, who are often unwilling to vote for a candidate unless they personally hear him speak in their own community.

Also, I like the fact that individual contributions for election campaigns cannot exceed \$2,500. That means tens of millions of voters are drawn into the process, people who tend to take a far greater interest in the candidates and their programs as a result of having contributed money to them.

Indeed, individual contributions make up the lion's share of the funds that candidates spend, a fact anyone can verify on the Federal Election Commission website. Russia lacks countless other details as well: all the little things that make up modern electoral and political systems and provide a strong and flexible mechanism for governance.

Another thing lacking, and one that I would personally like to see, is a Russian version of the Republican Party, even with its extremist ideological wing. True, the Republicans' current economic platform is absurd, calling for a return to monetary policies of 100 to 200 years ago. The party platform is apparently geared more toward core voters than toward swing voters, a possible mistake given the importance of the swing vote in a close race such as this one. And how can anyone explain their tax plan, which primarily benefits the richest 1 percent of the population? Or the Republicans' emphasis on job creators when the overwhelming majority of U.S. citizens, including those who vote Republican, do not create jobs for others? It is amazing that the Republicans think they can win the election with such an economic program.

Yet it is this very obsession that we lack in Russia: a desire to promote the interests of those who create jobs, invent new products and services, and create new ways to make the lives of others easier and their own richer. We don't have this ability to idolize the rare success stories and persuade 99 percent of voters to dream of one day joining the wealthiest 1 percent.

It is not that I want a party that protects the interests of the richest, the most talented and the gutsiest to rule Russia. But I do wish that Russia had such a party and that the party was strong enough to push this country forward.

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