10-28-2011

Region Continues Push to Give Voting Rights to Citizens Living Abroad

Andrés Gaudán

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Region Continues Push to Give Voting Rights to Citizens Living Abroad

by Andrés Gaudín
Category/Department: Region
Published: 2011-10-28

On Oct. 9, Paraguay became the eighth South American country, and the 117th of the 189 nations represented at the UN, to give citizens living abroad the right to vote and run for office, regardless of where they reside. Beginning with the 2013 presidential election, when Paraguayans will choose a successor to President Fernando Lugo, the registered-voter roll will be enriched by slightly more than 700,000 new voters. All political parties had called on their members to vote "yes" in the referendum, but not all mobilized to ensure the success of an exercise called to strengthen the country's still-fragile democracy.

Prior to the referendum, which fulfills one of Lugo's campaign promises, he had said, "Democracy's consolidation comes about with a high level of participation." In his final message before the vote, he issued a communiqué asking voters to support the "yes" position and saying, "We who live in the country enjoy all rights, but we have an historic debt to our brothers and sisters who were forced to live abroad."

The president was referring to the bloody dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989), and he said, "Tens of thousands of Paraguayans had to escape persecution, and many others left looking for the work that the country denied them. We have to ensure that those compatriots and their descendants regain the right to vote, which they lost for simply not being in the country."

In South America, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela already have progressive constitutional articles that guarantee their citizens the right to elect and be elected, wherever they live. Some political groups in Chile and Uruguay have tried to pass similar legislation but have run up against a wall built by the most conservative sectors of their societies.

Paraguayan initiative wins on first try

This was Paraguay's first attempt, and all parties endorsed it, some generously and others with a discourse that was mean-spirited and, most of all, profoundly demagogic. They are, coincidentally, the most conservative parties on the political spectrum: the Partido Colorado (PC), which for 35 years supported and tried to give a democratic face to the dictatorship, and the Unión Nacional de Ciudadanos Éticos (UNACE), founded and led by attempted-coup leader Gen. Lino Oviedo, who was jailed for involvement in political crimes and the most serious acts of corruption (NotiSur, Oct. 12, 2007).

The civil-society organization Centro de Derechos Humanos y Ciudadanía del Inmigrante (CDHCI) and the Foro de Mujeres del MERCOSUR (FMM) denounced the attitudes of both parties. "We recognize that the right to participate in the political destiny of the country by voting also returns dignity and citizenship to these persons, as well as strengthening their ties to the country as its democracy matures and it regains sovereignty after so many years of pillage," said CDHCI coordinator Paulo Illes.
The civil-society organization Centro de Derechos Humanos y Ciudadanía del Inmigrante (CDHCI) and the Foro de Mujeres del MERCOSUR (FMM) denounced the attitudes of both parties. "We recognize that the right to participate in the political destiny of the country by voting also returns dignity and citizenship to these persons, as well as strengthening their ties to the country as its democracy matures and it regains sovereignty after so many years of pillage," said CDHCI coordinator Paulo Illes.

Ivonne Lugo of the FMM said the "yes" victory on Oct. 9 "was a way to force the parties of the dictatorship to respect a minimal commitment to human rights and also respect the international community into which we are integrated, becoming the 117th country to guarantee everyone the right to vote."

In the referendum, "yes" received 80% of the vote and "no" the remaining 20%, but, because of the conservatives' boycott, with the complicity of the major media, only 12.4% of eligible voters participated.

Many analysts believe that the PC and UNACE wanted just that, low participation that would allow them to delegitimize the referendum. They failed, however, because, before the Colorados and Oviedistas could react, the Tribunal Superior de Justicia Electoral (TSJE) warned that Congress must ratify the outcome because "the legitimacy of the result does not depend on the percentage of participants, since the law stipulates clearly that nullity can only be decreed if at least 51% of the polling places do not open." On Oct. 9, 92% of the polling places opened.

Paraguay lacks accurate statistics, but the TSJE put the number of citizens living abroad, who, once registered, would be eligible to vote, at 722,142. The majority are in neighboring Argentina (550,713), followed by Spain (86,682), the US (50,000), and Brazil (28,822), with smaller numbers in Bolivia, Chile, and Uruguay. Those more than 700,000 citizens will not only be eligible to vote in national elections but will also be able to run for office. However, regulations are still under study to determine whether they can run for certain positions (particularly departmental and municipal) for which residency in the locale is a constitutional requirement.

**Paraguay win encourages other countries**

The referendum in Paraguay captured the enthusiasm of Chileans and Uruguayans, as well as, outside the region, Costa Ricans, who have been struggling for the same right but whose attempts have thus far been thwarted.

During the administration of former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010), the initiative did not make it past legislative committees. In September 2010, it suffered a new defeat when the Senate rejected a bill introduced by President Sebastián Piñera because it included the condition that those living abroad must come to Chile to vote.

During the administration of former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010), the initiative did not make it past legislative committees. In September 2010, it suffered a new defeat when the Senate rejected a bill introduced by President Sebastián Piñera because it included the condition that those living abroad must come to Chile to vote.

Sen. Ricardo Lagos Weber of the opposition Partido por la Democracia (PPD) explained his negative vote by recalling that Piñera, during a visit to Europe, spoke with communities of Chileans in
Switzerland and Spain and "promised the vote to his compatriots who lived abroad, but this bill that we are rejecting once again contains 'fine print.' He didn't tell them that the right to vote was contingent on their coming to Chile, rather than [being able to vote] by mail or at the consulates. Not everyone can afford to come from countries so far way."

In Costa Rica, José Manuel Echandi, presidential candidate for the Partido Unión Nacional (PUN) in the 2006 election, picked up on the Paraguayan experience. He said that "all impediments to [those living abroad] exercising the right to vote violates fundamental rights" and that, "rather than signifying further expenditures, it is a way to guarantee rights and liberties appropriate in present times."

In Uruguay, Deputy Yerú Pardiñas of the governing Frente Amplio said, "Now more than ever we must dig up the bill for voting abroad because we—legislators and society—don't want to take away an essential and democratic right from our brothers and sisters in the diaspora."

The deputy's anger had its rationale. When all that was left was a simple formality, the Uruguayan bill suffered two defeats. The progressive FA came to power for the first time in 2005 and brought with it the promise of the vote for Uruguayans living abroad, and President Tabaré Vázquez introduced the bill during his first week in office. The Congress did not take it up until 2009, however. Opposition from the conservative Partido Blanco (or Nacional) and Partido Colorado prevented the measure from obtaining the two-thirds majority constitutionally required to approve laws needing a supermajority.

Since the FA could, with its own legislators, obtain the two-fifths vote in Congress needed to call a referendum, it opted to go that route. The referendum, asking Uruguayans if they were willing to amend the Constitution to include an article granting residents in the exterior the right to vote, was held in October 2009, alongside presidential elections (NotiSur, Jan. 23, 2009, and Nov. 6, 2009).

A month before the election, the "yes" position was polling at 56%. A week before the election, that figure had fallen to 48%, when it needed 50% plus 1 for the article to be incorporated into the Constitution. On election day, "yes" obtained only 37.42%.

The reasons came down to two and were clear. First, the two traditional conservative parties had the complicity of the media to instill the idea that "those who will not suffer the effects of a bad election since they don't live here don't have the right to vote." Second, the highest electoral authority, which had a majority of Blanco and Colorado members, decided not to put ballots with "no" in the polling places. This confused voters who, according to "yes" supporters, thought, since there were not two options, it was unnecessary to put any ballot in the urn.

Pardiñas and other deputies announced that they would again raise the issue of voting for those living abroad and relaunch the campaign for that right to be one enshrined in the Uruguayan Constitution.

-- End --