

Voting Behavior of the Middle Class in the Moscow Megapolis

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Abstract

On the basis of statistical data and results of sociological polls, the authors analyze peculiarities and patterns typical for the voting behavior of the Moscow middle class in elections of various levels and scope. Results of the study have shown that the middle class is more active in elections than other groups of the Moscow population. In voting, the position held by representatives of the middle class substantially differs from the general position in Moscow, with the ruling party seeing minimum support and the number of spoiled ballot sheets exceeding the Moscow average. Representatives of the middle class think that election is conducted unfairly in Russia, there is no real alternative, and voting results are often falsified. Despite this, a considerable share of middle-class voters take part in voting, justifying this by the call of duty, aspiration to express their opinions and, at least by the number of ballot sheets cast in favor of the opposition, to tell the authorities that they are dissatisfied with the current situation.

Keywords: Voting campaign; Voting process; Information support of voting; Municipal election; Opposition; Voting activity; Turnout; Motives of voting behavior.



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1. Introduction

The voting behavior of the public is a lever used to influence authorities. Pursuant to Article 32 of the Russian Constitution (The Constitution of the Russian Federation), citizens have the right to participate in the administration of the state's affairs both directly and through their representatives and have the right to elect and to be elected to public authorities and local self-government bodies.

The struggle for power is in human nature, and as long as the victory in elections is the only legitimate way to gain this power, sociologists and political analysts will pay close attention to research related to voting behavior. The main task set by political forces is to hold (for the current force) or to gain power using democratic means (for opposition). For this reason, it is necessary to understand how voters cast ballots, how decision-making is influenced by one factor or another and a specific politician or party needs to do to adjust voting behavior accordingly.

In elections, political forces always draw support from certain social groups. The middle class is a target audience for some parties or politicians. In this article, the authors study the voting behavior of the middle class in Moscow, the biggest Russian city. However, the authors are confident that the results of the research work, to a certain extent, can be extrapolated to all cities in Russia because Moscow is a driving force of all socio-political processes and changes in the country.

Voting behavior studies have a long history. At the beginning of the 20th century, researchers made first attempts to identify to what specific social groups voters belong. Later, the concept of voting behavior was replenished by the idea of its multi-factor conditionality (Campbell *et al.*, 1960). E. Oppenhuys showed the importance of political instructions in identifying voters with political parties that influence voting behavior (Oppenhuys, 1995). In the middle of the 20th century, A. Downs's "rational concept of voting behavior" (Downs, 1957) gained momentum, the idea of mass media as a major factor determining voting behavior shaped up (Zaller, 1996). In the late 1960s, voting behavior was considered closely connected with the problem of political culture in the context of activities carried out by various political institutions, parties and mass movements.

From the 1970s, scientists in the Soviet Union tried to formulate basic theoretical provisions concerning laws of forming voting behavior and the nature of this phenomenon. To date, numerous empiric materials have been amassed to get a full idea of peculiarities typical for voting behavior of various social groups, factors, which determine voting behavior, types of voting behavior, etc. However, in certain cases, the complicated and

contradictory interdependency of objective and subjective motivation factors of voting behavior is simplified. In this article, the authors aimed at reviewing the voting behavior of the middle class as a special social group since, in the past, researchers didn't make attempts of this kind.

As a fundamental methodological basis, in this article, the authors suggest considering voting behavior as a political phenomenon driven by the development of the civil society, its political and legal culture and a specific feature of political mentality.

2. Methods

During the analysis, the authors used materials of the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation. Under analysis were mainly the voting results for 2016-2018 in Moscow, as well as results of research conducted by the authors, during which polls and several in-depth interviews were carried out and publications on social networks were analyzed. In addition, the authors used data from the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM, 2016) and the Yuri Levada Analytical Center (Levada-Center, 2018).

Information was collected within the strategy of an integrated comparative study by using the following methods: online polling and a personal in-depth interview with middle-class representatives who work in various sectors, as well as visual analysis. Empiric information processing implied the application of descriptive statistics and informal analysis of in-depth interview transcripts.

Respondents were selected by means of control questions using the following parameters: area of employment (intellectual), income (monthly income over RUB 60 thous, but not more than RUB 1 mln per family member), higher education, ownership of real estate, personal self-identification as a representative of the middle class. As a result, a purposive sample of 400 respondents who represent Moscow adults and make up the middle class group was formed. Snowball sampling served as the procedure for the formation of a study object. A pilot study showed that in this case, this is the most efficient way of gaining access to this category of respondents.

Projective and stimulating techniques that are used in a series of ten in-depth interviews with representatives of the middle class who engage in education, advertising, legal services, sales, and sport allowed the authors to find out hidden motives, unclear instructions, and choices in the structure of voting behavior. The method was used as full-fledged to obtain information that is important in terms of the research.

3. Results

3.1. Results of the Duma Election in 2016

According to the results of the voting, most votes in Moscow were cast in favor of the political party United Russia. The main result was not the expected victory of the "party of power", but the lowest turnout rate for the election of such level on record. (Table 1).

Table-1. Results of the Duma 2016 election in Moscow (% of those who voted and were polled, the authors' calculations) (Moscow-City Izbirkom, 2018)

Voting results for the region, total			
Voter turnout	Ballots cast for United Russia	Ballots cast for other parties	Invalid (spoilt ballots)
35.2	37.8	60.5	1.75
Middle-class voting results (after polls)*			
44.3	10.5	83.5	1.5

*4.5% of respondents did not answer which party they voted for

Poll results show that the turnout rate among representatives of the middle class differs from the region's average. The rate is nearly 10% higher than in Moscow as a whole. In the 2016 Duma election, the middle class not only showed a high participation rate but also expressed protests against the ruling party more aggressively. A gap of over 25% of the ballots cast for United Russia candidates compared with the voting results in Moscow as a whole gives reason to believe that the middle class is dissatisfied with the current situation in the country.

3.2. Results of the Election to the Council of Deputies of Municipal Formations of the City of Moscow Held on September 10, 2017

The election campaign was marked by high competitiveness. As a whole, this was typical for the election conducted nationwide. Voting results sparked heated discussions in various public and political circles about the ruling party's current positions and opposition prospects. The authors' poll results showed that the middle-class turnout rate in this election was more than two times higher than in Moscow as a whole (Table 2).

Table-2. Voting results for the election of Moscow municipal formation deputies held on September 10, 2017 (% of those who voted and were polled, the authors' calculations) (Mosgorizbirkom, 2018)

Voting results for the region, total			
Voter turnout	Ballots cast for United Russia	Ballots cast for other parties	Invalid (spoilt ballots)
14.8	76.76	23.24	–
Middle-class voting results (after polls)*			
31.3	14.3	85.7	0

The municipal election was competitive, with candidates from all current political forces represented in the election. Moscow representatives of the middle class not only were more active in civil activities compared with the general results in Moscow but also demonstrated their oppositional mood. Candidates nominated by the ruling party, United Russia, garnered nearly five times fewer votes than in Moscow as a whole.

3.3. Russian Presidential Election Results, 2018

In general, the election was conducted as usually, but certain factors gave some food for thought to political analysts, sociologists and journalists.

The authors think that the Crimea effect is an important factor that influenced the voting attitude of Moscow dwellers. Some experts believe that people who voted for Alexei Navalny in the 2013 Mayor election (Aptekar and Zheleznova, 2018) could have voted for Vladimir Putin in 2018. The unity of opinions about the peninsula's annexation to Russia brought together public sentiment across the country. Based on a Levada-Center poll, 86% of Russians support the expansion of the country's boundaries on account of the peninsula, and the relevant numbers in Moscow with regard to the same issue are close (79% of Moscow dwellers are solidary "with the rest of Russia" (Bondarenko, 2018).

At the same time, it is interesting to refer to the results of the authors' poll to find out whether or not the general Moscow voting results correlate with the voting choice of the middle class in Moscow (Table 3).

Table-3. 2018 Presidential Election results (% of those who voted and were polled, the authors' calculations) (Izbirkom, 2018)

Voting results for the region, total			
Voter turnout	Ballots cast for Vladimir Putin	Ballots cast for other candidates	Invalid (spoilt ballots)
59.94	70.88	27.63	1.49
Middle-class voting results (based on polls)			
32.6	74.3	18.6	7.2

Despite its status, the presidential election in Russia did not arouse much interest among the middle class in Moscow, although during the previous election the middle class, on the contrary, was more aggressive than Moscow dwellers in general. The authors attribute this to the society's overall opinion that the election results were predetermined. The second factor is a call by the opposition forces to boycott the election. In addition to the low turnout rate compared with the capital's general data, the percentage of spoilt ballots was very high. The authors are inclined to treat this as a certain form of protest among middle-class voters. At the same time, the authors point to the very high percentage of ballots cast in favor of the country's current leader.

In the authors' opinion, it can be said that the political views of the middle class in the presidential election were uncoordinated. In other words, the poll results show that the votes were cast, to a large extent, by those who really wanted to vote for Vladimir Putin and support the current authorities.

4. Discussion

Results of the interview's informative analysis make it possible to create a certain social portrait of a middle-class person. This, in turn, allows the authors to better understand and assess the content and motives of his/her voting behavior.

The respondents subscribe to the opinion that the middle class in Moscow and in the regions differs substantially. While positioning themselves as the middle class, Moscow respondents tend to focus on higher education, intellectual jobs and income that is sufficient enough not to think about survival. Having a job in accordance with university diplomas is not a priority. Of paramount importance is the commitment to personal improvement and desire to gain the necessary knowledge and skills, which are required only to climb the career ladder. During the interviews, the authors found out that the middle class leaves in their life much room for entertainment as a form of leisure. A typical representative of the middle class in the eyes of the middle class itself is a person who does not find it difficult to maintain his/her existence physically.

Representatives of this social layer do not feel as a unified community able to jointly solve political tasks. The typical feature of the political portrait is formal political apathy. They mention the fear of shock in life, appreciate stability and evidently tend to think that personal well-being depends on the environment in the country, although their attitude towards the current authorities is negative. When assessing the ideological positions, it can be said that representatives of this social layer are to a certain extent liberal.

The formation of the worldview is based, primarily, on interpersonal communication, trust, mainly in close friends from a narrow circle. It can be said that, to a certain extent, the representatives of the Moscow middle class are hostile to information provided by the federal media, especially television. The authors are inclined to interpret this as prior distrust towards information from official sources. As a consequence, they prefer liberal Internet media.

Proceeding from the described social portrait of a middle-class voter, the authors think that it is necessary to assess the results of the voting behavior study from the viewpoint of experience amassed in Russia and abroad. Scientists in the West first attempted to study voting behavior back at the beginning of the 20th century. Researchers highlighted a number of factors (social structure of population, economy and religion, types of settlements) that determine voting preference (Dogan and Pellasy, 1994; Lipset and Rokkan, 1990; Siegfried, 1913). The social delimitation is construed as a structural conflict among social groups. The basis of the social delimitation can be both objective social characteristics and value-related focus. Meanwhile, the voting behavior is formed through relations between voters and those who voters elect or those from whom voters elect. The authors believe that when analyzing the voting behavior of the middle class, one can reveal the signs of the rational choice approach, implying that election is a kind of market of goods and services similar to the economic market. Here, voters exchange their support and ballots cast in election for a favorable proposal from politicians and parties. It makes sense to agree with the conditions for a rational choice which were defined by 20th-century researchers (egoism of an individual, exchange of activities, the ability to take actions in accordance with a rational choice and methodological individualism). This theory is close to the economic theory. Downs wrote that “each citizen casts his vote for the party he believes will provide him with more benefits than any other” (Downs, 1957). Individuals are inclined to vote taking into account the state of the economy. If the economy faces any problems, then voters are inclined to pass on the responsibility to the executive power, which influences voting (Fiorina, 1981).

Talking about the impact of economic conditions on voting behavior in the middle class, it is necessary to point to two main voting components, namely the assessment of the past in comparison with the present and the assessment of the future, with the latter being the most important component (Lewis-Beck, 1988a). Interview analysis clearly shows that voters positively react to economic improvements only if a successful economic policy continues. In other words, the situation surrounding not improvement, but deterioration in the economic environment is of great significance when creating tactics of voting behavior. The way voters assess business activity possibilities plays an important role here.

Trying to understand the problem related to voting behavior in Russian conditions, it is necessary to note that Russian elections researchers highlighted various factors that were related to voting results. Major trends and splits were identified on the basis of statistical data. One of the primary trends was the division into traditionalistic (rural) and liberal modernization (urban) culture (Lewis-Beck, 1988b). The bigger settlements were in size, the less support they lent to left-wing political forces (Melvil *et al.*, 2008). The 2003 voting cycle showed that liberal parties' social bases are in big cities, while those of United Russia, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia are evenly spread all over the country.

At the same time, analyzing election cycles in modern Russia, it is necessary to emphasize that the results of Russian elections are also substantially determined by voters' socio-economic differentiation (Shevchenko, 1998). The study of the 2012 presidential election revealed a pattern, with average-income voters casting ballots for Gennady Zyuganov, people with high income voting for Mikhail Prokhorov, while “the zone of positive correlation of votes given in favor of Vladimir Putin is in the low-income area” (Nureyev and Shulgin, 2013). In the context of the analysis, the data obtained by the authors on a voting choice of the middle class in Moscow correlate with these conclusions.

Political analysts think that after 2005 the impact of economic and social factors decreased, while splits which arose during the first post-Communist election cycles persisted. As the political elite consolidated around the single party of power (2000), the split “current authorities – alternative options to the current authorities”, which is beyond the axle of the first factor, began to gradually dominate. As practice shows, living standards and the socio-economic conditions in the regions is just one of the voting behavior factors. It can be seen that currently, the collision of the situation is based on what political forces middle-class voters pin or do not pin hopes for in terms of the progressive development of the society and the values, which are close to voters regardless of direct dependence on their current financial situation.

Conclusions drawn by foreign researchers are important for interpretation of data the authors obtained. Using sociological polls, R. Rose marked the difference in political socialization among people whose views formed prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the youth who were born and grew up in new Russia. He also saw the difference in voting views depending on education. People with no university degree tended to back left-wing political forces, while university graduates were inclined to support right-wing parties (Rose *et al.*, 2004). It makes sense to agree with the conclusions made by foreign colleagues that the primary delimitation in Russia is socio-economic. The higher income voters had, the less they were interested in voting and backing left-wing parties.

Thus, the authors see that the problem related to voting behavior is really important and closely studied. Close attention in research is paid to peculiarities of voting depending on the affiliation with certain social groups. However, little attention has been paid to the study of the voting behavior of the middle class, which, in the West, is often considered as a driving force of all positive changes in the society. In most cases, in their works, researchers focus on specific regions because voting results have stabilized at the federal level. “At present, many researchers subscribe to the opinion that there are more complicated relations among social delimitation, political ideological splits and parties than the classical theory of splits shows” (Akhremenko, 2016).

5. Conclusion

The results of the authors' research show that the Russian middle class is heterogenic, although its representatives do have some common features and peculiarities of the model of voting behavior. In the megapolis of Moscow, the middle class takes a more active part in elections compared with other groups of the population, while the middle class's voting choice differs substantially from Moscow voters as a whole. Protests against the current authorities and votes for "available alternative options" are a remarkable indicator. The middle class's protest votes are stable from election to election. Candidates nominated by the "party of power" have slight support, while the number of spoiled ballots often exceeds the Moscow average. At the same time, there is some contradiction between the low turnout rate in elections and support of current authorities (as was the case in the 2018 presidential election). This is a sign that nowadays the middle class not only thinks that elections are not substantially an efficient mechanism designed to change the current political conditions in the country, but their political choices also vary. The need to express a civil position one way or another is an incentive for some representatives of the middle class to vote for the opposition. Voters cast ballots for a candidate or a party that can finish in second place in elections or spoil ballots. They come to vote not to cast ballots for "their" candidate, but to show their dissatisfaction with the situation.

The middle class is ready to take an active part in elections at various levels provided that the election is fair and has available options. Like the entire Russian society, the middle class is ready to vote for changes for the better and the development of the society. Politicians and parties, which rely on the middle class in their election campaigns, need to take into account the mood and peculiarities of voting behavior in this part of Russian citizens. The middle class's protest votes under the principle "against the current authorities" can change to a more constructive approach if the middle class is offered a fair election, real competition and an alternative of choice.

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