Building voting coalitions in electoral authoritarian regimes: a case study of the 2020 constitutional reform in Russia

Paul Chaisty* and Stephen Whitefield

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

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*Corresponding author: paul.chaisty@politics.ox.ac.uk

Electoral authoritarian political systems have a hybrid nature, possessing very significant authoritarian features alongside elections that can produce openings for political change. The risks that elections pose to regimes are diminished if they can build winning coalitions involving voters beyond their core of loyal support. This paper considers how the construction of voter coalitions might be conceptualized in the Russian electoral authoritarian context, with reference to the case of the 2020 vote on constitutional reform, which was conducted with the primary aim of extending President Vladimir Putin's term in office. Using data from a national survey of Russians conducted immediately after the vote, our analysis indicates that the regime's success, even taking into account allegations of widespread fraud, was the result of its offer of additional constitutional amendments that were able to target voters beyond Putin's core support.

Keywords: voting behavior; constitutional referendum; electoral authoritarianism; term limits; Russia

Introduction

The literature on electoral authoritarianism has brought out a number of commonalities and differences between democratic and authoritarian elections across a range of dimensions of the electoral process. In this paper, we address an important but as yet underexplored aspect of this question. If authoritarian regimes need to win popular votes, we ask, how do they manage successfully to build winning voting coalitions?

The question is important because while electoral authoritarian regimes possess very significant authoritarian features, including disproportionately high control over the electoral process (Schedler 2006),these regimes still face the risk that citizens' votes could produce openings for the opposition (Bunce and Wolchik 2006). Electoral fraud is common in such elections, affecting both reported and actual vote and turnout (Lehoucq 2003),[1] but, at the same time, over-reliance on electoral fraud can itself become an important factor in opposition mobilization (Tucker 2007). These risks are diminished if the regime can build a genuinely winning coalition, including support among those who may have negative views of the regime's performance. Our paper provides evidence that this is exactly how the Russian electoral authoritarian regime won the vote on the 2020 Russian constitutional reform proposals.

The Russian hybrid authoritarian regime is built around power structures in which the president—since January 2000, Vladimir Putin—sits at the apex. These structures involve presidential dominance over parliament, the regional authorities, the economy, and press, with severe limitations on the freedoms of civil society. As with many other examples of electoral

authoritarianism, Russia is a highly personalized regime in which Putin acts as controller and adjudicator over political, economic, and ethnic ties and competition within the elite. Political, social, and economic balance within the regime significantly depends on his continued dominance. The prospect of limitations on Putin's term in office therefore has potentially existential consequences for the regime itself.

Opposition political parties of course are curtailed in their capacity to organize and contest, and a prominent opposition leader, Alexei Navalny, has in recent years been jailed, poisoned, and jailed again. At the same time, elections have occurred regularly and the regime has invested heavily in the legitimacy it is able to draw from its claims to have won them. Electoral fraud has certainly been a central element in its electoral victories, but there is a scholarly consensus that the ruling party and Putin himself are broadly popular and that fraud and other manipulations are only part of the explanation for their victories (Frye et al. 2017 ; Wilson and Lee 2020).

The urgent challenge for the regime in 2020 was to ensure that Putin would not be forced to stand down because of constitutional term limits, when his term ended in 2024. Various means of achieving this were considered, but the choice in the end was to hold a constitutional referendum in which citizens were asked to endorse "zeroing" Putin's terms in office if the vote passed.[2] The difficulty with this strategy, however, was that it meant the authorities needed to win sufficient votes, which even with the regime's authoritarian advantages—including electoral fraud—was potentially risky, given evidence of Putin's declining popularity at the time. While the regime might rely on those loyal to Putin, how was it able to build a winning voting coalition beyond that? And what were the problems faced by the opposition in building a winning voting coalition of its own?

We address these questions through a nationally representative survey of voters that we conducted immediately after the 2020 referendum. We first outline the political circumstances that led to the referendum, the choices that were put to the electorate, and the positions of the parties that favored either Yes, No, or Abstain. Our argument, developed in the following section, is that the Russian electoral authoritarian regime faces many of the same challenges in building voter coalitions that are found in democratic electoral contexts. This means that it must cement its support among its own loyalists, hold on to regime supporters who have the potential to defect, and target voters who do not support the leader. This was made easier in this context by characteristics of referenda more generally that tend to enhance the likelihood of the success of these strategies. In the empirical analysis of our survey data, we then show that the regime did indeed face a very serious challenge to winning the referendum and that while fraud allegedly played a major role in ensuring the official majority, the regime also had success in building a broad voter coalition that targeted non-loyalists with material and ideological incentives that were made part of the constitutional reform offer. The opposition in turn failed to get out its pool of potential voters, was in no position to offer material benefits, and was ideologically divided such that its own position lacked coherence. We conclude the article with a discussion of the implications of our analysis of the Russian case for electoral authoritarianism more generally.

The Russian 2020 constitutional referendum

Following his re-election in 2018, President Putin entered his second term facing the problem that troubles all term-limited presidents: how to ensure the election of a preferred successor while preserving their authority within the political system. For many post-Soviet leaders, this succession problem has necessitated constitutional change to remove or mitigate term limits,[3]

and ultimately President Putin came to the same conclusion. On 15 January 2020, in his annual Address to the Federal Assembly, Putin announced changes to the Russian Constitution that proposed several solutions to this succession problem, which would take effect when his term expired in 2024. Crucially, a last-minute amendment (Article 81 3.1), introduced during the short consultation period between January and March 2020, gave Putin the option of serving two extra terms under new constitutional arrangements that limited all future president to two terms in total. Under this so-called "zeroing" amendment, the previous terms served by President Putin were rendered null and void, opening the way for him to stand for office again in 2024.

Although this decision provoked little elite-level conflict, it had the potential to stir up popular opposition. In Russia's system of electoral authoritarianism, which requires a degree of popular consent, this posed a political challenge. Notwithstanding the significant power of the authorities to manipulate and even falsify public votes, their capacity to mobilize via party structures and partisanship is limited, and the issue of term limits had been a divisive one. Throughout the post-Soviet period, polling had consistently found strong popular support for the maintenance of limits on the number of terms that a president could serve, and Putin's decision in 2011 to seek a third term in office ignited mass protests in the winter of 2011–12 (Chaisty and Whitefield 2019). Moreover, Putin faced mounting political challenges. His election in 2018 produced the shortest of honeymoon periods, and the COVID-19 pandemic derailed plans to revitalize the economy with a massive stimulus program. Within months of his re-election, support for the government plummeted over its handling of pension reform and its stewardship of the economy, and the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 failed to rally public support for Putin's leadership. Surveys found that trust in Putin fell by 10 percentage points between January and May 2020, when the constitutional proposals were formulated (Snegovaya, Volkov, and Goncharov 2020), and the rise of infections forced the authorities to delay voting on the constitutional proposals from April until July.

Faced with this challenge, the regime needed to build a coalition of voting support that could deliver a strong popular mandate for constitutional change. Putin insisted on the approval of the constitutional reform in a popular vote, and it was not enough for the Kremlin simply to win; it needed to win big, and this necessitated appeals to voters beyond Putin's core electorate. To deliver this vote, the Kremlin drew on the powerful first-mover advantages that incumbents enjoy in electoral authoritarian systems (Schedler 2002). Moreover, as we discuss below, it also drew on specific advantages that authoritarian regimes often find in the use of direct public voting (Penades and Velasco 2022). In that light, the Russian regime was able to announce the constitutional proposals without public consultation; the amendment process lasted just two months, and the campaign leading to the vote in July was heavily skewed in the Kremlin's favor—in fact, the authorities deliberately avoided the terminology of referenda to limit opposition engagement.[4] This one-sided process enabled the Russian authorities to construct a set of proposals that were carefully calibrated to appeal to voters beyond its core support, while denying opposition forces the space to unite against Vladimir Putin's efforts to use constitutional change to extend his time in power. In addition to the "zeroing" amendment, the Kremlin introduced constitutional amendments combining material and symbolic appeals to voters whose support was not guaranteed:

- amendments providing social benefits reminiscent of the Soviet era:
    - raising the minimum wage to at least the subsistence level (Article 75);
    - providing for the annual indexation of pensions (Article 75);

    - guaranteeing social insurance and the indexation of social benefits (Article
    - 75);
    - ensuring affordable and high-quality medical care (Article 72)
- amendments appealing to patriotism and traditional values:
    - protecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation (Article 67.2)
    - detailing Russian state continuity with the USSR (in legal terms) and its 1,000-year history, and upholding "historical truth" (Article 67.1)
    - fostering patriotism, civic consciousness, and respect for elders amongst children, and promoting family education (Article 67.1)
    - detailing the centrality of Russian language and Russia's multi-national culture (Article 68)
    - supporting compatriots living abroad and Russian cultural identity overseas (Article 69)
    - protecting the institution of marriage as the union of a man and a woman (Article 72)
    - restricting the right of state officials and politicians to hold foreign citizenship and bank accounts (Articles 71, 77, 78, 81, 95, 97, 103, 110, 119, 129)
    - stating the supremacy of Russian law over international law (Article 79)
    - preventing external influence in Russia's internal affairs (Article 79.1). [5]

These appeals disoriented the opposition. The Communist Party was sympathetic to amendments protecting social benefits, as well as amendments promoting traditional and patriotic values. In the event, the party abstained in the final Duma vote on the package of amendments. Opposition parties also dithered over how to refocus the vote on Vladimir Putin's attempt to circumvent constitutional term limits. All parties faced internal splits over whether to boycott the referendum or vote No, and ultimately took different positions, with the Communist Party backing the No campaign and the liberal opposition supporting Abstain (Luxmoore, 2020).

Therefore, the process of coalition-building during Russia's 2020 constitutional referendum provides an opportunity to assess the nature of coalition formation under electoral authoritarian conditions. In the next section, we outline our theoretical expectations of what an electoral authoritarian regime in the Russian context would need to achieve in order to construct an effective voting coalition. We then examine how successful the additive nature of the package of amendments was in enabling the Kremlin to construct a winning voting coalition in Russia's 2020 constitutional vote. We also explore the difficulties that faced those political forces that opposed the constitutional changes.

Theorizing electoral coalition-building in the context of Russian electoral authoritarianism

Electoral authoritarianism has become the most widespread form of governance in the post–Cold War period—comprising almost 40% of all political systems in 2019 (Maerz et al. 2020, p. 912)—and has been the focus of significant research in recent years (Magaloni 2006; Schedler 2006; Morse 2012). Its growing prevalence reflects a number of important historical changes, including the collapse of previous authoritarian forms such as Communist Party rule and the

decline in military dictatorships, and also the failure of many post-Cold War democracies to consolidate.

That older authoritarian systems or failed democratization efforts may lead to their recalibration as electoral authoritarian is a response to a number of factors (Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017, passim). First, the appearance of democracy took on great importance as a legitimating strategy in the post–Cold War period, and authoritarian political elites wished to take advantage of this. Second, the overall balance of political power in many countries between regime and citizens, including opposition parties and leaders, made the naked assertion of authoritarian regime power much more difficult to sustain. Democratic demands and sometimes openings could be best neutralized by authoritarian elites offering a degree of electoral competition in which they had significant institutional leverage over the outcome—from control over media and information, to privileging the ruling party institutionally, to downright electoral fraud. However, ruling elites in these regimes still faced the risk that mass voting could produce openings for the opposition, and that popular mobilization could get out of their control (Howard and Roessler 2006). So, while these regimes generally won popular votes, they also sometimes lost, and victory by fraudulent means could be the trigger for "electoral revolutions" that removed the authoritarian incumbents (Bunce and Wolchik 2006).

Much of the recent literature has examined the conditions under which the opposition succeeds in these cases. They include, *inter alia*, international pressure (Donno 2013), electoral repression and the stability of parties (Gandhi and Reuter 2013), the electoral prospects of opposition parties and the distinctiveness of their policy agendas (Van de Walle 2006; Wahman 2011), voter turnout (Franz 2018), and clarity on the composition and policies of future governments (Gandhi and Ong 2019). Our focus in this paper is on the relatively understudied question of how *regimes* construct winning voter coalitions against the anti-regime opposition.

The propensity of hybrid authoritarian regimes to face periodic crises during mass voting (Carothers 2018) and the possibility of loss means that they have to take seriously the task of obtaining sufficient votes to claim victory with any credibility. We know that these regimes are able to develop a range of legitimation claims (Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Blaydes 2011; Morse 2015; Mazepus et al. 2016; Han 2020) and can be popular with their citizens (Treisman 2011). These resources are clearly helpful in their ability to build voting coalitions. However, less is known about the composition of these coalitions and how they are constructed.

Clearly, voting coalitions are a product of both party- and voter-level factors, and hence the specific context will shape the strategies deployed. On the one hand, political actors must appeal to sections of the electorate through various mechanisms; on the other, voters have their own motivations for their decisions. Our empirical focus in this paper is on the voter side of the equation—what combination of elements of the electorate were mobilized to vote for the constitutional changes favored by the Russian regime. Thus, our theoretical expectations of who would turn out to vote Yes or No in the Russian constitutional referendum are determined by the nature of the Russian electorate at this time.

The changes proposed in the referendum were constructed by the authorities specifically with the aim of building a diverse coalition. In this regard, referenda provide specific advantages (Penades and Velasco 2022). They include the ability of incumbents to frame questions and control the timing (Qvortrup 2018). Moreover, direct votes on specific issues remove the immediate impact of partisanship, which is often a strong guide to vote choice and which may therefore facilitate governments in poaching votes from beyond their base (Camp 2008). However, whereas in democracies referenda are often used to decide issues that cross-cut the

government's own partisan base (Qvortrup 2018), in authoritarian regimes, crucially, they may be deployed by governments that see an opportunity to cross-cut the opposition's base (Penades and Velasco 2022).

We consider coalition-building to comprise three main elements in the Russian context: *cementing* the support of loyalists; *targeting* appeals on potential defectors to the opposition and from the opposition; and *harmonizing* their coalition by avoiding internal within-coalition divisions. The literature on cementing (Kitschelt et al. 1999; Green, Palquist, and Schiekler 2004; Holbrook and McClurg 2005; Stubager 2018), targeting (Dalton and Wattenberg 2002;; Luna 2016; de Vries and Hobolt 2020), and harmonizing (Sunshine Hillygus and Shields 2009; Lee 2016) is well developed in democratic systems. Is a different toolkit needed to understand electoral coalition-building in the Russian electoral authoritarian system? Our argument is that the same logic of cementing, targeting, and harmonizing applies, but that there are very important differences in the characteristics of relationships between political elites and voters that need to be understood.

First, political actors will seek to *cement* their core support, although in the Russian case they frequently do so in the absence of strong party attachments and identities and weak programmatic bases to electoral competition. This does not mean that ideological divisions are entirely missing in Russia. Conceptions of nationalism and demonization of the opposition as external enemies may be common and provide an ideological glue for the coalition (Smyth and Soboleva 2014). However, politics in Russia's electoral authoritarian system is highly personalized and so attachments to the authoritarian leader may provide a stronger cement to core elements of an electoral coalition (Baturo and Elkink 2021).

Second, because party loyalty is relatively weak in Russia, *targeting* focuses on a broader pool of independent voters who are not bound to the opposition by programmatic ties. The regime actors, therefore, may more easily offer policies that target very different and quite specific segments of the electorate (see Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi 2014). In this context, it is also important to note a vital asymmetry between regime and opposition. While the regime has abilities to make targeted offerings to sections of the electorate and to deliver on them, the opposition has much less capacity to do so. This was particularly evident during Russia's 2020 referendum, as we have already discussed.

Third, as the general literature on electoral authoritarianism also well attests, internal divisions within the ruling elite—and by extension its electoral coalition—are frequent sources of regime instability (Boix and Svolik 2013). To avoid this, the regime must seek to ensure that their appeals are *harmonious* to the range of their voters (Luna 2016), who should not beturned off by aspects of the targeted appeals. We also note in the Russian case that the opposition is challenged in harmonizing their own voters, who are often divided between democrats demanding regime change and even more hard-line authoritarians who believe that the regime is too liberal (Chaisty and Whitefield 2013). Such a divided opposition may disagree over whether to encourage voters to participate in the electoral process at all, as was the case in the Russian referendum; and as is the case in other electoral authoritarian cases, they may find it very difficult to offer a credible electoral pact or coalition government in the event of their victory (Magaloni 2006). The very fact that the opposition is ideologically divided may be a reason for support for the regime since voters can be faced with great uncertainty about the future direction of the polity and the potential for political instability.

This general approach to the mechanisms for electoral coalition building and the distinctive resources in play in hybrid regimes allows us to advance a number of hypotheses

about conditions under which the electoral authoritarian regime in Russia could succeed in coalition building in support of the proposed constitutional reforms.

Cementing:

- H1. Personalization of politics means that loyal supporters of the regime should be more mobilized and supportive of the "zeroing" of Putin's term limits than potential regime defectors and non-Putin voters.

Targeting:

- H2. The material and values appeals proposed by constitutional amendments should be supported more positively by potential regime defectors and non-Putin voters than Putin loyalists.

Harmonizing:

- H3. Yes voters should be more united on the political, system-level questions being addressed by the referendum than No voters.

We test these hypotheses by considering the successful electoral coalition that was built to win the vote on constitutional reform in Russia in 2020. The proposals put forward by the regime were deliberately designed with coalition formation in mind, and the varied forms that they took provide us with a unique opportunity to estimate the effectiveness of the cementing, targeting, and harmonizing strategies across and within the groups of voters who supported and opposed the proposed constitutional changes.

Data, methods, findings

Our analysis of voting during the 2020 Russian constitutional vote draws on a national probability sample of 1,200 Russian citizens. The sample was stratified by federal districts, rural-urban settlements, and gender-age groups (see online Appendix A). We include additional weighting on education attainment to align the sample distribution with the "micro-census" conducted by the Russian State Statistical Service (Rosstat) in 2015. As COVID-19 prevented face-to-face polls, the survey was conducted by telephone (CATI). It took place between 20 July and 11 August 2020 following the constitutional vote, which concluded on 1 July 2020.[7]

The COVID-19 pandemic also affected the voting process. Measures introduced to mitigate infections, such as week-long voting (25 June to 1 July) raised serious concerns about electoral manipulation (see Gershkovich 2020). These reports were supported by evidence from subsequent studies (see Kobak, Shpil'kin, and Pshenichnikov 2020; Podlazov 2020).[8] To incorporate this important feature of the constitutional vote into our analysis, we weight the survey by alternative estimates of turnout, which have been used to recalculate the vote (Shpil'kin 2020).[9] This weighting does not change the overall result—the revised estimates still find that the Kremlin achieved its majority—but the size of its victory was lower than officially recorded. The official result recorded 78.5% (Yes), 21.5% (No), and a 67.3% turnout; our weighted survey estimates Yes at 65%, No at 35%, and a 42% turnout.[10]

The politically sensitive nature of the referendum also raises questions about the reliability of survey responses in an authoritarian context where citizens may be unwilling to reveal their true preferences. Research into preference falsification finds some evidence for this in Russian surveys (Kalinin 2016), although this is not conclusive (Frye et al. 2017). Our survey

research seeks to minimize these concerns by asking questions about the referendum as forced choices from different directions. This technique has been found to reduce bias in survey responses (Lau and Kennedy 2019). The results of our survey also find high levels of disagreement between respondents over the constitutional changes, which belies concerns about the willingness of respondents to reveal their true preferences. In fact, compared to the official results, our survey finds that votes against the constitutional changes were over not under-reported, even compared to the modified results estimated by Shipil'kin. In our sample, 44% voted against the referendum, with turnout at 40%.

To test our three hypotheses, we subdivide those who voted Yes, No, or abstained into five main categories. First, *Putin loyalists or "core" voters*: those respondents who expressed an intention to vote for Vladimir Putin in a future presidential election and believed the government to be effective in acting "for the benefit of the majority of the society." Second, *potential Putin defectors or "vulnerables"*: voters who intended to vote for Putin in a future presidential election but were critical in their evaluation of the government's performance. Third, *"Non-Putin Yes" voters*: supporters of politicians closely associated with the regime—Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Moscow Mayor, Sergei Sobyanin—and supporters of opposition leaders who supported the constitutional amendments, such as Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia. Fourth, *"Non-Putin No/Abstain" voters*: supporters of opposition leaders who advocated No (Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov) or backed abstain (liberal opposition leaders Alexey Navalny and Grigory Yavlinsky). Finally, *"Other"*: voters who were either undecided about who to support in a future presidential election or who favored candidates with sparse support.

We asked all respondents two questions about the constitutional referendum. The first addressed the voting decision of respondents: for, against, or did not vote. The second concerned the reasons for their decision: either the specific constitutional proposals that they supported or opposed or the factors that deterred respondents from voting altogether.[11] Figure 1 reports the responses to the first question among the five voter groups. These data highlight the challenges that Putin faced. Just one-quarter of the electorate consisted of Putin loyalists, suggesting the lack of a natural majority for the proposal to extend the president's time in office. Responses to our second question also show that only a small proportion of the electorate was motivated to vote by the "zeroing" amendment. As can be seen in Figure 2, just 17% of the electorate supported constitutional reform first and foremost because it enabled Vladimir Putin to stay in power beyond 2024. In fact, the proportion of voters who opposed the constitutional reform in order to *block* future Putin terms was almost identical. Therefore, it was essential for the Kremlin to form a coalition of voters that exceeded Putin's core support base. How important was the package of constitutional amendments in providing sufficient appeals to build this coalition?

[FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE]

In our theoretical understanding, we expect effective coalition-building to entail three components in the Russian case: the cementing of core support; the targeting of voters outside of this loyal core, and harmony within the coalition on the system-level questions being addressed. To what extent was this achieved?

First, we consider the results for H1, in which we posit that the regime will seek to *cement* its support by high mobilization of core supporters for Yes, especially on the question of the zeroing of President Putin's term. Our survey suggests that Putin's coalition-building was successful in this regard. On the question of mobilizing support, Putin's core vote was more

likely to turn out in the referendum than any of the other voting groups. Whereas the percentage turnout by Putin loyalists exceeded 70%, turnout for the other voter categories was on average less than 50%. This difference in turnout between core voters and the rest was strongly significant.[12]

The low levels of turnout by opposition voters highlight the problems that parties opposed to the referendum faced in mobilizing their voters. Restrictions placed on campaigning, which were justified by the authorities in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the tactical differences between opposition parties over whether to support No or Abstain appear to have been a significant hurdle preventing opposition parties getting out the vote. Despite the Communist party's leadership advocating No, the vast majority of its supporters did not vote (over 70% according to our survey)—in fact, a lower proportion of Communist voters voted No than Navalny supporters, despite Navalny's commitment to abstention. This illustrates problems that opposition parties face in co-ordinating their activity in electoral authoritarian systems, which is a significant advantage for authoritarian incumbents.

Low chances of opposition success are also known to demotivate opposition voters in electoral authoritarian polities (Peisakhin, Rozenas, and Sanovich 2020), and was evident in the constitutional vote. Multivariate analysis of the reasons why respondents did not vote in the referendum shows the strong effect of low levels of perceived external efficacy among non-voters (see online Appendix B). Holding a variety of factors typically associated with voting and non-voting at their means—attitudes towards democracy, age, employment by the state, and education[13]—we find that those voters who strongly disagreed with the statement that the government acts in the interests of the majority were significantly *less* likely to vote than those who agreed strongly with the statement. In terms of predicted probabilities, non-voters were 37% points more likely to strongly disagree than strongly agree that the government was responsive to their needs. For most non-voters, "My vote wouldn't matter" was by some distance the main reason for not voting in the referendum. This reason was identified by 56% of non-voters, compared to just 11% who did not vote because of fears about COVID-19, and only 7.5% who felt that the vote was not important. Crucially for the regime, opposition supporters were more likely than regime loyalists to identify low internal efficacy as the main reason for not voting. Whereas just 26% of Putin voters responded that they did not vote because their vote "would not matter," 80% of CPRF, Navalny, and Yabloko voters identified this factor as the main reason for not voting.

Putin's core supporters were also significantly more likely than any other voting group to support the constitutional changes because of the zeroing amendment. In total, 47% of Putin's core vote explained their Yes vote in terms of this amendment. Nonetheless, the fact that this proportion was less than half of Putin's most loyal electorate is further evidence of the need for coalition-building. For other voting categories, support for the zeroing amendment was weaker or non-existent. Just one-quarter of Putin "vulnerables" voted in the referendum because of the zeroing amendment, and this proportion was even lower for voters who supported the other parties and candidates that backed constitutional change.

The relative weakness of support for the zeroing amendment, even among Putin's core support therefore necessitates consideration of our second hypothesis where we posit that the alternative appeals provided by the constitutional reform—material and ideological—were also necessary for the effective *targeting* of voters. As can be seen from Figure 3, this appeal was largely achieved through material amendments protecting social benefits, notably pensions and the minimum wage. As a proportion of the voting rationales for all Yes voters outside of the

Putin core, support for material amendments constituted 43% of the reasons for voting Yes. The ideological amendments protecting traditional family and patriotic values (e.g., the amendment preventing same-sex marriage) also appear to have been effective in targeting non-Putin voters.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

State guarantees for social and economic benefits had a strong ideological appeal to potential defectors and non-Putin voters. In multivariate analysis, we find that Putin vulnerables and non-Putin voters were either poorer or held much stronger interventionist attitudes on the economy (see online Appendix D for the full model). Holding a variety of individual-level socio-economic predictors at their means—poverty, age, gender, urban residence—we find that Putin vulnerables and non-Putin voters were significantly less likely to favor a market-based economy. This is clearly illustrated by the differences between the predicted probabilities for the different voting groups. Whereas Putin loyalists were over 40 percentage points more likely to support strongly the statement that "the market economy in which there is private property and economic freedom to entrepreneurs is the best system for Russia," Putin vulnerables and Non-Putin voters were 16 and 26 percentage points more likely to strongly reject this statement. Therefore, we argue, the addition of amendments to protect state-guaranteed Soviet-era social benefits appears to have been deliberately tailored to target such voters.

Finally, we find evidence for our third hypothesis: *Yes voters should be more united on the political system–level questions being addressed by the referendum than No voters.* On the central system–level issue raised by the constitutional reform—the strengthening of President Putin's personal authority at the expense of the system of constitutional checks and balances—the Yes coalition was more ideologically *harmonious.* Notwithstanding the challenge that this constitutional change presented to any future democratic development in Russia, Yes voters were less polarized than No voters on the question of whether democracy was the best system for governing Russia. As Figure 4 shows, the No/Abstain electorate contained a significantly greater proportion of voters who were opposed to the idea of democracy than the Yes electorate.[14] Indeed, the survey results summarized in Figure 2 above show that among No voters, the second most popular reason for opposing the referendum was opposition to new rules that formally at least *constrained* presidential power: rules strengthening parliament's power over the appointment of the government and limits preventing future presidents serving more than two terms. Therefore, within the opposition electorate, we find ideological division between democrats who opposed the constitutional amendments because they increased Putin's power and longevity, and anti-democrats who opposed the amendments because they introduced too many checks and balances into the system of power. This feature of Russia's opposition is not sui generis. In our conclusion, we discuss how such ideological differences within opposition coalitions are an important source of strength for ruling authorities in other electoral authoritarian polities.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Discussion and conclusions

Our aim in this paper was to advance the understanding of voting competition in hybrid authoritarian regimes. Our argument is that in seeking to win votes, political actors have a set of

tools that they can draw on to win support. Political actors in electoral authoritarian regimes, especially governing ones, do not rely solely on these tools, since to a far greater degree than in democratic states they can cheat, manipulate, and coerce. However, as the existing literature already accepts, these authoritarian weapons do not explain a very large part of voting competition.

We have identified three main tools deployed by Russia's electoral authoritarian regime—cementing, targeting, and harmonizing—to build voting coalitions in the case of the 2020 constitutional vote. Some of the conditions for each vary from democratic contexts: cementing, for example, depends less on partisanship and issue ownership than on personalism and performance, and targeting is also made easier in this context because of the availability of non-partisan voters and the ability of the regime to target them with specific material or symbolic benefits.

Crucially, harmonizing (of the regime coalition) and divisions (within the opposition) in hybrid regimes like Russia's may be facilitated by one central and common characteristic: the combination of authoritarian and electoral elements that is constitutive of the system. The explanation for the emergence of such regimes is no doubt the result of a variety of factors, from elite choice, to balance of forces, to international pressure, etc. Whatever the cause of its existence, however, it results in a specific political configuration—between autocracy and democracy—in which the regime's political stance becomes a central political cleavage. Those against the regime therefore may be for more democracy or for less. In Russia, this distinction within the opposition to the regime in turn creates a distinctive form of centrism for the ruling party to occupy: for the *status quo* against two forms of potentially destabilizing change. This ruling party centrism is evident in relation to those political parties that achieve office, as illustrated in Figure 5. The chart summarizes mean responses from Russian party experts on the question of where parties position on a seven-point anti-pro/democracy scale.[15] As can be seen, United Russia consistently takes the center ground, which may be part of the reason for its ability to hold public support.

[FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Such centrism by the ruling authorities creates strategic dilemmas for Russia's divided opposition. Other studies have attributed these strategic dilemmas to the ability of the regime to co-opt opposition parties, thereby stifling co-ordination between the systemic and anti-systemic opposition (Armstrong, Reuter, and Robertson 2020, 15). We contend that this divide is not only about material concerns. Ideological divisions within the opposition on system-level questions—in particular on the nature of the political system (i.e., whether it ought to be democratic or not)—enabled Russia's rulers to occupy a centrist position and to build a harmonious coalition of support for its constitutional reforms.

These divisions at the level of political parties appear to characterize electoral authoritarianism more generally. Figure 6 shows our analysis of all countries in the VDem data set across all regime types (Lührmann et al. 2020). As can be seen, average levels of party support for pluralism vary in predictable ways across regime types, with closed autocracies having the lowest and liberal democracies the highest. However, differences between parties on the dimension of political pluralism (measured as standard deviations) are much more pronounced in electoral authoritarian systems than in either electoral democracies or liberal democracies. This was not the case on other issue dimensions that we analyzed. Moreover, ruling

parties were more likely to occupy centrist positions on this question in electoral authoritarian regimes, with the opposition therefore divided between more democracy and more authoritarianism. In those cases where ruling parties coexisted with two or more opposition parties, the ruling party in electoral authoritarian systems occupied the center position (ambiguous or "weakly committed" to pluralism)[16] in 41% of cases, compared to just 13% in electoral democracies and 7% in liberal democracies. Opposition parties were also more likely to be divided in their support for democracy: 27% of opposition parties in this sample of electoral authoritarian systems were divided on the pluralism question compared to 20% in electoral democracies and 3% in liberal democracies.

[FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

While ruling parties in electoral authoritarian regimes need not adopt a centrist position, there is good reason to believe that if they do not do so—or, if the opposition finds a way to unite on either side of the regime divide—then they may lose one of the key elements in their coalition-building toolkit. This point raises the broader issue of the strengths and weaknesses of regime and opposition coalition-building and therefore of the resilience of such regimes. The opposition in Russia needs to unite its supporters but frequently cannot on multiple dimensions, notably on the direction of the polity. The dilemma that faces the regime is that a democratic transition risks its power, while abolishing elections would likely have the effect of uniting what opposition remains. The dilemma that the electorate faces, however, is that it may be faced with a choice between the devil-it-knows in the regime and a highly divided and unstable opposition. In Russia, this leaves the Kremlin in a powerful position to use electoral politics to exploit opposition divisions: "without us, *sauve-qui-peut*," with which appeal—along with targeted benefits and symbols—it is strongly placed to be able to produce winning coalitions.

Notes

1. Direct analysis of expectations of electoral fraud in the vote on the 2020 constitutional reform proposals goes beyond the availability of our data. However, analysis that we have conducted of non-voters in elections in Russia since 1993 for our forthcoming book clearly points to the effects of lack of belief in electoral fairness as a factor depressing individual propensity to vote.
2. Formally, the 2020 vote was not a referendum, which has a particular status in Russian constitutional law. Partly for reasons of brevity, however, we continue to refer to it as a referendum in the remainder of this article. But, as we note in the discussion, some political characteristics that are common to referenda also justify use of the term.
3. Post-Soviet politics is replete with examples of leaders who have adopted constitutional change to address this problem. In some cases, leaders have stayed in power by transforming the executive format of the constitution (e.g., Serzh Sargsyan in Armenia in 2017, who introduced a parliamentary system) or through the recalculation of presidential terms (e.g., Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan in 2000) or the abolition of term limits altogether (e.g., Emomali Rahmon in Tajikistan in 2016). In other cases, outgoing presidents have sought to bind the hands of their successors, as was the case of Leonid Kuchma in Ukraine in 2004.

4. For more details on the constitutional reform, see the special issue of the journal *Russian Politics* (Pomeranz and Smyth 2021).
5. For the full documentation of all the proposed amendments, see https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2020/03/10/824662-konstitutsiya-polnii-tekst-popravkami.
6. The telephone survey was based on Random-Digit Dialing (RDD) sampling. The RDDGen method was used to generate random numbers from open-source records of landline and mobile numbers. No quotas were set on the distribution between landlines and mobile phones.
7. Since the early 1990s, Russian analysts have applied statistical methods to calculate the effects of falsification on voting outcomes (Lyubarev 2020). This analysis seeks to detect anomalies in voter-candidate ratios in electoral districts where turnout is especially high, producing estimates of "real" results based on revised turnout.
8. This work has been cited in research on the constitutional vote (Hutcheson and McAllister 2021), and has been corroborated by other studies (Podlazov 2021).
9. The weighted survey excludes respondents who refused to answer; the official results exclude voters who spoiled their ballots.
10. We asked respondents to identify the main factor influencing their decision to vote: amendments affecting the balance of powers between political institutions (changes to the powers of the legislature and two-term tenure limits for future presidents); the amendment enabling President Putin to stay in power beyond 2024; amendments protecting social benefits (pensions and the minimum wage); amendments protecting the family and traditional values, and other reasons that the respondent wished to report, such as support for amendments appealing to patriotic values. We also asked respondents to identify reasons for not voting, and in Figures 1 and 2 we include those who deliberately abstained, as this position was taken by Russia's liberal opposition.
11. The value of the Pearson Chi-Square test statistic is 80.325 (Pr = 0.000).
12. Descriptive statistics for all variables are available in online Appendix C.
13. The difference between the responses of the Yes and No electorates is statistically significant. The value of the Pearson Chi-Square test statistic is 27.889 (Pr = 0.000).
14. We analyze four waves of expert surveys in Russia: 2003, 2008, 2013, and 2019. Each survey involves 10 experts recruited from a master list of scholars who had published a peer-reviewed article or book on the Russian party system in the past 10 years. They form part of a comparative project of party systems in 27 European states, which has involved over 1,000 experts since the early 2000s (Rohrschneider and Whitefield 2020).
15. The political pluralism variable has five response categories: "Not at all committed," "Not committed," "Weakly committed," "Committed," and "Fully committed."

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