Mobilizing Opposition Voters under Electoral Authoritarianism: A Field Experiment in Russia

Leonid Peisakhin
Assistant Professor of Political Science
New York University-Abu Dhabi
leonid.peisakhin@nyu.edu

Arturas Rozenas
Assistant Professor of Political Science
New York University
arturas.rozenas@nyu.edu

Sergey Sanovich
Post-doctoral Associate
Stanford University
sanovich@stanford.edu

Under electoral authoritarianism opposition supporters often abstain from voting because they think that their votes will not make a difference. Opposition parties try to counteract this apathy through campaigns that emphasize how voting can impact the outcome of the election and subsequent policy decisions. No systematic research has been done to measure the electoral impact of such mobilization campaigns. We follow a cluster randomized experiment administered by an opposition candidate in Russia’s 2016 parliamentary election. The campaign distributed 240,000 fliers to 75% of the households in a district in Moscow. The messages encouraged turnout by either priming the closeness of the election or highlighting the potential impact of voting on policy-making. Neither message had an effect on aggregate turnout or the distribution of votes. This suggests that conventional mobilization campaigns used in democracies – and mimicked by opposition parties under electoral authoritarianism – may not be effective when they contend with deep voter apathy.

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Most of today’s non-democracies are “electoral authoritarian” regimes which permit opposition and hold regular elections, but also use state funds, patronage networks, coercion, and fraud to undermine the opposition at the ballot-box (Levitsky and Way, 2010). Nonetheless, the opposition can sometimes deliver surprising victories that bring about a change in government – or even regime change – as was the case in Poland in 1989, Mexico in 2000, Kenya in 2002, or Malaysia in 2018.

One explanation for why the opposition under electoral authoritarianism succeeds so rarely – even when the incumbent is vulnerable – is voter apathy. Another has to do with the lack of credibility of mobilizational appeals that promise change in an environment where there has been no political turnover for a long time. In a political system stacked in favor of the incumbent, the opposition supporters do not expect that their votes will make a difference, and the government works hard to create the impression of invulnerability (Magaloni, 2006; Simpser, 2013). Opposition parties try to counteract these negative expectations by persuading their supporters that voting is important even in a highly unfair electoral environment. Opposition-led campaigns have been shown to be instrumental – usually as part of a larger menu of domestic and international factors – in forcing the authoritarian incumbents out of office in the Balkans and Georgia among other places (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010; Howard and Roessler, 2006).

In this study, we quantify the effectiveness of opposition-led mobilization campaigns using data from a large-scale field experiment implemented by an opposition candidate in Russia’s 2016 parliamentary election. The campaign distributed 240,000 partisan campaign fliers to 75% of the households in the candidate’s district. Campaign staff designed two types of ‘treatment’ fliers intended to mobilize the opposition supporters: one flier primed the closeness of the forthcoming election and another primed the connection between voting and policy-making. The ‘control’ flier contained only information about the election but no mobilizational messages. The three messages were cluster-randomized at the level of electoral precincts within the district.
We found that neither mobilization campaign affected turnout or the distribution of votes when compared to the control. These null results are robust not just in their systematic lack of significance but also in substantively small point estimates. In Russia, a paradigmatic case of electoral authoritarianism, opposition supporters did not seem to be affected by the message that their vote can make a difference. This is consistent with the literature that downplays the importance of opposition campaigning on electoral outcomes under competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way, 2010).

In this study, the control flier contained information about the date of the election and the candidate's name and photo. Thus, we estimate the net effect of a partisan campaign that primes the value of voting relative to a partisan campaign without such messaging but with basic information about the candidate and the election. The nature of partisan campaigning does not allow us to estimate the mobilizing effect of providing basic information about the election and candidates with no explicit mobilizational content.

Election outcomes under electoral authoritarianism often depend on whether the opposition has developed "a tool kit of novel and sophisticated electoral strategies that made them more popular and effective challengers to the regime" (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010). Yet, there is little systematic research about opposition strategies and their effectiveness under electoral authoritarianism. A related literature shows that non-partisan mobilization campaigns can be quite effective in authoritarian regimes and developing democracies (Guan and Green, 2006; Chong et al., 2015; Adida et al., 2017). To our knowledge, this study is the first to use a large-scale field experiment to measure the impact of partisan mobilization campaigns by political opposition under electoral authoritarianism.

1The campaign did not want to expend resources on fliers without information about its candidate.
**Experimental Design**

**Context.** The experiment was implemented in Moscow’s district 198 (Leningradsky), which is subdivided into 229 electoral precincts with the total of 507,000 registered voters. This district is one of fifteen in the city and is broadly representative of Moscow at large. We followed the campaign by Yulia Galiamina – a candidate for a seat in the national parliament in the district. Galiamina, aged 43 at the time of the election, is a local activist on issues of environmental protection and government accountability. In 2014, she ran for Moscow city council, coming second after the candidate for the ruling United Russia party. In the 2016 parliamentary race, Galiamina was running under the aegis of the Yabloko party, a well-established opposition party. In her district, the pro-regime coalition was represented by the candidate from Just Russia. The average turnout rate in 2016 in the district was 34%, which is typical of Moscow. At the conclusion of the race Galiamina came second with 14% of the vote behind the pro-government candidate who received 31%.

**Treatments.** Russian opposition politicians generally believe that many of their supporters do not vote because they think that their participation would make no difference.\(^2\) In an attempt to counteract these negative expectations Galiamina’s campaign distributed three types of fliers: a control flier containing the candidate’s photograph, her name, the campaign slogan, her party’s logo, and the election date; and two treatment fliers containing the same information as the control, but with mobilizational appeals.

The wording of the two mobilizational appeals is given in Table 1.\(^3\) In the “closeness of election” appeal, recipients were told factually correct information about the 2013 mayoral election where the independent candidate Alexey Navalny (who was not mentioned by name on the flier) lost by only 208 votes in one of the district’s rayons. The “policy-impact” appeal primed voters about the connection between voting and policy outcomes. The message is

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\(^2\)“Boikotiruiu zdrravyi smysl” (Boycotting rationality: Those who stay at home during elections will not make Russia free), novayagazeta.ru, 10 January 2018.

\(^3\)The fliers can be found in Online Appendix 1.
Do you support an independent candidate? We have a chance of winning! In the 2013 Moscow mayoral election, the opposition candidate was just 208 votes short of winning in one of our rayons. In the upcoming Duma election, your vote could be decisive!

Planning not to vote again? Then do not complain about the laws passed by the Duma. Do not let others decide what the future parliament will look like!

Table 1: Mobilizational appeals in the two treatment conditions.

"In the Russian context, ‘independent’ refers to someone from outside of the regime, and the term is used interchangeably with ‘opposition.’

formulated in a colloquial manner and triggers the ex-post regret of not taking part in elections. This design allows us to isolate the effectiveness of two mobilizational messages net of the basic factual information about the election and the candidate.

The campaign was hoping to mobilize pro-opposition voters, but it was also possible that pro-regime supporters would have been mobilized too if they perceived Galiamina to be a threat to the pro-regime candidate. In the analyses that follow we report effects on turnout and vote choice.

Implementation. Treatments were administered and outcomes measured at the level of electoral precincts. In total, there are 229 precincts in the electoral district under study. Of these, 17 service organizations (military facilities, hospitals, etc.), and the campaign did not attempt to deliver fliers there. It did set out to distribute fliers to mailboxes at all residential addresses in the remaining 212 precincts. On average, precincts have about 2,000 voters. The intent was to treat all 500,000 registered voters in the district. Twenty-four thousand fliers were printed for hand-delivery to individual household mailboxes in 2,727 residential buildings. Fliers were distributed by a marketing firm contracted by the

4The total number of precincts in subsequent analyses is 210. Inspecting the data we found two precincts with a turnout rate of 99-100% (see Online Appendix 2), about nine standard deviations off the district average. These two precincts are excluded from analyses.
candidate’s campaign. The distribution was scheduled for September 12-16 with the election taking place on September 18. Fliers were successfully distributed in 77% of buildings in the control and policy-impact conditions and in 74% of buildings in the closeness of election treatment. These are relatively high rates of coverage in a security-conscious city.

**Balance and Power.** In Table 2, we report how the three experimental groups are balanced with respect to pre-treatment characteristics. Group averages for each of the interventions are reported in columns 1-3, and difference of means statistics for comparison between each of the treatments and the control are in the last two columns. Observations are weighted by a precinct’s vote-eligible population to reduce the risk of small precincts driving the overall results. The balance is generally good, with the exception of turnout in the 2013 mayoral election where precincts in “closeness of election” group have slightly higher turnout than those in control. To address this problem, we control for turnout in 2013 in a subset of subsequent analyses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group means</th>
<th>Treatment – Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Control (N = 70)</td>
<td>Pivotal (N = 70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of apartments</td>
<td>1326</td>
<td>1404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of buildings</td>
<td>14.01</td>
<td>13.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Voters</td>
<td>2469</td>
<td>2422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnout in 2011</td>
<td>64.58</td>
<td>64.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Russia vote in 2011</td>
<td>45.74</td>
<td>45.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnout in 2012</td>
<td>56.26</td>
<td>56.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putin vote in 2012</td>
<td>46.34</td>
<td>45.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnout in 2013 elections</td>
<td>31.52</td>
<td>32.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navalny vote in 2013</td>
<td>27.99</td>
<td>29.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations weighted by precinct voting population. P-values for two-tailed t-test in parentheses.

Table 2: Balance tests.

The number of units in this study (N = 210) is in line with other similar field experiments that manipulate treatments at the level of lowest possible electoral or administrative units (e.g. Adida et al. (2017) have 137 units); Mvukiyehe and Samii (2017) have 142 units). The
power of this experiment is between 0.74 and 0.94, depending on exact formulation of the null hypothesis, to detect a two percentage point treatment effect under the 95% confidence level (see Online Appendix 3 for calculations).

**RESULTS**

In Table 3, we report the estimated effects of a precinct being assigned to one of the two mobilizational treatments relative to the control on three outcomes: turnout, support for the candidate (Galiamina), and support for the candidate’s party Yabloko.\(^5\) Outcomes are measured in percentage points, and coefficients are estimated using weighted least squares (WLS).\(^6\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Turnout</th>
<th>Candidate vote</th>
<th>Party vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Closeness</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.59)</td>
<td>(0.38)</td>
<td>(0.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.59)</td>
<td>(0.37)</td>
<td>(0.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnout in 2013</td>
<td>0.67**</td>
<td>0.69**</td>
<td>0.77**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Observations   | 210     | 210            | 210        |
| Adjusted R\(^2\) | -0.002  | 0.60           | -0.005    |
|                |         | -0.005         | 0.31       |
|                |         |                | -0.001    |
|                |         |                | 0.39       |

WLS estimates with two-tailed p-values: *p<0.05. **p<0.01.
Dependent variables are measured in percentages.

Table 3: Treatment assignment effects on turnout and support.

Neither of the two mobilizational messages had an effect on election outcomes relative to the control. The coefficients in Table 3 are very small in magnitude across all specifications and not significant. The coefficients for the closeness of election and policy impact primes are −0.02 and 0.04 respectively. Given that outcomes are measured on a percentage-point scale, these very small coefficients represent quite precisely estimated null

\(^5\)In addition to casting a vote for a candidate, voters cast a separate vote for a political party.
\(^6\)In Online Appendix 4, we report very similar results from OLS regressions.
effects of the two treatments on turnout. The estimated coefficients for percentage of votes cast for the candidate and her party are also small (varying from $-0.83$ to $0.28$) and directionally inconsistent across specifications. In Online Appendix 5, we show that the null effects are robust to inclusion of different pre-treatments covariates.

**POSSIBLE REASONS FOR NULL EFFECTS**

**Lack of Statistical Power.** Could it be that null results are due to lack of statistical power? This explanation would be plausible had the estimated effects been large but noisy. Instead, the results in Table 3 show substantively small point estimates that are estimated quite precisely (the largest standard error is only 0.84 of a percentage point).

**Low delivery or take-up rates.** The reported estimates could suffer from attenuation biases due to incomplete delivery of the leaflets and potentially low take-up rates. To address this concern, we check whether treatment effects are higher in precincts with higher delivery rates. In places where more fliers are delivered, more fliers should have been read. For each precinct, we calculate the share of buildings that received leaflets. We then estimate treatment effects at different saturation thresholds. In Figure 1, we report the effect of the two treatments on turnout at various levels of treatment saturation, varying from precincts where at least 0% of buildings received fliers ($N = 210$) to those where at least 80% of buildings received them ($N = 100$). Treatment effects consistently hover around zero and do not increase as the saturation rate goes up. This pattern also holds for other dependent variables, as shown in Online Appendix 6. This evidence is inconsistent with the idea that null results are due to incomplete delivery of fliers or their low take-up rates.

**Electoral Fraud.** Another possible explanation for null findings might have to do with the fact that elections in Russia are at times fraudulent. As discussed in Online Appendix 7, three facts negate this explanation. First, although election fraud was widespread across
Russia, there was little evidence of large-scale fraud in Moscow. Second, to negate possible
treatment effects the regime would have had to inflate turnout in precincts in the control
condition while not inflating support for pro-regime parties there, as we didn’t find any
treatment effects on support for candidates. This would defy the logic of electoral fraud.
Third, our simulations show that to attenuate treatment effects to the point of our results the
level of electoral fraud would have had to be considerably higher than any existing estimates.

**Weakness of Mobilizational Appeals.** It is possible that null findings in this instance
are due to the weakness of the specific mobilizational appeals that we use in the context of
Russia’s 2016 parliamentary race. While information interventions are known to be effective
in developing democracies (Chong et al., 2015; Adida et al., 2017; Mvukiyehe and Samii,
2017) and are commonly used by the opposition parties in Russia (Kynev, Lyubarev and
Maksimov, 2017), it might be that standard appeals to closeness of the election or policy
impact of voting are not credible under authoritarianism. For instance, potential voters
might have been skeptical about the closeness of the race in the precinct at large beyond
a specific rayon. Likewise, the policy impact prime might have fallen short because of the
perception that the legislature is little more than a rubber stamp for decisions made by the

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7Thinly worded closeness of election primes have been shown to be ineffective even in the U.S. context; see Enos and Fowler (2014).
executive and therefore not an effective agent of political change.

We cannot rule out this explanation for null findings. If these specific appeals were too weak to sway potential voters then this would suggest that conventional mobilizational appeals to vote pivotality and voting as a moral duty might ordinarily be ineffective under electoral authoritarianism.

**Voter Apathy.** A more disturbing possibility from the perspective of potential for political change is that the appeals were read and changed voters’ views about the election but still failed to get voters to the polls because of a feeling of despondency in a context where the regime seems destined to win either because it enjoys genuine majority support or because it is able to manipulate electoral results and effectively suppress dissent. Survey evidence suggests that only 14% of respondents around the time of the 2016 election thought that they could effectively express their political preferences through voting. Eighty-seven percent said that they had no influence over policy decisions.8

If the baseline intrinsic benefits of voting are perceived to be extremely low under electoral authoritarianism, then even highly persuasive mobilizational appeals would be insufficient to overcome the costs of voting and deep voter apathy. Given the ruling party’s dominance, it might make little sense to vote *locally* for opposition candidates in the absence of a plausible signal that change at the *national* level might be within reach.

**Conclusion**

The results of the experiment suggest that the attempts of opposition parties to mobilize voters through appeals that prime the value of voting may not be effective when the baseline levels of political apathy are high and belief in possibility of regime change is low. This is either because conventional appeals to vote pivotality or voting as a moral duty might be generally ineffective in the authoritarian context where elections are rarely close and

8See [https://www.levada.ru/2016/09/06/elektoralnye-ustanovki/] and [https://www.levada.ru/2016/08/24/nol-vliyaniya/].
the legislature does not have an important role in policy-making or because voters are so despondent that even appeals that bring about a change in attitudes fail to alter political behavior. Survey evidence would be required to adjudicate between these two explanations.\textsuperscript{9} The overall empirical finding about conventional mobilizational messages failing to get voters to the polls adds to our understanding of the difficulties that opposition parties face under electoral authoritarianism.

This study is only a single data point, albeit in a paradigmatic case. The effects of identical campaigns would likely be different in other contexts where, for example, the baseline levels of political apathy are lower or where there is a commonly observed signal (e.g., economic crisis, protest, divisions within ruling elites) that regime change is possible or imminent.

REFERENCES


Enos, Ryan D and Anthony Fowler. 2014. “Pivotality and turnout: Evidence from a field

\textsuperscript{9}We were not able to field a survey around the campaign’s field experiment in this instance given the high costs of public opinion research in Moscow.


