Strategic Voting, Image of Invincibility, and Partisanship: Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Russia

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Abstract

This article investigates the case of the Smart Voting — a campaign urging opposition supporters to vote for the strongest opponents of United Russia in single-member districts — to explore what makes people more or less likely to vote strategically in authoritarian elections. I concentrate on two factors that can influence opposition voters' behavior: the perception of the incumbent party's invincibility and partisan distance between a voter and the main contender of the dominant party on a ballot. To test my hypotheses, I use the results of a conjoint survey experiment conducted in the second largest Russian city — Saint Petersburg — in the run-up to the 2021 State Duma election in September 2021. The results strongly support the hypothesis about ideological distance, while finding no substantial evidence for the effect of the image of invincibility. Thus, informing voters about regime electoral vulnerability — challenging the image of invincibility — did not significantly influence their willingness to engage in strategic voting.

Keywords: authoritarian elections, strategic voting, opposition coordination, Smart Voting, survey experiment

Note: The analysis was pre-registered prior to data collection, with the pre-analysis plan publicly accessible at https://osf.io/cnx75. There were minor deviations from the plan: instead of OLS regression and AMCEs, logit regression and marginal means were used in the reported analysis to ensure a consistent presentation of the results. These adjustments do not substantively affect the findings. The survey experiment was approved by the EUI Ethics Committee.

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Introduction

2011 was a challenging year for Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia. As his term as prime minister was coming to an end, the government's approval ratings hit a four-year low: for the first time, it received a negative net approval rating, with 54% of the population dissatisfied with its performance, compared to 44% who viewed it favorably; between December 2010 and June 2011, the percentage of people who viewed his own performance as prime minister negatively also rose from 11% to 30% (Levada Center, 2024). Similarly, support for the ruling party, United Russia, was in decline (Levada Center, 2011). At the same time, the slogan "Vote for any party other than the party of crooks and thieves"[1], popularized by the then-popular blogger Alexei Navalny, sparked widespread discussion on the internet (Radio Svoboda, 2011). In the December election that same year, United Russia received 49% of the vote share—15 percentage points fewer votes than in the previous election—and lost the supermajority in parliament required to pass constitutional laws.

In 2021, electoral prospects for Putin's party looked no better: the country faced a decade-long stagnation in real disposable income, numerous corruption scandals, as well as international sanctions. Again, like in 2011, Navalny's strategy to defeat United Russia was at the center of public discussion. While United Russia remained the most popular political party according to opinion polls, it could only secure the support of a plurality of voters: in a survey conducted by VCIOM two weeks before the elections, only 28% of respondents reported intending to vote for it (VTsIOM, 2021). Indeed, the party received 4 million fewer votes than in 2011: 28,064,200 compared to 32,371,737, according to official results.

Nevertheless, owing to the regime's electoral engineering, United Russia secured 70% of parliamentary seats despite a declining voter base. Such engineered victories raise broader questions about electoral strategies employed by authoritarian regimes. Autocracies commonly utilize tactics such as political machines and workplace intimidation (Frye et al., 2019a, 2019b, 2014; Mares and Young, 2018), as well as resource allocation targeted to loyal constituencies (Magaloni, 2006; Blaydes, 2010), to manufacture legislative super-majorities. Additionally,

[1] "The party of crooks and thieves" is an expression widely circulating among opposition in Russia used to refer to the ruling United Russia party

most autocracies adopt disproportional electoral rules, ensuring that even a modest plurality of votes can translate into a super-majority in parliament (Barbera, 2013). This latter approach proved particularly effective in Russia, where the introduction of a mixed electoral system without seat compensation transformed 49% of the vote share into 70% of parliamentary seats. While this disproportionality clearly benefits incumbents by amplifying their electoral strength, it also carries inherent risks by making the regime's electoral survival heavily dependent on opposition voters' inability or unwillingness to coordinate strategically. Indeed, when an incumbent candidate fails to secure the majority support of voters, opposition supporters have an opportunity to engage in strategic voting—also known as tactical, sophisticated, or insincere voting—casting their ballots not for their preferred candidate, but for the candidate most likely to defeat the incumbent.

Yet, despite the theoretical importance of strategic voting for weakening authoritarian regimes, we know surprisingly little about its actual prevalence or effectiveness in autocratic settings. Theoretically, coordinated strategic voting could undermine incumbents' grip on power by exploiting vulnerabilities created by disproportional electoral systems. Yet, empirical evidence remains sparse, and many fundamental questions remain unanswered: Under what conditions do opposition voters coordinate successfully? Why do some voters embrace strategic voting while others abstain from it? This paper aims to shed light on the factors that shape voters' willingness and ability to vote strategically under authoritarian rule. Specifically, it deals with the two primary explanations for this phenomenon discussed in the literature: the perception of the dominant party's invincibility and partisan or ideological divides within the opposition. First, authoritarian regimes invest significant resources in building the perception of widespread popular support and cultivating "an image of invincibility" to dissuade both voters and elites from defecting (Magaloni, 2006). From an opposition voter's perspective, being strategic — switching from one's preferred opposition candidate to the one with a stronger chance of winning — is a suboptimal strategy as long as the ruling party's victory appears inevitable. Additionally, ideological and policy divisions within the opposition make cross-party voting challenging. While the autocracy-democracy divide may be the most salient issue for opposition supporters, their partisan preferences can, at times, outweigh their demand

for democratic change (Gandhi and Ong, 2019; Svolik, 2018). Building on this, this paper examines how these two factors – the perception of the dominant party's vulnerability and partisan divides – shape opposition supporters' decisions to vote strategically in authoritarian regimes.

The "Smart Voting" campaign, launched by Alexei Navalny in 2019 to encourage strategic voting among Russia's pro-opposition electorate, provides a unique opportunity to empirically address these questions and examine the factors influencing voters' willingness and ability to vote strategically. The strategy, as explained by Navalny himself, was quite straightforward: "The parties themselves cannot agree and nominate a single candidate against United Russia. But we can agree on this. We are different, but we have one policy — we are against the monopoly of United Russia. Everything else is mathematics. If we all act smartly and vote for the strongest candidate, he will win, and United Russia will lose" (Novaya Gazeta, 2018). The Smart Voting strategy, as Navalny named it, aimed to mitigate informational and coordination problems that prevent voters from strategic behavior. On the one hand, Navalny and his team developed a set of informational resources to make the information on the strongest UR opponents in SMDs easily available. On the other, being one of the most popular opposition politicians with an audience of millions of people, Navalny advocated for his strategy and effectively took a role of a coordinator. In the September 2021 legislative election, for the first time the strategy was deployed both nation-wide and in a number of local legislative elections that took place simultaneously.

To test the effects of the incumbent party's electoral vulnerability and partisan dislike of the leading opposition candidate, I rely on the results of a survey experiment conducted among opposition supporters in Russia's second-largest city – Saint Petersburg – in the run-up to the 2021 election. In the experiment, respondents chose among five fictional candidates with randomly varying characteristics – most importantly, party affiliation and whether or not the candidate was endorsed by the Smart Voting project. Crucially, half of the respondents were randomly assigned to receive real-world information highlighting the low level of support for the United Russia candidate in their district and the overall decline in support for the party across the country. Specifically, for the respondents in the treatment group, the conjoint part was preceded by

a short vignette containing information on the United Russia candidate's vote share in the previous election, which ranged from 19% to 35%, depending on the district. The vignette also included opinion poll results from the largest polling company, VCIOM, showing that national support for United Russia had fallen from 41% in September 2016 to 26% in August 2021. Respondents from the control group received no information before the conjoint part of the survey.

While the Smart Voting endorsement itself proved highly effective, providing respondents with additional real-world information highlighting the dominant party's vulnerability did not further increase their likelihood of voting strategically for the strongest opposition candidate. At the same time, the impact of Smart Voting weakens as partisan distance increases: opposition supporters appear willing to set aside some of their partisan preferences to vote strategically, but their readiness declines significantly when the endorsed candidate belongs to a party they view negatively. These results suggest that perceptions of vulnerability alone may not suffice to mobilize strategic behavior, and successful strategic voting campaigns must carefully consider partisan divides among opposition supporters.

By investigating the promises and limitations of strategic voters' coordination under electoral autocracy, I contribute to the study of political behavior under authoritarianism, authoritarian resilience and dominant parties' longevity. While existing scholarship concentrates on the use of vote buying, intimidation and selective allocations of resources, these strategies represent only one side of a coin. I draw researchers' attention to a previously understudied aspect of authoritarian elections and examine how autocrats can sustain their power with fragmented opposition electorate, as well as the factors that can potentially allow supporters of the opposition to overcome challenges thus created.

The paper is organized as follows. In the next section, I briefly engage with relevant literature and outline the main hypotheses to be tested. In section 2, I introduce the reader to the Russian context. After that, I present the data and research design. Section 4 presents the preliminary results of the study and section 5 concludes.

Strategic voting and partisanship in authoritarian regimes

In this article I deal with two questions. First, how does the perception of an invincible incumbent influence voter behavior in authoritarian regimes, and how important is this perception for pro-opposition strategic voting in particular? Second, to what extent does partisanship influence voters' strategic calculations in electoral autocracies?

The first question intersects two largely separate bodies of literature: one on strategic voting and the other on electoral behavior in authoritarian regimes. The strategic voting literature, originating with Duverger's influential work (Duverger, 1959), has primarily focused on democratic contexts, and its application to electoral autocracies has seldom been thoroughly investigated. In contrast, studies of electoral behavior in authoritarian regimes typically concentrate on the inducements to vote for the incumbent, such as vote-buying and intimidation (Frye et al., 2019a, 2019b, 2014; Mares and Young, 2018), or the targeted distribution of particularistic benefits to the incumbent's key constituencies (Magaloni, 2006; Blaydes, 2010). While understanding what motivates people to vote for an authoritarian incumbent is important, focusing solely on this aspect leaves questions about pro-opposition voters' behavior unanswered.

However, the two body of literature present occasional thematic intersections. The most relevant one deals with the role of margin of victory in voters' calculus. According to the dominant view in the literature on authoritarian politics, by securing large margins in elections, authoritarian leaders seek to generate an image of invincibility that, apart from deterring elite defection, disincentivizes opposition supporters from voting strategically. As Magaloni puts it:

"…[E]ven if voters are willing to set their ideological or ethnic differences aside, as long as the hegemonic party cannot be defeated, they are better off voting sincerely for their first choice rather than strategically voting for the strongest contender. This is another reason why perceptions of invincibility help hegemonic parties – these perceptions serve to discourage mass snowballing effects." (Magaloni, 2006)

Therefore, when the likelihood of defeating the incumbent appears bleak, opposition supporters may be more likely to vote sincerely for their preferred candidate. Even if their first choice candidates are not expected to win, voting for them allows opposition voters to derive utility from signaling their support for specific values and policies, which, as Letsa (2020) ar-

gues, motivate people to participate in authoritarian election in the first place.

Following the same logic, it could be reasonable to expect pro-opposition voters to exhibit more strategic behavior as the regime shows the signs of weakness, which aligns well with an informal intuition, most prominently shared by such theorist of strategic voting as Cox (1997), according to which the incentive to vote tactically should be higher in marginal constituencies. In addition, this is also similar to how the display of public discontent can lead citizens to bandwagon against the regime in Kuran's (1991) work, or opposition parties to coalesce in Van de Walle's (2006).

The aim of the current article is primary empirical, and it consists in testing whether providing information on the incumbent party standing in a respondent's district — in particular, information that suggest a reduction in the incumbent's support base and therefore a more contested election — make the latter more likely to cast a strategic vote against a hegemonic party candidate or not. Magaloni's own argument is ambiguous in this regard: while she argues that as long as the dominant party cannot be defeated, "opposition voters possess no incentive to desert their first choice" (Magaloni, 2006), it is not clear what was the main driver of strategic desertion in Mexico: perception of the PRI vulnerability (marginality of the election), or having a clear leading candidate (distance to contention).

The second question addressed in this article examines the role of partisanship and partisan divisions in the survival of authoritarian regimes. There is strong evidence that in democracies, polarization and the intensity of partisan feelings can hinder the public's ability to serve as a democratic check on the incumbents (Graham and Svolik, 2020), while in authoritarian regimes ideological divisions within the opposition make it harder to mobilize political unrest and press political demands (Lust-Okar, 2004). Focusing on Malaysian 2018 general election, Gandhi and Ong (2019), highlight the role of ideological or partisan splits within the opposition electorate in authoritarian regime survival. In particular, they examine the trade-off opposition voters face when choosing between their personal ideological preferences on the one side and commitment to electoral alliance on the other. As Gandhi and Ong demonstrate, supporters of the opposition are more likely to abstain from voting for a coalition, thus preferring authoritarian status quo to alteration of power, if they expect their least preferred party to lead the coalition govern-

ment and there is an alternative option closer to their preferences. Specifically, in their study of Malaysia's 2018 elections, Gandhi and Ong found that Malay Muslim supporters of the pro-Malay party BERSATU were prone to defect if they believed that the secular, multiethnic DAP would dominate the coalition government. This behavior was less common among DAP supporters, who had no viable alternative and thus showed stronger loyalty to the coalition, despite concerns over a potential BERSATU-led administration. Svolik (2018) presents a complementary perspective on voter behavior in polarized societies, showing how voters may be willing to tolerate anti-democratic actions by incumbents due to their strong partisan preferences. Thus, in highly polarized societies such as Venezuela, voters often prioritize their partisan loyalty over democratic principles. Even when voters profess a commitment to democracy, they may still support incumbents who manipulate electoral processes if the alternative is to vote for an ideologically distant challenger. Ultimately, the findings illustrate that while many opposition voters value democratic turnover, their demand for democracy is rather elastic and can be offset by partisan considerations.

Similarly, in my article I explore the role of partisanship in strategic voting in Russian elections. Specifically, I investigate to what extent strategic voting is conditional on partisan dislike of the most likely contender.

Background

The current electoral system in Russia was designed to capitalize on pro-opposition supporters' fragmentation and their inability to vote tactically. For legislative election in Russia, both at a regional and a federal level, the mixed-member majoritarian representation system is used. Out of the 450 seats in the State Duma, 225 are allocated through proportional party-list representation, while the remaining 225 — through a plurality voting single-member districts. The most important feature of this electoral system is the absence of any kind of compensatory mechanism that would make the allocation of seats in the parliament more representatives. This system was introduced after the 2011 State Duma election, when the United Russia — the dominant party

since early 2000s — failed to gain the absolute majority of the vote. [2] The rationale behind this reform was political: the UR's popularity was waning and to secure its constitutional majority in the next elections the system had to become less representative. In tandem with the electoral reform, the Kremlin also eased the barriers to party registration: this allowed spoiler parties to enter the electoral arena and split the electorate of the UR's opponents. As a result, the number of registered parties doubled for the 2016 election compared to 2011, rising from 7 to 14. The result of this electoral engineering payed-off: though in total UR gained four million votes fewer than in 2011, it won in 203 of 225 SMDs and secured a super-majority in the parliament.

At the same time, the very characteristics of the system that provided the UR institutional advantage in the short run also made its electoral success contingent on two factors: its relative popularity and the inability of opposition voters to coordinate. After 2016, however, changing political environment have began to erode these two foundations of the UR's hegemony. The approval rating of UR dropped from 45% to 32% after the government announced the raising of the retirement age in 2018. Sparked by the annexation of Crimea and confrontation with the West popular mobilization (so-called "Crimea effect"), which was still present by the time of the 2016 State Duma election, also faded away. Coupled with the stagnation of real disposable income since 2011 (in fact, in 2020 it fell below the level of 2011), it led the approval rating of UR to reach its fourteen-year minimum (Mukhametshina, 2019). As a result, United Russia's prospects of securing a super-majority became dependent on the fragmentation of the pro-opposition electorate.

Against this background the Smart Voting project came into being. Announced by an anti-corruttion activist and a politician Alexei Navalny, it posed a challenge to the UR by aiming at facilitating coordination of pro-opposition voters. The strategy, as described by Navalny himself, was straightforward: "The parties themselves cannot agree and nominate a single candidate against United Russia. But we can agree on this. We are different, but we have one policy - we are against the monopoly of United Russia. Everything else is mathematics. If we all act smartly and vote for the strongest candidate, he will win, and United Russia will lose" (Novaya

[2] Although according to the official results the UR scored 49% of the popular vote, independent researchers and election observers reported evidence of massive outright electoral fraud. By some accounts, the real UR's result was about 35% (Shpilkin, 2011).

Gazeta, 2018). From their side, Navalny and his team developed a set of information resources to help opposition-minded voters to identify such candidates: a smartphone application, a site and a system of e-mail notifications.

2021 Legislative elections were the first in which the the Smart Voting strategy was applied on a federal level. Before that it was pretested on a regional one: in the 2019 Moscow City Duma election, the 2019 Saint-Petersburg municipal elections and in a number of other legislative elections in Russian regions. Even though the opposition scored substantially better than during the previous electoral cycle, estimating the effect of the Smart Voting campaign on this outcome is a challenging task. The very character of the available data does not fully allow for causal inference, simply because there are no counterfactuals: in any district, the strongest non-UR candidate was endorsed by the the Smart Voting campaign. Some cases, however, do provide pieces of evidence that point to the effectiveness of the project. Exploiting the fact that in municipal elections the same person can run in different districts simultaneously, Turchenko and Golosov (2021) compared the results of the same municipal candidates who were supported by the Smart Voting project in some districts but not in others. As the authors argue, the campaign indeed improved strategic coordination among opposition-minded voters during the municipal election in Saint-Petersburg in 2019: in particular, inclusion of a candidate in the Smart Voting list improved his or her result by 7% on average. However, it is difficult to know whether the relationship is causal: it is still possible that the person was supported by the Smart Voting in one district and not in the other precisely because he or she was the strongest candidate only in the first one. Nor does the data allow us to identify factors that made people more or less likely to vote tactically.

Data and research design

To test whether information on the incumbent's electoral vulnerability and partisan dislike of the Smart Voting candidate affect opposition supporters' propensity to vote strategically, I rely on the results of a conjoint survey experiment conducted among supporters of the opposition in Saint Petersburg in the run-up to the 2021 Russian legislative elections. In this section, I

introduce the data and the experimental design. First, I describe the survey setup and justify key organizational decisions regarding its conduct. Specifically, I explain why (1) the survey targeted pro-opposition supporters and the criteria used to identify them, (2) was conducted on the streets, (3) took place in Saint Petersburg, and (4) focused on five specific districts of the city.

Survey sample

The experimental part of the survey was conducted among pro-opposition respondents only: at the beginning of the survey, there was a filtering question about the attitude towards several politicians. In particular, if a respondent scored Vladimir Putin 4 points or higher or Alexey Navalny 2 points or lower on a 5-point scale, the experimental part of the survey was skipped, and the respondent was asked several concluding socio-demographic questions. In total, 1205 respondents finished the survey, of whom 549 were identified as pro-opposition and participated in its experimental part.

The reasons for this were both theoretical and practical. First, theoretically, this study focuses on the behavior of potential opposition supporters. While the experimental treatment employed in the survey could likely cause some initial regime supporters to defect, this type of behavior falls out of the scope of the current article: the key question investigated here is not what causes defection from the regime party, but what prevents those who are already skeptical of the regime from acting in a way that poses the greatest challenge to it. Hence, focusing on opposition supporters made the survey more resource-efficient by targeting the population most relevant to the research question. Second, from a practical perspective, targeting pro-opposition respondents ensured greater safety for enumerators. While discussing political topics in Russia in 2021 did not expose enumerators or respondents to risks beyond those encountered in daily life, Navalny's organization was officially recognized as extremist in June 2021. A survey conducted shortly after this court decision showed that the designation was generally supported by those who approved of Vladimir Putin's leadership (Dergachev, 2021). In light of this, I chose to exclude such respondents from the part of the survey related to the Smart Voting project, which included the conjoint experiment, several direct questions, and a list experiment measur-

ing support for the project.

The second aspect of the survey that deserves attention is that it was conducted on the streets: enumerators were positioned in areas with high pedestrian traffic, such as intersections near public transportation hubs and large apartment complexes, and invited random passersby to participate in the survey. This was partly because private marketing companies with large online panels in Russia do not work with politically sensitive topics, while independent pollsters lacked a sufficiently large online panel of pro-opposition respondents. There was also a substantive reason why a street survey was a better alternative to the traditional door-to-door approach. Specifically, conducting the survey outdoors provided respondents with a greater sense of anonymity and security, making them more likely to answer questions sincerely. According to some experts, on the streets surveys may in fact provide more reliable results in authoritarian context, such as Russian, in comparison to traditional phone or home interviews (Socratilin, 2016). Finally, the survey was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made interviewing respondents on the cramped landings of Russian apartment buildings less safe from a public health perspective.

As for the choice of the city, Saint Petersburg presented a good case to study strategic voting in authoritarian regimes. Thus, it is a second largest Russian city with more than 5,5 million inhabitants and contentious electorate, and one of a few cities in which the 2021 State Duma election took place concurrently with the election to the local legislative assembly. This allowed to sample respondents by single member districts used in the election to the Saint Petersburg legislative assembly, leveraging significant variation in support for United Russia across these districts to construct a treatment rooted in real-world information. By selecting a city with both low- and high-support districts, the design ensured that the treatment — providing respondents with data on the varying strength of the United Russia candidate in their district — closely mirrored real-world electoral conditions.

Thus, the survey was conducted on the streets in four single-member districts of Saint Petersburg where United Russia had the lowest total share in the 2016 local legislative election: the 4th, the 12th, the 15th, and the 16th districts. These districts were purposely selected for the survey to ensure the experimental “image of invincibility” treatment - providing information

about the weakness of the UR candidate in a respondent's district - was as strong and plausible as possible. Since this was accurate real-world information, it was more likely to affect respondents and trigger a behavioral response mimicking one that could have been observed in the real world. To make the experimental ballot more plausible, each choice task had five candidates from the five most popular parties in Saint Petersburg. In this regard, the design closely approximates lab-in-a-field experiments: similar to lab experiments, it provides a controlled setting for testing hypotheses while being situated in a natural, real-world environment. By combining the control and precision of a laboratory setting with the contextual realism of a real-world environment, it enhances the external validity of the findings while maintaining a robust experimental framework. In such settings, respondents are more likely to interpret the tasks as realistic and relevant, increasing the ecological validity of their behavioral responses.

Design of the experiment

In the conjoint part, respondents were presented with three choice task, in each of which they were choosing between five candidates with randomly varying attributes, such as the inclusion of a candidate in the Smart Voting list, candidate's party affiliation and three characteristics secondary to my analysis, but included to ensure the plausibility of the experimental ballot: gender, nationality and professional background. Even though the survey was conducted only among pro-opposition respondents, in every conjoint task there was a candidate nominated by the UR. Again, the inclusion of such a candidate ensured plausibility of the experimental conditions. Table 1 presents an example choice task from the experiment.

Table 1: An Example Conjoin Task

Candidate	Select
Igor Smrinov. Self-employed, nominated by the JUST RUSSIA party	( )
Dmytry Petrov. Member of the Legislative Assembly, nominated by the CPRF	( )
Gulnaz Minikhanova. Chief Medical Officer, nominated by the United Russia party	( )
Daria Sidorova. CEO of a private company, nominated by the LDPR, supported by the Smart Voting project	( )
Victor Ivanov. Municipal deputy, nominated by the Yabloko party	( )

To estimate the effect of the "image of invincibility", I randomly split the sample into two groups. For the treatment group, the candidate choice experiment was preceded by a preamble with real-world information about the electoral vulnerability of the United Russia party in a respondent's district. For example:

In the last election to the Legislative Assembly of St. Petersburg, in about half of the electoral districts, United Russia candidates won only by a small margin. Thus, in your district (Vasileostrovsky district), United Russia candidate Konstantin Chebykin won 34% of the vote, while his closest competitor got 25%. Since then, the overall rating of United Russia has dropped significantly: according to VTsIOM, it fell from 41% in September 2016 to 26% in August 2021.

If opposition supporters adjust their behavior strategically in response to perceptions of the ruling party's electoral vulnerability, providing such information is expected to increase their likelihood of supporting a Smart Voting candidate compared to the control group, which did not receive any additional information.

Measuring partisan distance

As mentioned above, the survey included direct questions about respondents' political views, including a request to rank political parties on a five-point scale. However, assessing absolute attitudes toward political parties is not the same as measuring a respondent's relative distance from a candidate compared to other candidates. A score of **3 out of 5** for a candidate's party, on its own, is not very informative: a respondent might rate their most preferred party a **3**, while assigning even lower ratings to all others.

Both in real elections and in the candidate choice experiment, voters rarely find a party that perfectly aligns with their ideal ideological position. Instead, they often select the "lesser evil" — a party or candidate that is merely closer to them than any other alternative. Thus, attitudes toward political parties must be evaluated not only in absolute terms but also relative to other parties.

To capture this relative positioning, I introduce the concept of partisan distance, which I calculate as the difference between the highest score a respondent assigns to any party and the

score assigned to a particular party. Higher values indicate greater ideological distance.

For example, suppose a respondent rates three parties on a five-point scale as follows: CPRF — 3, LDPR — 2, and UR — 1.

The partisan distance between the respondent and a candidate from each party would be:

[Distance to CPRF = 3 - 3 = 0]

[Distance to LDPR = 3 - 2 = 1]

[Distance to UR = 3 - 1 = 2]

Here, lower values indicate greater proximity, while higher values reflect a larger distance between the respondent's preferred party and a given candidate's party.

Expectations and quantities of interest

I am interested in knowing whether respondents are more likely to vote for a candidate who is randomly assigned to be endorsed by the Smart Voting project, as well as how this effect is conditioned on the partisan distance between the candidate and the respondent and the perception of the incumbent party vulnerability. According to my hypotheses, pro-opposition voters will be more reluctant to follow Navalny's recommendation and choose a candidate who is most likely to defeat the incumbent's, if this candidate's ideological position is vastly different from their own. At the same time, I expect voters to behave more strategically and support Smart Voting candidates more as the prospects of the incumbent's defeat loom large.

My primary causal quantity of interest is the marginal mean (MM), which represents the average predicted probability of a candidate being chosen, given a specific characteristic or combination of characteristics. Marginal means are calculated by first estimating a logistic regression model and then computing the average predicted probability of a candidate being chosen for each feature level, averaging over the distribution of other covariates. As suggested by Leeper et al. (2020), marginal means and their differences provide an intuitive way to analyze subgroup preferences. For consistency, I use marginal means across all specifications[3].

First, to estimate how the inclusion of a candidate in the Smart Voting list affects a respon-

[3] While AMCEs could be estimated using a standard OLS model as proposed by Hainmueller (2014), doing so would require switching between AMCEs and MMs in different parts of the analysis. To ensure interpretability and coherence, I rely exclusively on marginal means.

dent's choice, I use a logistic regression model, from which I compute marginal means to assess the effect. The model specification is as follows:

$$chosen_{ijk} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * Smart\_Vote_{ijk} + \beta_2 * Party_{ijk} + \beta_5 * Nationality_{ijk} + \beta_6 * Gender_{ijk} + \beta_7 * Occupation_{ijk}. \quad (1)$$

Where *I* denotes i*th* respondent, presented with *K* choice tasks, in each of which choosing the most preferred of the *J* alternatives. For example, in my proposed survey, each respondent will be asked to chose between five candidates *(J = 5)* three times *(K = 3)*, each time presented with a different randomly generated set of candidates.

To estimate the effect of the "image of invincibility" treatment, I fit a logistic regression model that includes an interaction term between Smart Voting endorsement and treatment condition:

$$chosen_{ijk} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * Smart\_Vote_{ijk} + \beta_2 * Image\_Vulnerable_{ijk} + \beta_3 * (Smart\_Vote_{ijk} \times Image\_Vulnerable_{ijk}) + \beta_4 * Party_{ijk} + \beta_5 * Nationality_{ijk} + \beta_6 * Gender_{ijk} + \beta_7 * Occupation_{ijk}. \quad (2)$$

From this model, I compute marginal means for Smart Voting endorsement separately for the control group (no information) and the treatment group (information on United Russia's electoral vulnerability). This allows me to assess how the probability of selecting a candidate changes depending on exposure to the treatment.

Finally, to test if the Smart Voting endorsement's effect differs across the levels of partisan distance, the following specifications is used:

$$chosen_{ijk} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * Smart\_Vote_{ijk} + \beta_2 * Par.Dist._{ijk}$$
$$\beta_3 * (Smart\_Vote_{ijk} \times Par.Dist._{ijk}) +$$
$$\beta_4 * Nationality_{ijk} + \beta_5 * Gender_{ijk} + \beta_6 * Occupation_{ijk} \quad (3)$$

Here, partisan distance ($Par.Dist._{ijk}$) is calculated as the difference between the highest score a respondent gave to any party and a score respondent gave to a particular candidate's party.

In all models, standard errors are clustered at the respondent level to account for both the non-independence of choices made by the same respondent across multiple tasks and the clustering of treatment assignment at the respondent level, where all choices within a respondent's tasks are subject to the same treatment condition.

Results

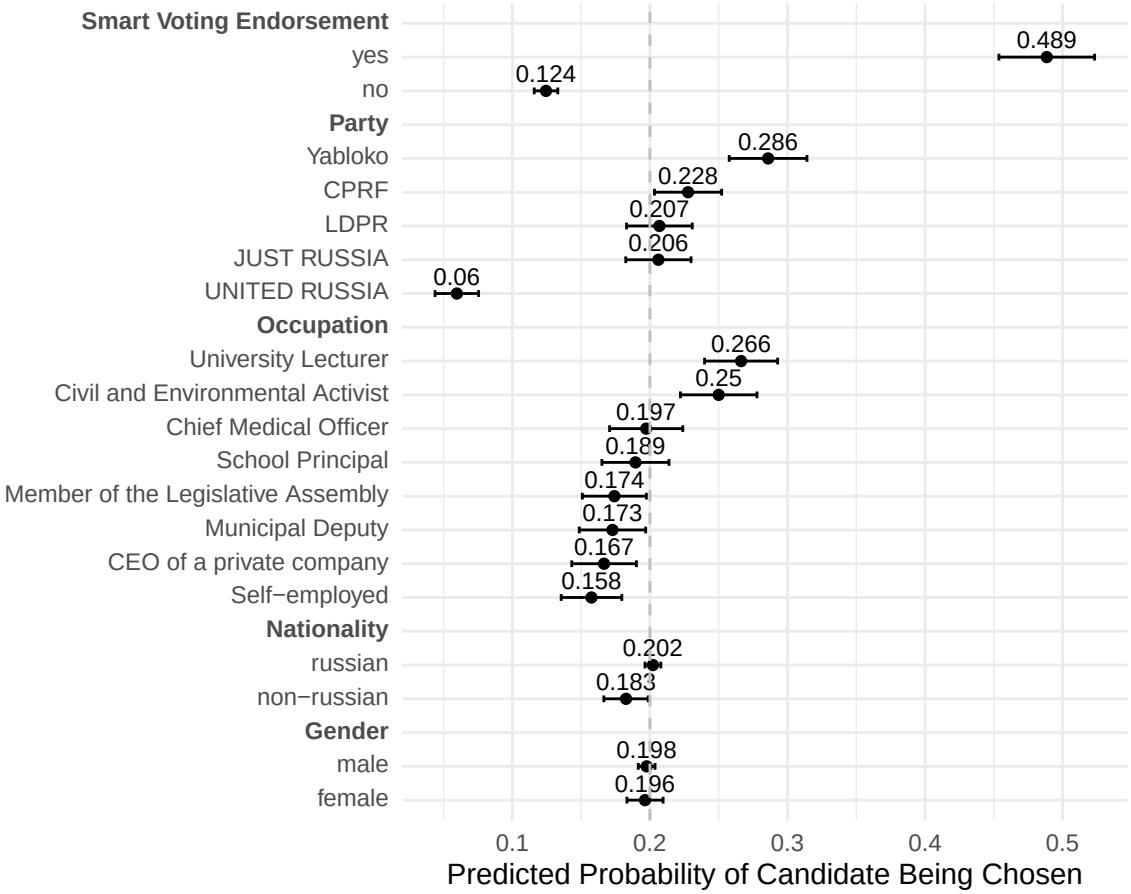
In this section, I present the results of the conjoint experiment using marginal means (predicted probabilities), which offer an intuitive interpretation of candidate selection probabilities. Full regression tables are provided in the appendix for completeness.

Base specification

Figure 1a presents the base results of the conjoint analysis. The effect of the Smart Voting endorsement is both large and significant: candidates supported by the project have a predicted probability of 0.489 of being chosen, compared to 0.124 for those who are not endorsed. This means that candidates endorsed by Smart Voting are 36 percentage points more likely to be chosen compared to the baseline. Among the respondents in the sample, the Smart Voting endorsement remains the strongest predictor of a candidate being selected. It is important to note, however, that the conjoint analysis was conducted among pro-opposition respondents, and the results are therefore not representative of the population of Saint Petersburg. Still, the

substantial effect of the endorsement highlights its potential as a mobilization tool, suggesting that strategic voting campaings can play a crucial role in shaping electoral outcomes among opposition-leaning voters in autocracies.

Figure 1: Predicted Probability of Candidate Selection by Attribute.

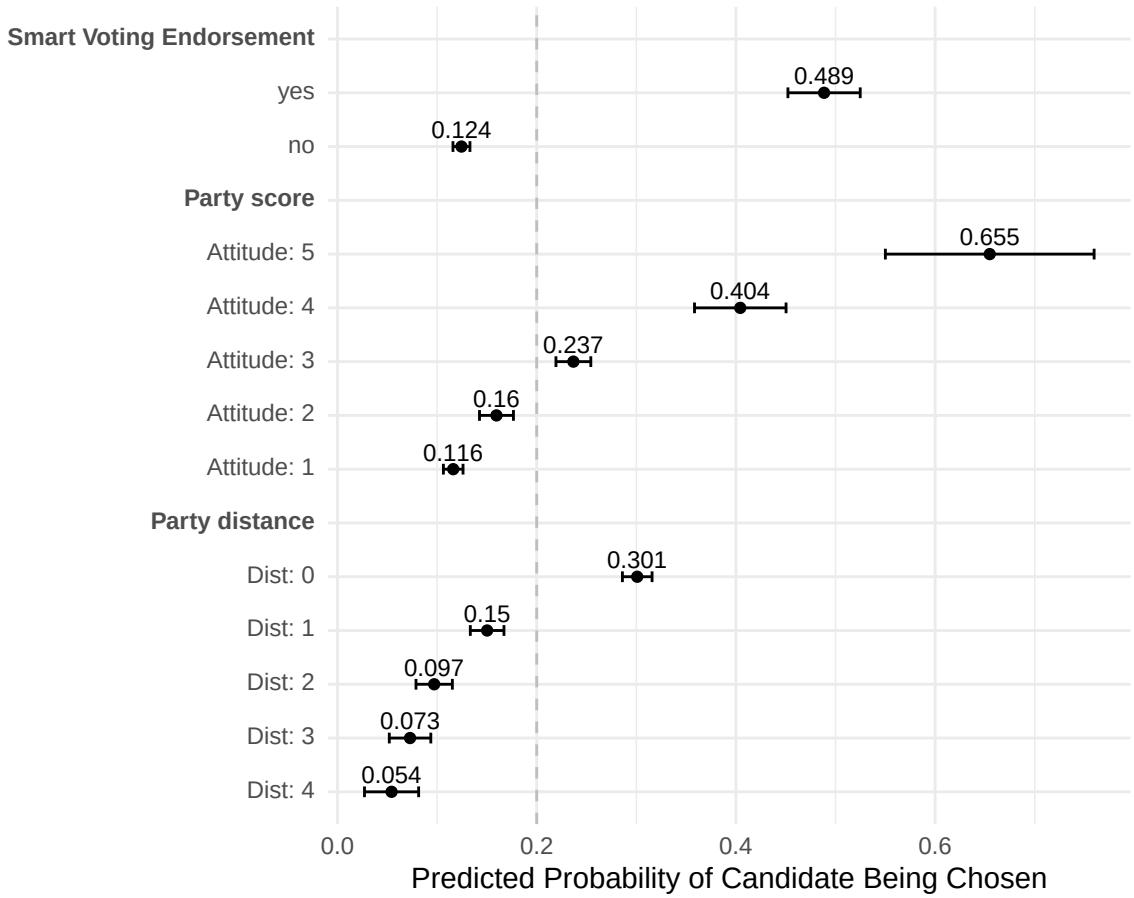


(a) The figure shows predicted probabilities of candidate selection derived from logistic regression with standard errors clustered by respondent. Points represent predicted probabilities, and horizontal bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The dashed line marks the baseline probability of candidate selection (0.2). Confidence intervals not intersecting this line indicate statistically significant effects.

In addition to the Smart Voting endorsement, affiliation with the Yabloko party also increases a candidate's likelihood of being chosen compared to the baseline Just Russia party. At the time the survey was conducted, Yabloko was the only truly liberal opposition party on the ballot, which likely explains its preference among respondents in the sample. As shown in Appendix Section , respondents rated Yabloko higher than any other party.

As Figure 2a shows, partisan distance has a consistent and stable negative effect on the probability of a candidate being chosen. The greater the distance between a respondent and a

Figure 2: Predicted Probability of Candidate Selection by Smart Voting, Party Score, and Partisan Distance.



(a) The figure shows predicted probabilities of candidate selection derived from logistic regression, with standard errors clustered by respondent. Points represent predicted probabilities, and horizontal bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. The dashed line marks the baseline probability of candidate selection (0.2). Confidence intervals not intersecting this line indicate statistically significant effects. Predictions vary by Smart Voting endorsement, respondent's party ratings (1 = lowest, 5 = highest), and partisan distance. Partisan distance ranges from 0 (candidate from respondent's highest-rated party) to 4 (candidate from respondent's lowest-rated party when another party received the highest rating).

candidate's party — measured as the difference between the highest rating a respondent gave to any party and the rating of a particular candidate's party — the lower the predicted probability that the respondent will select such a candidate. For example, candidates from parties with minimal distance from a respondent have a 30.1% predicted probability of being chosen, while those with distance of 3 have only a 7.3% probability, and those with 4 drop further to 5.4%.

Similarly, attitude toward a candidate's party significantly influences the probability of selection. While candidates from parties rated 2 are not notably more popular than those from parties rated 1 (16.0% vs. 11.6%), higher levels of support for the candidate's party (from 3 and above) substantially increase their likelihood of being chosen. Candidates from parties rated 5 by respondents have a 65.5% probability of being selected, compared to only 11.6% for those from parties rated 1, marking a 53.9 percentage-point increase.

Although these results are not representative of the broader population of Saint Petersburg or Russia, the primary objective of this study is to explore the mechanisms underlying strategic voting, focusing on the factors that make voters more or less likely to engage in it. Specifically, this research examines how the effect of Smart Voting support interacts with factors such as partisan distance and perceptions of authoritarian party invincibility. The next section addresses these questions in greater depth.

Perception of the incumbent's vulnerability and strategic voting

In this section, I discuss the effect of providing respondents with information about the electoral vulnerability of the incumbent party. For the experimental group, the candidate choice experiment was preceded by information on (1) the ruling party candidate's performance in the last Legislative Assembly election in the respondent's district and (2) the dynamics of United Russia's approval ratings among the general population. In the selected four districts, United Russia candidates performed poorly, receiving 34%, 32%, 20%, and 32% in the 4th, 12th, 15th, and 16th SMDs, respectively. Nationally, the party's approval rating had declined by 15% since the previous election. This information was presented to encourage respondents to perceive United Russia and its candidates as more vulnerable on election day. An example of the vignette is as follows:

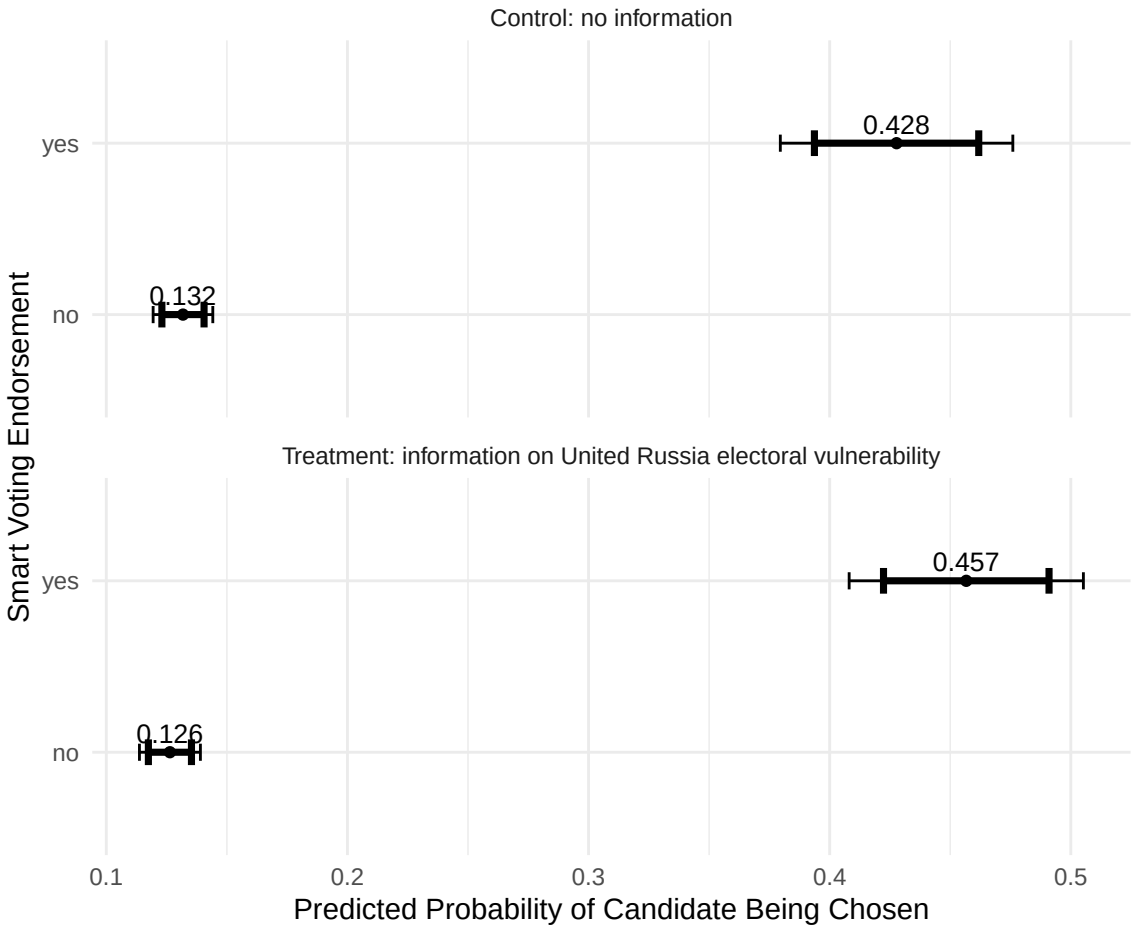
In the last election to the Legislative Assembly of St. Petersburg, in about half of the electoral districts, United Russia candidates won by a small margin. Thus, in your district (Vasileostrovsky district), United Russia candidate Konstantin Chebykin won 34% of the vote, while his closest competitor got 25%. Since then, the overall rating of United Russia has dropped significantly: according to VTsIOM, it fell from 41% in September 2016 to 26% in August 2021.

Figure 3a shows the point estimates and confidence intervals for the effect of Smart Voting endorsement across the two experimental conditions. The results indicate that the effect of Smart Voting endorsement remains stable between the groups: in the control condition (where no additional information was provided), candidates endorsed by Smart Voting have a 42.8% predicted probability of being chosen, compared to 45.7% in the treatment condition (where respondents were informed about United Russia's electoral vulnerability). This 2.9 percentage-point increase in the treatment group is not statistically significant, as indicated by the overlapping 83.4% confidence intervals. In other words, providing respondents with information about the potential weakness of the incumbent party does not appear to amplify the effect of Smart Voting endorsement. This suggests that the strategic voting mechanism triggered by Smart Voting operates independently of explicit cues about United Russia's vulnerability.

A potential concern regarding this result could be that the treatment was too weak to affect respondents' evaluation of UR's popularity. To rule out this possibility, I examine how respondents from the experimental groups answered several political questions after the conjoint experiment. These include a direct question about support for Smart Voting, a list experiment indirectly measuring participation in Smart Voting (see Table 3), and, most importantly, respondents' ratings of UR. Additionally, I include a model with a binary variable for the UR rating, which takes the value 1 if a respondent rated UR 2 or higher and 0 otherwise.

In the list experiment, respondents were asked to count how many factors from a given list they would consider when voting in the upcoming election. In the control group, three potential factors were listed. For the experimental group, an additional factor was included: "Recommendation of 'Smart Voting'." This design achieves several objectives. By including the additional factor only for the experimental group, it allows me to indirectly measure the influence of "Smart Voting" recommendations without requiring respondents to explicitly dis-

Figure 3: Predicted Probability of Candidate Selection by Smart Voting and Information Treatment



(a) The figure presents predicted probabilities of candidate selection derived from logistic regression with standard errors clustered by respondent. Points represent predicted probabilities; horizontal bars indicate 95% confidence intervals (thin bars) and 83.4% confidence intervals (thick bars). The dashed line marks the baseline probability of selection (0.2). Confidence intervals not intersecting this line indicate statistically significant effects. Overlapping 83.4% confidence intervals between groups indicate the absence of statistically significant differences in the effect of Smart Voting endorsement across experimental conditions at the 5% level.

close their views. This approach mitigates concerns regarding social desirability bias or fear, as respondents may be reluctant to openly admit their support for "Smart Voting."

Table 3: List Experiment

[H]

Take a look at this list of factors and tell me how many you believe
may influence your vote choice in the coming election.
The economic situation in the country
Statements by candidates and party representatives in debates
Positions of candidates and parties on vaccination and COVID-19 restrictions
Recommendation of 'Smart Voting'
Count: 0 1 2 3 4

To estimate the framing effect in the list experiment, I use a linear regression with an interaction term between the treatment condition in the conjoint and the treatment condition in the list experiment, specified as follows:

$$Items\_Count_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ConjointTreat}_i + \beta_2 \text{ListTreat}_i + \beta_3 (\text{ConjointTreat}_i \times \text{ListTreat}_i) + \epsilon_i$$

In this case, the interaction term captures whether respondents who were shown information on United Russia's standing in the conjoint part *and* were assigned to the treatment group in the list experiment select, on average, a higher number of items in the list experiment. In other words, it tests whether exposure to information about United Russia in the conjoint experiment makes respondents more likely to implicitly acknowledge 'Smart Voting' as a factor affecting their vote choice in the list experiment.

All other models are estimated using a simple linear model with of the form:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ConjointTreat}_i + \epsilon_i$$

As Table 4 shows, while respondents from both the control and experimental groups showed no statistically significant differences in answering the first three questions, those who were shown the vignette emphasizing UR's vulnerability gave it a significantly lower rating compared to respondents in the control group, both in the numerical and binary representations of the

variable. Building upon the findings by Buckley et al. (2024), who demonstrated that support for authorities in Russia is correlated with beliefs about their popularity, we can interpret the lower rating for United Russia in the treatment group as evidence that respondents updated their beliefs about the overall support for the ruling party.

Table 4: The effect of presenting repondents with information emphasising the UR's electoral vulnerability on reported knowledge of the Smart Voting project, participation in it (direct and list experiment), and the UR rating

	SV knows	SV part.	SV list count	UR rating	UR binary
Information Treatment	0.036	0.046	0.090	-0.164*	-0.078+
	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.130)	(0.077)	(0.043)
List Treatment			0.649***		
			(0.132)		
List X Information			-0.035		
			(0.183)		
Constant	0.520***	0.440***	1.367***	1.607***	0.367***
	(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.092)	(0.056)	(0.031)
Num.Obs.	516	516	516	482	482
R2	0.001	0.002	0.087	0.009	0.007
R2 Adj.	-0.001	0.000	0.082	0.007	0.005
F	0.663	1.073	16.242	4.514	3.363
RMSE	0.50	0.50	1.03	0.85	0.47

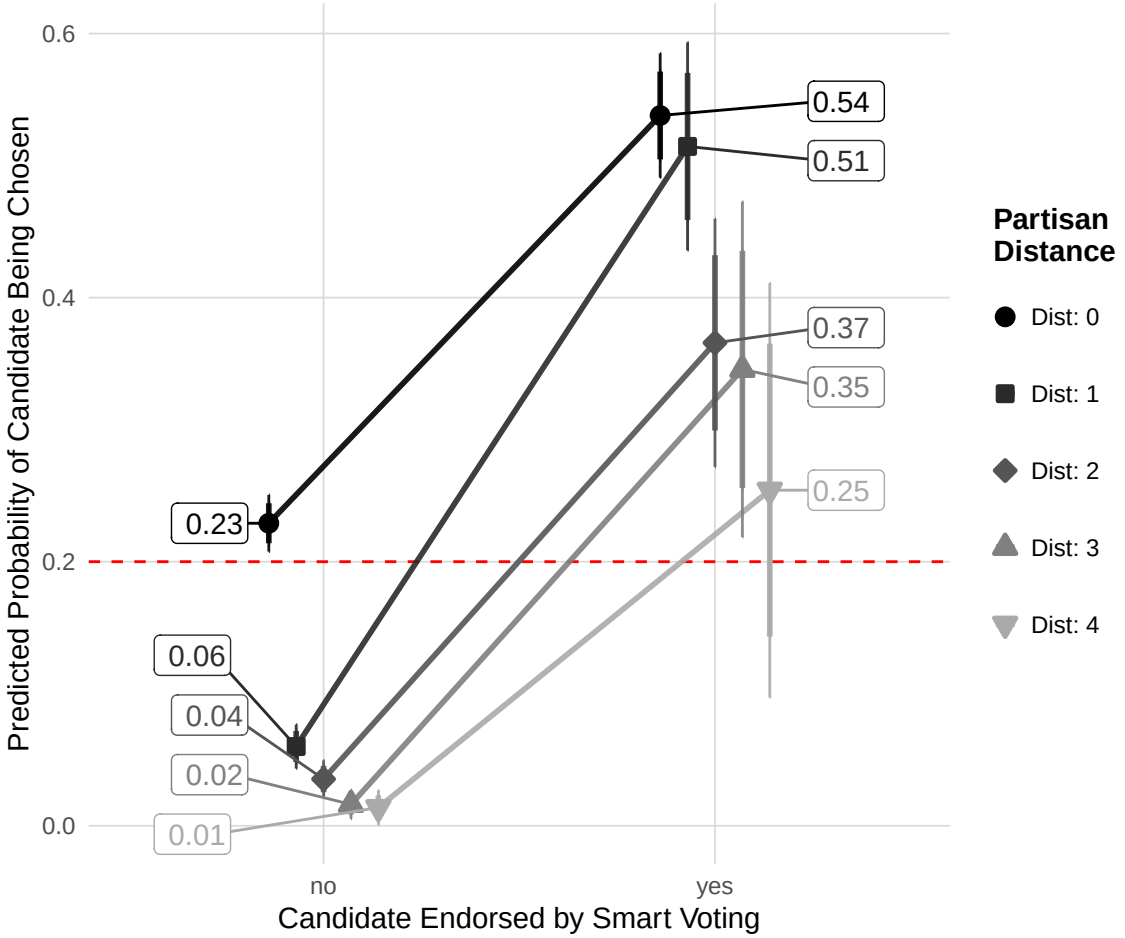
+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001

Partisan distance and the smart voting support

Figure 4a presents the model with the interaction between Smart Voting support and the ideological distance between a respondent and a candidate. The x-axis represents whether a candidate was endorsed by Smart Voting ("no" or "yes"), while the y-axis shows the marginal means of the likelihood of choosing a candidate.

In line with the hypothesis, as the ideological distance between voters and candidates grows, the effect of Smart Voting diminishes. In particular, voters easily switch their support to the second-preferred party: in fact, as long as candidates are endorsed by Smart Voting, voters show a similar likelihood of choosing either their first or second-choice candidates (with marginal means of 0.54 and 0.52, respectively, indicating no statistically significant difference). Without

Figure 4: Predicted Probability of Candidate Selection by Smart Voting Endorsement and Partisan Distance.



(a) The figure presents predicted probabilities of candidate selection derived from logistic regression with standard errors clustered by respondent. Points indicate predicted probabilities; vertical bars represent 95% (thin) and 83.4% (thick) confidence intervals. The dashed line marks the baseline selection probability (0.2). Confidence intervals not intersecting this line indicate statistically significant endorsement effects. Non-overlapping 83.4% confidence intervals indicate statistically significant differences in endorsement effects across partisan distance levels at the 5% level. Partisan distance ranges from 0 (candidate from respondent's highest-rated party) to 4 (candidate from respondent's lowest-rated party when another party received the highest rating). Steeper lines indicate stronger effects of Smart Voting endorsement across levels of partisan distance.

the endorsement, however, voters are much less likely to choose their second-choice candidates, with a probability of only 0.06, compared to a probability of 0.22 for their first-choice candidates.

In contrast, for candidates whose party was further from respondents' ideological preferences (distance levels 2, 3, or 4), the effect of the Smart Voting endorsement is less pronounced. The predicted probabilities of candidate selection were lower, and these estimates exhibited greater uncertainty, as indicated by wider confidence intervals. Although the endorsement still led to an increase in predicted support (positive slopes for all partisan distances), the magnitude of this increase is substantially smaller compared to candidates from ideologically closer parties. The overlapping confidence intervals suggest that differences between these more distant categories in terms of endorsement effects are not statistically significant. These results suggest that the endorsement by the Smart Voting project was most effective for candidates whose party alignment was already relatively close to the respondents' preferences. At greater distances, however, the influence of the endorsement diminishes, reflecting the limits of strategic voting when ideological or partisan divides are too pronounced.

What makes it possible to compensate for a different baseline preferability is the steeper slope for the effect of the Smart Voting endorsement when the distance is 0. As the upper figure demonstrates, the interaction effect is significant only for the level "Yes*Dist: 1", while other slopes are not significantly steeper or flatter. In other words, for third- and fourth-choice candidates standard penalties apply, without a discount for being endorsed by Smart Voting, which second-choices candidate enjoys. From a substantive point of view, this result indicate that strategic considerations tend to sway away ideological differences more effectively when the latter are relatively small.

Discussion

In this paper, I put to the test two questions: first, whether undermining the image of the regime's invincibility makes pro-opposition-minded voters more or less likely to engage in tactical voting; second, whether partisan divisions hinder voters' strategic behavior in electoral autocracies.

First, the "image of invincibility" hypothesis did not find support in the data. Respondents in the sample who were informed of United Russia's fragile position in their districts were not significantly more likely to choose candidates endorsed by Smart Voting. This finding suggests that simply perceiving an authoritarian party as vulnerable may not be sufficient to prompt voters to shift their behavior in favor of opposition candidates. Even when voters recognize signs of regime weakness, other factors — such as the viability of opposition candidates or the perceived risks of supporting them — may constrain their willingness to act.

On the one hand, the lack of any visible effects is consistent with the findings of Peisakhin et al. (2020). In their field experiment, informing voters about the closeness of the election in Moscow in the run up to the 2016 parliamentary election affected neither vote shares nor turnout. However, the scope conditions of both studies warrant caution when generalizing this result to broader contexts. Thus, the survey experiment targeted respondents in the districts of Saint Petersburg — a highly contentious urban context similar to Moscow — where 44% of pro-opposition respondents expressed a willingness to follow Smart Voting recommendations even without treatment. Such high baseline willingness may create a ceiling effect, where the potential for additional influence from the treatment was limited because many respondents were already inclined to vote strategically. In environments where voters already perceive relatively high competition or opposition presence, additional information highlighting regime vulnerability might have limited impact on strategic voter behavior.

Thus, this result suggests that Magaloni's assumption — that perceived regime fragility motivates strategic voting for the strongest opposition candidate — may not hold in all contexts. Instead, it underscores the nuanced and context-dependent nature of voter decision-making in authoritarian systems. From a more practical perspective, the results highlight that opposition efforts aiming at facilitating strategic pro-democratic behavior, such as Smart Voting, must account for additional barriers to voter coordination, even when the dominant party is perceived as vulnerable.

Second, the analysis of how partisan preferences interact with Smart Voting endorsement suggest both limitations and potential of coordinated strategic voting in authoritarian regimes. First, the effect of Smart Voting endorsement significantly diminishes as the partisan distance

grows large. Generally, this results is consistent with findings by Svolik (2018) and Gandhi and Ong (2019), which also show how partisan considerations, under certain conditions, offset demand for democracy. However, unlike in Venezuela, where economic polarization plays a defining role, or Malaysia, where elections are shaped by ideological and religious-secular cleavages, electoral competition in Russia is less structured around either. These findings may suggest that whatever divisions exist within the opposition electorate are more affective than ideological in nature, with partisan attitudes playing a greater role than substantive policy disagreements.

At the same time, the effect of Smart Voting endorsements was just as strong for candidates from 'second-best' parties — those rated just one point below respondents' top choice — as for candidates from their most preferred party. This suggests that strategic coordination should to be most effective when the second strongest party is reprieved as viable by a substantial fraction of pro-opposition electorate. Additionally, this finding offers insights into the logic of party-system building under authoritarianism. In authoritarian regimes, the leadership possesses far greater control over party systems than in democracies, enabling them to engineer the composition of the political landscape to serve their needs. By manipulating party systems, authoritarian leaders can groom a second-strongest party that is ideologically extreme or otherwise nor acceptable for pro-opposition voters, leaving them reluctant to consolidate around it. This strategy reduces the likelihood of a coordinated challenge to the regime while ensuring that moderate, potentially unifying opposition parties remain marginalized. However, this approach carries risks: if the dominant party were to lose influence, the presence of an extreme second-strongest party could destabilize the political landscape, leading to unintended consequences for regime stability.

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Appendix

Logit regression results

The tables below report coefficient estimates from logistic regression models predicting candidate selection as a function of candidate characteristics. Coefficients represent log-odds of selection relative to the reference category for each categorical variable. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level to account for within-respondent correlation.

Table A1: Logistic Regression Estimates of Candidate Selection Probability: Basic Model.

Variable	Coefficient
Constant	-2.196***
	(0.154)
Smart Voting Endorsement: Yes	1.754***
	(0.115)
Party: JUST RUSSIA	-0.111
	(0.131)
Party: LDPR	-0.119
	(0.132)
Party: UNITED RUSSIA	-0.952***
	(0.178)
Party: Yabloko	0.392***
	(0.136)
Occupation: Chief Medical Officer	0.393**
	(0.156)
Occupation: Civil & Environmental Activist	0.572***
	(0.144)
Occupation: Member of Legislative Assembly	0.114
	(0.146)

Occupation: Municipal Deputy	0.133
	(0.145)
Occupation: School Principal	0.3**
	(0.147)
Occupation: Self-employed	-0.032
	(0.147)
Occupation: University Lecturer	0.753***
	(0.144)
Nationality: Russian	0.15*
	(0.088)
Gender: Male	-0.062
	(0.074)
Observations	6960
Pseudo R	0.143
AIC	5953.6
BIC	6056.3

Table A2: Logistic Regression Estimates of Candidate Selection Probability: Party Ratings and Partisan Distance.

Variable	Coefficient
Constant	-1.908***
	(0.064)
Smart Voting Endorsement: Yes	1.992***
	(0.12)
Party Attitude: 2	0.073
	(0.105)
Party Attitude: 3	0.309***

	(0.087)
Party Attitude: 4	1.092***
	(0.117)
Party Attitude: 5	2.162***
	(0.258)
Party Attitude: NA	-0.141
	(0.123)
Distance: 1	-0.578***
	(0.101)
Distance: 2	-0.996***
	(0.13)
Distance: 3	-1.23***
	(0.176)
Distance: 4	-1.56***
	(0.293)
Observations	6960
Pseudo R^2	0.199
AIC	5558.4
BIC	5633.7

Table A3: Logistic Regression Estimates of Candidate Selection Probability: Information Treatment.

Variable	Coefficient
Constant	-2.165***
	(0.159)
Smart Voting Endorsement: Yes	1.664***
	(0.16)

Image Vulnerability: 1	-0.059
	(0.082)
Party: JUST RUSSIA	-0.112
	(0.131)
Party: LDPR	-0.12
	(0.132)
Party: UNITED RUSSIA	-0.953***
	(0.178)
Party: Yabloko	0.393***
	(0.136)
Occupation: Chief Medical Officer	0.395**
	(0.156)
Occupation: Civil & Environmental Activist	0.572***
	(0.144)
Occupation: Member of Legislative Assembly	0.113
	(0.146)
Occupation: Municipal Deputy	0.133
	(0.145)
Occupation: School Principal	0.301**
	(0.146)
Occupation: Self-employed	-0.034
	(0.147)
Occupation: University Lecturer	0.753***
	(0.144)
Nationality: Russian	0.15*
	(0.088)
Gender: Male	-0.063

	(0.075)
Interaction: Endorsement * Vulnerability	0.174
	(0.227)

Descriptive statistics

Politicians ratings

Here I present some descriptive statistics: how respondents rated politicians and, accordingly, how many of them were considered as pro-opposition and pro-regime, the distribution of age, education and income across these two groups, as well as how pro-opposition respondents answered direct questions about the Smart Voting project.

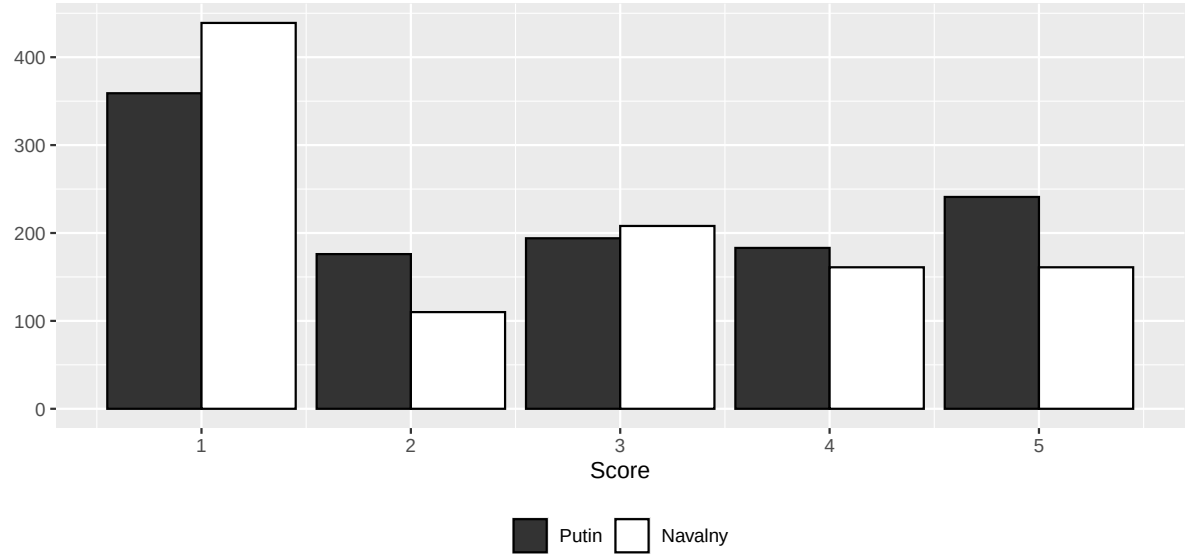

Figure A1

As we can see, the general sample is rather balanced in respect to the number of pro-opposition and pro-regime respondents: of 1205 respondents surveyed 549 were identified as pro-opposition and 656 as pro-regime.

As Figure A2 shows, the age of respondents from these two groups, we can see that the proportion of the supporters of the regime increases with the age group: among the pro-opposition respondents about 40% are between the age of 18 and 29, while in the other group only 28% fall in that age category. However, among those of 30-39 years old the proportions of the op-

position minded respondents is only slightly larger than that of the pro-regime ones, and in the higher the age group gets, the larger the share of the sympathizers of the regime is.

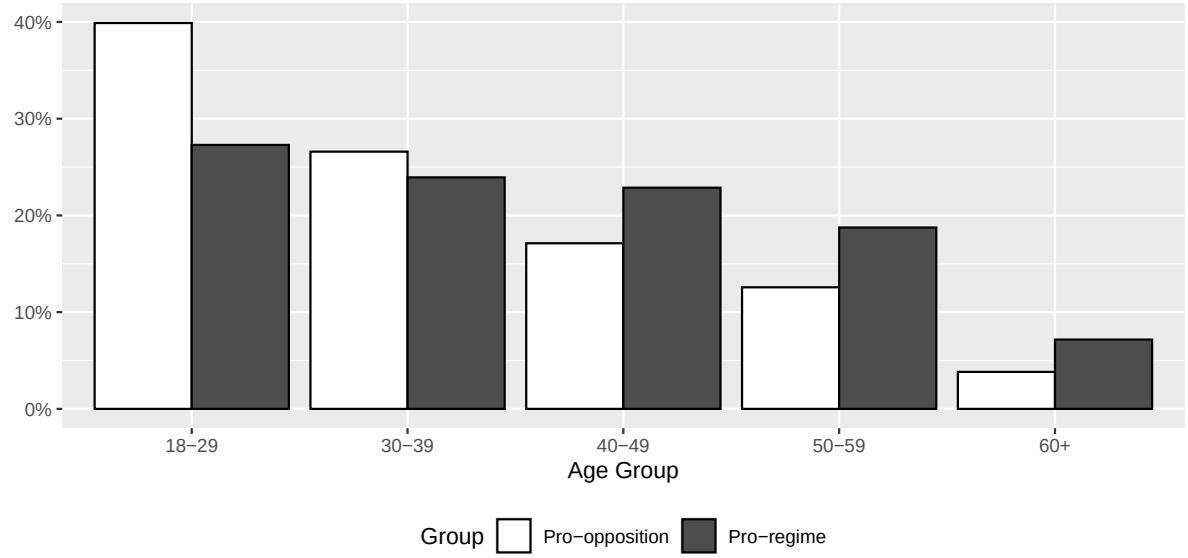

Figure A2

Education and income

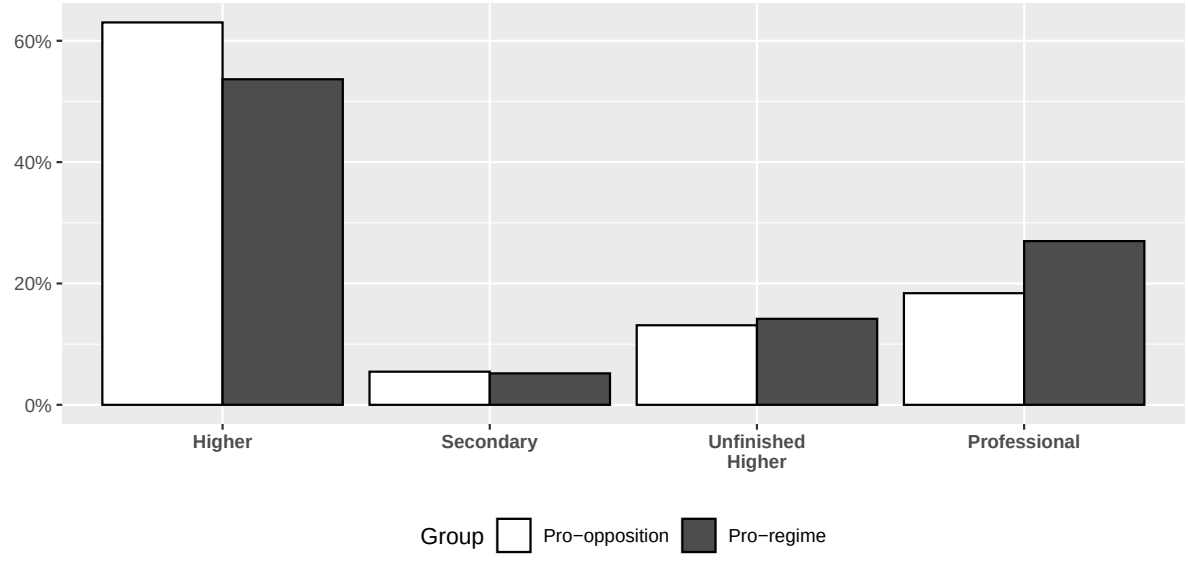

Figure A3

Surprisingly enough, the groups are not significantly different in respect to education and income of the respondents, as reported in Figure A3 and Figure A4. Even though on average

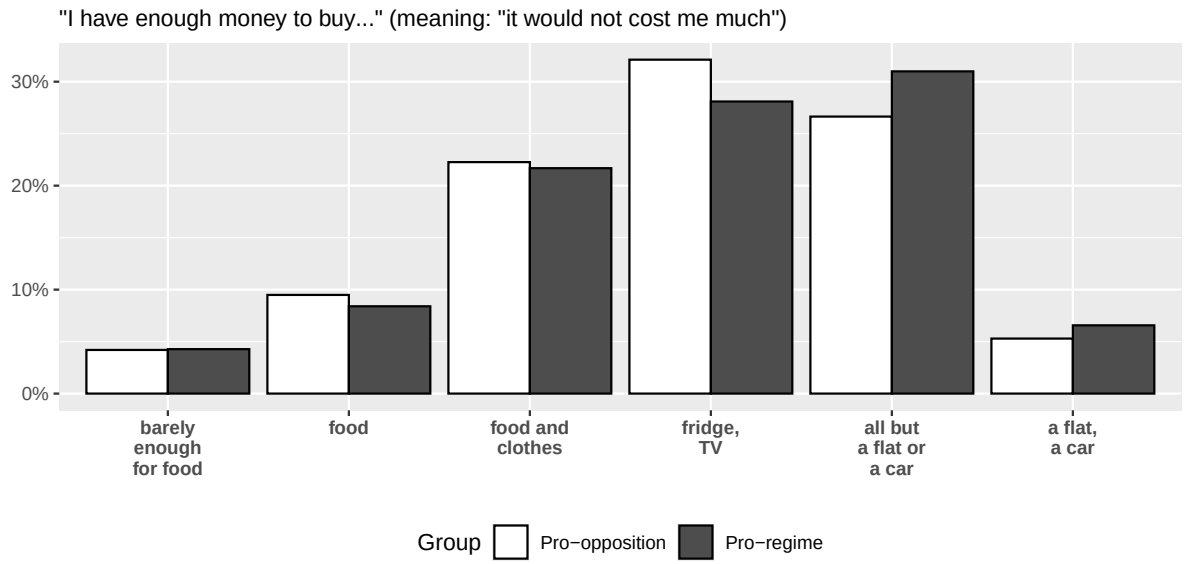

Figure A4

the respondents classified as pro-opposition are more educated and seem to be more well-off financially, the differences are marginal. In fact, the share of "wealthy" respondents - those that can easily afford buying a flat or a car - is higher in the pro-regime group.

Election particiaption

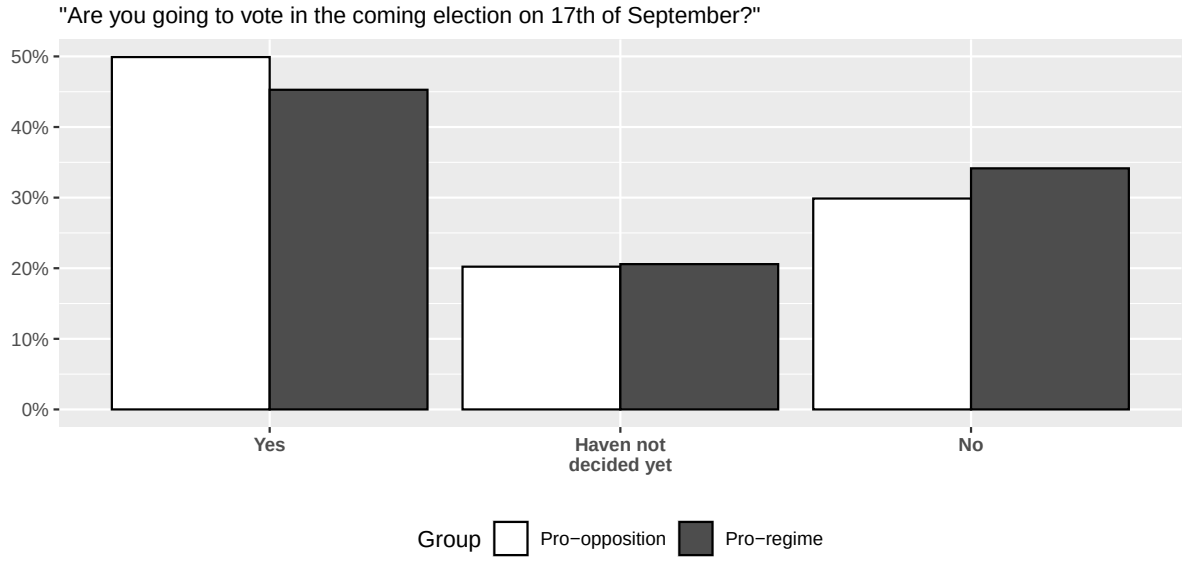

Figure A5

Turning to the electoral mobilization, we, yet again, see no drastic differences. As Figure A5 show, among the pro-opposition group, almost 50% percent expressed their willingness

to vote in the coming election, while in the opposite group the respective number is 45%. The shares of those who had not decided whether to vote or not are roughly identical between the two groups, as reported in Figure A6. However, a larger proportion of the pro-opposition respondents reported not having decided which party or candidate they were going to vote for: its share equals to 41% percent in comparison to 31% in the pro-regime group.

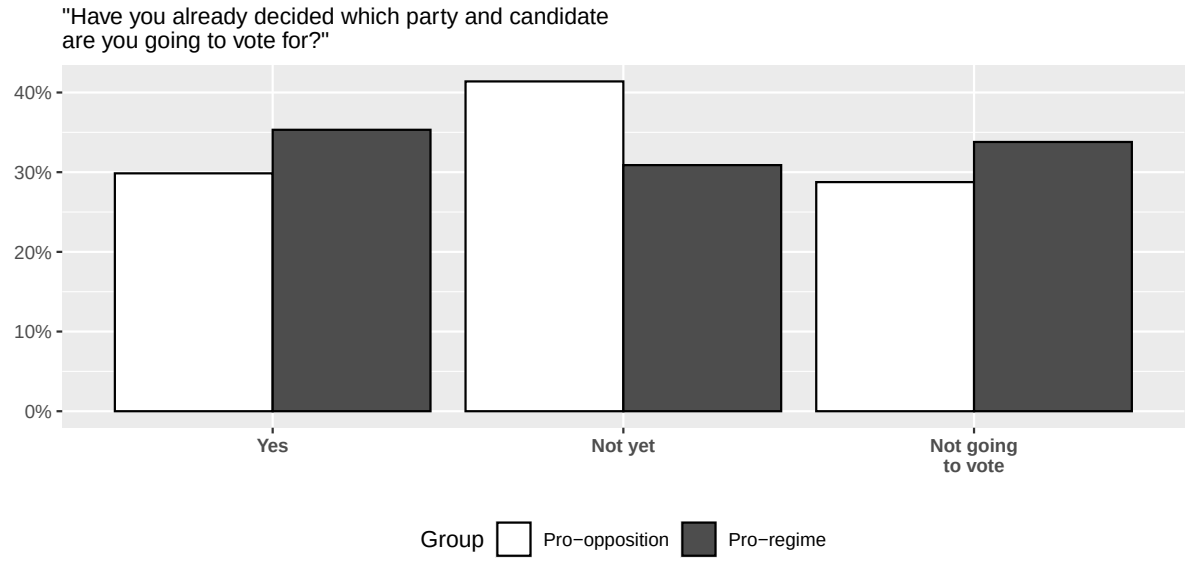

Figure A6

All in all, two groups are not significantly different from each other in respect to education, income or willingness to vote. However, it is important to stress that these number are not representative: they provide information only about the sample, not about the general population of Saint Petersburg.

Smart Voting and political parties

Having compared the pro-opposition and the pro-regime respondents, I now turn to the former group on its own. In contrast to pro-regime respondents, those identified as opposition minded were asked several additional questions, such as the attitude towards five main political parties, the knowledge about the Smart Voting project and the willingness to follow its recommendations on the election day.

As shown in Figure A7, among the opposition minded respondents from my sample, 55% knew about the Smart Voting project and 22% reported that they “heard something” about it.

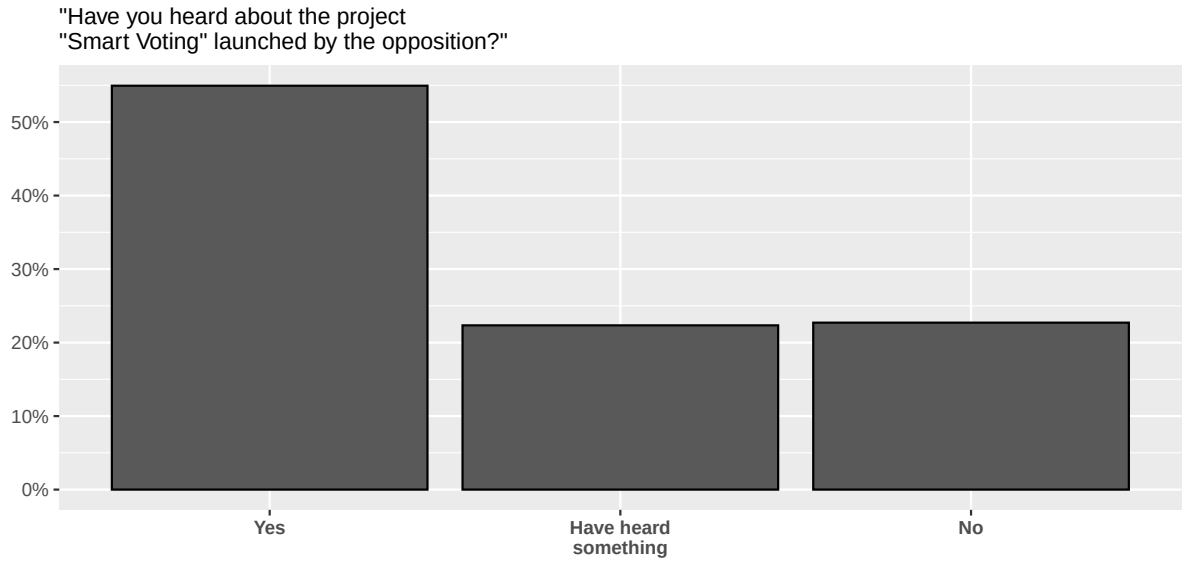

Figure A7

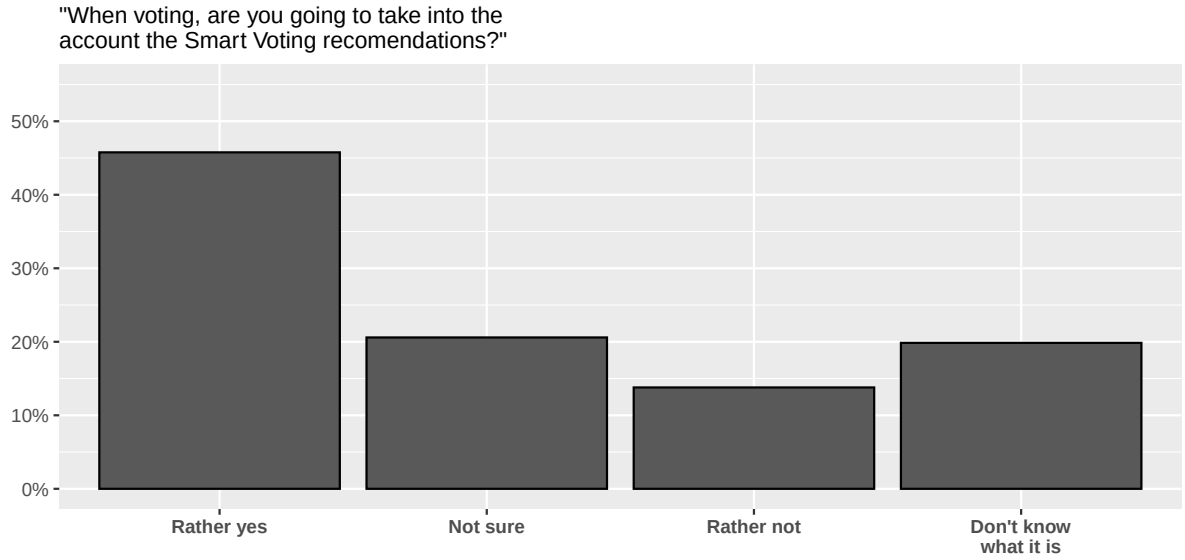

Figure A8

Next, as Figure A8 shows, 46% claimed that they were likely to follow the project's recommendations regarding the vote choice, 21% were undecided and 14% answered "rather not". It is important to note that these questions, as well as the question about the parties, respondents answered on their own, without an enumerator seeing their choices. Therefore, these data should reflect the actual distribution of preferences rather accurately, and issues associated with the social desirability bias (or, to put it differently, preferences falsification) can be partially mitigated.

Figure A9 shows the distribution of pro-opposition respondents' ratings towards five main political parties - the United Russia, the Just Russia, Communist Party of Russian Federation, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and Yabloko - the results are rather unsurprising. The most well-rated party is Yabloko - the only one that can be considered truly oppositional and the only one not present in the State Duma. Similarly, the United Russia - the dominant party with a super majority in the parliament - is rated the lowest. However, in general the parties are given rather low scores: the mode of the score for all parties except Yabloko is 1. Yet even Yabolko was rated less than 3 points by 43% of respondents. All of this is consistent with the observation that Russians in general place little trust in political parties.

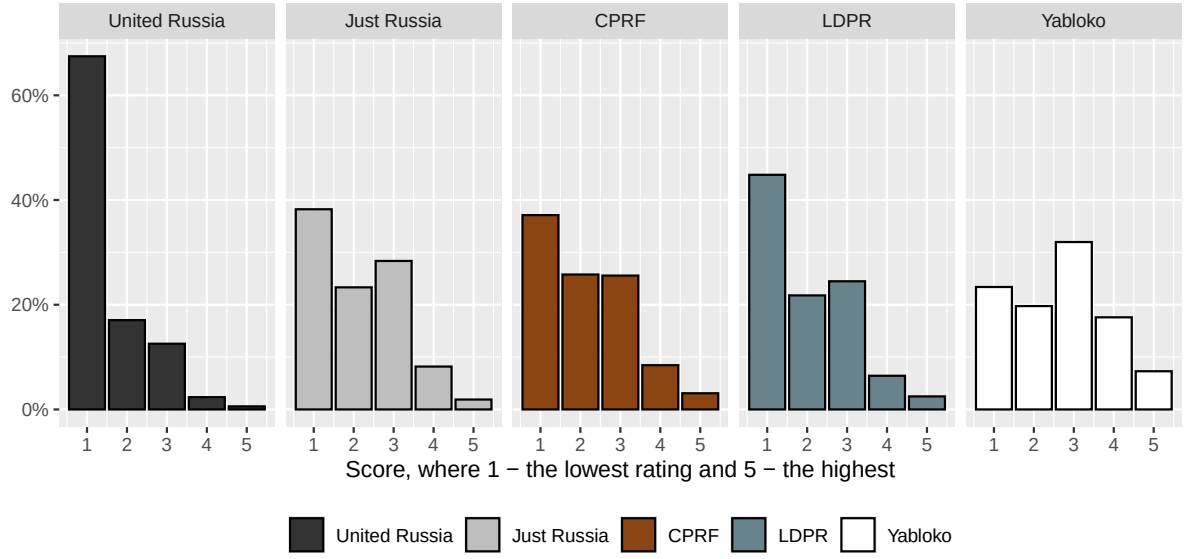

Figure A9

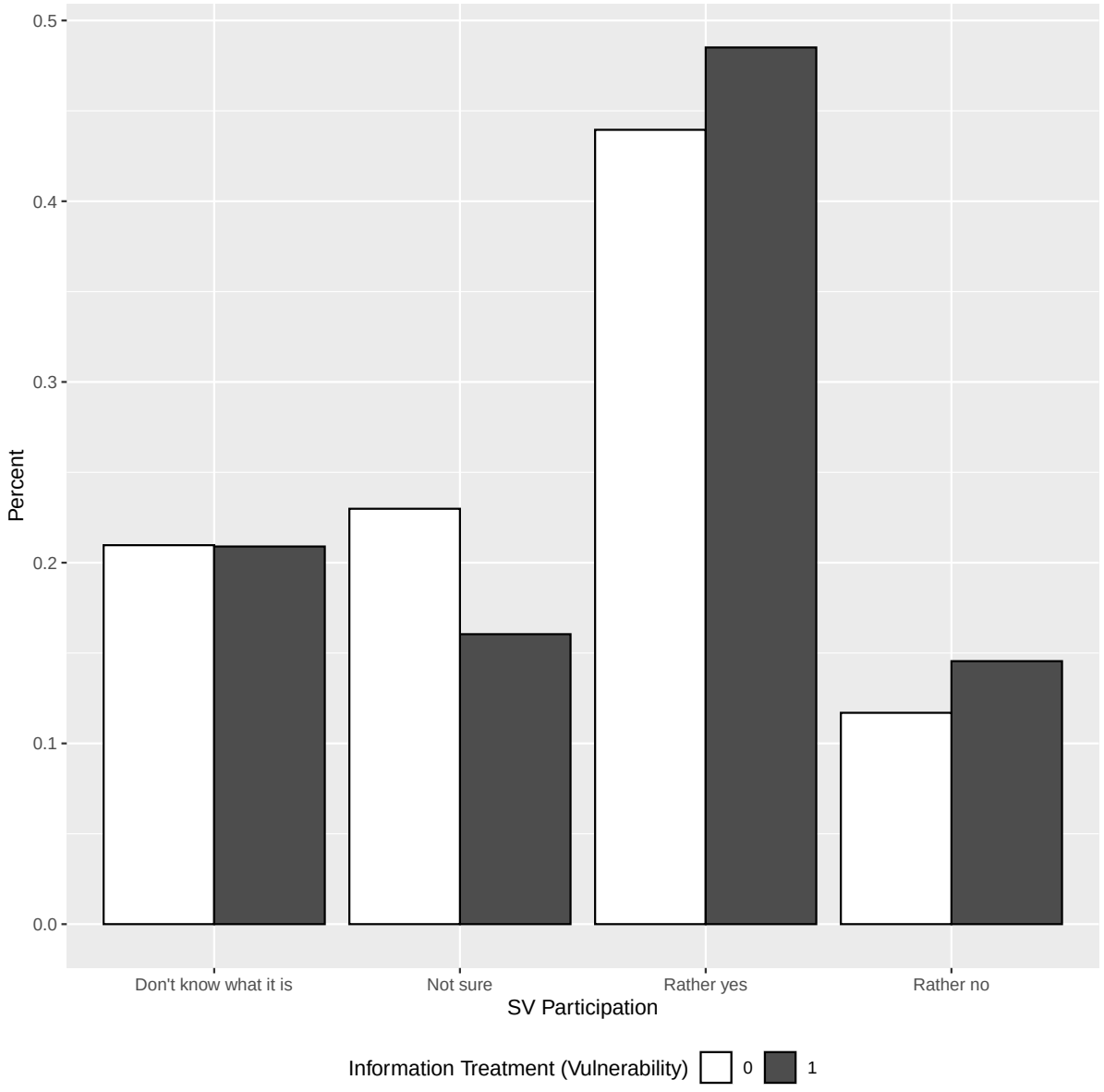
0.5
0.4
0.3
0.2
0.1
0.0
Percent
Don't know what it is
Not sure
Rather yes
Rather no
SV Participation
Information Treatment (Vulnerability)
0
1

Figure A10

Smart Voting and image of vulnerablility treatment

Survey questionnaire

A Short Description

What: A survey containing a conjoint experiment + a list experiment.

How: The survey will be delivered offline, using electronic tablets; the survey is scheduled to be conducted on September 10-17, 2021.

Aim: To understand how effective the Smart Voting project is in coordinating opposition voters against the incumbent party and what moderates its effect.

The Approach Script

Hi! My name is %NAME%, I am a student from %UNIVERSITY_NAME%. We are conducting research on voting behavior of citizens of Saint-Petersburg. Could you please answer a few questions? It will not take more than 7 minutes.

The Consent Form In order to proceed, please review the consent form.

This is a research project being conducted by Ivan Fomichev, a PhD student at the European University at Saint-Petersburg and the European University Institute. We are not working for any candidate in the following elections; this is a purely academic project.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary, and we do not provide any benefits to the participants. You may refuse to take part in the research or exit the survey at any time. You are free to decline to answer any particular question for any reason.

Since this is a survey about electoral preferences, we will ask about your opinion on political issues, which might cause discomfort. You can always refuse to answer or abort the survey at any moment.

We guarantee confidentiality and anonymity. We do not collect personal data such as phone numbers, names, or any other identifying information. No video or audio recordings are made.

We do not anticipate any risks for participants beyond those encountered in daily life.

If you have any questions or complaints about the survey, you can contact the principal investigator, Ivan Fomichev, by calling +7-981-748-45-12 or via email at ifomichev@eu.spb.ru.

CONSENT: Do you agree to participate in the survey?

☐ I consent

☐ I do not consent

Quota Block

1. **Gender** (filled by the enumerator)
2. **District residency:**

   ☐ I live in this district (continue the survey)

   ☐ I live somewhere else (stop the survey)

3. **Age:** (respondent states their age)

General Questions about Politics and Elections

4. **Have you heard about the upcoming September elections for the State Duma and the Legislative Assembly of St. Petersburg?**

   ☐ No, I have not

   ☐ I heard something

   ☐ Yes, I am aware of that

   ☐ [Refuse to answer]

5. **Are you going to vote in this election?**

   ☐ Yes, I am

   ☐ I have not decided yet

   ☐ No, I am not

   ☐ [Refuse to answer]

6. **If yes, have you decided on a party or candidate?**

   ☐ Yes, I know both the candidate and the party

☐ I decided only about the party

☐ No, I have not decided

☐ [Refuse to answer]

Politician Rating

7. **Please rate the following politicians on a five-point scale:**

   - Alexander Beglov (Governor of Saint-Petersburg)
   - Vladimir Putin (President of Russia)
   - Grigori Yavlinsky (Founder of "Yabloko" party) + "I don't know him"
   - Alexei Navalny (Opposition politician) + "I don't know him"

Candidate Choice Experiment [Respondent were asked to fill the rest of the survey themselves so that the enumerator doesn't see the answers]

[Treatment] 8.1. **The candidates' performance varied significantly in the last election: in some districts United Russia candidates won by a large margin, while in others the elections were very close. For example, in the 15th single-member district, where we are now, the United Russia candidate Boris Ivchenko attracted, 20% of the vote, while his closest rival - 18%. Below there is a list of fictional candidates with several characteristics: gender, occupation etc. If you were to vote in the following election, which one do you think you would choose?** - Ivan Ivanov (former school principal, nominated by Just Russia, supported by Smart Voting) - Daria Smirnova (environmental activist, nominated by Yabloko) - Dmitry Dmitriev (CEO of a private company, nominated by United Russia) - Anna Aleksandrova (householder, nominated by LDPR) - Piotr Petrov (chief medical officer, nominated by CPRF) - [ ] I wouldn't vote for any

[Control Group] 8.2. **I have a list of fictional candidates with some characteristics: gender, party, occupation etc. Had these candidates been real, which one do you think you would have chosen?** *(same list as above)*

List Experiment

9. **How many of the following factors affect your voting choice?** *(do not specify which ones)*

    - Food price inflation
    - Candidates' TV debate performance
    - Candidates' positions on COVID-19 restrictions
    - *(treatment only)* Smart Voting recommendations

10. **Please rate the following political parties on a five-point scale:**

- United Russia
- A Just Russia — Patriots — For Truth
- Yabloko
- CPRF
- LDPR

Smart Voting Awareness

11. **Have you heard about the Smart Voting project?**

☐ Yes, I know its purpose

☐ I heard something but am unsure

☐ No, I have not

12. **If yes, will you consider its recommendations?**

☐ Yes, most likely

☐ Maybe

☐ No, highly unlikely

Demographic Block

13. **Highest level of education completed:**

☐ Secondary

☐ Upper-secondary

☐ Short-cycle tertiary

☐ University degree

☐ PhD

14. **Household financial well-being**

Please select the option that best describes your financial situation:

☐ We have barely enough money for food.

☐ We can buy food, but buying clothes can be more problematic.

☐ We can buy food and clothes without difficulty, but need to save for more serious purchases.

☐ We can buy a fridge or a TV without much effort, but buying more expensive items requires planning.

☐ We can buy almost anything except a flat or a car.

☐ We can buy a flat or a car without difficulty.

Thank you for your time! Goodbye!