

**It's All Relative:
Electoral Fraud, Protests, and Political Attitudes in Russia**

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Abstract

How do electoral manipulation and oppositional protests influence political attitudes in non-democratic contexts? I leverage the plausibly exogenous variation in the timing of a series of original surveys fielded on nationally-representative samples in Russia to understand the ways in which electoral fraud and post-election protests independently impact trust in political institutions over time. This study argues that electoral fraud decreases trust in the autocrat only when it is perceived as being more egregious than usual. However, trust rebounds following unexpected post-election protests. Finally, I examine the conditional impacts of fraud and protest on trust, finding that updating occurs primarily among those with weak political affiliation.

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Russia leads the world in lack of institutional trust (*The Moscow Times* 2019). Lack of trust in political institutions can have important consequences for rules compliance (Murphy 2004), economic growth (Dasgupta 2010), and regime support (Chen 2017) and contribute to protest and other forms of contention against the regime (Jian-Hu Zhu and Rosen 1993; Li 2004). Extant research has examined how economic performance (Colton and Hale 2009; McAllister and White 2008; Mishler and Rose 2001; Rose, Mishler, and Munroe 2011; Treisman 2011) and institutional and cultural factors influence views of political leaders and institutions (e.g., Citrin 1974; Hetherington 1998, 2004; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Mishler and Rose 2001; Shi 2001), but less is known about how particular politically-charged events influence institutional trust—particularly in non-democracies.

I leverage the plausibly exogenous variation in the timing of survey implementation during the 2011-2012 Russian election season and subsequent protests to examine the ways in which electoral manipulation and anti-regime protests impact trust in political leaders and institutions. Contrary to previous research, I find that allegations of electoral fraud negatively impact trust primarily for the autocrat; trust in other government institutions remain consistent over time. Furthermore, I find that trust in the autocrat rebounds following anti-regime protests and remains relatively stable over the course of oppositional protest movements. Finally, I examine the conditional impact of fraud and protest on institutional trust, most notably for political affiliation. Here I find that electoral manipulation and protests lead to updating mainly among individuals with weak political affiliation—not regime opponents or supporters as prior research has shown (Frye and Borisova 2019; Reuter and Szakonyi 2021). I also find that protests that occur as a result of fraud allegations, rather than further injuring the autocrat, can

actually increase trust. However, as with allegations of electoral fraud, protests improve trust primarily among those with weak political affiliations.

This study has important implications for scholarly understanding of fraud, protests, and institutional trust in non-democracies. Why, when, and to what extent non-democracies engage in electoral fraud has long been a question of concern for political scientists. However, the impact of fraud and protests on public opinion is difficult to untangle and, as a result, has been relatively understudied. First and foremost, this study demonstrates that even in contexts where electoral manipulation is common, egregious fraud—fraud that is seen as being particularly blatant or extensive—negatively impacts perceptions of the autocrat. This finding suggests that studies of electoral fraud on public opinion must take into account the *relative* level of perceived manipulation. Furthermore, it suggests that it is important to disentangle trust in different institutions and leaders. Rather than assessing attitudes toward the government or political institutions generally, this study shows that political events impact trust in political entities in different ways and to different extents.

Theoretical Expectations and Hypotheses

This paper examines the variable effects of (1) electoral manipulation and (2) protest on trust in political leaders and institutions in a particular non-democratic context. I lay out my theoretical expectations and hypotheses below.

Elections and Electoral Fraud

Elections in non-democracies provide information to the public about the relative strength and popularity of leaders and can influence decisions to participate in mass unrest (Blaydes 2011; Chernykh and Svolik 2015; Cox 2009; Egorov and Sonin 2018; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Gehlbach and Simpser 2015; Little 2012; Londregan and Vindigni 2006;

Magaloni 2006; Rozenas 2012). It stands to reason electoral outcomes that differ from general public expectations—that result in an either better or worse performance by the regime—will lead citizens to update their beliefs about the popularity of the incumbent and the strength of the regime. As a result, non-democratic leaders are incentivized to manipulate electoral results to decrease the possibility of an unfavorable outcome.

Electoral fraud can itself impact views of political incumbents. On one hand, electoral manipulation can be seen as a signal of strength: By engineering strong victories, autocrats can deter potential challenges to the regime (Egorov and Sonin 2018; Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2018; Gehlbach and Simpser 2015; Little 2015; Magaloni 2006). According to Simpser (2013, xv), “Manipulating elections excessively and blatantly can make the manipulating party appear strong, while failing to manipulate in this manner can convey weakness.” On the other hand, excessive manipulation may be viewed as a signal of elite weakness: It can demonstrate to the population that support is low and that the regime was forced to manipulate the election to artificially inflate support—particularly if regime performance is worse than expected. Non-democracies are more likely to commit fraud when they are vulnerable and do not expect to win elections without manipulation (Diamond 2010; Magaloni 2010).

Yet a third outcome is feasible: Instead of signaling regime strength or weakness, electoral manipulation may be viewed simply as “business as usual” and have little impact on citizen attitudes toward the regime. According to Little (2015), electoral manipulation may have limited influence on perceptions of the government when it is viewed to be common practice. According to this view, when citizens have seen fraud in past elections, they will include fraud in their evaluations of political incumbents.

Existing theories of electoral manipulation often focus on *expected* level of manipulation. That is, they consider fraud to be a common practice that is generally accepted as a regular part of the political process by both citizens and elites alike. The core claim of this study is scholars must take into account *relative* levels of *perceived* manipulation, even in political contexts where electoral manipulation is common. While citizens may believe that electoral fraud is a given in elections (“business as usual”), authorities must still abide by some pretense of rules. Blatant disregard for these implicit rules should result in a decrease in trust in political decision-makers, particularly when the regime performs worse than expected even with manipulation. Indeed, as Little (2012, 254) argues, “Beliefs that there was a high level of fraud—all else equal—will lead to more anti-regime action.” Extant research focuses primarily on how fraud influences prospects for anti-regime action (Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Daxecker et al. 2019; Lankina 2015a; Lankina and Skovoroda 2017; Little 2012; Tucker 2007); this paper focuses not on the likelihood of anti-regime protest, but rather how fraud impacts anti-regime *sentiment*. As Reuter and Szakonyi (2021) show, overt use electoral fraud can undermine the regime’s core base of electoral support.¹ While oppositional protest may be more immediately detrimental for regimes, anti-regime sentiment can have important consequences for regime legitimacy and long-term stability (Chapman 2021; Reuter and Szakonyi 2021; Gerschewski 2013).

However, we would not expect to see a decrease in trust for all leaders and institutions. Rather, I expect that trust will decrease specifically for the parties deemed responsible for the fraud. Research has shown that when clarity of responsibility lies with particular actors, they are more likely to be evaluated negatively (Iyengar 1991). Other studies, however, have argued that

¹ See also for review on how electoral manipulation (broadly defined, including vote buying and pre-electoral violence and intimidation) can impact support for candidates.

politically-charged events impact views of the government broadly, not just particular actors or institutions (e.g., Frye and Borisova 2019). It is not always a simple task to identify the party responsible for particular outcomes; rather, this calculus will vary based on the particular political context and issue area.² As Criado and Herreros (2007) argue, public opinion is most susceptible in systems where political power is highly concentrated in a few individuals or institutions, allowing people to more clearly assign responsibility for political and economic outcomes (see also Hobolt and Tilly 2014). In centralized non-democracies with more personalistic elements, such as Russia, responsibility is more clearly attributable to the autocrat.³ Consequently, I would expect allegations of electoral fraud to lead to a decrease in trust in the autocrat—the individual seen as the primary political decision maker and, thus, the one responsible for the occurrence of electoral manipulation—not all political institutions.

Hypothesis 1: If electoral manipulation is believed to be unusually high, then trust in the autocrat will decrease.

Protests

Unexpected oppositional protests may also shape political attitudes toward political institutions and leaders in non-democracies. On one hand, citizens are more likely to hold positive attitudes of the regime if they believe that it enjoys widespread support (Little 2017). Anti-regime protests, therefore, may demonstrate to the public the malign nature of the regime and act as a signal regarding the true level of support in society (Hale and Colton 2017;

² Of course, attribution can be influenced by political institutions, political entrepreneurs (cf. Javeline 2003), and the media (cf. Entman 1993; Hameleers et al. 2018; Iyengar 1991; Rozenas and Stukal 2019).

³ Some issues, such as economic downturn, may be more susceptible to scapegoating than electoral manipulation (Sirotkina and Zavadskaya 2020).

Lohmann 1994; Tertychnaya 2020), leading citizens to revise their views of the country's leaders. Furthermore, opposition protests may reveal information to the public about "regime malpractices and abuses," which may in turn suppress support for the regime (Tertychnaya 2020, 1930). Moreover, how the regime responds to the protests—either through tolerance or repression—can lead to further updating: Government repression in response to protests can further lower people's trust in government institutions and leaders (Sangnier and Zylberberg 2017; El-Mallakh 2020; Tertychnaya and Lankina 2020).

On the other hand, some scholars argue that unexpected protests may actually *improve* attitudes toward regime. Frye and Borisova (2019, 822) argue that protests that occur unexpectedly can reveal information not only about attitudes toward the regime but also "the willingness of the ruling elite to tolerate public opposition." If citizens expect the government to react to protests with violence and the government represses the protests, attitudes toward the regime should either worsen or stay the same, depending on the expected and true level of repression. However, if citizens expect the government to react negatively toward to the protest, but it does not, then trust may increase as citizens update their beliefs regarding the tolerance of the regime to dissent. In this framework, it is the government's reaction to unexpected protest that sends a meaningful signal to citizens, not the content of the protests themselves.

Alternatively, an increase in regime trust following protests may be evidence of "voting against disorder" (Pepinsky 2017). Under this framework, the occurrence of protests may increase support for the existing order due to fear of instability. In a study of protests in Egypt, El-Mallakh (2020, 320) finds that greater exposure to protests "makes individuals more willing to give up rights in exchange for security and political stability" and to vote for pro-regime

candidates (see also Tertychnaya and Lankina 2020).⁴ Under either mechanism, trust in the regime should increase following oppositional protests.⁵ As laid out in the previous section, I would expect this positive updating to occur primarily for the autocrat.

Hypothesis 2: Unexpected protests will increase trust in the autocrat.

Setting the Stage: The Russian Election Season of 2011-2012

In September 2011, then-Russian President Dmitri Medvedev announced in a televised interview that he planned to step down as president and not run for a second term in office. Medvedev's decision to step down, he said, would allow Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to run for the presidency—a position he vacated in 2008. While Medvedev enjoyed “fairly high levels of trust,” in his own words, “Prime Minister Putin is the most authoritative politician in our country, and his approval ratings are somewhat higher” (Barry 2011).

In fact, this so-called “castling” move angered many Russians, who believed that this decision demonstrated pre-planning on the part of authorities and robbed them of a true voice in the political process (McFaul 2014, 244). Medvedev himself stated that the castling move had been decided years in advance. Following the announcement, Putin was booed at a boxing match, and Communist Party delegates refused to stand when he entered the Duma (parliament).

⁴ Existing studies typically focus their studies on voting behavior. This paper expands upon these findings by examining public attitudes toward the regime.

⁵ The goal of this paper is not to adjudicate between these two competing mechanisms linking protests and trust in institutions. However, Appendix B briefly examines each mechanism in regards to the 2011-2012 Russian protests and provides preliminary results.

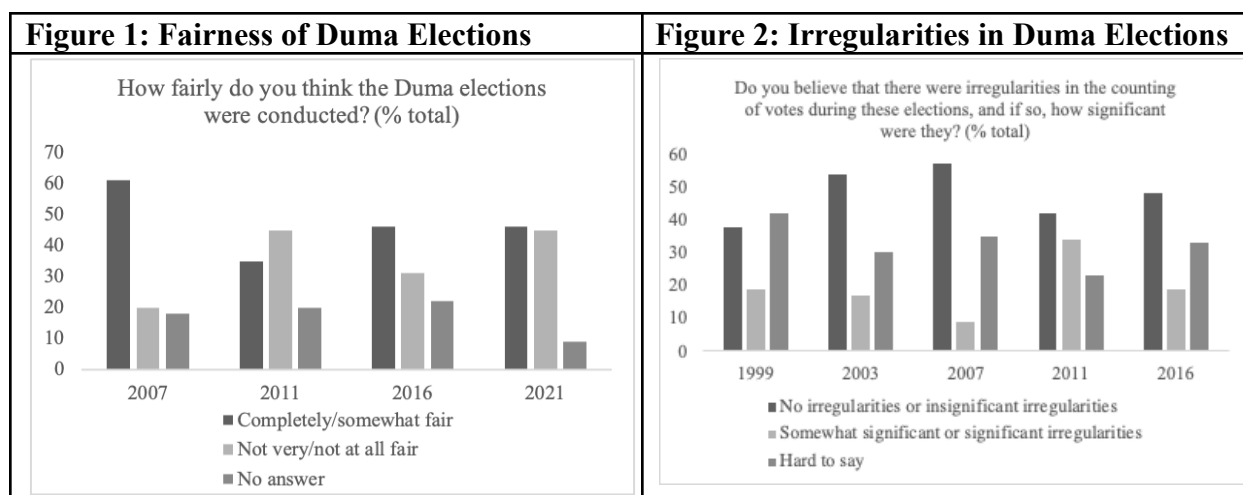
The lead-up to the December 2011 Duma elections saw a decrease in support for Putin, Medvedev, and United Russia, the ruling party, according to Levada Analytical Center polls.

The December 4 Duma election was marred by widespread allegations of manipulation and fraud (OSCE 2012). Local and international media reported serious irregularities in the voting booth before and after the election. Numerous cases of ballot stuffing and carousel voting were caught on camera and posted on YouTube (Ananyev and Poyker 2019). Election observers were disallowed from witnessing the sealing of ballot boxes, activists were harassed, and local websites that attempted to expose the fraud were subject to cyberattacks (Trenin et al. 2011). These, along with other forms of manipulation, led the OSCE to conclude that the election was subject to “undue influence of state authorities” and that the state “did not provide the necessary conditions for fair electoral competition” (OSCE 2012).

Although electoral manipulation is part and parcel of the Kremlin’s menu of manipulation, the 2011 Duma electoral fraud was particularly egregious. Even with these administrative manipulations, United Russia received slightly less than 50 percent of the vote, down from 64 percent in 2007. This figure is doubtlessly inflated: Enikolopov et al. (2013) found that the vote total for United Russia was approximately 11 percentage points lower in regions that did not have independent election monitors than in regions that had election monitors (see also Buzin and Lyubarev 2008; Kalinin and Mebane 2011; Mebane and Kalinin 2009; Myagkov et al. 2005; Shpilkin 2009; Vorobyev 2010).

More importantly, the election was *perceived* as being more unfair than previous Duma elections. 45 percent of Russians viewed the December 2011 Duma elections as being not fair or very unfair, compared to 20 percent for the 2007 Duma elections and 31 percent for the September 2016 Duma elections, according to public opinion polls (Figure 1). Similarly, 34

percent of Russians thought there were significant irregularities in the counting of votes in the 2011 Duma elections, compared to 9 percent in 2007 and 19 percent in 2016 (Figure 2). The 2011 Duma election was also considered to be more dishonest than the subsequent 2012 Presidential election: According to estimates, approximately 60 percent of respondents thought that the presidential election was fair, while only 27 percent believed it to be partially or completely dishonest (Levada Analytical Center 2012a).



Source: <https://www.levada.ru/en/2016/11/09/parliamentary-election-results/>

While electoral manipulation allowed United Russia to maintain a narrow majority in the Duma, it ultimately led to widespread protests. On December 10, approximately 50,000 protesters took to the streets in Moscow to denounce the flawed elections in the largest demonstration since the fall of the Soviet Union. While the protests denounced the authorities as a whole, much of the ire was directed specifically at Vladimir Putin. Protesters called for Putin's resignation, rallying around cries of "Russia without Putin," "Putin, go away," and "Putin is a thief." Despite not holding the presidency at the time of the protests, there was little doubt that Putin was still the dominant political actor and decisionmaker, a belief reinforced by the castling move announced by Medvedev three months prior.

Despite expectations of “an extreme state response” (Smyth 2020, 174), the Kremlin’s initial reaction was surprisingly mild: While authorities staged counter demonstrations and downplayed the protests in the state media, the protests were permitted to continue relatively undisturbed. The Kremlin’s rhetoric even began to soften over time: During Putin’s annual widely-viewed question-and-answer session on December 15, Putin acknowledged that there was some dissatisfaction stemming from legitimate grievances about the political system, and stated that he was glad that protesters were able to legally and peacefully voice their opinions. For his part, Medvedev proclaimed that “I treat any criticism of state institutions and individual officials with the utmost attention and respect” in his December 22 state-of-the-union address. More importantly, the authorities’ response to the protests were perceived as being appropriate and fair: 55 percent of individuals stated that they believed authorities’ response to the protest was just right while less than 10 percent thought the response was too harsh.

Large-scale protests continued well into the summer months of 2012, growing beyond Moscow and spreading throughout Russia. However, initial widespread support for the protests began to dwindle and opinions of the protesters themselves soured over the months following the initial December 10 protests. In December, a plurality of respondents (44%) supported the protests. By the time the presidential election took place on March 4, successfully restoring Putin to the presidency with 63 percent of the vote, support for the protests had decreased to 32 percent with the majority of respondents (54%) stating that no good had resulted due to the protests (Levada Analytical Center 2012b).

Data and Methodology

Data are based on an original, nationally-representative survey of Russians. These surveys took place in four waves during the 2011-2012 election season. The first wave was conducted prior to

the 2011 Duma election (on December 4) from November 17-30; the second—after the Duma elections from December 9-22; the third—prior to the 2012 presidential elections (March 4) from February 16-31; and the fourth—after the presidential election from March 16-April 3.⁶ 23 percent of respondents (n=1,202) were interviewed prior to the December 4 Duma election. 3 percent (n=141) were interviewed between the December 4 elections and the protests on December 10 (including the day of the protest).⁷ 20 percent (n=1,060) of respondents were interviewed in the weeks following the protest. The final two waves of the survey were conducted immediately before and after the March 4 presidential elections with 27 percent conducted in the weeks immediately prior and 27 percent conducted in the weeks immediately after the election. See the Appendix for more information.

Because the assignment of the day of the interview is plausibly exogenous to trust in political institutions and leaders, I attribute the differences in responses to the impact of the election and the protests. I assume that without reports of excessive fraud and without protests the underlying baseline levels of political trust would have remained constant over all periods under examination. Reports of fraud and the protests were easily the most important events that

⁶ Waves 3 and 4 include a Moscow oversample. As the analyses in this study focuses primarily on Waves 1 and 2, which did not include an oversample, I do not present results with sampling weights in the main text. Nevertheless, results are similar when using post-stratification weights to adjust the sample to concord with population distributions of locality type, gender, age, and education. See Appendix for results.

⁷ While there were some protests before December 10, these were small in comparison to the December 10 protests, confined mostly to Moscow, and were not widely covered in the media.

took place during Russia during this period; furthermore, I am unaware of any other external shocks that could account for the variation in attitudes documented in this study.

Table 1 lists the time periods under examination and the number of observations in each time period. Note that the main analysis is concerned primarily with Periods 1-3; Periods 4 and 5 are included as robustness checks. For the Post-Protest Period, I examine the initial wave of protests; while the protests continued well into the new year, the rapidly evolving political situation makes it difficult to isolate the effects of protest over an extended period. Therefore, analyses on the effect of protests speak to these early events.

Table 1: Information on Time Periods

Period	Name	Dates	Observations
1	Pre-Duma	November 17-30	1,202
2	Post-Duma	December 9-10	144
3	Post-Protest	December 11-22	1,060
4	Pre-Presidential	February 16-31	1,401
5	Post-Presidential	March 16-April 3	1,401

Assumptions

In order to conduct the analyses, I assume that respondents interviewed after the Duma elections received the electoral manipulation treatment, that is, that they were aware of the results and allegations of fraud. The electoral manipulation was widely covered in domestic and international media and posted on social media; government officials, including President Medvedev, the Prosecutor General, the First Deputy Interior Minister, and Putin's Press Secretary all acknowledged the allegations in the days following the election. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that respondents would have heard of the allegations. I also assume that respondents interviewed after the protests had heard of their occurrence. Once again, the protests were widely covered by the popular media. However, if some respondents in these groups did not receive the treatment (that is, were not aware of the allegations of fraud and the protests), this

would artificially reduce the difference in responses between treatment and control groups. Consequently, if this assumption is violated, the results would provide an overly conservative measure of the actual impact of these events on attitudes.

The respondents across the different time periods are not biased in covariates that could affect the variables of interest. This is particularly important given the imbalance in the number of observations for the short Post-Duma Period. I assessed balance with respect to respondent socio-economic and demographic variables such as gender, age, income, education, and locality. On average, the respondents were relatively similar across time periods, although there was some variation in income and education. As a result, I control for these two variables in the analyses. See the Appendix for results of randomization checks.

Finally, in order to explore how electoral manipulation and protest influence trust in different political actors and institutions, I assume that respondents have distinct and separate attitudes toward the president, Duma, and other political institutions, including the army, courts, local government, and police. If respondents are unable to disentangle their attitudes toward Putin and other political institutions, I would be unable to make any conclusions about the differential influence of events on political trust. Indeed, correlation coefficients show a weak to moderate correlation in trust in various institutions, suggesting that it is appropriate to examine views of these institutions separately. See Appendix Table 1 for correlation coefficients.

Results and Discussion

In this section, I examine whether there are any differences in trust in political leaders and institutions following the 2011 parliamentary election and the resulting protests. As argued above, I would expect the elections to lead to a decrease in trust for Putin specifically, followed by an increase in trust after the elections. I do not expect either event to influence views of other

institutions. Table 2 depicts the mean and standard deviation for each time period under examination for trust in Putin, the Duma, army, courts, local government, and police. It also includes the result of t-tests between the three periods.⁸

Table 2: Trust in...			
	Pre-Duma	Post-Duma	Post-Protest
Putin	3.386a (0.036)	3.000b (0.106)	3.301 (0.039)
Duma	2.593 (0.035)	2.489 (0.095)	2.631 (0.037)
Army	3.378 (0.034)	3.388 (0.104)	3.387 (0.037)
Courts	2.767 (0.035)	2.853 (0.104)	2.755 (0.038)
Local Government	2.629 (0.035)	2.577 (0.098)	2.669 (0.037)
Police	2.757 (0.035)	2.683 (0.101)	2.713 (0.037)

Note: Table reports means for each period with standard errors in parentheses.
A) Difference between Periods 1 and 2 are statistically significant at $p < .05$.
B) Difference between Periods 2 and 3 are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

There is no evidence to suggest that the parliamentary elections and subsequent anti-regime protests influenced public trust in Russia's institutions: Levels of trust for the Duma, army, courts, local government, and police remain relatively stable before the Duma election (Pre-Duma Period), after the Duma election and before the protests (Post-Duma Period), and after the initial wave of protests (Post-Protest Period). The results for Putin tell a different story. Following the fraudulent elections, Putin's rating dropped by nearly .4 points on a 5-point

⁸ See Appendix Table 3 for weighted results.

scale—more than a 10-percentage point decrease. However, his ratings rebounded in the immediate post-protest period to roughly pre-election levels.⁹

Why do we see this difference for Putin but not for any of the other institutions, including the Duma, whose fraudulent elections sparked the oppositional protests? As demonstrated above, protests were not just anti-regime, but specifically anti-Putin. Despite not holding the office of the presidency, there was little doubt among Russians that Putin was the key decision-maker in the Russian government—a belief doubtlessly reinforced by the castling move and evidenced by the specifically anti-Putin rhetoric of the protestors.¹⁰ The Duma itself had little independence and is seen primarily as a rubber-stamp for Kremlin directives. Moreover, Putin was then head of United Russia, the ruling party, and the party is closely aligned with Putin and his policies. However, just as Putin received the majority of the blame for manipulating the elections, so too did he reap the benefits of the post-election protests.

Relative Manipulation

This study theorizes that electoral manipulation will only influence political attitudes when it is seen as more egregious or overt than usual (Hypothesis). I would therefore expect that an election with perceived “normal” levels of fraud would not influence attitudes toward the regime. As argued above, the 2011 Duma elections were perceived as being more fraudulent than usual, compared both to other Duma elections and the presidential election in 2012. According to my hypotheses, we would expect to observe a decrease in trust in Putin after an election with

⁹ Results are robust to ordinary least squares with fixed effects for income and education, robust standard errors, and ordinal logistic regressions with fixed effects for income and education.

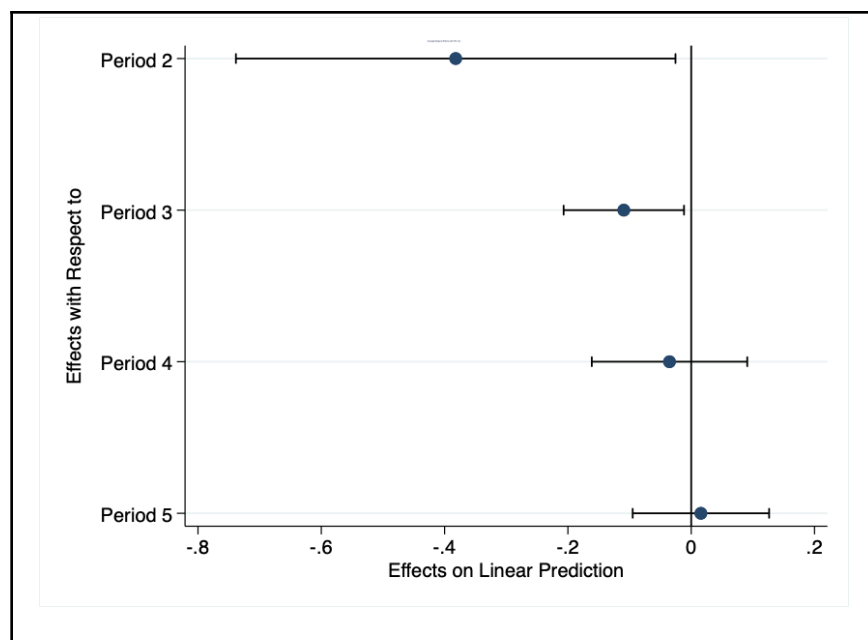
¹⁰ In fact, according to Levada polls, Putin was named “Man of the Year” for every year during his time as Prime Minister—handedly winning out over then-President Medvedev.

relatively blatant fraud (e.g., the 2011 Duma elections); trust in Putin should stay the same after an election with perceived “average” levels of fraud—such as the 2012 presidential election. Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that the presidential election influenced trust in Putin or any other political institution (Table 3). If anything, there is a slight increase in trust in Putin from the post-protest period during the height of the anti-regime protests, to the post-presidential elections period. Figure 5 presents the marginal effects for trust in Putin with respect to time. These findings suggest that it is not the elections themselves, but rather the perceived egregious fraud of the Duma elections that impacted trust in Putin.

Table 3: Trust in...			
	Post-Protest	Pre-Presidential	Post-Presidential
Putin	3.301 (0.039)	3.401 (0.033)	3.411c (0.034)
Duma	2.631 (0.037)	2.680 (0.032)	2.691 (0.0372)
Army	3.387 (0.037)	3.358 (0.035)	3.329 (0.033)
Courts	2.755 (0.038)	2.741 (0.034)	2.682 (0.034)
Local Government	2.669 (0.037)	2.738 (0.033)	2.657 (0.034)
Police	2.713 (0.037)	2.716b (0.033)	2.427c (0.033)

Note: Table reports means for each period with standard errors in parentheses.
 A) Difference between Periods 3 and 4 are statistically significant at $p < .05$.
 B) Difference between Periods 4 and 5 are statistically significant at $p < .05$.
 C) Difference between Periods 3 and 5 are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Figure 5: Marginal Effects on Trust in Putin



Note: Ordinary least squares with robust standard errors and 95% confidence intervals. Fixed effects for income and education. Pre-Duma Period is the reference period.

Non-response Bias

It may be the case that the data are vulnerable to preference falsification. Polling data in Russia has been shown to have an authoritarian bias that distorts how the public expresses its opinions (Rogov 2017). There is also evidence to suggest that reported electoral turnout is inflated in opinion polls (Kalinin 2016). However, scholarship has shown that self-censorship has limited influence on political attitudes in Russia: In a series of list experiments, Frye et al. (2017) found little to no evidence of preference falsification when asking about sensitive attitudinal topics, such as approval of Putin.

Even if bias does exist in the data, as long as the bias is consistent across time, the results would still be meaningful. That being said, it is plausible that social desirability bias may drive respondents to refuse to answer before the election when the regime's position was more secure: It held a majority of seats in the Duma and no elections had taken place to show people that

support for the authorities was lower than expected. If that is the case, I would expect to see higher non-response before the Duma election.

In fact, the data show higher non-response *after* the Duma election (Table 3). Before the election, approximately 9 percent of respondents refused to answer the question about trust in Putin; this figure increases to 14 percent after the election ($p=.04$). It may be the case that respondents were more fearful to answer after the election due to potential instability, but in that case, I would expect to non-response to be higher specifically after the protests. In reality, the non-response rate after the protests (Post-Protest Period) is statistically indistinguishable from non-response before the election (Pre-Duma Period) and after the elections but before the protests (Post-Duma Period).

I have no reason to believe that supporters of the regime would have higher non-response than non-supporters. Indeed, non-responders appear to be more opposed to the regime than the average respondent: Of the non-responders, 17 percent voted for United Russia compared to 35 percent of the total respondents; 36 percent of non-responders stated that they supported United Russia as opposed to 58 percent of the total respondents. Because non-responders are predominantly non-supporters, the results should be a conservative estimate of the true impact of perceived electoral manipulation on trust.

Table 4: Non-Response for Trust in Putin					
	Pre-Dum a	Post-Dum a	Post-Pro test	Pre-Presiden tial	Post-Presiden tial
Putin	0.088a (0.008)	0.142 (0.029)	0.105 (0.009)	0.103 (0.008)	0.088 (0.008)
Mean non-response (0 = non-response) by time period. Standard errors in parentheses. A) Difference between Periods 1 and 2 are statistically significant at $p < .05$.					

Political Affiliation and Trust in Institutions

Do electoral manipulation and oppositional protests influence all individuals in the same way? In this section, I examine a key potential mechanism that may underpin the relationship between fraud and protest and trust in the regime: political affiliation.¹¹ Of course, this is not the only factor that may condition trust in authorities; future research should examine additional pathways. As always, conditional results should be viewed with caution. Political affiliation is not randomized, so results are suggestive.

Extant research has argued that attitudes toward the government should be conditioned on individuals' prior political beliefs: Attribution of responsibility for electoral fraud has been shown to be conditioned on partisanship (Cantú and García-Ponce 2015; Reuter and Szakonyi 2021; Sirotkina and Zavadskaya 2020; Frye 2019). In their study of the 2016 elections in Russia, Reuter and Szakonyi (2021) show that providing respondents with information about electoral fraud reduces support for ruling party candidates primarily among regime supporters. According to this logic, "core regime supporters are more likely to have *ex ante* beliefs that elections are free and fair" (ibid, 275) and are therefore most likely to update their beliefs when presented with information that challenges these preconceptions.

Conversely, Frye and Borisova (2019) argue that respondents update their views about the regime based on authorities' response to protest. Their theory implies that the updating should be mainly among regime *opponents* who have low estimations of the regime before the protests. When regime opponents see that the government is allowing the protests to occur with

¹¹ These are not the only factors that may condition the relationship between politically-charged events and political attitudes. In the Appendix, I briefly examine other commonly-considered mechanisms, including residency, interest in politics, and media usage.

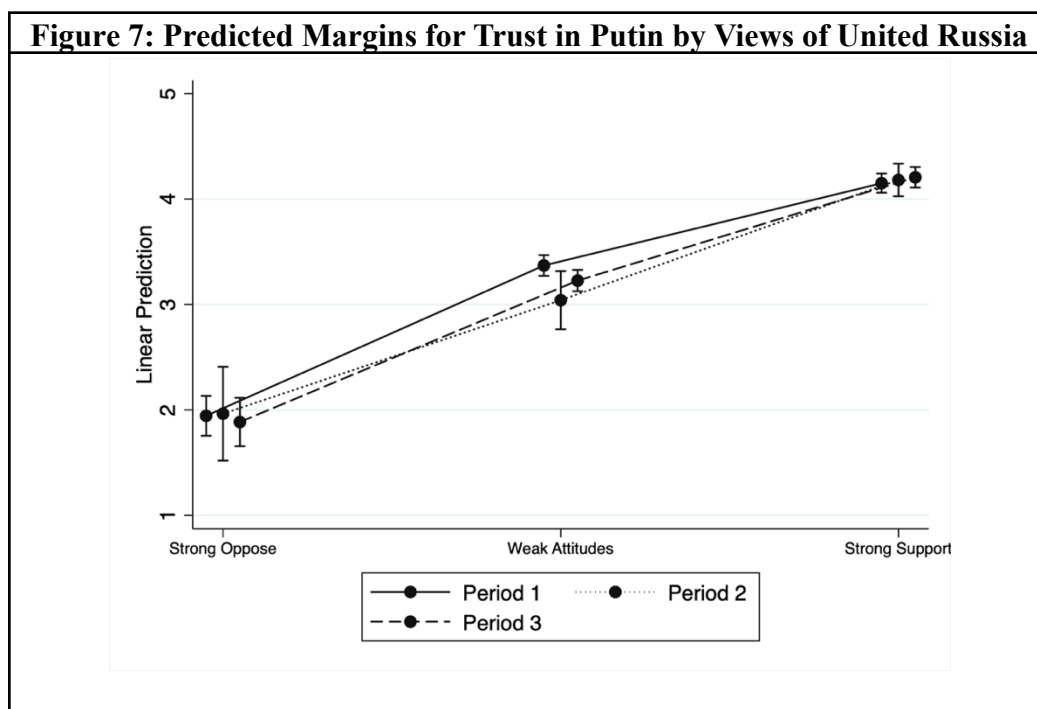
limited repression, trust should increase specifically among this group. In other words, individuals whose prior beliefs are challenged by new information are more likely to update their views than individuals whose beliefs are reinforced by new information.

However, research on information updating has long shown that the *strength*—not just the direction—of political attitudes has important consequences for public opinion: Individuals with strongly-identified beliefs are less likely to be swayed by information that is contrary to their belief set than individuals with weak political priors (Lodge and Taber 2000 2013; Muñoz and Anduiza 2019; Reuter and Szakonyi 2021; Strickland, Taber, and Lodge 2011). As Zaller (1992) argues, individuals are more likely to be receptive to particular political messaging only if the message is consistent with their pre-existing political orientation. This implies that, conversely, people are more likely to disregard arguments that are perceived to be in conflict with their underlying values and partisan identities. The stronger the belief, the less likely that updating will occur. Therefore, it may be the case that updating will occur mainly for individuals who have weak or indifferent attitudes of the regime, not strong proponents or opponents.¹²

Following Frye and Borisova (2019) and Reuter and Szakonyi (2021), I measure political affiliation using support for United Russia, the ruling party. To examine whether the influence of protest on trust is contingent upon the strength of support for United Russia, I include an interaction term for individuals who state that they “support United Russia more than any other party” after the elections (Strong UR Supporter x Post-Duma Period) and after the protests (Strong UR Supporter x Post-Protest Period). I also create an interaction term for individuals

¹² Indeed, I find that the impact of electoral fraud on trust in Putin does not appear to be conditional simply on political affiliation: Trust in Putin among opponents or supporters of United Russia does not change over time (see Appendix Table 5).

who state that they are “strongly opposed to United Russia” by time period (Strong UR Opponent x Post-Duma Period, Strong UR Opponent x Post-Protest Period). Finally, I create an interaction term for individuals who are indifferent to United Russia or hold weak opinions (somewhat opposed or somewhat supportive) by time period (Weak Attitudes x Post-Duma Period, Weak Attitudes x Post-Protest Period).



Note: Predicted margins for trust in Vladimir Putin by views of United Russia with 95% confidence intervals. Ordinary least squares with robust standard errors. Fixed effects for income and education are not shown.

Figure 7 shows predictive margins on trust in Putin for strong support of, strong opposition to, and weak views of United Russia over time.¹³ Unsurprisingly, strong support for United Russia has an independent and positive impact on trust for Putin generally; conversely,

¹³ Results are robust to the inclusion of all five time periods and to the inclusion of fixed effects for age, sex, income, education, residency, interest in politics, and media use. In line with expectations, trust in other political institutions (other than Putin) over time is not conditional on attitudes toward United Russia.

strong opposition to United Russia has an independent negative effect on trust. However, it is the impact of partisanship over time that proves most interesting. Contrary to previous results, strongly opposing United Russia does not have a discernible impact on trust for any time period.¹⁴ Similarly, strong ruling party support does not appear to mediate the impact of electoral manipulation on regime attitudes. Rather, results suggest that updating occurs primarily for individuals who are indifferent to or hold weak opinions of United Russia.

Electoral fraud appears to influence trust among those who are indifferent to the regime or who hold weak opinions. The coefficient for the Post-Duma Period is negative and significant, which indicate that the electoral fraud decreased trust in Putin for those who hold neither strongly positive nor strongly negative opinions of the ruling party. Individuals who hold weaker opinions of the regime are more likely to update their views based on new information—in this case, the occurrence of egregious electoral manipulation. However, contrary to expectations, there is limited evidence that the resulting protests improved trust in Putin: The coefficient for Post-Protest Period is also negative and significant, indicating that trust in Putin after the protests was lower than in the Pre-Duma Period, but the f-statistic (1.07) indicates that the difference between these periods is negligible. Furthermore, I find that the impact of electoral fraud on trust in Putin does not appear to be conditional simply on political affiliation: Trust in Putin among opponents or supporters of United Russia does not change over time (see Appendix Table 5).

Thus, prior to the average treatment effects examined above, these results tell a more nuanced story about political affiliation and trust. In line with research on motivated reasoning. I

¹⁴ Results should be viewed as suggestive due to the low number of observations in each group. The dataset includes only 24 and 27 observations in the Post-Duma Period for strong UR opponents and supports, respectively.

find that new information causes updating specifically for individuals who have weak beliefs—but mainly in regards to electoral manipulation, not the resulting protests. Individuals with strongly-held beliefs do not appear to be swayed by new information: Strong supporters of the regime are more likely to seek out information that supports their existing views and to discount information that is contrary to their pre-existing beliefs (i.e., that fraud exists) (cf. Taber and Lodge, 2006). Strong opponents, on the other hand, are more likely to already hold beliefs that manipulation occurs during elections. This finding has important implications for trust as individuals with weak political affiliation constitute 58 percent of the sample and highlights the importance of examining the conditional impacts of fraud and protest on trust.

However, individual support for particular political parties, like trust in institutions or political figures, is also likely to be influenced by political events. Individuals who update their trust of Putin in response to electoral manipulation or protests are likely to also update their support of United Russia, the party of power and the party that benefited from electoral manipulation in the 2011 Duma election. Indeed, overall support of United Russia decreased after the election (from 57% in the Pre-Duma Period to 46% in the Post-Duma Period) only to rebound in the Post-Protest Period (to 53%). I therefore examine two additional variables that help capture the direction and strength of attitudes toward the government: regime preference and beliefs that the Russian government is “on the right path.” For both, respondents are divided into three categories: two categories representing strong attitudes and one representing weak attitudes. See the Appendix for more information on the variables and results. As with support for United Russia, trust in Putin decreases in the Post-Duma Period primarily for those who have weak political attitudes: those who have no preference for regime type and those who hold weak opinions about whether Russia is on the right path.

Conclusion

Whether and when authorities use repression remains one of the key questions in the study of authoritarian politics. As the number of authoritarian regimes around the world continues to grow, the conditions under which particular strategies of societal control benefit—or harm—authoritarian regimes will continue to be of central import. The 2011 Duma elections and resulting protests were a turning-point for the Putin regime, one which has resulted in the increase in repressive tactics to limit opposition and alternatives to the ruling order.

This study has shown that the mere existence of electoral fraud in contexts where manipulation is often considered “business as usual” does not lead the public to update their beliefs about authorities. The central goal of this study is to demonstrate that it is the *relative* amount of *perceived* fraud that leads to attitudinal updating: When individuals view fraud as being particularly egregious—when the visibility and extent of fraud is higher than expected—trust in authorities decrease. This finding has important implications on the future study of public attitudes and elections in non-democracies: Instead of focusing on the mere existence or level of fraud, research needs to interrogate how people view a particular instance of electoral fraud in comparison to other elections. Furthermore, citizens do not punish the entire system for alleged manipulation, as is often assumed. Rather, the public can and does differentiate among different political institutions and leaders, and direct their ire toward those deemed to be responsible for decision making. In highly-centralized, personalistic regimes such as Russia, this leads to a decrease in trust specifically for the autocrat.

Yet, allegations of electoral fraud do not sway all groups equally. Those with strongly identified priors, who hold either strongly favorable or strongly opposed views of the regime, are not swayed by allegations of egregious electoral manipulation. This finding provides further

evidence that individuals with firm political priors are less likely to update their beliefs when presented with new information. Rather, it is the people in the middle, those with weaker political beliefs, that are most susceptible to new information: Trust in Putin decreases after allegations of electoral fraud specifically for individuals who are weakly opposed or weakly supportive of Russia's ruling party.

These findings have important implications for understanding not just the level but also the type of electoral manipulation that authorities may pursue. In non-democracies, authorities frequently rely on electoral manipulation in order to secure victory and achieve their desired results, particularly when they do not expect to win elections without manipulation. But, as this study demonstrates, reliance on manipulation can further erode support for authorities, which may in turn require the use of even more manipulation to secure victory. However, fraud is only likely to depress views of the regime if citizens view the manipulation as being worse than usual. Ballot stuffing and harassment of election monitors, a few of the common manipulation tactics, are highly visible to the public and are therefore more likely to harm attitudes of the regime. But all forms of manipulation are not equally visible to the public. Instead of relying on these tactics, authoritarian regimes can rely administrative tools—such as increasing barriers to entry, barring candidates, or online elections—to manipulate elections away from the public eye, thus limiting the potential costs of manipulation. The most recent Duma election in Russia in 2021 exemplifies this shift to less visible forms of manipulation: Authorities extended the voting period and introduced online voting, decisions that contributed to what experts have argued were the most falsified in Russia's history (Cordell 2021); yet the elections were seen as no more fraudulent than prior elections, in part because the majority of Russians do not view these tactics as increasing the potential for manipulation (Levada Analytical Center 2021).

This study also shows that unexpected oppositional protests may benefit authorities: Following the December 2011 election protests, trust in Putin increased—though, once again, this updating occurs primarily among those with weaker prior political beliefs. These results demonstrate the speed by which individuals can and do update their views when presented with new information. Research has shown that people have limited political knowledge and do not take into account their complete knowledge set when making political judgments; instead, individuals make judgements based on information that readily comes to mind (Iyengar et al. 1982). In this instance, the protest events all but erased the sins of electoral manipulation in the minds of the public, restoring trust to roughly its pre-election levels. These results imply that while specific events can and do influence attitudes toward the government, these attitudes are difficult to sustain in the long term.

While results suggest that protests can improve trust in the autocrat, future research must pay greater attention to the mechanisms by which protest is linked to regime attitudes. On one hand, protests may lead individuals to revise their attitudes based on authorities' response to protests: If authorities pursue a mild response to protests (as they did initially during the December 2011 protest movement), individuals may update their beliefs about the freedoms afforded to them and, consequently, their attitudes toward the regime. However, it may also be the case that oppositional protests may signal the potential for future instability, leading individuals to double down in their support for the regime, essentially “voting against disorder” (Pepinsky 2017). Preliminary results provide greater support for the authority response mechanism than the disorder argument, but future research should further consider these potential mechanisms to better understand the link between protests and political attitudes in non-democracies (see Appendix B).

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