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Candidate Filtering: The Strategic Use of Electoral Manipulations in Russia

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Abstract

Incumbents have many tools to tip elections in their favor, yet we know little about how they choose between strategies. By comparing various tactics, this paper argues that electoral malpractice centered on manipulating institutions offers the greatest effectiveness while shielding incumbents from public anger and criminal prosecution. To demonstrate this, I focus on one widespread institutional tactic: preventing candidates from accessing the ballot. First, in survey experiments, Russian voters respond less negatively to institutional manipulations, such as rejecting candidates, than to blatant fraud, such as ballot-box stuffing. Next, using evidence from 25,935 Russian mayoral races, I show that lower societal and implementation costs enable incumbents to strategically reject candidacies from credible challengers and then reduce their electoral vulnerability. In all, the technology behind specific manipulations helps determine when and how incumbents violate electoral integrity.

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Manipulating electoral outcomes is a key way for incumbents to preserve their hold on power. Influencing who runs, who votes, and how votes are counted can increase the chances of victory at the ballot box (Birch, 2011). But how do incumbents decide when and by which means to violate electoral integrity? To date, much work has focused on the reasoning behind blatant, illegal electoral fraud, such as buying off voters, stuffing ballot boxes, or engaging in voter suppression (Lehoucq, 2003; Alvarez, Hall, and Hyde, 2009). But fraud is just one way to tilt the electoral playing field. Districts can be redrawn to advantage certain parties. Challengers can be repressed.¹ Independent media outlets can come under pressure, preventing some campaigns from promoting their ideas and candidates to voters. This range of tactics constitutes what some scholars have termed the “menu of manipulation” (Schedler, 2002). Strategies carry trade-offs, as incumbents must balance overall effectiveness against the costs of carrying out the manipulation and potentially getting caught.

We know little though about how incumbents select options from this menu, if they do at all. To better understand their decision-making process, this paper unpacks the technologies and administrative procedures often used to undermine electoral integrity. I argue that electoral malpractice centered on manipulating institutions (such as electoral law) generates lower costs than engaging in overt fraud. Manipulating institutions requires fewer resources to implement and incurs lower risks of public disapproval or criminal prosecution of responsible officials. By capturing legislative processes, incumbents can pass laws that legitimate such manipulation as well as frustrate attempts by rivals and civic activists to put forth legal challenges. Not only does the general public

¹In many autocratic regimes, such challengers identify openly as opponents of the regime. But at the subnational level or in developing democracies, incumbents may face challengers who view elections as a way to plug into the ruling party (perhaps having been blocked informally), rather than displace the regime. Electoral manipulation is used to protect incumbent advantage, rather than shield the regime from its foes.

have a difficult time determining whether the law is being applied fairly, there is little recourse to punish those responsible for tilting the playing field. Voters are unable to corroborate whether electoral law is being evenly applied and are more likely to accept the government's actions as justified. Intervening early in the electoral process and under legal cover offers significant advantages over committing electoral fraud.

To demonstrate this empirically, I focus on one common institutional tactic: 'candidate filtering', i.e. the selective registration of certain candidacies. This tactic is widespread across countries and political settings, but we lack data about how and why such an early stage, pre-election intervention is used. I first draw on original survey experiments from Russia to show that respondents express less anger over rejected candidates than two types of electoral fraud. That subdued response translates into a lower likelihood of joining protests and turning out on election day, two ways to punish incumbents who tamper with elections. Without clear-cut evidence that laws are being broken or applied arbitrarily, voters hesitate to designate these institutional manipulations as indicative of fraud and take accordant action.

These lower societal and legal costs then affect how incumbents deploy institutional manipulations versus choosing to commit overt electoral fraud. First, in contrast to existing literature, I show that incumbents are more likely to abuse electoral law and reject candidates in order tip close, competitive elections in their favor. That is, incumbents harbor lesser fears about facing ex post punishment, and restrict ballot access precisely when they sense electoral vulnerability and/or the presence of strong challengers. To demonstrate this, I analyze new data on 25,935 mayoral elections in Putin-era Russia from 2005-2019. Over this period, 10,231 (9.6%) of 106,236 Russian mayoral candidates saw their application to run for office denied by local election commissions.

First, the partisan flavor of candidate filtering suggests its explicit use as a tool of electoral malpractice. A startling 68 (0.3%) out of 23,144 regime-affiliated candidates were refused the right to run. Instead, rejections are heavily concentrated among indepen-

dent candidates and members of non-systemic opposition parties, both more autonomous from the government and less easily co-opted. These challengers are being strategically prevented from reaching the ballot precisely when the regime fears elections will not go its way. Rejection rates next increase when the incumbent declines to run for re-election. Given the greater uncertainty that open seats generate, governments take extra precautions to shape candidate slates to their own benefit and protect replacement candidates that cannot benefit from incumbent advantages.

Using several measures of candidate viability, I then show that strong challengers are more likely to be rejected. Rejection rates are higher among better educated candidates as well as those who possess financial resources through a past career in the private sector. Most importantly, challengers who have held office previously face substantially higher risks of being refused registration. The governing experience they can use to attract voters creates liabilities for incumbent officials, who intervene surgically to remove them from the ballot and prevent them from attaining higher office. Results in the Appendix suggest that filtering out strong challengers is also strongly correlated with more favorable electoral outcomes for the regime-affiliated candidates that make it to election day.

These findings make several contributions to the literature on electoral malpractice. Recent work has argued that fraud is common among more popular incumbent regimes ([Simpser, 2013](#)), as well as less likely to occur during competitive elections ([Egorov and Sonin, 2014](#); [Rozenas, 2016](#)). Because fraud can enrage citizens, incumbents may be wary of going too far when elections are tight. Yet the greater the threat to their hold on power, the more powerful the incentives to undermine electoral integrity in less observable ways. By widening the scope of manipulations studied, this paper shows that high levels of uncertainty and political competition drive incumbents to tamper with elections by abusing electoral institutions. I develop a new approach for identifying how such manipulations can be targeted at the micro-level, while using survey experiments to demonstrate why incumbents have less to fear from filtering out challengers than committing fraud. This

disaggregated approach improves our ability to show how “harder-to-detect” manipulations allow incumbents to retain power even when scrutiny is high (Harvey, 2016).

This preference for institutional manipulations highlights how legal ambiguity and information asymmetries help governments exploit the law while avoiding societal blowback. Leaders are sensitive to how their actions to undermine democracy are received by voters (Birch, 2011; Van Ham and Lindberg, 2015). By shielding institutional manipulations within the aura of normal lawmaking, they create difficulties for citizens learning about flaws in the electoral process, while also depriving challengers of legal recourse and focal points for coordinating collective action (Tucker, 2007).² This argument builds on similar work by Klaas (2015) and Cheeseman and Klaas (2018) in arguing electoral exclusion can help a regime manage reputational risks when tampering with elections. It differs by focusing on the domestic rather than international costs (international election monitors rarely monitor subnational elections), while bringing in survey experiments to differentiate popular perceptions over electoral manipulations. The focus on lower-level elections and public opinion significantly improves our understanding of how incumbents are constrained by domestic political factors, while allowing for a more detailed analysis of which opposition figures are targeted and when this strategy is applied.

This paper thus presents the first empirical study of the drivers of candidate rejections. Although scholars have highlighted how opposition candidates in Russia are prevented from running for office (Golosov, 2011), there has been no systematic evidence of how electoral law is politicized to muffle challengers.³ Using detailed data on individual registrations, the analysis reveals the Putin regime manipulating institutions to protect weak incumbents and defend against strong challengers. While related to work

²Selectively rejecting challengers also encourages and supports regime loyalists, akin to how the Russian government regulates NGO activity (Plantan, 2019).

³Differences in rejection rates between parties could stem from variation in organizational capacity, and not efforts by the regime to block certain candidates (Bækken, 2015).

connecting electoral exclusion to governance and civil conflict ([Simpser and Donno, 2012](#); [Klaas, 2018](#)), this paper goes further by modeling the trade-offs incumbents face between pre-election and post-election interventions. Although opposition parties may pay attention to institutional manipulations when deciding to protest election results ([Chernykh, 2014](#)), the findings here demonstrate they face an uphill battle mobilizing public anger over candidate filtering.

Unpacking Electoral Malpractice

Not all types of electoral manipulation are created equal. As [Birch \(2011\)](#) cogently explains, some electoral manipulations are costly to implement and require significant resources. Though seemingly straightforward, successfully organizing ballot box fraud depends on extensive organization and co-optation of local agents ([Rundlett and Svolik, 2016](#)). Vote-buying requires financial allocations and organization to reach pliable voters ([Van Ham and Lindberg, 2015](#)). Dense social networks of parties and brokers must monitor political behavior, which may not be always present ([Nichter, 2008](#); [Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi, 2019a](#)).

Beyond the tangible costs, incumbents can incur painful consequences if the violations they commit are exposed. First, actors carrying out manipulations face legal punishment if they are caught in the act ([Harvey, 2019](#)). Intimidating voters requires the use of coercion, which may descend into violence and generate criminal liabilities. Second, incumbents may be wary of protests arising from disapproval and anger over the way elections were conducted ([Tucker, 2007](#); [Kuntz and Thompson, 2009](#)). Fraud can lead voters to disengage from politics and stay home on election day, in the process delegitimizing elections ([Simpser, 2012](#)). Incumbents face strong incentives to conceal the steps they have taken to undermine elections in order to prevent backlash ([Beaulieu and Hyde, 2009](#)).

This dual set of implementation and exposure costs varies across different types of

electoral malpractice. But work disaggregating the broad category of electoral manipulations and outlining the cost structure of the various strategies is still somewhat in its infancy. [Harvey \(2016\)](#) argues, for example, that strategies such as vote-buying and voter intimidation carry a lower risk of exposure for government agents. Such dispersed tactics rely on societal actors and complicate efforts to both monitor and hold agents accountable. The probability of getting caught stuffing ballot boxes may lead incumbents to adopt certain strategies farther outside the public eye ([Sjoberg, 2014](#)).

This paper focuses on types of electoral malpractice that rank relatively low in terms of the resources required to implement and the potential fallout for implicated actors. Manipulating institutions, i.e. the legal framework and administration of elections, may be the most cost-efficient, least visible and thus least risky avenue for skewing election outcomes ([Birch, 2011](#); [Norris, 2013](#)). Examples of institutional manipulations include stocking election commissions with political sympathizers, curbing independent media and advertising, skewing access to public funding to favor certain parties, and selectively registering candidates to shape the options available to voters. Passing laws and handing down such decisions does not require the development of clientelist networks and the mobilization of large-scale financial resources. Instead, capturing legislative institutions and electoral commissions, which incumbent governments nearly by definition have achieved, is both necessary and sufficient.

Institutional manipulations are generally much less visible, and thus harder for election monitors, opposition activists, and the media to monitor and definitively establish that malpractice had occurred. By passing legislation through codified channels, incumbents can cloak their decisions in legal formalism that deters scrutiny and protects against later prosecutions. As [Van Ham and Lindberg \(2016, 11\)](#) write, “formal sanctions are no longer effective if oversight institutions are themselves successfully captured.” Governments can more easily persuade observers that actions taken strictly adhere to the letter of law and deserve less scrutiny. The general public may also be more likely to believe

that incumbents are operating on stronger legal standing.

This is not to argue that manipulating institutions is completely costless, but rather less sensitive and harder to detect than fraud. Public outrage could result over ridiculously drawn electoral districts or the conspicuous rejection of nationally popular challengers (Klaas, 2015). But on average, the potential for these types of manipulations to be clearly connected to malicious abuse of the system and then spark protest is lower. And while institutional strategies may lack in perceptibility, they abound in effectiveness. Shaping electoral administration tilts the playing field in favor of incumbents with a much greater degree of certainty (Birch, 2011; Van Ham and Lindberg, 2016).

The first argument of this paper is then that institutional manipulations are less costly for incumbents to commit and draw less undesirable attention from the justice system and the public at large. One empirical implication is that voters should respond differently to incumbents manipulating institutions rather than engaging in overt fraud, such as vote-buying or stuffing ballot boxes. Interpreting their actions as blatantly illegal or unreasonable requires more sophisticated examination. Voters are not personally experiencing fraud, nor is there verifiable evidence of fraud being committed, such as videos of ballot box stuffing or statistical analyses of actual versus official turnout (Smyth and Turovsky, 2018). Incumbents should then face lower societal costs for committing institutional manipulations in comparison to more blatant types of fraud. The popular appetite for punishing agents involved in manipulating electoral law is lower.

Hypothesis 1. *Institutional manipulations will generate lower societal and legal costs for incumbents than overtly engaging in fraud.*

Because incumbents are shielded from potential punishment, institutional manipulations can then be deployed strategically to prevent challengers from unseating them from office. Otherwise fearful of the backlash election fraud would cause, incumbents feel less constrained to intervene using institutions in order to ensure their hold onto power. We might expect first that incumbents will manipulate electoral institutions when they sense

electoral vulnerability and narrow margins of victory. Fraud that carries a lower risk of detection and liability becomes an attractive strategic option for ensuring victory in tight races. Opposition actors who cry foul about other excessive practices struggle to hold regimes accountable for manipulating institutions.

Second, we should expect regimes to use less detectable, attributable forms of fraud to target credible political challengers. Rivals with financial and organizational resources can more easily upend electoral competition and send incumbents out of office. Deploying blatant electoral fraud against such individuals can incur real risks for the government (such as post-election demonstrations). More nuance and subtlety is needed to handle such political threats. Intervening early on and with clear legal authority enables incumbents to sideline challengers deemed capable of beating them in forthcoming elections. Voters may observe these candidates being rejected, but not see any wrongdoing in the legal process. Here again political uncertainty drives the use of electoral manipulation.

Hypothesis 2. *Given their lower societal and legal costs, institutional manipulations will be more prevalent when regimes face electoral vulnerability and/or credible challengers to their rule.*

Neutralizing the biggest threats to the incumbent government long before election day limits voters' choices for expressing their unhappiness with the process. Though some fraud may be needed to ensure an adequate level of turnout for purposes of legitimacy, skewing competition through institutional maneuvers may reduce the need to take risks on election day that voters can easily pin on the regime.⁴ This tactical shift gives the impression of cleaner elections without costing the regime. In the next section, I highlight one prominent type of electoral manipulation cloaked in institutional formalism that will be analyzed throughout the paper: the prevention of certain politicians from registering

⁴Due to difficulties measuring day-of electoral fraud in Russia at the local level, this paper cannot adequately test the substitution effect between different types of manipulations. This question merits further scrutiny in a different political setting.

their candidacies.

Candidate Filtering

Of the institutional manipulations listed above, the selective registration of candidates, i.e. candidate filtering, is among the most widespread, as well as the most controversial. Governments around the world regularly take steps to impose regulations and manage access to election ballots. Candidates may need to collect signatures from eligible voters, submit financial deposits, court existing parliamentarians, and/or fill out extensive documentation, such as asset disclosure forms and proof of residence.

Some ballot access regulations are normal, justified, and essential for healthy democracy. Many people approach running for office less than seriously, submitting improper paperwork or failing to abide by legal requirements. Erecting artificial but reasonable barriers to electoral entry can help reduce voter confusion, attract more experienced candidates, and reduce the number of wasted votes.

However, candidate filtering becomes detrimental to electoral integrity when it is used to disqualify political opponents of the regime from running for office. Although the explicit reasons given for refusing to register such candidates may be technical (such as insufficient signatures or incorrect forms), unwanted challengers are disproportionately targeted in order to keep them off the ballot. Opposition activists around the world frequently cry foul about registration procedures being applied unfairly by government officials to prevent them from winning elections. Suspicions of filtering being used to marginalize oppositionists have arisen in Bahrain, Congo and Venezuela.⁵ Indeed, the

⁵El Yaakoubi, Aziz. "Bahrain Bars Members Of Opposition Groups From Standing In Elections" *Reuters*, May 13, 2018. Brocchetto, Marilia. "Congo Bars Key Opposition Figure From Presidential Election," *Bloomberg*, August 24, 2018. "Venezuela's Maduro: Some Opposition Parties To Be Barred From Presidential Vote." *CNN*, December 10, 2017

use (and potential abuses) of candidate filtering may be familiar to many observers of Russian electoral politics. A particularly illuminating study by [Bækken \(2015\)](#) drew on interviews with local analysts and politicians to claim that vocal, critical, and serious challengers often find themselves on the wrong side of registration rulings. Other work has analyzed rejections at the regional level, finding stark differences in successful registration rates between candidates from different parties ([Ross, 2018](#)).

These anecdotes suggest candidate filtering is used by incumbents to manipulate elections. But because there are also justifiable reasons for selectively blocking certain candidates, it can often be hard to decipher whether and when a regime is acting appropriately versus when it is abusing its power to systematically punish viable challengers. Although suspicions abound, we still lack definitive evidence that selective registration is used to repress challengers to incumbents. For example, in Russia, [Bækken \(2015, 68\)](#) writes that “the practice has not been openly restrictive against any particular candidates.”

This ambiguity perfectly illustrates why this method of manipulating elections is so attractive to incumbent regimes and motivates this paper’s central arguments about institutional manipulations. The fact that opposition candidates get rejected more often can be construed as a matter of relative resource capacity rather than actual violations of electoral law by incumbents. After all, pro-regime candidates enjoy substantial organizational advantages in collecting signatures and correctly filling out registration forms. In Russia, “signatures are money”, and the ruling party United Russia can draw on vast legal and mobilization teams to ensure that all its candidates reach the ballot ([Bækken, 2015, 66](#)). Candidates from outside the ruling party may struggle to attract the necessary funds and personnel to collect signatures. By constantly changing signature requirements, electoral commissions can place additional obstacles to registration, while staying well within the confines of the law ([Lyubarev, 2011](#)).

Even when the commissions’ decisions border on the absurd (such as nitpicking signatures or requesting ridiculous documents), the legal veneer surrounding registration

makes this manipulation much less riskier than committing overt electoral fraud ([Birch, 2011](#); [Ross, 2018](#)). Incumbents can hide behind the stringent laws they themselves passed, arguing all along that the playing field was still wide open and that many challengers were still able to register. Election officials can claim they were only following the rules as passed by elected legislatures. Many voters may never learn that some candidates were not allowed to run, and even if they did, they would be hard pressed to accurately attribute responsibility for the rejections.

Experimentally Measuring the Costs of Electoral Manipulations

Hypothesis 1 argued that incumbents face lower societal and legal costs for manipulating institutions, such as regulating ballot access. These costs can come in two forms: (1) popular disapproval and anger, potentially leading to protests and voter abstention and (2) legal consequences for the perpetrators of the fraud. I test this claim using survey evidence about how citizens evaluate different types of electoral manipulations. One approach would be to ask voters directly to rank the relative acceptability of various electoral activities. Although informative, in many countries voters feel pressure to disapprove of all items in a list of electoral malpractices presented side-by-side. Surveys show the vast majority of voters come out strongly against all types of electoral manipulation.

Instead, I adopt an experimental approach that elicits how respondents react to learning that different types of electoral manipulations occurred during a hypothetical election campaign. Russia offers a particularly compelling case for studying differential reactions to electoral malpractice. Elections over the last decade have been far from free and fair. The Russian government has adopted a wide diversity of tactics covering institutional manipulations (such as preventing opposition candidates and parties from registering), clientelistic mobilization (pressuring workers and students to vote for the regime),

and ballot rigging (stuffing ballot boxes, etc.). Not only are citizens generally aware of these tactics, but the public can still express its disapproval of electoral deficiencies, be it through social media or protests.⁶ As the 2011-12 wave of protests demonstrated, the regime cannot simply commit fraud in complete disregard of popular opinion. Monitors and analysts carefully track, for example, how votes are counted.

The first survey experiment asks respondents to imagine mayoral elections in their municipality were to be held later that year. Respondents were randomly assigned into one control and three treatment groups describing the run-up to the hypothetical election. Each treatment group received extra information about how the election was conducted: (1) an independent candidate (i.e. someone not running with a party affiliation) was refused registration, (2) local governments organized voting carousels (i.e. they helped citizens vote multiple times); and (3) public sector employees were pressured to vote. Table 1 gives the full question wording.

The first treatment describes a common institutional manipulation, and the treatment makes no mention that the refusal of the admission of an independent candidate was done illegally. This ambiguity over procedural quality is intentional. Rarely are there clear cut cases of sham rejections, mainly because incumbents prevent voters from learning how procedural decisions were made. The rejections of opposition candidates during the 2019 Moscow City Duma elections are a good example. The official reason given was fake signatures, and state-controlled media showed interviews and pictures testifying to problems in rejected candidates' petitions. Although independent media and the rejected candidates raised objections, a regular citizen in Moscow would be faced with competing sources of information and would have to come to her own conclusions about the legality of the process. This treatment is designed to succinctly elicit the same uncertainty.

Because the specific actor is not referenced in this rejection decision, respondents could overlook that the rejection was made for incumbents' benefit. This second source of am-

⁶Experiments show Russians answer honestly to sensitive questions (Frye et al., 2017).

biguity about the actors responsible again maps closer to the reality of the registration process,⁷ but could affect the interpretation of the experimental results. To address this concern, in the next section, I discuss a second survey experiment that removes the two sources of ambiguity by including a treatment where a leading opposition candidate is refused registration (implying the incumbent would benefit, mostly likely unfairly). To preview, this wording change does not alter the rank ordering of electoral manipulations. Excluding candidates in any manner creates ambiguity for voters, regardless of whether the individuals targeted present serious challengers to incumbents.

The first treatment also intentionally references independent candidates. Independents in Russia present significant problems for incumbents, making them attractive targets for refusing registration. Disavowing party affiliation often is a sign of strength, rather than weakness: independents can draw on their own financial resources (particularly time spent in the private sector) to fund their campaigns and personal popularity to win over voters. This enables them to make a stronger argument to the public about their distance from incumbents. In many cases they offer a more credible alternative to those voters seeking change in leadership, one that is not subordinate to national parties.

The second treatment ('karousels') captures blatant, illegal electoral fraud. Respondents would be familiar with the practice from media coverage. Finally, the third treatment describes voter mobilization in the workplace. This type of clientelism is common during elections to all levels of government (Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi, 2019b), and voters are generally aware of how the practice occurs.

One potential concern with this type of vignette experiment is that including any description of how an electoral campaign was conducted could shape responses. To account for this, I included a 'Control' group where respondents were given an ostensibly innocuous treatment: that the Central Election Commission would increase the num-

⁷Media coverage of rejections rarely implicates politicians in commissions' decisions. Voters would have to come to that conclusion themselves.

ber of electoral precincts. Changing this number is a legal administrative action that happens regularly during election cycles as new population censuses are released. Although smaller precincts may help parties monitor broker effort and thus lead to more vote-buying (Rueda, 2017), voters for the most part will be unaware of such statistical patterns and not associate precinct size with electoral manipulation.

Respondents were then asked about (1) their emotional reaction to the information about flaws in the electoral process, as measured on a five-point scale with higher values indicating more anger and (2) their behavioral reaction, as measured by their likelihood of participating in a collective action to raise awareness over threats to electoral integrity, such as signing a petition or joining a protest. The ‘emotional’ outcome draws on recent work on American politics arguing that voter fraud can provoke anger and lead to mobilization by certain groups of voters (Valentino and Neuner, 2017). Respondents were directly asked to express their level of disapproval, if any, about the way these hypothetical elections were conducted. The ‘behavioral’ outcome captures whether respondents were willing to translate that anger and/or frustration into some form of collective action.⁸

The aim is to capture whether incumbents face any public costs from using different types of electoral manipulations. Respondents were assigned to one treatment arm; the two outcome questions were then asked in immediate succession. As an extension, I discuss below a second, similar experiment asking voters about their willingness to vote in a hypothetical election after different types of manipulations had been committed.

⁸Many factors beyond the degree of grievance contribute to whether citizens join collective action, including mobilization by elites and the level of repression. This experiment partly accounts for them by including as an option a much less costly and more individualistic form of protest (signing a petition) and focusing on variation between grievances, holding structural and organizational factors constant across the treatments.

TABLE 1: EXPERIMENT WORDING AND TREATMENT ASSIGNMENT

Preamble: Suppose that mayoral elections in your municipality were to be held in September of this year. During the campaign, it becomes known that:

		N	%
Control	The election commission increases the number of electoral precincts.	390	24.1
Treatment #1	An independent (without party) candidate is refused registration.	400	24.8
Treatment #2	The municipal administration organizes schemes so that people vote multiple times ('karousels').	444	27.5
Treatment #3	Public sector employees (school teachers, doctors, etc.) face pressure from the municipal administration to turn out.	382	23.6
Total		1,616	
Outcome #1:	How angry would you be that these elections might not be completely free and fair?		
Scale:	0 - Elections are free and fair 1 - Not at all angry 2 3 - Somewhat angry 4 5 - Very angry		
Outcome #2:	How likely would you be to participate in some kind of societal action to raise awareness about electoral integrity (signing a petition, joining a demonstration, etc.)?		
Scale:	1 - Not at all likely 2 3 - Somewhat likely 4 5 - Very likely		

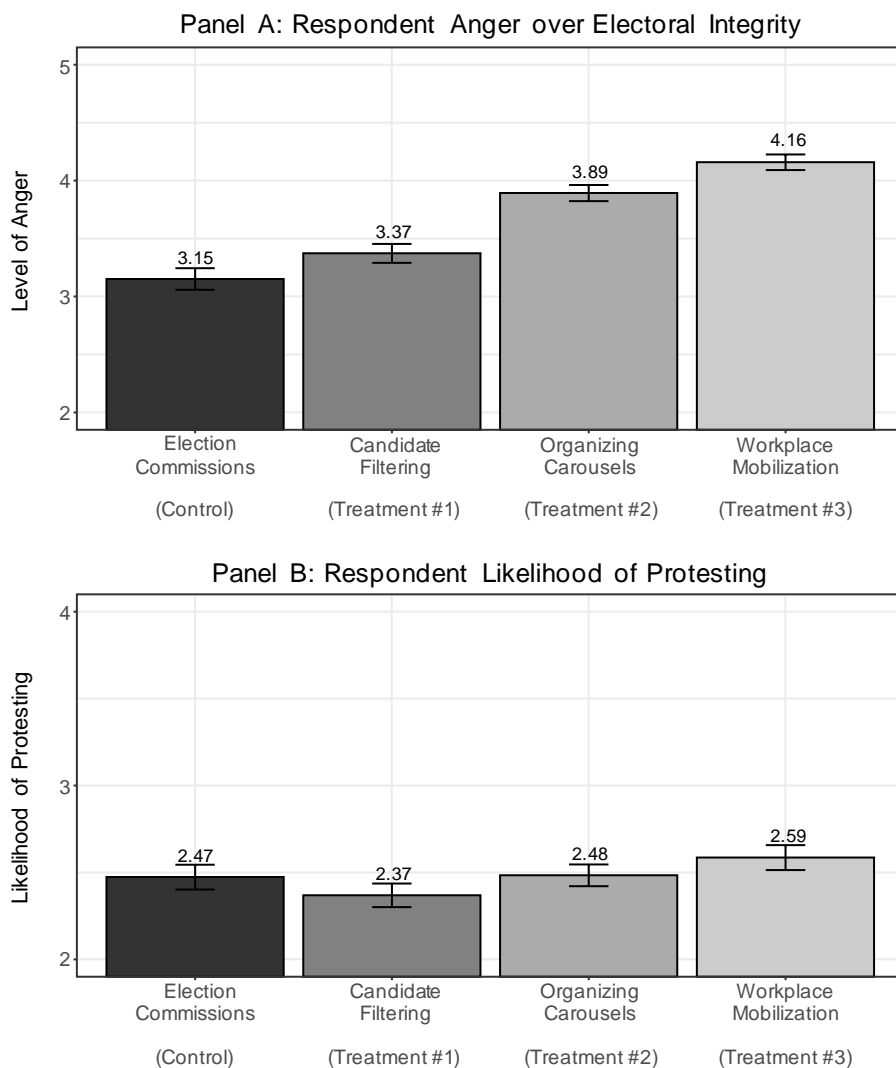
The experiment was placed on an omnibus survey conducted by Levada Market Research from May 24-29, 2019 that queried a representative sample of 1,616 Russian adults from 51 regions. Appendix Section D presents the Russian version and information on survey design, as well as results from two-sample difference-in-means and Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests showing randomization was correctly done. As an additional check, I show regression results below that include confounders in the analysis.

Experimental Results

The experimental results are shown graphically in Figure 1. In Panel A, the columns depict the mean level of anger (the 'emotional' outcome) that respondents expressed within each treatment group; the y-axis gives the five-point scale. Panel B shows the means for the 'behavioral' outcome regarding the willingness to join a collective protest, also broken

out by treatment group. Although both questions are measured on five-point scales, we should be careful not to directly compare treatment sizes: a one-unit change in one's level of anger may not be the same as a one-unit change in one's willingness to protest.

FIGURE 1: SURVEY EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE - PLOTS



Panel A shows the mean level of anger over electoral integrity per control or treatment group, with a value of 1 indicating Not at all Angry and a value of 5 indicating Very Angry. Those who saw the elections as free and fair were coded as 0. Panel B shows the mean likelihood of participating in a collective action in protest over electoral integrity, with 1 indicating Not Likely to Participate and 5 indicating Very Likely to Participate.

Panel A shows that all three examples of electoral manipulations elicit greater anger over the quality of the hypothetical elections than the control group. The differences

are large and statistically significant. Respondents react most negatively to Workplace Mobilization, which figures an entire point higher on the five-point scale than the Election Commissions control group. Importantly, Candidate Filtering ranks in between. Although respondents express some anger over an independent candidate being refused registration, the level is much lower than the two overt forms of fraud (Carousels and Workplace Mobilization). As hypothesized, this type of institutional manipulation resonates less strongly with Russian citizens.

Panel B looks at how that anger potentially translates into protest activity. We see a similar pattern to the results on anger, except the differences between the treatments are more noisily estimated. The difference between the outcome in Treatment #1 is statistically different (at the 95% level) from that in Treatment #3: voters informed that an independent candidate had been refused registration were less likely to express interest in protesting that manipulation than those informed that workers had been pressured to vote by their bosses. Interestingly, respondents informed about candidate filtering are also not more likely to protest candidate filtering when compared to those told about an increase in the number of precincts. This null finding indicates that candidate filtering does not anger or agitate people enough to take specific collective action, whereas other forms of electoral manipulation appear to have a stronger effect.

Table 2 shows regression results that statistically confirm the differences shown in Figure 1. Columns 1-4 analyze the ‘emotional’ outcome, while columns 5-9 analyze the ‘behavioral’ outcome. The models vary the comparison group: the first two columns in each group compare the three treatments to the Control Group, while the second two look at differences between the treatments themselves. The even numbered columns include a standard battery of demographic controls (gender, age, education, economic status, past turnout, town size, and employment status).

The results show that candidate filtering elicits the least negative emotional reaction.⁹

⁹Anger over electoral malpractice is positively correlated with willingness to join a col-

TABLE 2: SURVEY EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE - REGRESSION RESULTS

Outcome: Comparison Group:	Level of Anger				Likelihood of Protesting			
	Control		Treatment #3		Control		Treatment #3	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Treatment #1: Candidate Filtering	0.221** (0.113)	0.238** (0.113)	−0.786*** (0.106)	−0.783*** (0.106)	−0.105 (0.098)	−0.092 (0.097)	−0.217** (0.097)	−0.222** (0.097)
Treatment #2: Organizing Carousels	0.742*** (0.109)	0.752*** (0.109)	−0.266*** (0.103)	−0.265** (0.103)	0.010 (0.095)	0.028 (0.095)	−0.102 (0.095)	−0.099 (0.094)
Treatment #3: Workplace Mobilization	1.008*** (0.113)	1.020*** (0.114)			0.112 (0.098)	0.124 (0.098)		
Covariates	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	1,485	1,471	1,147	1,134	1,546	1,532	1,174	1,163

*** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1 The outcome variable in Columns 1-4 is the level of anger over electoral integrity, while that in Columns 5-8 is the likelihood of participating in a collective action in protest. Column headers denote whether the comparison group is the 'Control' (Election Commissions) or 'Treatment #3' (Workplace Mobilization). Models use OLS and vary the inclusion of covariates..

The differences between the treatments are statistically significant at conventional levels (Columns 1-4). In terms of willingness to protest, only the difference between the Candidate Filtering and the Workplace Mobilization treatments is large and precisely estimated (Columns 7-8). Respondents assigned to the Candidate Filtering Treatment react no differently than those from the Control Group or those informed about carousels being used. Candidate filtering is less likely to motivate respondents to join a collective action.

Although respondents did not express great interest in joining collective actions, electoral fraud can still generate other changes in political behavior. Voters who do not approve of electoral manipulation can express their dissatisfaction with fraudulent elections by staying away from the polls ([Simpser, 2012](#)). To test differential effects on voter turnout, I conducted another survey experiment through Levada Market Research from March 23-27, 2018 on a representative sample of 1,612 Russian adults.

lective action. Appendix Table D4 regresses Outcome #2 on Outcome #1, controlling for treatment group and demographics. Respondents who expressed anger over the electoral process were much more likely to indicate interest in joining a collective action.

The experiment hews very closely to that described in Table 1, but with two key changes that help unpack the mechanism behind the differential responses to electoral manipulations. As before, respondents were allocated into control and three treatment groups: Candidate Filtering, Workplace Mobilization, and Carousels. But this time, the person being refused registration is described as the "main opposition candidate." This wording explicitly raises the possibility of the selective registration strategy being used to restrict ballot access for a credible challenger to the regime, rather than just an electoral commission doing its job removing non-serious candidates. Even though the 'municipal administration' is not expressly included as the actor responsible for rejecting this candidate, respondents could easily assume that because the candidate was from the opposition, incumbent authorities gained electoral advantages from excluding him or her. In addition, the hypothetical election takes place at the national level, allowing us to partially unpack whether respondents view filtering in higher stakes elections differently. Full question wording and results are shown in Appendix Section E.

This second experiment confirms that candidate filtering produces less negative reaction amongst the Russian voting public. Respondents were more likely to vote in elections where a candidate has been refused registration (compared to the control group of elections with an increased number of precincts), than in elections where more blatant falsification and ballot rigging tactics were used. Interestingly, the fact that the candidate rejected was an open and credible challenger to the regime did not change the voting calculus of respondents. Respondents reacted to ambiguity over the way ballot access was managed, rather than the precise wording of the treatments used to describe whom the registration refusal targeted. Taken together, the two experiments suggest that voters respond differently to various types of electoral malpractice, with incumbents facing lower societal costs when they intervene earlier in the electoral process to tilt the playing field

¹⁰

¹⁰Strong regime supporters react most negatively to learning about electoral manip-

Qualitative Evidence about Societal and Legal Costs

The challenges of mobilizing popular anger around candidate filtering are made clear from several high-profile cases in Russia. Candidates have little recourse to contest rejections, and rarely do protests or legal challenges actually achieve a reversal of the decision, much less punish electoral commissions. Russia has experienced its share of large-scale protests in response to overt electoral fraud, but because registration rejections happen long before election day and without accompanying viral videos, they fail to offer such a visible trigger event to push demonstrators onto the streets.

Take the example of Alexey Navalny, Russia's most prominent oppositionist who built a grassroots campaign to challenge Vladimir Putin in the 2018 presidential elections. Armed with the required 15,000 signatures and 500 endorsements, Navalny had his registration rejected by the Central Election Commission. Five years earlier, he had been convicted of what is widely believed to be a fabricated case of financial fraud, which prevented him from standing for office. After his rejection, Navalny struggled to mobilize nationwide protests to place pressure on the government to reverse its decision. In the end, Putin coasted easily to re-election and no election officials faced any repercussions for disqualifying Navalny's candidacy.¹¹

ulations (as per [Reuter and Szakonyi N.d.](#)), but Appendix Section D3 shows that both opposition and regime supporters rank candidate filtering as less problematic than the other two electoral manipulations.

¹¹Similar tactics are used during gubernatorial races, mainly the notorious municipal filter in place since 2012 ([Goode, 2013](#)). Instead of acquiring signatures from voters, candidates must court municipal deputies, the majority of whom are loyal to the regime. The filter was used to disqualify popular independent candidates in Moscow and Primorsky Krai. Meduza. "Russia's 'Municipal Filter' Locks Out The Candidate Who Probably Won Primorye's Invalidated September Gubernatorial Election." November 20, 2018.

A similar situation unfolded during the 2012 Arkhangelsk mayoral election. Four years prior, popular independent candidate Larisa Bazanova narrowly lost a disputed recount during a race for the same office. In her next bid in 2012, her candidacy was rejected by the local election commission for having too many invalid signatures.¹² Although some expected her to mount protests to challenge the decision,¹³ ultimately she decided to appeal to the district court. Of the four candidates whose candidacies were rejected, only Bazanova filed suit, but in the end, again her candidacy was rejected.

Finally, controversy erupted in summer 2019 over the rejection of 19 opposition candidates to the Moscow City Duma because of signature irregularities allegedly found on their registration forms. Thousands of protesters took to the streets, demanding the election commission reverse its ruling and admit the candidates. At first glance, these events perhaps run counter to the survey results: Muscovites risked prison terms by protesting.

But several caveats are in order. First, many of the protestors' slogans went far beyond candidate rejections. News coverage highlighted protestors' anger over economic issues, restriction of political freedoms, and especially police brutality during the suppression of unsanctioned demonstrations. Violent videos and images of riot police arresting thou-

sands did more to generate widespread anger than discontent over the application of electoral law. Candidate registrations may have sparked the move to the streets but the tinders were dry. Representative polls also found minority support among Muscovites supporting protestors' calls to reverse the rejections; the majority was either against or indifferent to the protests.¹⁴ Second, incumbent authorities refused to make concessions; several of the rejected candidates appealed, but saw their cases denied.

This outcome is tragically common. Using data on disputes over candidate registra-

¹²Molchano, Eduard. "Prostaya Arifmetika." Kasparov.Ru, January 18, 2013.

¹³Exo Severa. "Nesostojavshiysya Kandidat V Mjery Arhangel'ska Larisa Bazanova Prizvala Gorozhan Na Miting. .. No Sama Ne Yavilas"" January 18, 2012.

¹⁴RBK. "Tret' Moskvichey Polozhitel'no Otneslis' K Akciyam Protesta" August 6, 2019.

tions in Russia, [Popova \(2012\)](#) finds little evidence that the legal system protected candidates against incumbents using electoral commissions to constrain competition. [Bækken \(2015\)](#) also cites interviews decrying the courts' independence and the chances of rejected candidates overturning the decisions of electoral commissions. Few if any instances exist of commissions facing criminal punishment for their decisions to reject candidates.

Cross-nationally high-profile registration refusals handed down to national opposition figures rarely spark widespread outrage. In Iraq, the disqualification of hundreds of candidates led a key Sunni political party to protest by boycotting the 2010 general elections; however, the party changed course and ultimately participated after realizing the ineffectiveness of the protest action ([Frankel, 2010](#)). Officials in Azerbaijan, Ghana, and Cameroon have all used registration refusals to stem opposition ambitions without paying high political costs ([LaPorte, 2015](#)).¹⁵ Some governments do back down and reinstate opposition candidates after initially refusing them, but only after threats of mounting violence in the streets force them to change course ([Harish and Toha, 2019](#)).

Competitiveness and Electoral Manipulations

Candidate filtering can be a uniquely effective electoral manipulation that insulates incumbents against popular and legal exposure if it is discovered. Hypothesis 2 argues that these traits enable incumbents to deploy filtering strategically to win close, competitive elections. To test this, I collected data from the Russian Central Electoral Commission (CEC) on 106,236 mayoral candidates from 13,616 municipalities in 84 Russian regions over 2005-2019. Russian mayors are powerful local politicians with the authority to set budget allocations and policy priorities. Municipal spending accounts for 7% of Russian GDP ([Szakonyi, N.d.](#)). Mayors are far from the most prestigious position within the Russian government, but thousands of candidates contest these races because of the real

¹⁵BBC. "Ghana's Nana Rawlings 'Shocked' at Election Ban." October 19, 2012.

influence offered.¹⁶

To register, mayoral candidates submit some combination of: an official statement; documents confirming their citizenship, education, wealth, employment history, and party membership; information on campaign finances; and a list of signatures from local citizens supporting their candidacy. These rules vary across regions. Regional governments set their own rules for gubernatorial, mayoral, and local elections. Thresholds vary for the total number of signatures required, the number of incorrect signatures allowed, and size of candidate deposits, among other requirements (Lyubarev, 2011).

To measure whether or not a municipal candidate was rejected by an election commission, I code a binary indicator for each candidacy based on a field in the data that denotes registration status.¹⁷ Bækken (2015) gives anecdotal evidence of the official reasons often handed down in Russia, noting that most violations appear to fall in one of three categories: signatures found invalid, registration incorrectly filled out, or violations of electoral law occurring during the campaign.¹⁸ As acknowledged above, some part

¹⁶Since the mid-2000s, many regions have used a ‘manager’ model where municipality chief executives are appointed by a local commission, rather than being popularly elected. I include region fixed effects to control for this selection.

¹⁷The CEC does not share why registrations were rejected, only indicating whether registration was denied. The results are robust to subsetting to candidates who were rejected outright rather than booted just before the election (Appendix Table B5).

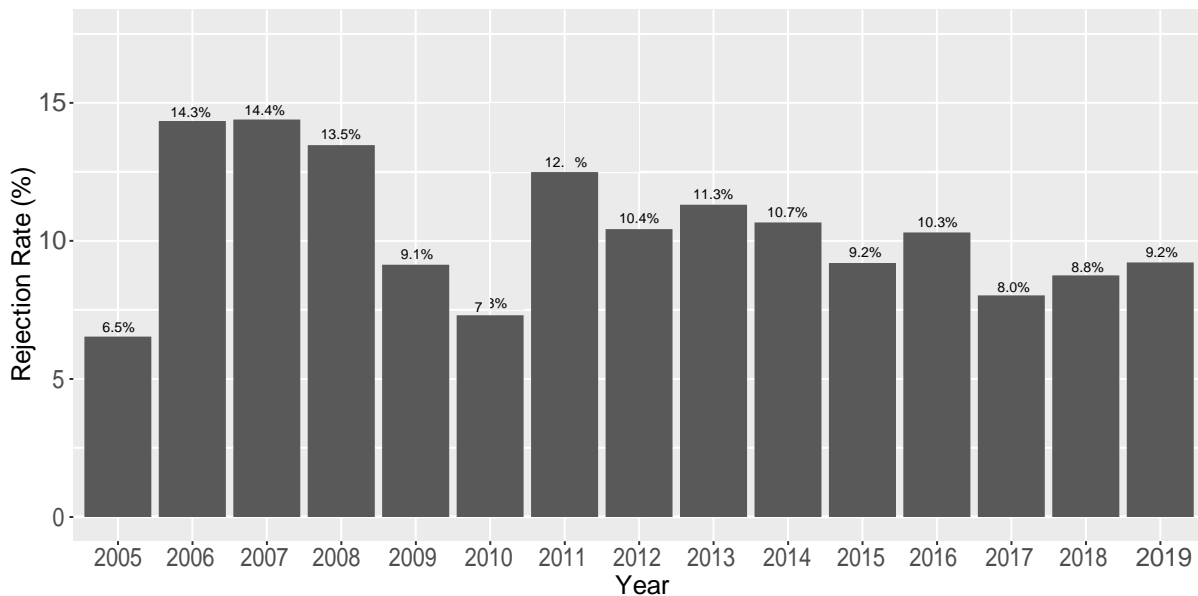
¹⁸In some areas, incumbents may act early on to co-opt or intimidate serious challengers away from registering and running for office. This practice introduces some degree of selection bias: data are missing on any candidates that otherwise would have run but were blocked long before they reached the registration stage. We cannot know which potential candidates declined running because of co-optation or intimidation. Instead, I include region and municipality type fixed effects in all models to account for the fact that such intimidation practices may be stronger in regions and especially larger cities with

of these rejections are completely legitimate and used to prevent non-serious candidates from running. One of this paper's central empirical aims is to investigate whether rejections in Russia are systematically being used to repress opposition candidates, and if so, the conditions under which this strategy is deployed.

Over the period of 2005-2019, 10% of all candidates were rejected by election commissions. Figure 2 shows that rejections spiked in 2006-2007 before gradually trending downwards by 2010. Instructively, this was a time of party consolidation when the ruling party regime faced few threats to its moves to consolidate power. However, the rate spiked upwards in 2011 just as the popular protests swelled, new faces helped resurrect the non-systemic opposition, and ruling party candidates saw intense political competition on numerous flanks. These over-time dynamics suggest the rejections correlate with broader national political dynamics.

Are candidate registration procedures being used to block opponents from challenging the regime? To answer this, I first coded whether candidates were members of any of the four big political parties, i.e. United Russia (the ruling party), or the Communist Party, Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), or Just Russia (the systemic opposition); ran as an independent without political affiliation; or as a member of a smaller political grouping (the residual category). The Russian government has invested considerable resources in not only developing the ruling party United Russia, but also coopting and shaping the development of systemic opposition parties ([Reuter and Robertson, 2015](#); [Reuter and Szakonyi, 2019](#)). Political parties that can win seats to the federal State Duma also have to collect fewer signatures to register in lower level elections. These efforts allow the regime to better manage potential challengers and channel their antagonism to more developed political machines. Moreover, this selection bias should make it harder to uncover results showing stronger candidates are more often officially rejected, since some portion of this high-quality group has already been removed prior to the registration process. We should then interpret the point estimates for these variables as a lower bound.

FIGURE 2: REJECTION RATE OVER TIME



This figure shows the percentage of candidates that were rejected in municipal elections each year from 2005-2019.

the regime within officially sanctioned political organizations that can be bought off or cajoled.

As described above, independents are among the most serious, viable challengers to the ruling party due to their financial resources, education, and political experience. Appendix Section B8 compares candidate viability across candidates with different political affiliations. For those allowed to run, independents win greater vote share and elections at much higher rates than candidates from opposition parties. The threat they constitute may drive the regime to selectively target them during the registration process.

Breaking down rejections by party illuminates these dynamics. Table 3 first shows the number of mayoral candidates running for office across Russia from each of the four national political parties, smaller parties (aggregated), or running as independents. We see that United Russia fields candidates in 89% of mayoral elections countrywide, beat out only by independent candidates, who contest 96% of all elections. The other opposition parties, systemic or otherwise, participate at much lower rates. Political parties can field

only one candidate per race, while there can be multiple independents in an election.

More interesting is the rate of rejection, which is much higher for independents. Over 1 in 8 independent mayoral candidates see their registrations refused by election commissions, compared to 0.03% for United Russia (UR) candidates. Only 68 of the over 23,000 UR candidates were rejected over the period. This difference is staggering. Independents outnumber UR candidates by roughly 3 to 1, but their rejection rate is 465 to 1. Systemic opposition parties experience much fewer rejections. These numbers suggest large, politically motivated discrepancies in the way candidates achieve ballot access.¹⁹

TABLE 3: REJECTED CANDIDATES BY PARTY

Party	Num. Elections	(% of Total)	Num. Candidates	Num. Rejected	Rejected (%)
Independent	24,865	95.9	67,578	9,461	14
Communist Party	1,257	4.8	1,781	177	9.9
United Russia	23,144	89.2	23,245	68	0.3
LDPR	7,206	27.8	7,234	275	3.8
Smaller Parties	2,994	11.5	3,002	130	4.3
Just Russia	3,390	13.1	3,396	120	3.5
Total	25,935		106,236	10,231	9.6

This table shows the participation in mayoral elections broken down by party (rows) and registration status. Columns 1 and 2 denote the number (and percentage of total) elections in which a candidate from that party participated. The right hand columns show the number of candidates that attempted registration and the number (and percentage) that were rejected by election commissions.

To test whether rejections are used strategically during competitive elections, I first focus on elections where the regime feels particularly vulnerable to strong challengers. One measure is whether the sitting incumbent runs for re-election. Open contests with-

¹⁹Regions set different thresholds for the number of signatures required from independent candidates, who in most if not all cases have to collect more signatures than candidates affiliated with parties. Differences in rejection rates could in theory then reflect problems independents face complying with the more arduous requirements, rather than overt political discrimination. To address this possibility, below I rely on alternate measures of candidate viability and electoral vulnerability and run robustness checks showing rejections are based on political factors rather than candidate incompetence or resource scarcity.

TABLE 4: CANDIDATE DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	Registered Candidates	Rejected Candidates
(1) Number of Candidates	95,909	10,231
(2) Age (mean)	46.1	45.8
(3) Female (%)	26.9	21.4
(4) College Education (%)	68.5	72.5
(5) Businessperson (%)	12	18.2
(6) Num. Previous Campaigns (mean)	0.6	0.5
(7) Num. Previous Wins (mean)	0.2	0.1
(8) Incumbent (%)	16	3.2

This table gives basic descriptive statistics about the individual candidates that either successfully registered (left column) or were rejected by the election commission (right column).

out incumbent participation create a more level playing field and may attract stronger candidates. Regimes then go to extra lengths to help their replacement candidate and restrict ballot access for opposition figures. I capture this electoral vulnerability by coding a binary indicator for each mayoral candidacy if the sitting incumbent did not participate in that election, i.e. there was no incumbency advantage at work. This variable ‘Open Seat’ takes a 1 if the incumbent *did not* run for re-election, and 0 otherwise. The absence of an incumbent running could open up the playing field for newcomers and increase the probability that a challenger could win office.²⁰

Next, governments may be concerned about viable challengers that can attract greater public support and run stronger campaigns. First, I code the highest level of education that each candidate received. More educated candidates pose a bigger threat to their regime, due to their higher competency and organizational ability (Besley, Montalvo, and Reynal-Querol, 2011). Secondary education is very widespread in Russia, with 98% of all candidates having finished high school. Instead, I code a binary indicator for whether a candidate had a college degree; roughly two-thirds of candidates had this level of education. Surveys suggest voters rank education near the top in terms of desirable character-

²⁰Appendix Section B6 shows robustness checks using the incumbent’s vote share in the previous election as an additional measure of vulnerability.

istics in their political leaders; more educated candidates may enjoy electoral advantages in convincing voters they will make more competent leaders.²¹

Next, I use information on previous place of work to code whether candidates had private sector experience before running for office. Careers in business offer financial resources and economic autonomy to challenge the regime (Reuter and Szakonyi, 2019). An incumbent government might fear well-heeled challengers who can afford the substantial campaign costs and attract wider support given their outsider status. This coding of businesspeople uses keywords to capture firm directors, individual entrepreneurs, and top-level managers who work in private, and not state-owned, firms (Szakonyi, 2020). Finally, I use data on all municipal, regional, and federal elections to identify whether mayoral candidates had ever previously won election to a different government position. I match individual candidates to previous elections using their full name, birth year, and region. For each candidate, I create a count of the elections they had won, as well as the office pursued. In all, the three measures capture the campaign advantages held by certain candidates.

Though detailed polls and actual popularity measures are not available, on average candidates with governing experience and more money to spend tend to attract more followers. The data on electoral experiences can also be used to test the alternate hypothesis that rejections are being correctly handed down to individuals not complying with electoral law. For example, some candidates may not have the resources to collect correct

²¹In 2019, a representative TSIOM omnibus poll asked 1,600 Russians to list the most important traits they look for in public officials (up to six from a list of 23). Nearly one-third (32%) selected education, placing it in third behind honesty (53%) and the ability to listen to others (36%). This preference for education did not vary across respondent age, income, or residence in rural versus urban areas, though women did rank education higher than men. The data and survey methodology can be found at “Grazdanin i Lider: Glavnyie Trebovaniye i Kachestva” TSIOM. February 21, 2019.

signatures or a proper understanding of electoral law. I count the number of past successful campaigns each candidate had conducted previously to differentiate between serious and non-serious candidates. Table 4 shows descriptive statistics comparing registered versus rejected candidates, which I next explore in more detail using regressions..

Empirical Results

Hypothesis 2 holds that rejections will be more likely when the incumbent government senses electoral vulnerability or the presence of credible challengers. To test this, I show a series of regressions where the outcome variable is a binary indicator for whether a candidacy is rejected by an election commission during the registration process. The unit of analysis is the individual candidacy.²² To ease explication, I employ linear probability models; the results are robust to using logit models in Appendix Table B7.

Institutional features strongly suggest the need for a fixed effect approach to capture variation across regions, years and municipality types. Regions differ over whether they use elections to select municipal chief executives and the specific procedures required to run for office. Russia also experienced political and economic shocks nationwide (financial crisis, popular protests, etc.) that could affect the willingness and capacity of local commissions to block candidacies. Finally, Russian municipalities fall into four subcategories based on population size: municipal rayons and city okrugs (upper tier) and rural and urban settlements (lower tier). Standard errors are clustered on the election level.

Table 5 shows two sets of regressions. In Columns 1-3, the full sample of candidacies is used. The reference category for the party membership variables is affiliation with UR. In Columns 4-6, I restrict the analysis to only opposition and independent (non-regime) candidates. Since UR retains majority control of subnational governments and electoral

²²The sample shrinks by 6% due to missingness in the education variable. See Appendix Table B1 for a robustness check on the full sample that excludes education.

TABLE 5: CANDIDATE REJECTIONS

	Candidate Had Registration With UR Cands.			Rejected Without UR Cands.		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Age (log)	0.007 (0.004)	0.007* (0.004)	0.007 (0.004)	0.010** (0.005)	0.011** (0.005)	0.011** (0.005)
Female	-0.014*** (0.002)	-0.014*** (0.002)	-0.014*** (0.002)	-0.021*** (0.003)	-0.021*** (0.003)	-0.021*** (0.003)
College Education	0.008*** (0.002)	0.008*** (0.002)	0.007*** (0.002)	0.012*** (0.003)	0.012*** (0.003)	0.012*** (0.003)
Businessperson	0.017*** (0.003)	0.017*** (0.003)	0.017*** (0.003)	0.012*** (0.004)	0.012*** (0.004)	0.012*** (0.004)
Num. Previous Campaigns	-0.002** (0.001)	-0.002*** (0.001)	-0.001** (0.001)	-0.002*** (0.001)	-0.002*** (0.001)	-0.002** (0.001)
Num. Previous Wins	-0.010*** (0.002)	-0.009*** (0.002)	-0.018*** (0.002)	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.040*** (0.005)
Candidate was Incumbent	-0.016*** (0.002)	-0.010*** (0.003)	-0.009*** (0.003)	-0.049*** (0.005)	-0.043*** (0.005)	-0.044*** (0.005)
Open Seat		0.010*** (0.003)	0.010*** (0.003)		0.014*** (0.003)	0.014*** (0.003)
LDPR	-0.001 (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)			
Independent	0.127*** (0.002)	0.129*** (0.002)	0.125*** (0.002)	0.133*** (0.004)	0.133*** (0.004)	0.128*** (0.004)
Communist Party	-0.006 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.004)	-0.006 (0.004)	-0.006 (0.004)	-0.006 (0.005)
Smaller Parties	0.010 (0.009)	0.012 (0.009)	0.015 (0.010)	0.002 (0.009)	0.001 (0.010)	0.003 (0.010)
Just Russia	-0.003 (0.004)	0.00001 (0.004)	0.002 (0.005)	-0.003 (0.005)	-0.003 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.005)
LDPR * Num. Previous Wins			-0.019*** (0.005)			
Independent * Num. Previous Wins			0.022*** (0.004)			0.044*** (0.006)
Communist Party * Num. Previous Wins			-0.003 (0.006)			0.018** (0.008)
Smaller Parties * Num. Previous Wins			-0.022* (0.012)			0.002 (0.013)
Just Russia * Num. Previous Wins			-0.013* (0.008)			0.008 (0.009)
Region, Year, Municipality Type Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Outcome Mean	0.077	0.077	0.077	0.098	0.098	0.098
Observations	99,350	99,350	99,350	76,713	76,713	76,713

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1 The outcome variable is a binary indicator for whether a candidate was rejected by an election commission. Columns 1-3 include the entire sample of candidates that attempted to register and run for mayor in their municipality. Columns 4-6 exclude all candidates from the United Russia ruling party. All models include region, year and municipality type fixed effects and cluster standard errors on election.

commissions across Russia during the period, we are potentially most interested in understanding how this regime decides which candidates should be prevented from accessing the ballot and contesting its hold on power. Analyzing just this pool of challengers, do candidate viability and electoral vulnerability still predict registration refusals? For these models, the party reference category is LDPR, a systemic opposition party that occupies a median position with regards to ideology and viability.

Several interesting findings are apparent. First, rejections are more likely to occur when a sitting incumbent declines to seek re-election. This ‘open seat’ signals a more competitive playing field where the incumbent government’s advantages are diminished. Institutional manipulations such as candidate filtering help the regime ensure that replacement candidates are able to protect its hold on power. Robustness checks in Appendix Table B6 confirm that elections with weaker incumbents, as measured by vote share in the previous election, are more likely to see candidates repressed.

Second, we see that more viable candidates experience more registration rejections. Candidates who have completed a college degree (signaling competence), worked in an upper-level management position in the private sector (signaling financial resources), and declined party affiliation (signaling autonomy) are all more likely to be rejected. These point estimates are all statistically significant and substantively large. For example, businesspeople see a 24% higher rate of rejection relative to the benchmark mean. Independent candidates are rejected more than twice as often.²³

Finally, the effect of having served in elected office prior to running for mayor is particularly important. On one hand, incumbent candidates are far less likely to be rejected.

²³Female candidates are less likely to be rejected, possibly because male candidates view female challengers as weaker, and use institutional rules to give themselves advantages in such contests (Fréchette, Maniquet, and Morelli, 2008). Since women in Russia are less likely to own or run businesses at the time of their candidacy, they may also have fewer financial resources to fund their campaign.

This is intuitive: these politicians have direct influence on the composition and behavior of electoral commissions, and can ensure that their applications sail through. But rejection rates increase dramatically for independent candidates that have won elections previously, whether at the municipal or the regional level (see Appendix Table B4 for an analysis of different political records). The interactions in Columns 3 and 6 between being an independent and having won office before are both statistically significant and of a large magnitude. Each additional previous win increases the probability of rejection among independents by roughly 20% (four percentage points). Regimes go to considerable lengths to prevent independent candidates from running who have demonstrated records of successful political campaigns and governing experience.

Yet systemic opposition candidates who have won elections before are not more likely to be disqualified. One explanation is that the regime can rely on other methods to co-opt members of the systemic opposition, defanging the threat they could pose to the regime. The ruling party in Russia needs opponents to ensure the legitimacy of its electoral victories. Voters may refuse to turnout if they do not see even superficial alternatives to the regime. [Smyth and Turovsky \(2018, 196\)](#) argue that the systemic opposition parties “create the illusion of authentic representation of different political interests and procedural fairness.” Independent candidates are not bound to party structures and may be more likely to rebuff the regime’s attempts to dictate their political role.

In the Appendix, I show modeling approaches that vary both regressors and samples. First, Appendix Section B1 shows the results are robust to including a count of past rejections, some of which are due to real legal reasons and thus capture candidate seriousness. The effects on independents and previous experience are not being driven by incompetent candidates who constantly file low quality registration attempts. It strains reason that strong, well-funded, and politically experienced candidates experience difficulty with electoral forms on a systematic basis across regions and years. Next, restricting the analysis to only independents shows that the main measures of candidate viability

and regime vulnerability still predict rejections (Appendix Section B8). The results are also robust to including municipality covariates (Appendix Section B3). Overall, there is strong evidence that Russian officials abuse the registration process to filter out threatening candidates, particularly when their chances of losing power are the greatest.

Finally, I examine whether candidate filtering affects how elections are decided. Election-level regressions in Appendix Section C examine three outcome variables: turnout, UR candidate victory, and UR candidate's vote share. The main predictor is a count of rejected independents who had won office previously. The additional focus on more credible challengers running in competitive elections is intended to capture manipulations designed specifically to improve the ruling party's electoral chances. For each election, I also include a count of the total (rejected and accepted) independent candidates to control for the pool of potential such candidates that could have been rejected.²⁴ All models include controls for municipality size, the total number of candidates, the number of precincts in the election, the standard deviation in precinct population size within each election, and region, year, and municipality type fixed effects.

Rejecting strong candidates helps the ruling party win elections. When such credible candidates are rejected, ruling party candidates earn larger vote shares and are more likely to win election. However, turnout drops, potentially an indicator of voters staying home because the elections are pre-ordained. Taken together, these results suggest institutional manipulations are a way for incumbents to maintain real electoral advantages. Filtering out strong candidacies gives voters less choice, and although some respond by abstaining, those costs are not significant enough to jeopardize incumbents' hold on power.

²⁴This variable functions like a denominator. For example, in one election, three independent candidates with previous wins ran, and one was rejected. A value of 3 enters the specification as the variable "Independents with Prev. Wins: All", and a value of 1 enters as "Independents with Prev. Wins: # Rejected."

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that certain types of electoral malpractice are more appealing to incumbents than others. Voters react less negatively to candidate filtering than they do to fraud, and there is little evidence incumbents later face a high legal price. This lack of constraints partly frees incumbents' hands to strategically use filtering during races where they sense electoral vulnerability or are challenged by well-resourced, experienced rivals. Even when elections are competitive and political outcomes uncertain, incumbents need not shy away from committing electoral malpractice, particularly if it involves manipulating institutions. Much of this damage can be inflicted long before election day, which then handicaps rivals' ability to mobilize supporters around a verifiable electoral injustice. Filtering thus allows regimes to pre-empt the emergence of strong foes by preventing them from winning lower level elections and building upwards momentum.²⁵

If the costs are relatively low, why don't incumbents rely exclusively on hard-to-detect strategies, such as candidate filtering, to tip elections in their favor? Ordering only one item off the menu of manipulation may have its own drawbacks. First, many citizens, even in autocracies, come to expect at least some degree of competitiveness during elections and a superficial commitment to democratic principles (Norris, 1999; Letsa and Wilfahrt, 2018). Filtering out all unwanted candidates severely constrains voters' choices and produces blowback if elections are too stage managed. The analysis suggests turnout falls when competition is restricted. Regimes may be concerned that tampering too much will delegitimize elections to the point that no one participates. Expanding the definition of electoral malpractice to comprise less detectable forms of manipulation opens up new questions about how incumbents can rig elections and prevent alternation in power

²⁵Not all candidates being targeted by selective registration may be opposed to the regime, but instead be trying to displace specific incumbents and take power within the system. Candidate filtering is one of many tools for incumbents to protect their positions.

without high paying political costs (Reuter and Szakonyi, N.d.).

Further analysis at the cross-national level should investigate whether the same patterns hold for competitive national elections. Russia is just one of many nondemocracies where political pressure is regularly exerted on election management bodies (Norris and Nai, 2017). Candidate filtering should be especially prominent in countries where judicial independence is under threat, since regimes can more easily rely on the co-opted courts to enforce these biased registration decisions. It is true that in Russia over the last 20 years, authoritarianism has been greatly consolidated: the United Russia party has asserted a dominant grip on political institutions, some international electoral monitors have been curbed, and though the 2011-2012 election cycle sparked nationwide protests, other problematic contests did not generate such outrage. By decreasing the opportunities citizens have to publicly express their discontent over electoral fraud, rising authoritarianism changes the incentives for incumbents to manipulate elections.

When the lens is shifted to subnational politics, Russia shares more similarities with other competitive authoritarian countries, in turn increasing this paper's generalizability. Russian voters have a greater ability to choose mayoral alternatives to United Russia; independent, non-regime affiliated candidates won 28% of elections. The ruling party cannot indiscriminately co-opt the electoral process because it can be voted out. Next, international election monitors are less active during subnational elections in countries worldwide, making Russia less of an outlier in having sidelined them during national contests. Instead, the main constraints on engaging in subnational electoral fraud are domestic: public opinion, opposition parties, local monitors, and judicial bodies. Social media has improved the coverage of electoral malfeasance (Reuter and Szakonyi, 2015), while political protests in Russia's regions occur with some regularity (Lankina and Voznaya, 2015). Perhaps because of these similarities, the use of candidate filtering at the mayoral level in Russia occurs at a similar rate to national elections worldwide.²⁶

²⁶The National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) 5.0 Dataset codes

One scope condition bounding the subnational analysis's relevance for national contests relates to the salience and polarization surrounding the electoral contest. The survey experiments show that citizens do express anger over candidate filtering; the intensity just lags that elicited by other strategies. Incumbents that consistently abuse registration procedures risk citizens updating and learning that institutions are transparently crooked. The more well-known and oppositionist a challenger is, the more difficult it will be for incumbents to sideline him or her and prevent the mobilization of a principled, angry movement calling for greater electoral integrity. That this paper analyzes candidate filtering at the city level should be kept in mind here. Smaller-stakes elections not only feature lower-profile politicians, but sometimes can divulge into local power struggles, rather than open ideological conflict and calls for ousting regimes. We should expect candidate filtering to cause even less outrage in society when the rivals targeted are ideologically aligned with the government overseeing the registration process.

Because citizens might not be aware of the abuses of power occurring during the electoral process, strengthening independent media would help raise awareness that the facade of institutional integrity is being undermined. In some countries, there may be a disconnect between the general public's understanding of elections and the reality behind the scenes. Newer forms of authoritarianism rely on controlling information rather than outright violent repression ([Treisman, 2018](#)). Candidate filtering may be akin to gerrymandering: a significant body of research and coverage is necessary to expose the

whether "opposition leaders were prevented from running and contesting" ([Hyde and Marinov, 2012](#)). From 1945-2015, 19% of national elections saw the opposition excluded, with that number dropping to 10% for those held since 2000. Interestingly, 24% of Russian mayoral elections saw at least one candidate rejected. When more viable candidates are considered (those with a business background or previous electoral victories), rejections occurred in 5-9% of elections. Russian authorities do not appear to rely heavily on filtering to skew results in their favor in comparison with their counterparts worldwide.

problem. Beyond judicial reform and increasing information, professionalizing electoral commissions would place autonomous bureaucrats on registration front lines, and perhaps lead to less politically motivated decisions ([Hyde and Pallister, 2015](#); [Herron, Boyko, and Thunberg, 2017](#)).

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