

# The Complicated Views of Pro- and Anti-Putin Protestors

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in [Campaigns and elections](#), [Comparative Politics](#), [Protest](#)



This is a guest post by [Regina Smyth](#), a political scientist at Indiana University, and [Anton Sobolev](#) and [Irina Soboleva](#), Research Associates in the Laboratory for Political Studies at the Higher School of Economics, Moscow Russian Federation. All views expressed below are those of the authors. Previous posts by Smyth or about her research are [here](#).

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Most observers of Russian politics predicted that the challenge to the Putin regime would come from fissures among rival groups of the ruling elite. Yet, it was Russia's voters who cracked the "tandem rule" in the form of votes against the ruling party, Endinaya Rossiya (ER), in December 2011. In the months following Duma elections, the voters' significant expression of national opposition redounded through the political system. Tens of thousands of citizens demonstrated against the regime in major cities across Russia provoking

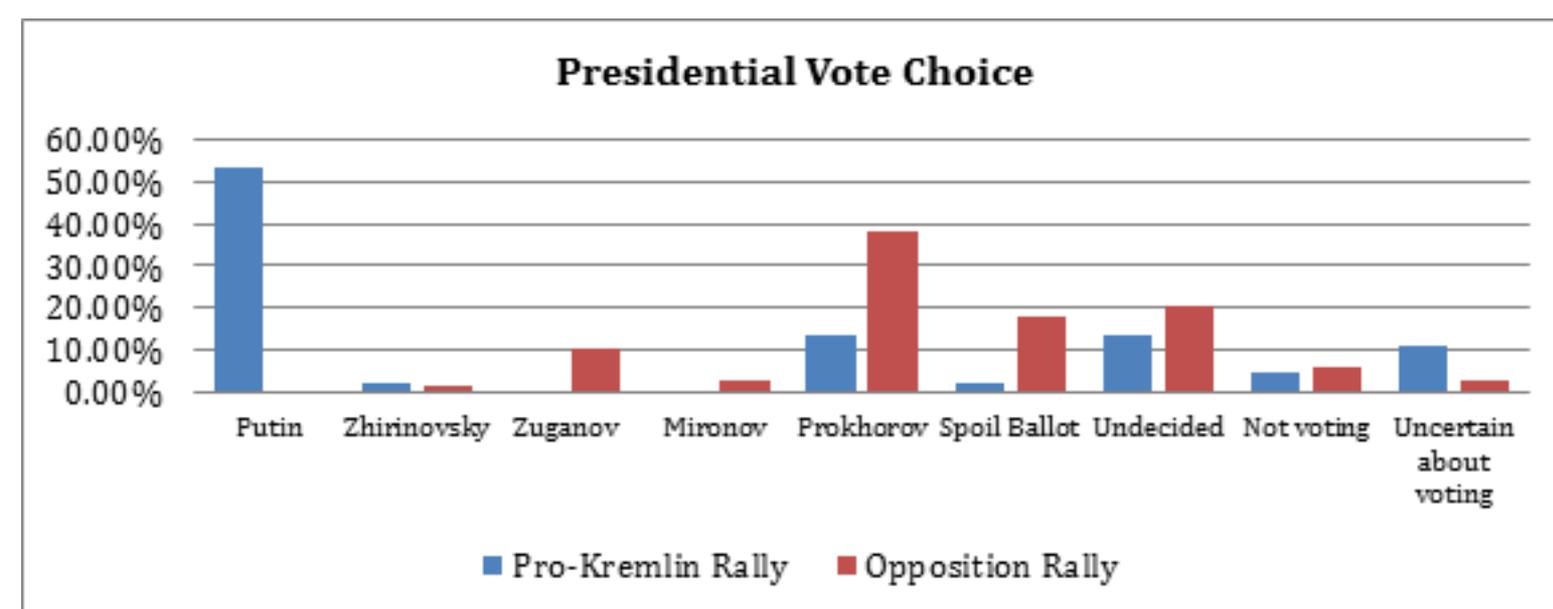
significant institutional change. Subsequently, candidates to regional and local electoral offices in March 4 elections have abandoned ER, masking themselves as independents. Competition for mayoral offices has increased in a number of large cities. The Kremlin has removed unpopular ER incumbents from office in an effort to demonstrate the government's responsiveness to mass discontent.

In Sunday's contest, Mr. Putin will most likely win the support of the majority of voters, particularly given the lack of viable opposition. However, votes for Putin should not be interpreted as unquestioning support for the regime or the new President. A recent pilot study of Moscow protestors on both sides of the regime divide shows that even among pro-Putin demonstrators there is significant skepticism about the regime, Mr. Putin and policy.

Internet footage shows pro-Putin demonstrators either incapable or unwilling to express independent political opinions. Media reports and political analysts often dismiss these rallies, characterizing pro-Putin demonstrators as unthinking loyalists or apathetic citizens. Our preliminary data show that this characterization is simplistic. Putin supporters recognize the role of falsification in the parliamentary elections and expect falsification in the presidential elections. Moreover, a significant proportion of demonstrators blame the government for electoral fraud.

As a group, these participants expressed different political views than anti-government protestors. While anti-government protestors see the country headed in the wrong direction and support greater spending on social programs, pro-Putin demonstrators are more positive about the direction of change and are unwilling to make a trade-off between defense spending and social spending. Likewise, while anti-regime protestors are more likely to attribute protest to regime actions and Putin himself, the pro-Putin protestors are more likely to attribute protest to discontent brought on by the global economic crisis. Yet, there is significant variation in these opinions as well.

The most immediate result in the survey is the response to the question of vote choice in Sunday's presidential election reported in the figure below. While anti-Putin protestors are clear in their rejection of the former President, they are not united in support of a single opposition candidate or strategy of expressing their discontent. Yet, perhaps more surprisingly, participants in pro-Putin rallies are not united behind Mr. Putin. As the figure shows, just over 53 percent of rally participants plan to vote for Mr. Putin. This result underscores the tension within Russian society – both the growing skepticism about Mr. Putin and his regime as well as the significant support that he still garners among likely voters.



Given these divisions, what will happen in the coming weeks? National polls consistently show that more than seventy percent of Russians believe that the former President will recapture his office in the first round of elections, with some electoral fraud. Yet, this does not ensure growing protest actions. There is no doubt

that anti-Putin protestors have come to believe in the efficacy of protest as a political tool. The great majority attended several protests, demonstrating their sustained support for the action. Almost all of them say that they will continue to protest in sanctioned actions. However, just over thirty percent would participate in unsanctioned protests and the new Moscow administration has been slow to offer permits to the opposition. This result suggests that if city officials refuse to grant permits to protest actions, those actions are likely to be much smaller than we have seen in the past two months. If permits are granted, then protests will be sustained.

These data need to be interpreted with caution. They result from a pilot study, and the sample is quite small. Moreover, these respondents reflect the opinions of citizens of the capital and may not reflect the support for the Putin regime across Russia. Still, these findings underscore the growing discontent with the regime in both the pro- and anti-Putin camps, highlighting the pressures on Mr. Putin to change course and either pursue the reforms proposed in the interval between elections or embark on a political crackdown that has been hinted at in the last days leading up to the election.