

Vote, Spoil, Rally: Opposition's Duma Choices

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It's a hard time for opposition voters in Russia.

With the State Duma elections just two weeks away, it would seem that voters unhappy with United Russia will soon have the chance to register their discontent.

But with victory by the ruling party on Dec. 4 considered a foregone conclusion and electoral rules manipulated to prevent independent groups from even getting on the ballot, expressing dissatisfaction at the polls is a tricky task.

Dissenters are increasingly forced to seek loopholes to make their voices heard and four strategies have been gaining steam: voting for United Russia's opponents, spoiling the ballot, taking the ballot home or boycotting the elections all together.

All four approaches have their flaws, and opposition groups have debated them in exchanges

sometimes even more heated than when bashing United Russia. With the elections looming, The Moscow Times takes stock of the alternatives.

Anyone but United Russia

There are six recognized political parties besides United Russia: The Communist Party, The Liberal Democratic Party, A Just Russia, Right Cause, Patriots of Russia and Yabloko. No write-ins are allowed.

Voting for any one of them seems the most logical choice, however, there is little chance that any will gain significant traction because of the fatigue voters feel for groups that have been around forever and accomplished little.

The two prominent exceptions, A Just Russia and Right Cause — established in 2006 and 2008, respectively — have ties to the Kremlin and are struggling to prove their independence.

Moreover, only three parties — United Russia, the Liberal Democrats and the Communists — have much chance of crossing the 7 percent threshold for Duma entry, adding to voters' fears of casting a wasted vote.

This is fed by the popular misconception that votes cast for the bottom-rung parties are distributed among those that made the cut. In fact, such votes are simply not counted in the distribution of the actual Duma seats.

Despite the criticisms, this approach appears to be the runaway favorite, to a large extent thanks to active promotion by famous whistleblower Alexei Navalny, whom some bloggers already call a presidential candidate for the 2016 race.

Whatever the shortcomings of the opposition parties, every seat they get in the Duma weakens United Russia's grip on power, Navalny has repeatedly [said](#) in the months leading up to the December vote.

"It's unifying: everyone is against United Russia," Navalny, who was expelled from Yabloko in 2007 over his nationalist stance and is now not unaffiliated with any party, wrote on his blog in September.

Navalny is a lawyer by day, but he made a name for himself exposing corrupt authorities and state-linked corporations. He has switched his focus to the ruling party this year, coming up with the popular slogan "the party of crooks and thieves" in February.

Casting a vote also has the added benefit of ensuring that an unused ballot cannot be employed in election rigging, supporters of the "Navalny Strategy" say.

But this approach has left the host of opposition-minded parties and movements that were barred from the elections on various pretexts angry as they feel it effectively ignores their struggle.

Cross Them All Out

To vote for any legal party means to "accept the vicious [electoral] system," argues Boris Nemtsov, a co-leader of one unregistered group — the Party of People's Freedom, or Parnas.

Parnas was denied registration with the Justice Ministry earlier this year in what its leaders say was a decision sanctioned by the Kremlin. Unregistered parties cannot run for the Duma.

In the past, supporters of such groups could vent their frustration by picking "none of the above" on the ballot, but that option was abolished in the mid-2000s, when its popularity began to skyrocket.

Nemtsov now proposes to revive it by force through spoiling ballots.

"It's the only variant that leads to a cancellation of the elections," Nemtsov told The Moscow Times in a telephone interview last week.

"It's not a boycott, it's civic-mindedness," he said.

The elections are declared invalid if more than 40 percent of the ballots cast are spoiled, although that is a highly unlikely prospect.

The group created by Nemtsov and fellow opposition-minded liberals to promote their strategy has the moniker Nakh-Nakh — a play on a strong Russian expletive for refusal. The Cyrillic "Kh" corresponds to the Latin "X" — a symbol they are urging voters to mark on their ballots.

Anyone taking this approach needs to be very careful. Experts say that if a mark touches any of the small boxes next to a party's title, the vote may be counted in that party's favor. In the past, this happened most often when the box belonged to United Russia.

Staying Home

The barriers that prevent so many groups from running render the whole elections unconstitutional, said Sergei Udaltsov, leader of the Left Front movement.

"We don't recognize those elections! Boycott is the only option left!" the angry Udaltsov told The Moscow Times by telephone. The Justice Ministry threw out six registration requests by his group, each time on questionable technicalities.

In October, Udaltsov requested the Central Elections Commission strike his name from the list of voters, he said.

But the commission refused, saying this cannot be done on request and that he needs a convincing reason, such as "death, incapacity, loss of citizenship, imprisonment or army service."

Boycotting the elections cannot possibly make them void because the minimum turnout threshold was canceled in 2006.

Still, Left Front plans to take to the streets instead of to the polls on Dec. 4, hoping that mass rallies will provide vivid proof of public discontent, said the 34-year-old Udaltsov, who has been detained more than 100 times for unsanctioned protests.

Nevertheless, they will pay a visit to election authorities first to collect their absentee ballots, Udaltsov said. Such ballots can be cast at any polling station, and opposition activists allege they are widely used to rig the vote.

The strategy dates back to the Soviet Union, when members of the liberal-minded intelligentsia chose not to participate in the one-party elections that uniformly ended with 99.9 percent of the votes cast for the Communist Party, as was officially reported.

But boycotters will face pro-Kremlin competition in the streets. The loyalist youth movement Nashi plans to bring up to 30,000 supporters to Moscow, who will camp out in tents in city squares, ensuring that the opposition cannot rally there. They also plan to take absentee ballots, but unlike Udaltsov's supporters, they will use them.

Take It Home With You

Most absentee ballots will likely be used by United Russia's supporters, State Duma Deputy Gennady Gudkov, a member of the oppositional A Just Russia, said Friday.

Employees at state-funded institutions around the country are being pressured into getting absentee ballots and voting at work under the supervision of their bosses, said Gudkov, echoing reports of United Russia abusing its "administrative resources" ahead of the elections.

Most allegations are never proved in the courts — which are mostly loyal to the Kremlin. More importantly, the significance of absentee ballots is not to be overstated: only 2.6 million of them are printed — enough for about 4 percent of the voters.

Those who vote locally, meanwhile, can just take their ballot home, denying support to all candidates, but ensuring it is not used in vote rigging.

A popular post circulating in the blogosphere claims that most unclaimed ballots are used to stuff ballot boxes in the last hour of voting, when very few voters show up. To thwart that, the public is urged to vote right before the polls close to help expose the fraud.

But while this strategy prevents violations and increases the turnout, it does little to help the existing opposition.

Moreover, though the law does not explicitly prohibit taking the ballot home, the chairman of the Central Elections Commission, Vladimir Churov, insisted last year that ballots are "state property" and should not leave polling stations.

While polls workers cannot prohibit voters from taking their ballot home, people "may be spooked into not doing it by elections officials or security guards," Nemtsov says.

Headcount

Vote rigging is much less widespread than many believe, never accounting for more than 10 percent of the vote, a spin doctor running a United Russia campaign in one of the regions told The Moscow Times.

In many regions, no outright ballot stuffing takes place at all because the ruling party needs a very strong grip on the local administration to make it work, said the political consultant, who only agreed to speak about trade secrets on condition of anonymity.

What really matters is the turnout, he said by telephone. A small turnout is beneficial for United Russia because those who stay at home are usually the party's opponents who are too apathetic or disillusioned to come, he said.

This view was echoed by most analysts and opposition politicians.

"The higher the turnout, the fewer the opportunities for falsifications and the lower their effectiveness," said Arkady Lyubarev, an expert with Golos, the country's sole independent elections watchdog.

Yabloko chairman Grigory Yavlinsky agreed, noting that high turnout raises chances for all parties.

"It's the only opportunity to voice your disagreement with the current system for the next several years," Yavlinsky said at a news conference last week. "We know that if the turnout is 70 percent, Yabloko would get 10 percent."

The independent [pollster](#) Levada Center put Yabloko's popularity in a recent survey at 4 percent. But it also predicted a turnout of 55 percent.

Left Front's Udaltsov remained skeptical, arguing that the authorities will manage "to forge the results no matter what the turnout is."

The Central Elections Commission could not be reached for comment Sunday. Under its current head Churov, an old friend of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, it has been routinely accused of covertly supporting the Kremlin and the ruling party.

In a complex twist, turnout is defined based on the number of collected ballots, while the 450 Duma seats are distributed based on the actual valid ballots cast for the parties that cross the 7 percent threshold. That means that taking the ballot home would increase the turnout, but not affect how many seats the parties that make it — including United Russia — would get.

Those who spoil ballots or ignore the vote "redelegate their vote to others," Lyubarev wrote in his instructions for voters released by the Golos watchdog group.

"For the ruling party, it is more beneficial if the voter spoils his ballot than votes for its opponents," prominent elections expert Alexander Kynev [wrote](#) on Gazeta.ru.

The majority, meanwhile, does not care. Fifty-eight percent of respondents in a November poll by Levada said they did not expect the Duma vote to have any positive impact on their

lives.

Incidentally, that is almost the size of United Russia's constituency — its support stood at 51 percent in early November, according to the same poll.

Staff writers Alex Winning and Alexey Eremenko contributed to this report.

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