

## The 2020 Regional Elections in Russia: A Rehearsal for the 2021 Duma Elections

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Boiko won four seats while supporting several other elected candidates. In Tomsk, two members of Team Navalny were elected to the City Council. And in Tambov, UR lost 17 of 18 seats in the local Council. Team Navalny attributed these victories to the “smart voting” strategy, a reference to opposition voters’ coalescence around those non-UR candidates who are most likely to successfully challenge UR incumbents. While the real effects of the strategy in these elections are hard to establish, “smart voting” might become a key coordination device for the opposition in the next federal elections. In sum, the September 2020 “dress rehearsal” elections revealed the range of tactical choices that the regime and the opposition will be able to deploy in the key battle for the State Duma in 2021.

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## ANALYSIS

# The 2020 Regional Elections in Russia: A Rehearsal for the 2021 Duma Elections

By Mikhail Turchenko (European University at St. Petersburg)

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### **Abstract**

The September 2020 regional elections in Russia employed a new three-day voting scheme. This change, along with biased electoral rules, helped the Kremlin to maintain control over all gubernatorial offices, as well as—via United Russia—over all regional parliaments and a majority of city councils in regional capitals. At the same time, Alexei Navalny’s “smart vote” initiative was effective in big cities. Multi-day voting will once again be used in the Duma elections next year, but there the Kremlin’s landslide victory is in jeopardy due to United Russia’s declining popularity among voters and the ability of the candidates backed by the “smart vote” campaign to defeat UR nominees in a number of single-member districts.

### **Main Actors and Results**

For the authorities and the opposition alike, the regional elections held in Russia in September of this year can be considered a rehearsal for the 2021 Duma campaign. The Kremlin’s primary goal was to test multi-day voting, with the main election day, September 13, preceded by two days of early voting. The official explanation for this change to the electoral process was that early vot-

ing would make the process “as comfortable as possible”<sup>1</sup> for voters. In reality, however, the authorities were trying to reduce the risk of unfavorable electoral outcomes at the regional level in advance of the national legislative races next year. Multi-day voting limits the effectiveness of electoral observation, facilitates the two-part task of mobilizing state-dependent voters to go to the polls and monitoring their activity, and simplifies the use

1 “V TSIK Rossii sostoyalos’ zasedanie ekspertnoi ploshchadki.” 16 July 2020. <http://www.cikrf.ru/news/cec/47052/>

of blatant forms of electoral malpractice. Moreover, it is nearly inevitable that three-day voting will be chosen for the next Duma elections (provision for this was made through Russian legislation signed on July 31), and conducting multi-day voting in advance of those elections helps to legitimize this new procedure in voters' eyes.

The opposition, for its part, has been continuing to test a new tool for coordinating voters against the United Russia party and regime-backed candidates: the "smart vote." The "smart vote" campaign was announced by Alexei Navalny, a major Russian opposition figure, in November 2018. It was first implemented during the Moscow City Duma elections and the St. Petersburg municipal elections last year, resulting in visible success for candidates backed by the "smart vote."<sup>2</sup> In 2020, it was important for the opposition to assess the campaign's potential outside the largest cities and to advertise it among voters.

Leaving aside by-elections to the State Duma in four single-member districts (SMDs), there were three main campaigns in September 2020: gubernatorial elections in 18 regions, legislative elections in 11 regions, and city council elections in 22 regional capitals. Taken together, the results of these races seem to have been favorable for the regime. Kremlin-backed candidates won all the gubernatorial contests, while United Russia maintained a comfortable majority in all regional assemblies and in most regional capitals, the exceptions being Novosibirsk, Tomsk, and Tambov. At the same time, relative support for the regime fell. The average share of votes for United Russia, as well as turnout, were lower in both the regional legislative elections and the most important local contests than they had been in the previous round of elections, held in 2015 (see Figures 1–2 on p. 9 and 10). United Russia was able to maintain its dominance only with the help of biased electoral rules and manipulations, the latter taking place mostly during the early voting stage. These factors also explain the electoral success of the Kremlin's nominees in gubernatorial elections.

### Overview of Gubernatorial Elections

The gubernatorial races were the only subnational campaigns in 2020 where the regime's candidates not only won, but did so with approximately the same average result as—and lower average turnout than—in the previous elections. This was made possible thanks to two principal factors: (1) biased registration rules, which

resulted in the complete absence from ballot papers of candidates the Kremlin considered undesirable; and (2) electoral abuses during multi-day voting.

As the "Golos" movement reports,<sup>3</sup> the 2020 gubernatorial elections were characterized by the absence of competition. Any candidate that posed a threat to regime-backed nominees was barred from registering by the so-called "municipal filter"—the need to collect the signatures of between 5 and 10 percent of the local deputies of a region.<sup>4</sup> Considering that most municipal deputies are affiliated with United Russia, it is no surprise that the only candidates who were allowed to be included on ballots were those who were not real challengers to the Kremlin's cadres.

Early voting also played a role. Figure 3 on p. 10 shows that the eventual winner's share of the vote is strongly positively correlated with the share of early voting but not with the share of turnout that came on September 13—the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient, denoted by the Greek letter  $\rho$  on the figure, is equal to 0.75. This may signal electoral abuse during the early voting phase of the gubernatorial elections. This intuition is backed by evidence provided by the "Golos" movement.<sup>5</sup> For instance, in Krasnodar city, where independent observers succeeded in covering a solid number of polling stations during all three days of voting, turnout was three times lower than in other parts of the region, and the share of votes for a KPRF-backed candidate was twice as large. "Golos" reported similar findings in a number of other regions.

### Overview of Regional Legislative Elections

The legislative elections paint a slightly different picture than the gubernatorial races. On the one hand, United Russia retained its majority in all regional assemblies. On the other hand, the official results of UR lists, the average results of UR nominees, and turnout rates were all lower in 2020 than in the parliamentary elections held five years ago. Two factors explain this reality: (1) biased electoral systems; and (2) manipulations at the early voting stage.

All Russian regions have to elect no less than 25 percent of all deputies by proportional representation (PR).<sup>6</sup> In 2020, 10 out of 11 regions used PR to elect half of their deputies, while the other half were elected in SMDs by plurality vote. The outlier was Kostroma Oblast, where just 10 of 35 deputies were elected by PR. Figure 4 on p. 11 illustrates the votes-to-seats conversion for United Russia in the PR and SMD contests, respectively. UR lists systematically

2 Grigorii Golosov and Mikhail Turchenko, "How Smart is Smart Voting?" Riddle. 13 August 2020. <https://www.ridl.io/en/how-smart-is-smart-voting/>

3 "Itogi vydvizheniia i registratsii kandidatov na vyborah vysshikh dolzhnostnykh lits sub"ektov Rossiiskoi Federatsii 13 sentiabria 2020 goda." Golosinfo.org. 18 August 2020. <https://www.golosinfo.org/articles/144615>

4 In addition to this barrier, self-nominated candidates also have to gather voter signatures (party-nominated candidates are exempt from this obligation).

5 "Itogi obshchestvennogo nabliudeniia za vyborami v edinyi den' golosovaniia 13 sentiabria 2020 goda." Golosinfo.org. 15 October 2020. <https://www.golosinfo.org/articles/144816#1-1>

6 The only exceptions are Moscow and St. Petersburg, where pure single-member plurality can be employed.

get a higher proportion of seats for their share of the vote under PR than other party lists; UR candidates' victories in SMDs are also disproportionate to their average vote shares in given regions. It is well known that SMDs are favorable for big parties, but United Russia also extracts benefit from PR. This is due to the five-percent legal thresholds, as well as biased seat allocation formulae such as the Imperiali highest averages and the Tyumen<sup>7</sup> method.

Kurgan Oblast provides a shining example of how United Russia takes advantage of biased electoral rules. Although the party's list received just 44.57 percent of the vote in the region and the average vote share of UR candidates in SMDs was 48.32 percent, United Russia won 58.8 percent of PR seats and 100 percent of SMD seats.

As in the gubernatorial elections, United Russia results in regional contests were boosted by early voting (see Figure 5 on p. 12). Moreover, the Spearman's correlation coefficient is even higher here—0.85. Early voting helped both UR list results and the average vote share of UR-affiliated candidates. Belgorod Oblast was the only region where United Russia improved its PR and SMD results in terms of both votes received and seats gained in comparison with the 2015 election. Unsurprisingly, it was also the region with the highest rate of early voting—40.39 percent. Since overall turnout in the region was 54.48 percent, it is easily apparent that about three-quarters of ballots were cast in advance. Immediately after the election, Belgorod governor Evgeny Savchenko, who had ruled the region since 1993, stepped down.<sup>8</sup> Within a week, he had been appointed to the Federation Council, the upper chamber of the Russian parliament.

### Overview of City Council Elections

In the city council elections, United Russia retained its majority in all but three regional capitals. These elections, however, had two main features that set them apart from the gubernatorial and legislative campaigns considered above. First, as Figure 6 on p. 13 reports,<sup>9</sup> early voting hardly influenced the outcomes of municipal races. This may be because city councils are comparatively less important to federal and regional authorities alike than are regional legislatures or governorships. In addition, it is much easier for candidates, parties, and independent organizations to observe local contests.

Second, city council elections, especially in Tomsk and Novosibirsk, were chosen by Navalny's team as a main target for the "smart vote" campaign. Figure 7 on p. 14 indicates the votes-to-seats conversion for United Russia in the PR and SMD parts of local elections. As in the regional elections, the conversion was favorable to UR—particularly in SMDs.<sup>10</sup> That being said, there are three capitals in which UR candidates failed to achieve a majority in SMDs in the city council elections, namely Tomsk, Novosibirsk, and Tambov. If in Tambov United Russia's poor results are due to the city's idiosyncrasies (a broad coalition has formed around a former mayor of the city), then in both Tomsk and Novosibirsk United Russia's relative failures can be attributed to the "smart vote" campaign. The number of "smart vote" candidates elected in these cities was larger than anywhere else except Tambov.

### Conclusion

Country-wide early voting, implemented in regular Russian elections for the first time, did not cause turnout to increase but helped the authorities to maintain control over the main regional branches of government: governorships and legislatures. There is no doubt, therefore, that this tool will be called upon again, as it is important for the Kremlin to maintain its stranglehold on legislative power during the Duma's next term. At the same time, the opposition-led "smart vote" campaign also enjoyed some successes, especially in big cities, where—with only a handful of exceptions—vivid manipulations are costly and observers are highly active.

The "Smart Vote" campaign seems to be dangerous for the Kremlin as it looks toward the 2021 Duma elections. The campaign has the potential not only to harm United Russia, but also to overcome the political apathy of opposition-minded voters by bringing them to the polls in hopes of defeating a UR-backed candidate. In sum, despite all attempts to reduce the uncertainty of electoral outcomes in the run-up to the 2021 national elections, the next Duma election will be much more challenging for the Kremlin than the previous campaign was, and the authorities have already admitted it.<sup>11</sup>

*See overleaf for information about the author, further reading, and figures.*

7 "Pravoye osobennosti vyborov 13 sentiabria 2020 goda." Golosinfo.org, 27 July 2020. <https://www.golosinfo.org/articles/144538#3>

8 "Belgorod Region Governor Evgeny Savchenko Steps Down after 27 Years in Office." Meduza, 17 September 2020. <https://meduza.io/en/news/2020/09/17/belgorod-region-governor-evgeny-savchenko-steps-down-after-27-years-in-office>

9 The growing lines on Figure 6 are due to Kazan, the capital city of Tatarstan. Tatarstan, in turn, is a region with one of the strongest political machines in Russia.

10 It is important to note that since 2015, eight cities have changed from municipal electoral systems with mixed PR and SMD components to pure SMD-plurality.

11 "Confident but Not Uncontested: Internal Campaign Documents Show that Russia's Ruling Political Party Has a Plan to Hold onto the State Duma and Beat Alexey Navalny's Strategic Voting Initiative." Meduza, 21 October 2020. <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/10/21/confident-but-not-uncontested>

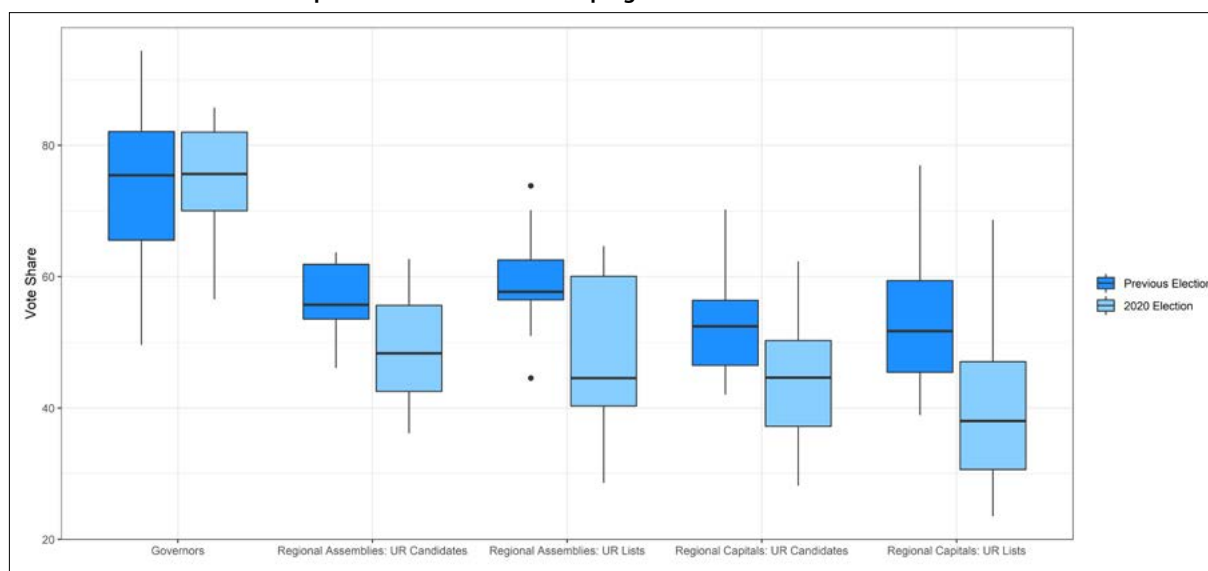
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*Further Reading:*

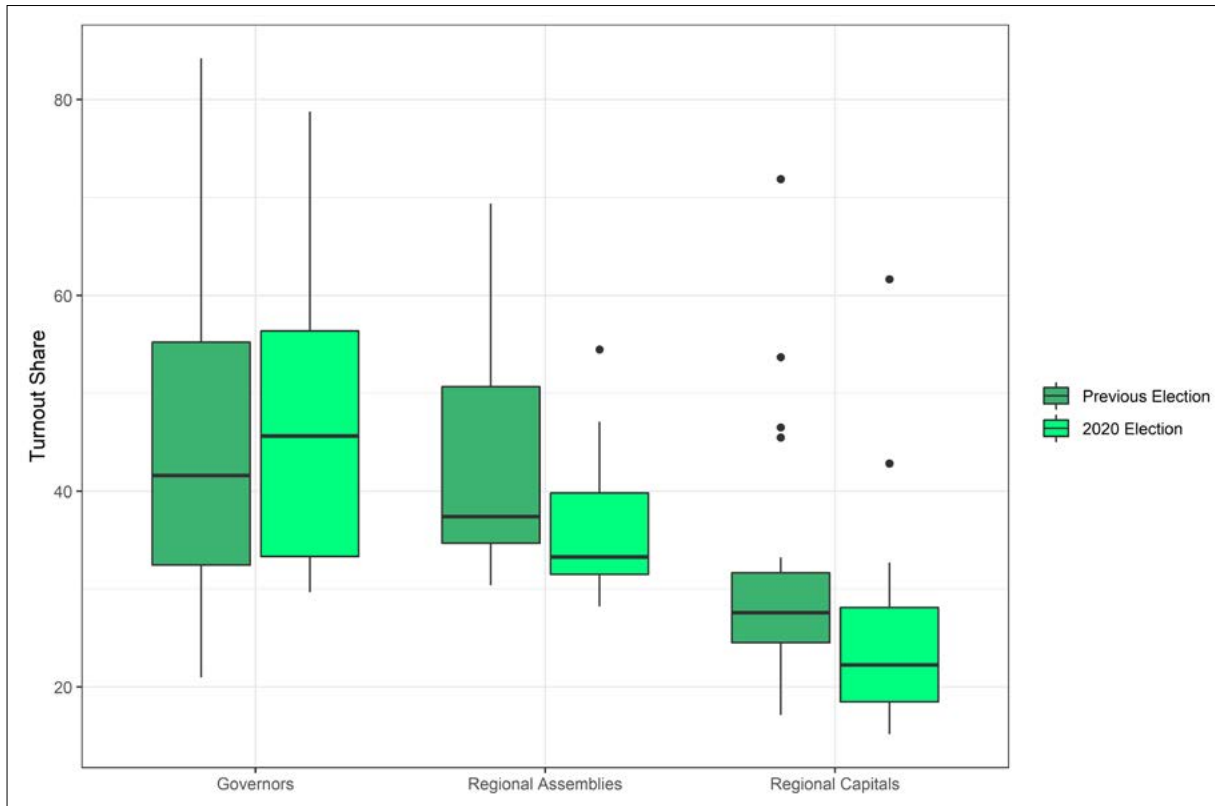
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**Figure 1: Results of the Kremlin’s Nominees in Gubernatorial Races and United Russia in Legislative and City Council Elections Compared to the Previous Campaign**



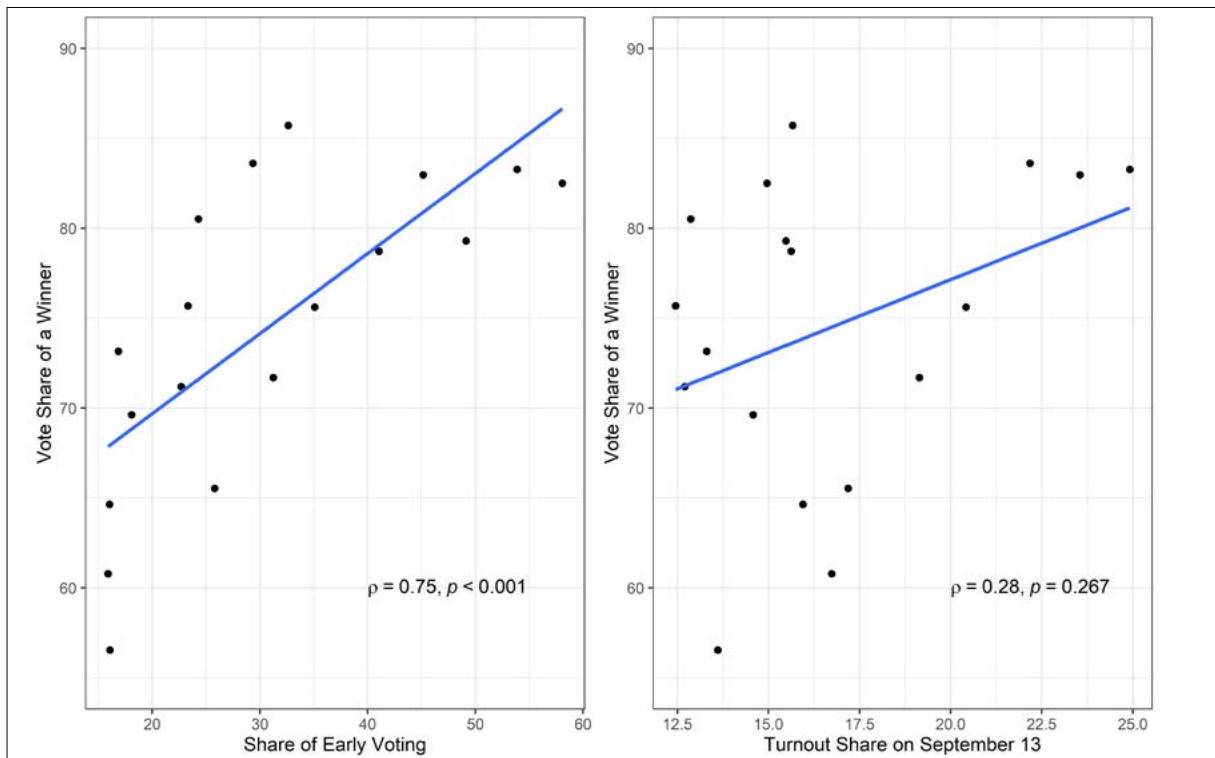
Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Central Election Commission of Russia

**Figure 2: Turnout Differences between the 2020 Elections and the Previous Campaign**



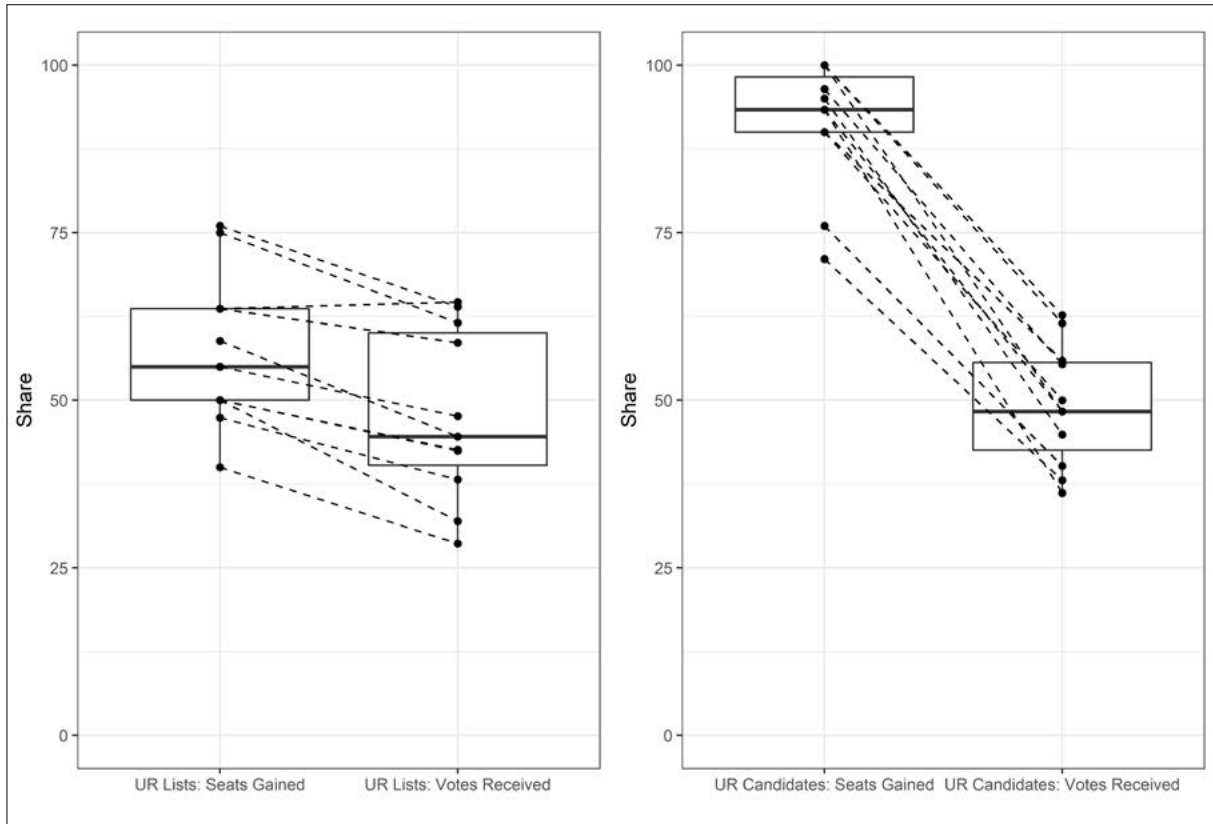
Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Central Election Commission of Russia

**Figure 3: Relationship between Winner's Share of the Vote in a Gubernatorial Race and Early Voting**



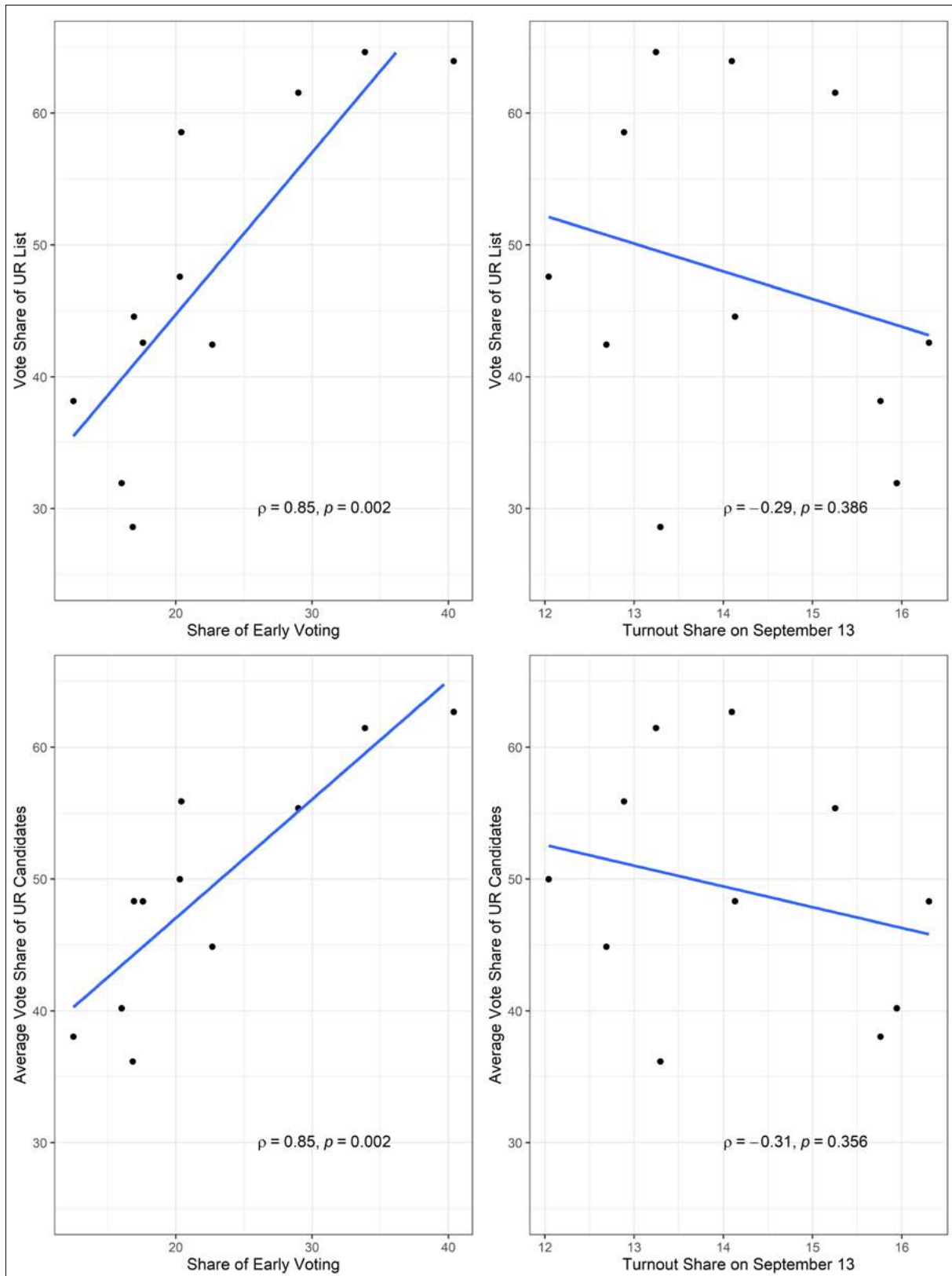
Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Central Election Commission of Russia

**Figure 4: Votes-to-Seats Conversion for United Russia in Regional Electoral Systems**



Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Central Election Commission of Russia

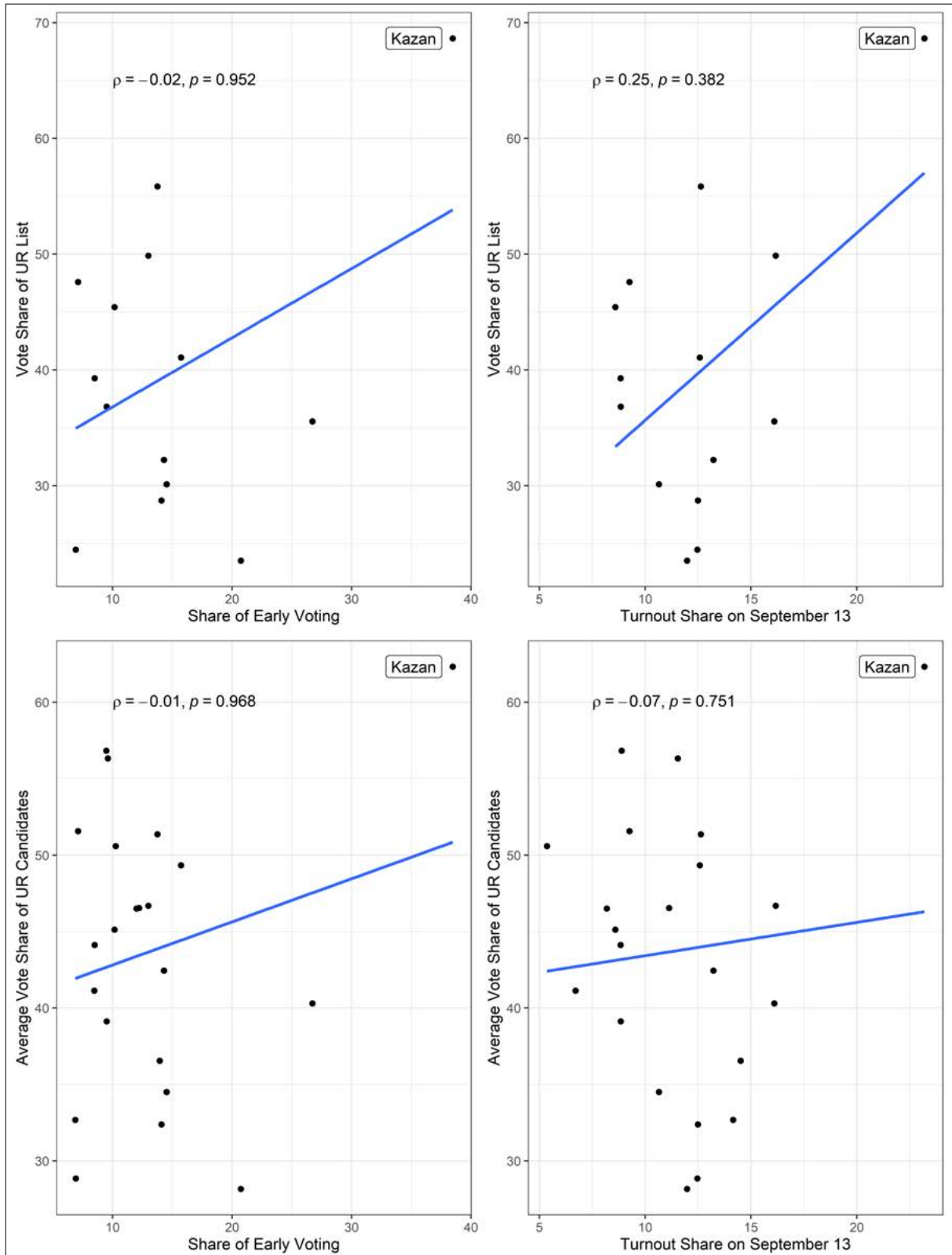
Figure 5: Relationship between United Russia’s Results and Early Voting in Regions



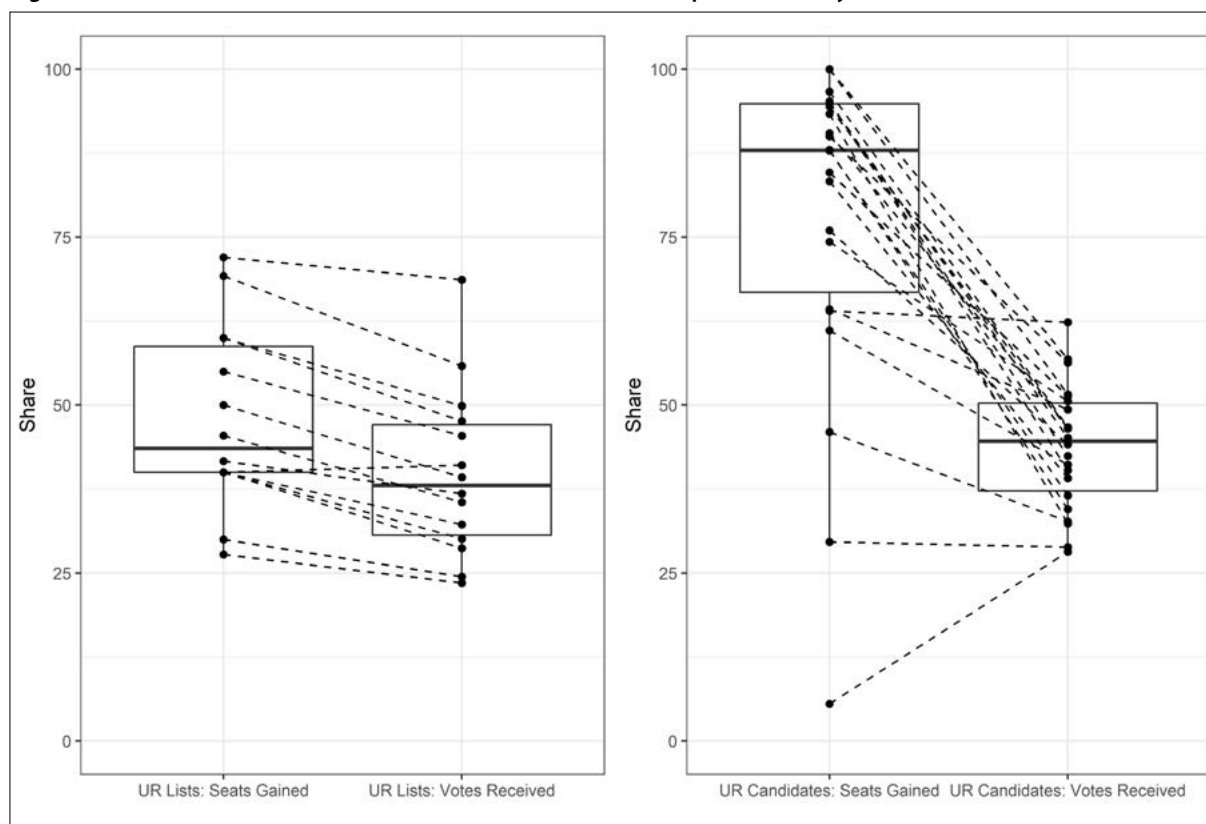
Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Central Election Commission of Russia



Figure 6: Relationship between United Russia's Results and Early Voting in Capitals



Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Central Election Commission of Russia

**Figure 7: Votes-to-Seats Conversion for United Russia in Municipal Electoral Systems**

Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Central Election Commission of Russia

## ANALYSIS

### The Quest for a Technocratic Utopia in Russian Subnational Governance

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#### Abstract

Technocratic selection could help address two challenges faced by the Russian political regime: the need to prevent the opposition from mobilizing and gaining support through subnational competitively elected offices and the need to ensure popular legitimacy. What we see, though, is technocratic selection either being used for the wrong offices or being applied selectively, rendering it useless or even harmful.

#### Technocratic Politics, Politics and Regime Legitimacy

September was marked by two seemingly unconnected events. On the “single election day,” which this year went on for several days due to the extended voting period, most Russian regions voted in regional and municipal-level elections. Almost simultaneously, in

Solnechnogorsk (Moscow oblast’), the final round of the “Leaders of Russia” competition, an annual contest to determine the most promising public and private managers, took place. While different in scope and effect, those two events illustrate the use and limits of the technocratic approach to leadership at the subnational level in Russia.