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ARTICLE

Opposition rule under autocracy: Evidence from Russia

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Abstract

How does the opposition govern under autocracy? Most authoritarian regimes tolerate some degree of internal opposition, allowing it to contest and even take power. Yet we know little about how such power-sharing dynamics affect governance. In this paper, I exploit a unique instance where an opposition won control of political institutions in a prominent electoral autocracy: the 2017 Moscow municipal elections. Using a difference-in-differences design, I find that opposition control of municipal councils reduced the financial returns from office for ruling party deputies. This decrease in earnings comes from opposition-held councils removing rent-seeking opportunities by organizing more competitive procurement, reducing unnecessary budget expenditures, and curbing over-the-top compensation. Using a survey experiment, I then show that voters prefer opposition candidates with municipal governing experience over ruling party ones without it. Even in repressive environments, challenging autocratic rule may be well served by joining rather than boycotting institutions.

Electoral authoritarian regimes risk losing elections. At the national level, the most dramatic of such electoral losses can unseat an autocrat entirely from office, a somewhat infrequent but well-studied phenomenon (Knutsen, Nygård, & Wig, 2017; Treisman, 2020). But more common are autocrats losing power in a piecemeal fashion, forced to concede individual positions or sometimes even complete control over institutions to the opposition. Such "democratic enclaves" are a common feature in many authoritarian regimes, from the judiciary in Tunisia (Corduneanu-Huci, 2019), the Istanbul government in Turkey (Öktem, 2021), or municipal wards in South Africa (Farole, 2021). Opposition control over geographic constituencies can later upend broader politics. For example, Lucardi (2016) finds that local opposition victories diffused across Mexico and built a "springboard" to unseat the ruling party in national elections. Indeed, opposition victories in local elections preceded five out of the six Color Revolutions in Eurasia (Bunce, 2017). Yet we know comparatively less about how the opposition actually governs within the autocratic power vertical.

This paper offers new insights by evaluating the effect of opposition rule on several key governance outcomes, in particular control over corruption. Autocratic states are especially vulnerable to public anger about graft in their ranks, which can trigger mass demonstrations and even lead to regime overthrow (T. Carothers & Youngs, 2015; Tucker, 2007). Cognizant of this issue for voters, many oppositions around the world have placed anti-corruption front and center in their platforms, promising that if they took power, they would reduce waste and punish officials found stealing at the till (Bågenholm, 2009; C. Carothers, 2023). But can the opposition deliver on these promises to deliver more transparency and integrity, especially if the autocrat still holds onto national power? Do oppositions govern more impartially, or do they exploit the same rent-seeking opportunities as ruling parties?

To answer these questions, this paper exploits a unique setting where the opposition won control over some autocratic institutions through the ballot box. In late 2017, a coalition of Russian opposition parties and independents won half or more seats in 29 of 124 municipal councils during the Moscow municipal

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The Cornell Center for Social Sciences verified that the data and replication code submitted to the AJPS Dataverse replicates the numerical results reported in the main text of this article.

elections. Municipal deputies may occupy the lowest political rung in Russia, but by virtue of working in the federal center they are still visible politicians with close connections to the population and some policymaking levers.

Analyzing a series of difference-in-difference (DiD) designs, I compare how corruption and other governance outcomes differed between councils held by the opposition versus those held by the regime over the 5-year term. My analysis primarily draws on administrative data, including the detailed income and asset disclosures that deputies are required to file every spring. In addition, I conducted interviews with ten former deputes about their time in office and about how budget allocations and anti-corruption efforts were done.[1]

The results first show that opposition rule helps control corruption. Based on within-deputy specifications, deputies from the ruling party earned roughly 22% less income in years when they served in an opposition-held council. There is no effect on the income of their spouses or any evidence that ruling party deputies were better able to hide their corruption. To verify the latter, I analyze two measures of hidden earnings and assets built from verifying disclosures against a database of luxury car ownership in Russia. Finally, members of the opposition saw neither an increase nor a decrease in their earnings, suggesting that their time in power was marked by less economic favoritism.

To explain why ruling party deputies saw such a drop in income, I run additional DiD specifications using data on municipal procurement and budgets. Opposition-held councils were significantly more likely to adopt more transparent, more competitive methods—electronic auctions—for procuring goods and services; such methods have been found in other contexts to be associated with less corruption (Pavel, Sičáková-Beblavá, et al., 2013; Tkachenko, Yakovlev, & Kuznetsova, 2017). Looking at municipal budgets, I find that opposition councils raised more revenue, decreased expenditures, and increased budget surpluses. Changing the distribution of state resources may be one channel through which regime deputies are cut off from rent streams.

Finally, I investigate how voters evaluate opposition politicians that participate in authoritarian institutions using evidence from a survey of 2,980 Russians in late 2021. An original survey experiment shows that respondents prefer hypothetical independent candidates to the Russian Duma over those from the ruling party only when independents have previously won municipal elections. Boycotting the electoral system provides no electoral dividend. In other words, voters reward opposition candidates who have prior experience in elected office, even when serving in government means collaborating with the regime. Taking these results together, opposition participation in autocratic governments not only leads to less corruption and waste but also better positions challengers to win over voters.

This paper makes contributions to several distinct literatures. Although a large body of work has documented the various strategies that oppositions use to challenge authoritarian regimes (Gandhi & Ong, 2019; Helms, 2023; Lindberg, 2006), comparatively less attention has been paid to what they do after taking power. Beyond exploiting office to coordinate national election campaigns (Bunce & Wolchik, 2011), opposition activists still must tend to the day-to-day business of governance. How they approach these decisions determines whether voters will evaluate their track record in office when higher office is at stake (Langfield, 2014).

I show that even in a highly centralized authoritarian regime such as Russia, opposition forces can co-opt local institutions and impose their own policymaking preferences. But the effects are most observable when the opposition holds a majority of seats and exerts greater influence over administrative procedures. Institutional change through reforms and oversight, rather than electoral accountability, may best constrain the behavior of autocratic elites. By shining a light on their policy achievements, the paper contributes to current debates about the role and functioning of opposition under autocracy (Albrecht, 2005; Armstrong, Reuter, & Robertson, 2020; Reuter & Robertson, 2015; Szakonyi, 2024). Demonstrating capacity to govern effectively within autocratic institutions may better serve an aspirational opposition than boycotting participation altogether.

Next, I provide causally identified evidence that autocracies which grant the opposition formal access to political institutions observe less corruption in their ranks, a contribution to debates about how to combat rent-seeking in these regimes (Chang & Golden, 2010; C. Carothers, 2022; Zhu & Zhang, 2017). By monitoring state processes and increasing scrutiny of previously neglected budget institutions, opposition deputies can change the incentives and opportunities for officials to enrich themselves in office. The benefits of working within institutions to improve accountability and reduce waste may outweigh the reputational costs of collaborating with the regime.

OPPOSING AUTOCRATS

One of the central challenges that autocrats face is how to manage the opposition, in particular when

[1] This research was approved by my university's IRB (#NCR235251). Due to foreign agent laws that could put subjects at risk in Russia, I was only able to speak with deputies living in exile.

it is well-organized and openly calling for political change. Fearful of triggering backlash over a disregard for democratic norms, only rarely do regimes ban oppositions altogether (Helms, 2021). Instead, autocrats wield a combination of carrots and sticks, at times repressing while other times tolerating some challengers within formal state institutions (Frye, 2022; Morgenbesser, 2020). By granting the opposition access to elections, legislatures, and even some executive posts, autocrats can acquire critical information about whom their most threatening challengers are, their popularity in society, and their activities (Frantz & Kendall-Taylor, 2014). Oppositions do not always accept the invitation to vie for power, instead opting to boycott elections (Beaulieu, 2014; Buttorff & Dion, 2017; Smith, 2014). Running for office could be viewed as complicit validation of the authoritarian project, conferring undeserved legitimacy hiding behind a veneer of democracy.

Yet much of the literature to date has focused on the opposition's strategic behavior around elections, rather how it governs once elected. In Turkey, Öktem (2021) highlights both a change in rhetoric and media policy when the democratic opposition wrestled Istanbul away from President Erdogan's ruling party but also a compromising of democratic values seen as necessary for competing later on the national level. Right (2023) also shows how opposition participation as members of the minority in Cambodian local councils may constrain rent-seeking. But power sharing can also increase regime durability: introducing and maintaining relatively free and fair local elections can help regimes discipline cadres and improve their responsiveness to citizens (Bohlken, 2016; Martinez-Bravo, et al., 2022).

In this paper, I focus on the potential for the opposition to improve government accountability and stop the abuse of state resources. A central tenet in the literature on the causes of corruption is that political institutions, particularly those promoting democratic competition, matter (Lederman, Loayza, & Soares, 2005; Potter & Tavits, 2011; Stephenson, 2015). For example, the drive to win reelection can generate positive incentives for politicians to curb their rent-seeking behavior in order to better appeal to voters (Ferraz & Finan, 2011). Even if power is not conceded to a true opposition, political turnover can spur improved economic performance in autocratic regimes (Li & Zhou, 2005). Authoritarian regimes that lack mechanisms of accountability have been found to be especially prone to high levels of corruption (Chang & Golden, 2010).

Taking control over institutions under autocracy, I argue that the opposition has two basic objectives for its time in power. First, translating local electoral victories into national success requires building a public track record different from the authoritarian status quo. In reality, this means reform: curbing waste and corruption, upholding personal ethics, and supplying policy closer to the preferences of the median voter. But crafting a media narrative of being a force against corruption is hard to achieve if opposition politicians are engaging in the same rent-seeking behaviors. A failure to differentiate itself from the regime makes the opposition vulnerable to critiques of irrelevance, ineffectiveness, and corruption.

Second, work on "springboards" suggests that oppositions enjoy the most success contesting higher levels when they can weaken the mechanisms that authoritarian regimes exploit to reproduce their power over time (Lucardi, 2016). For example, many regimes rely on extensive networks of patronage to co-opt elites and ensure loyalty. Others use administrative resources to induce dependence, weave clientelist ties with voters, and tilt the electoral playing field. Thus, we should expect that upon assuming elected office, the opposition should attempt to undermine the financial channels used to reward cronies and bind voters to the regime.

Success in improving government accountability is by no means assured. Abruptly made aware of their geographic vulnerabilities, regimes may concentrate both repression and concessions to knock the opposition off their upwards trajectory, as evidenced by episodes of opposition control in Venezuela (Dickovick & Eaton, 2013), Tanzania (McLellan, 2022), and Zimbabwe (Raftopoulos & Mlambo, 2009). Moreover, regimes can divide and co-opt the opposition to prevent it from capitalizing on its presence in office (Arriola, Devaro, & Meng, 2021; Reuter & Robertson, 2015). Opposition parties may also struggle to govern effectively due to their own internal weaknesses, such as by taking a stance against negotiating with the regime. Leaders of the opposition could also have ascended to their positions based on their ability to organize protests, rather than their understanding of the nuts and bolts of governing (Farole, 2021). It thus is an open question about what oppositions can achieve in power.

INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

Prior to its 2022 all-out invasion of Ukraine, Russia was classified as an electoral authoritarian regime, where an entrenched ruling party led by personalist leader Vladimir Putin dominated executive and legislative institutions across the country (Gelman, 2014). Though flawed, elections were still used to select many positions of authority. Opposition to the regime generally falls into two camps. The so-called "systemic" opposition is made up of a small number of nominally independent political parties (the Communist Party, Just Russia, and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia) that have representation in most of Russia's

elected legislative organs. At the national level, these parties rarely openly challenge the regime, instead trading acquiescence for continued access to spoils (March, 2012). In recent years, some lower level members of the systemic opposition have grown critical of the regime and earned support from some of the regime's most vehement rivals through "smart voting" campaigns (Turchenko & Golosov, 2023).

Russia's "nonsystemic" opposition refers to the diverse array of political groups, activists, and individuals who operate outside the established political framework and actively criticize the regime. Generally viewed as pro-democratic, this opposition has been mostly blocked from acquiring formal political power at any level of government, instead engaging in street protests and civil society initiatives (Gelman, 2015). Various nonsystemic opposition leaders, most notably Alexey Navalny, have unsuccessfully tried to run in elections but have been met with harassment, legal obstacles, repression, and even murdered by the government (Szakonyi, 2022).

An upsurge in protests following the fraudulent December 2011 parliamentary elections generated interest among the nonsystemic opposition in using municipal office as a springboard to national office. Given its concentration of opposition activity, Moscow quickly emerged as a good place to begin mobilizing. At the top of its municipal government is an elected mayor, whose administration dominates policymaking in the city. Below the mayor sit 12 administrative okrugs, whose heads are appointed and dismissed by the mayor. At the lowest rung of the ladder are 125 municipalities (rayoni) in the city of Moscow, which include both a head (glava upravy) and a council of between 10 and 15 deputies elected from multimember majoritarian districts (Wienen & Dickson, 2019).[2]

Councils are responsible for approving municipal budgets and convening public hearings to get citizen feedback on spending. Budgets cover the municipal administration, cultural initiatives, and small-scale social transfers, such as pensions for retired employees (Szakonyi, 2023). Deputies also oversee the approval process for construction projects (such as repairing apartment blocks) and beautification plans (such as improving outdoor spaces and lighting) (Gorokhovskaia, 2018; Wienen & Dickson, 2019). Revenue to pay for these programs comes from land and personal property taxes, tax-sharing agreements with the regional government, and transfers (De Silva, Kurlyandskaya, & Andreeva, 2009). Though deputy work places significant demands on a person's time, most council members receive only nominal monthly compensation (approximately the minimum wage).[3]

Why then would the opposition target this relatively powerless municipal institution? One of the key concessions made by the regime in response to the 2011–2012 protests was to reintroduce gubernatorial elections, including those for the Moscow mayor. But concerned about opposition challenges, the regime also imposed a "municipal filter," whereby candidates have to earn the signatures of deputies from at least 75% of municipal councils in order to register. Overnight, deputies became gatekeepers to the mayoral ballot. But municipal elections also allowed the opposition to demonstrate to voters it could handle governing. Many opposed to the Putin regime have been banned from holding elected office and consequently vulnerable to critiques that they had fallen out of touch with voters. The opposition understood that opportunities to win elections were available only at the municipal level, where the positions were not seen as important and carried limited policy-setting capacity.[4]

In the run-up to the 2017 Moscow municipal elections, a new "Political Uber" electoral strategy was launched by Dmitry Gudkov, a former Duma deputy aiming to run in Moscow Mayor, and Maksim Katz, Gudkov's former chief of staff. Running under the alliance United Democrats, this initiative tapped modern Western campaign know-how to catapult the opposition into electoral victories. Gorokhovskaia (2019) documents how the movement built a powerful electoral machine. First, the United Democrats paid special attention to candidate recruitment, selecting based on their commitment to radical reform (rather than strict party affiliation). Once selected, candidates were trained how to communicate with voters and navigate Russia's arcane registration process. Finally, coordinated infrastructure helped candidates fundraise, distribute campaign materials, exploit digital technologies, and learn about urban management (Gorokhovskaia, 2019). Candidates focused their campaigns on resolving local issues, such as improving infrastructure and access to basic services, as well as making government spending more efficient and transparent.[5]

The end result marked a "small electoral revolution" (Gorokhovskaia, 2018) that caught the regime by surprise. United Democrats candidates won 267 out of the

[2] Moscow technically has 146 municipalities, following the addition of 21 mostly rural districts in 2012. Since these new units are on a different electoral cycle, this paper focuses on the core 125 municipalities.

[3] Deputies can grant themselves small bonuses, which vary by council; council heads receive a regular salary.

[4] In that regard, municipal councils sit at an interesting node within the broader power vertical present in Russia: low enough to escape much attention from top elites but not completely powerless so as to prevent officeholders from exerting any policy influence.

[5] Interview with former municipal deputy, July 2024. Gudkov also used his popular Facebook page to motivate voters by highlighting misuse of budget funds, self-dealing, and corruption among municipal officials (see https://www.facebook.com/100000943480007/videos/1634704133237687/).

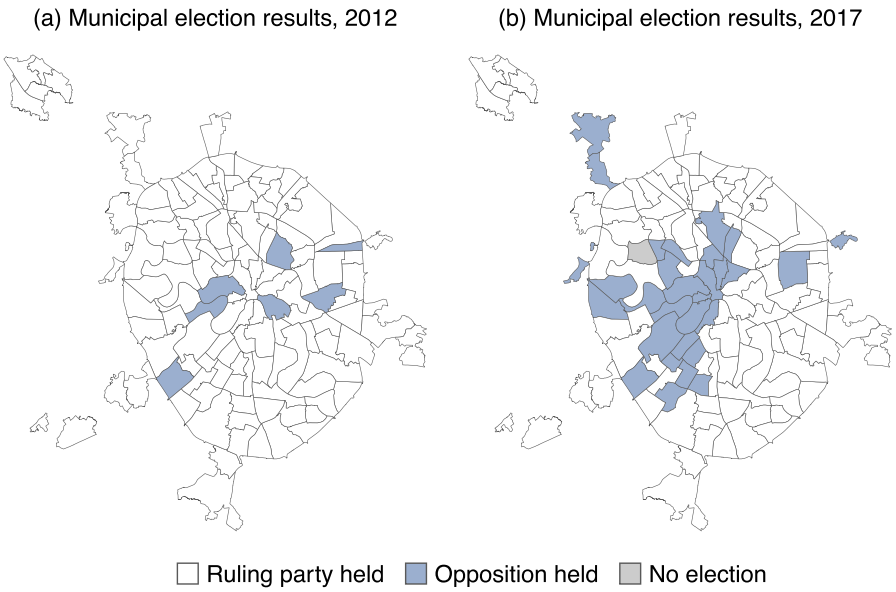

FIGURE 1 Russian opposition's electoral victories in Moscow. *Note*: These maps show the percentage of council seats in each municipality held by the members of the opposition. Panel A shows the March 2012 election results; panel B shows the September 2017 election results. One municipality (Shukino) held elections in 2012 and then again in 2016 (rather than 2017).

1,502 seats available (18%). Collectively, candidates from outside the ruling party United Russia (UR) won 349 seats (23%). This gave them control over half or more of the seats on 29 of the 124 councils. Not a single UR candidate won a seat on eight councils, including in President Putin's home district of Gagarinsky (Ross, 2018). Figure 1 shows the sea change in opposition control, with victories concentrated in the center and west of the city. As impressive as these results were, the opposition did not win enough seats to overcome the municipal filter and enable Gudkov to run for mayor in 2018 (Golosov, 2018).

Right from the outset, expectations were low that an opposition presence on these councils would amount to any real change. First, the regime was surprised and affronted by the opposition's success. Having lost reelection, some former council chairs from UR took their time exiting their posts and interfered with the work of the newly elected deputies (Gorokhovskaia, 2018). Other times, losing UR candidates formed "shadow councils" that attempted to usurp power from their successors.[6] Sticks were also used, as phony criminal charges were filed against nine deputies from the opposition; several either served jail time or emigrated as a result.[7] Most opposition deputies were also newcomers to this upstart, diverse coalition of reformers.[8] That inexperience combined with the limited scope of powers enjoyed by the councils led to restrained optimism about any policies actually changing.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To evaluate the opposition's time in office, I collected data on all 125 municipalities located within the city of Moscow. I focus on municipal politics in Moscow for several reasons. First, Moscow is the largest urban agglomeration in Russia, contributing upwards of 15% of its GDP (Kosareva & Polidi, 2017). Moscow municipalities are both socially and economically heterogeneous but operate according to the same set of institutional rules (e.g., those governing the separation of powers) (Bederson, 2021). Finally, per Norton (2022), Moscow is "an ideal case study of the difficulty of urban co-optation" that many authoritarian regimes face. Its large, rapidly growing, and dense population can make governance difficult while offering a unique opportunity for the opposition to use the fraction of municipal offices they won as a springboard upwards.

Electoral data

Data on all 8,327 candidates to Moscow municipal councils in the 2017 elections come from the Russian Central Election Commission, which contains affidavits and vote results (Russian Central Election

[6] Vasil'chuk, Tat'yana, "Sergey Yur'yevich reshil, chto my uzhe vse raspilili," *Novaya Gazeta*, May 10, 2019.
[7] "Please take me back to 2017. How Moscow pressures independent municipal deputies," *OVD-Info*, November 11, 2022
[8] Davydov, Ivan, "Oops! How Moscow's Municipal Election Turned into a Headache for City Hall," *openDemocracy*, September 20, 2017.

Commission, 2024).[9] For the 1,502 deputies that won election in 2017, I coded whether they were members of the opposition if they ran on the United Democrats platform (267 deputies, or 17.8%), were otherwise members of a systemic or nonsystemic opposition party (44 deputies, or 2.9%), or ran as an independent (38 deputies, 2.5%). In other words, a candidate was coded as part of the opposition if they did not explicitly run with the ruling party UR.

I use a binary distinction for whether deputies were members of the ruling party because the lines between the systemic and nonsystemic opposition do not map cleanly onto the United Democrats platform. Of the 267 deputies from the coalition, 26 were drawn from the systemic opposition and 70 ran as independents. Of the 82 opposition deputies that were not part of the United Democrats coalition, another five came from nonsystemic parties. Independent media following municipal politics labeled deputies according to whether they were members of the ruling party or not, and journalists referred to the 29 councils where UR was not in the majority as independent, democratic, and held by the opposition.[10] In the Systemic versus Nonsystemic Opposition section, I examine heterogeneity based on the different types of party affiliation.

I also coded candidates' age, gender, and sector of employment as listed in their registration. Figure 2 provides summary statistics about how the opposition differed from UR. Opposition deputies were younger, more often male, and more likely to be employed in the private sector, either as a company director or a white-collar professional, while also more often out of work.

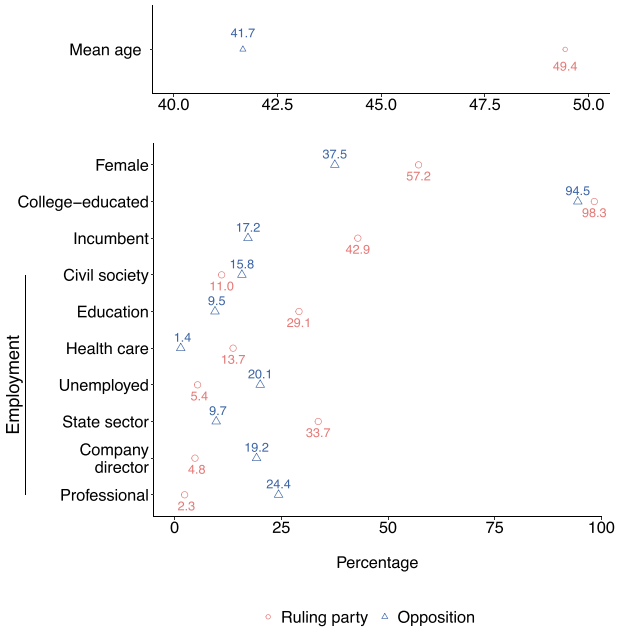

FIGURE 2 Deputy characteristics, by political affiliation. *Note*: This figure shows summary statistics comparing the demographics of opposition deputies versus those from the ruling party United Russia. All figures in the lower panel denote the percentage of all members of the group with the designated characteristic.

Income and asset disclosures

To measure corruption at the municipal level, I exploit one of former President Dmitry Medvedev's first acts after assuming office in 2008: a requirement that officials file annual financial disclosures detailing income and assets for themselves and their immediate family. By 2015, nearly all elected and appointed officials at the municipal, regional, and federal levels were required to submit disclosures by April 1 about their previous year's finances. Although the information collected is extensive,[11] only a portion of *every* form was made available to the public online.[12] Thousands of officials who failed to file forms or submitted incorrect information have been removed from office or criminally prosecuted (Prosecutors General, 2018).

Since 2011, Transparency International-Russia has gathered the disclosures of hundreds of thousands of officials into an online database (Income and Disclosures, 2024). Using automated and manual efforts, I retrieved all available disclosure forms for Moscow municipal deputies from 2015 to 2021.[13] Disclosures contain information on annual income, real estate (type, size, and ownership, but not address), and the make and models of all cars for each deputy, his or her spouse and dependent children. Deputies serving in the 2012 or the 2017 convocations of municipal councils filed disclosures in 9,102 of the possible 11,608 years that they were required to do so, a compliance rate of roughly 78.4%; deputies that served in both convocations (the main analysis sample, as described below) comply at a higher rate of 91%.[14] Online Appendix Table A5 (p. APP-10) shows that opposition control over councils did not have any effect on compliance with disclosure rules.

I first capture corruption by looking at the officially reported incomes of deputies and their spouses, each logged; this total reflects both legal work and illegal rent-seeking. Deputies come from a range of pro-

[9] I collected the same data for all candidates to the 2012 elections.
[10] Talanova, Darya, "Dazhe satanu podklyuchili," *Novaya Gazeta*, January 12, 2022.
[11] The complete forms included information on income, expenditures, bank accounts, company shares, properties, liabilities, and transportation.
[12] Example forms in English and Russian can be found in Online Appendix Section B (p. APP-3).
[13] 2015 was the first year that these deputies were required to submit; the government stopped publishing declarations in 2022.
[14] These numbers also understate true compliance since they include in the denominator some deputies that had left office but are impossible to track. I also removed all deputies that ran and won for higher office. One municipality (Tverskoye) also did not share any disclosures before 2017.

fessional backgrounds, only some of which may see benefits from elected office. For example, a deputy's company may contract consulting services to the municipality, a clear conflict of interest that does not always merit criminal investigation. On average, deputies earned roughly 2.7 million rubles per year (or roughly $54,000); their spouses, when employed, earned 1.1 million rubles (or $21,000) per year.[15]

However, deputies engaged in corruption may strategically hide what they make in office from appearing in their disclosures, perhaps afraid that opposition councils may scrutinize them. To measure hidden assets and earnings, I create two indicators based on discrepancies in their disclosures. First, I use a new database of Russian auto insurers to identify any luxury cars that deputies owned or drove while in office but that did not appear in their disclosures (Russian Association of Motor Insurers, 2024); 33 deputies (2.2%) failed to disclose luxury cars and were coded as having "hidden assets." Second, I estimate the value of the cars that did appear on deputies' disclosures using listings from Russia's largest online car marketplace auto.ru. I then divide the total value of cars reported each year by the total family income to create a continuous measure of hidden earnings. Investigative journalists and academics have used this ratio (i.e., officials driving cars they should not be able to afford) as an indicator of malfeasance (Braguinsky, 2009; Braguinsky & Mityakov, 2015).[16] Both measures are described in more detail in the Online Appendix on page APP-5.

I combine the two indicators to create a time-varying index of corruption based on whether a deputy has any undisclosed luxury cars or has a hidden earnings ratio of above 1, meaning the value of the cars they drove exceeded their earnings for that year. Overall, 128 deputies (8.6%) had at least some hidden assets or earnings. This aggregation approach follows work by Szakonyi (2024) that combines the binary dimension of having hidden assets with the continuous measure of the hidden earnings. As a robustness check, I analyze the continuous measure of corruption that divides the total valuation of all disclosed and undisclosed cars each year by total family income. Summary statistics can be found in Online Appendix Table A1 (p. APP-2).

Together the two measures capture hidden income and assets held by deputies domestically as well as a vulnerability to corruption investigations. Not only are disclosures used by law enforcement authorities to prosecute ill-gotten gains, but they are also publicly available for journalists and activists to scrutinize. Deputies with such red flags are not only abusing their office for personal gain but are doing so in a manner that is easier to detect. Neither measure can capture, however, the presence of offshore assets or other complex laundering schemes. Therefore, following other work, we should interpret these indicators as capturing whether the change in opposition control affects the degree of more easily detectable corruption (Szakonyi, 2024).

Identification strategy

My primary approach for identifying the effect of opposition control on governance outcomes uses a DiD design. First, I code the 29 municipal councils where the opposition won 50% or more of the seats in the 2017 elections as the treatment group ("Opposition-Held Council"), with the remaining 95 entering the control group.[17] The treatment is activated following the opposition taking their seats in late 2017 and staying in power until the next elections in September 2022; I interact the treatment above with an indicator "Post-2017" designating the years 2018–2022.[18]

To use the DiD design with the disclosures data (which are measured at the individual-year level), I first limit the sample to only those deputies that served in both the 2012 and 2017 convocations, who by and large are affiliated with the ruling party.[19] The reason is to limit selection bias. Council compositions changed dramatically following the 2017 election. Because demographic characteristics may be correlated with both income and corruption, individual-level fixed effects are needed to absorb these attributes and enable a controlled comparison of income earned by the same individuals under different institutional settings.[20] Based on this two-period design, I estimate the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{dt} = \alpha + \beta * Treatment_m + \gamma * Post-2017_t \\ + \eta * Treatment_m * Post-2017_t \\ + \zeta_{dt} * X + \zeta_{mt} * Y + \theta_d + \theta_t + \epsilon_{dt}, \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

[15] All exchanges rates are calculated at 50 rubles to the US dollar. Because some deputies may earn money from real estate, I control for the number of such assets.

[16] Meduza, "He could afford these Bentleys only if he starved himself for six years," March 8, 2018.

[17] In four municipalities, opposition candidates won exactly 50% of the seats. I code these as part of the treatment, in line with news articles distinguishing the 29 total councils as opposition-held. I drop the municipality Shukino from the analysis since it followed a different electoral calendar.

[18] Since candidate-elects did not enter office until late September, I use 2018 as the first full year that the opposition held power.

[19] Online Appendix Table A4 (p. APP-9) analyzes the determinants of reelection for deputies. Candidates from the ruling party who are wealthier and less corrupt are more likely to win reelection. For members of the systemic and nonsystemic opposition, there are no clear correlates.

[20] To ensure a more balanced panel, I require all deputies in the sample to have submitted declarations in all three pretreatment years, have submitted at least five annual declarations while in office from 2012 to 2021, and be elected to the same council. These restrictions focus the analysis on deputies for whom we have consistent income data.

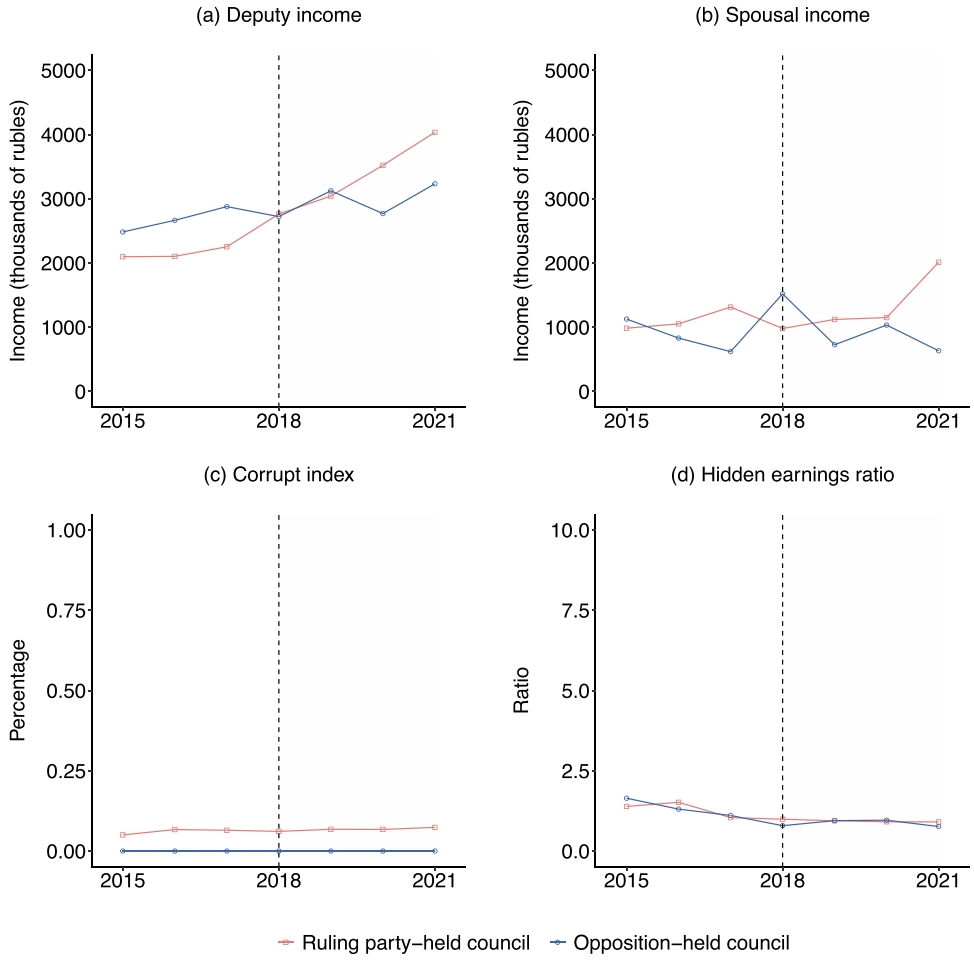

FIGURE 3 Deputy income, by period and opposition control. *Note*: This figure plots the average income for ruling party deputies (left panel) and their spouses (right panel) serving in councils that were controlled by the opposition after 2017 (in blue) and those that were always controlled by the regime (in red). The dotted line indicates the beginning of the post-2017 period when the opposition took control over the municipalities included in the treatment group. One million rubles is $20,000 at an exchange rate of 50 rubles to the dollar.

where Y is a vector of the disclosures-related outcomes for deputy d and time t. *Treatment* indexes municipalities that saw an opposition control a majority of seats following the 2017 election, *Post-2017* is a dummy for the period following the 2017 election, and the interaction between the two generates the coefficient of interest. All models include deputy fixed effects (θ_d), year fixed effects (θ_t), and time-varying covariates at the deputy level (X: vote percentage, head of council status, marital status, logged total number of assets, and number of children) and municipality level (Y: population (log), council size, and an indicator for whether the council was controlled by the opposition in 2012).[21] All models use Ordinary least squares (OLS) and cluster errors on the deputy level.

To assess identification, I construct parallel trends for each of the outcome variables analyzed. Using both data at the deputy and municipality levels (see Control over Procurement and Control over Budgets sections and below), Figures 3–5 show that in the pretreatment period, municipalities controlled by the opposition after 2017 followed very similar trajectories as those that were held by the regime following those elections. In most cases, the pretreatment differences between the two groups are not statistically different from one another, and when they are the trends run neatly in parallel.[22] These tests suggest the absence of pretrends that might imperil the use of a DiD design.

As long as parallel trends hold, selection into treatment need not undermine identification. Still, Online Appendix Table A3 (p. APP-8) shows results from

[21] This equation defines the treatment as just being controlled by the "United Democrats," drawing a distinction from the seven municipalities that were controlled by non-UR deputies from 2012 to 2017. I show in Table A6 in the Online Appendix that the results are robust to dropping these seven municipalities.

[22] One potential exception concerns the trends for Figure 4. In Online Appendix Section G on page APP-14, I show that this potential trend violation recedes once important predictors of auction usage are controlled for.

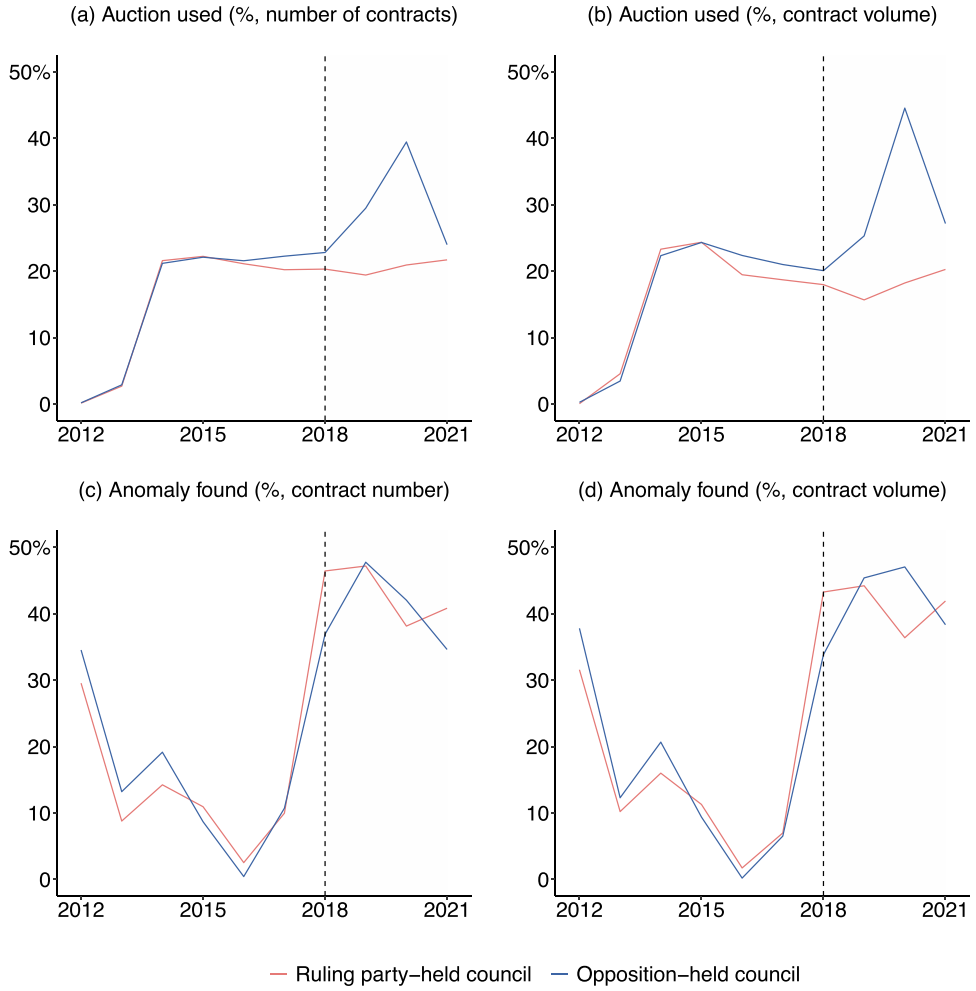

FIGURE 4 Change in procurement outcomes over time. *Note*: This figure plots the average of procurement-related outcomes by treatment and control group by year. The dotted line indicates the period following the 2017 election when the opposition took control over the municipalities included in the treatment group.

regressing opposition seat share (%) on a battery of predictors at the municipal level. The only significant predictors are the size of the council (larger councils see fewer opposition deputies) and the number of candidates running. Predictors such as population, expenditures, average disclosed income, and the percentage of incumbents running for reelection are not correlated with opposition success.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

How does opposition control over municipal institutions affect the rents from holding elected office? Table 1 analyzes reported income earned by deputies that served in councils held by the regime and the opposition in the pre- and post-2017 periods. Under this DiD design, the key coefficient of interest is the interaction between an indicator for whether the deputy served on a council held by the opposition and another indicating whether the opposition was in power in a given year. Both constituent terms from this interaction are absorbed by the individual and year fixed effects.

Column 1 includes all 359 deputies that served in both convocations, irrespective of party affiliation, finding a slightly negative but noisily estimated effect of opposition control on earnings. However, when the sample is subset to only deputies affiliated with the ruling party in column 2, we observe a 22% drop in deputy income in the post-2017 (posttreatment) period. In other words, ruling party deputies that won reelection into a council taken over by the opposition earned substantially less money in office compared to their previous convocation in office; in real terms, this amounts to a decrease of roughly $10,000 per year (500,000 rubles, or approximately the median annual income in Moscow in 2019). Sharing power with the opposition reduces the returns to elected office for the ruling party.

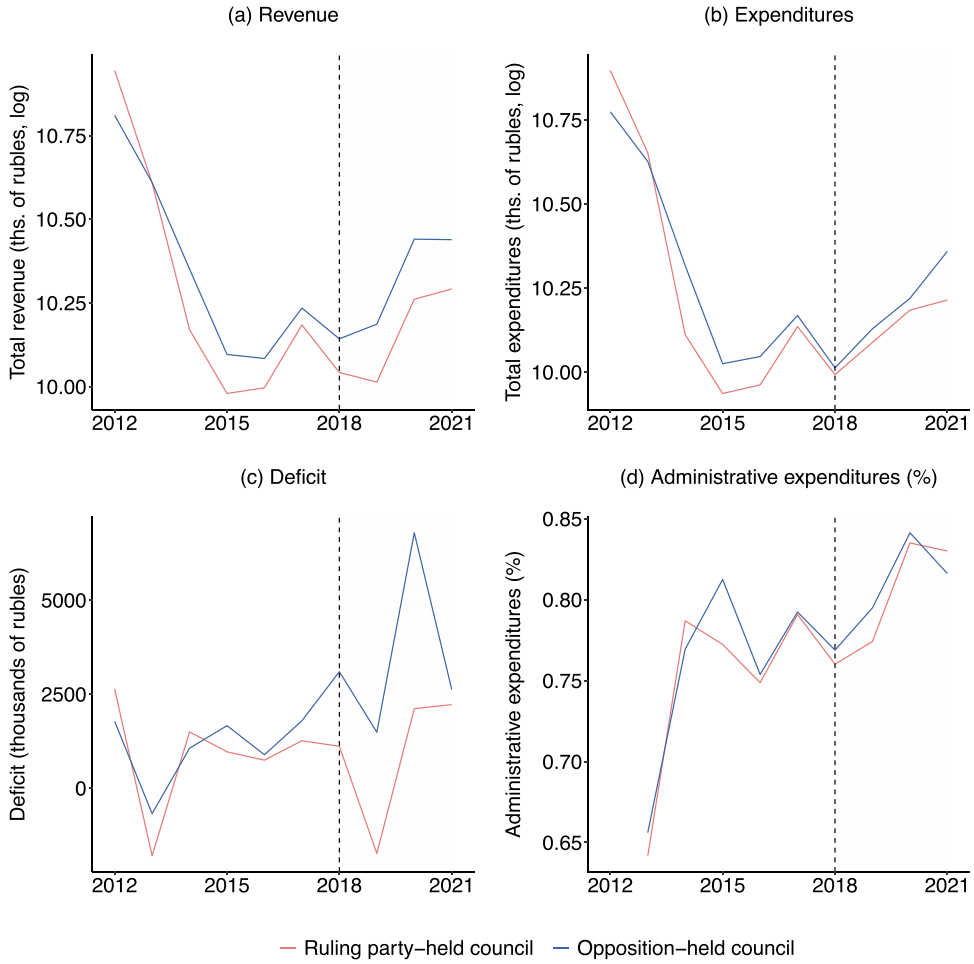

FIGURE 5 Change in budget outcomes over time. *Note*: This figure plots the average of budget-related outcomes by treatment and control group by year. Panel D is calculated using annual municipal expenditures in the denominator. The dotted line indicates the period following the 2017 election when the opposition took control over the municipalities included in the treatment group. Panels A and B are measured in thousands (ths) of rubles.

The left panel of Figure 3 provides a graphical representation of these results from column 2, Table 1; in other words, it subsets the analysis to only ruling party deputies were we observe the largest impact from opposition control. The *x*-axis indexes years. The blue line plots the average annual income for regime-affiliated deputies serving in the 29 councils that would ultimately come under control of the opposition after 2017; the red line plots the same outcome in those that always stayed in the hands of the regime, pre and post the 2017 elections. We see that incomes across the treatment and control groups grow in parallel up until the 2018 turnover in power to the opposition. From 2018 onwards, ruling party deputies in opposition-held councils saw their income growing much more slowly than their counterparts in councils where the ruling party held a majority of seats.

Importantly, opposition members did not grow richer when they held a majority of seats on the councils. For the small number that kept their seats, there is basically no change in their reported deputy earnings (column 3). Interviews with municipal council deputies suggested that they were fearful of the intense microscope applied to their activities in office by the regime and state-owned media.[23] Concerned about any personal enrichment being used to undermine their newly acquired power, deputies may have walked a straighter line while in office.

Table A6 in the Online Appendix shows a series of robustness checks to probe these results further. First, the results are robust to excluding all control variables. Next, I create several different measures of opposition control beyond just majoritarian control: indicators for the opposition holding at least one-quarter, one-half, or three-quarters of seats on the council, as well as a continuous measure of opposition control ranging from 0 to 100. In all cases, greater opposition presence after the 2017 elections is associated with decreased reported incomes among deputies. However, the results in column 7 also show no change in

[23] Interview with former municipal deputy, July 2024.

TABLE 1 Opposition control and reported income in office.

	Deputy income (log)			Spouse income (log)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Opposition-held council = Post-2017	−0.171†	−0.218**	−0.055	0.141	0.049	0.003
	(0.087)	(0.078)	(0.169)	(0.284)	(0.264)	(0.528)
Municipal population (log)	1.074	0.922	0.562	2.217*	2.527*	−7.207
	(0.790)	(0.801)	(2.679)	(1.049)	(1.065)	(8.481)
Number of council members (log)	−0.277	−0.087	−2.286*	−0.694	−0.980	0.639
	(0.229)	(0.234)	(1.130)	(0.663)	(0.677)	(2.742)
Vote percentage	−0.194	−0.074	−0.598	0.578	0.452	2.917
	(0.214)	(0.212)	(0.835)	(0.847)	(0.925)	(2.563)
Council head	0.356*	0.225	1.751**	0.200	0.410	−0.088
	(0.156)	(0.140)	(0.321)	(0.309)	(0.296)	(0.574)
Total assets (ihs)	0.084^{+}	0.082	0.062	−0.148	−0.104	−0.488
	(0.048)	(0.050)	(0.136)	(0.119)	(0.131)	(0.289)
Married	−0.048	−0.097	0.356			
	(0.069)	(0.061)	(0.260)			
Number of children	0.127^{+}	0.079	0.274	−0.049	−0.134	−0.168
	(0.073)	(0.075)	(0.198)	(0.187)	(0.198)	(0.442)
Opposition majority in 2012	−0.222	−0.179	−0.331	0.391	−0.145	1.469^{+}
	(0.166)	(0.174)	(0.282)	(0.360)	(0.335)	(0.774)
R^2	0.757	0.758	0.689	0.637	0.652	0.596
Observations	2,418	2,107	311	1,383	1,193	190
Subset	All	Ruling party	Opposition	All	Ruling party	Opposition
Deputy fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: This table analyzes annual deputy income, logged (columns 1–3), and spousal income, logged (columns 4–6). The unit of analysis is the deputy-year. Columns alternate between the full analysis sample and subsets based on ruling party or opposition affiliation. Standard errors are clustered on the deputy level. ihs, inverse hyperbolic since transformation.
$^{\dagger}p < 0.10$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

ruling party deputy income when only the opposition holds a minority of seats on a council. Finally, I show the results are robust to excluding the seven districts that had opposition majorities in the 2012 period.

Next in Table 1, columns 4–6, we see no effect of opposition control of councils on spousal income. However, the smaller sample size (not all deputies are married to spouses in the workforce) makes precise estimation difficult. Table 2 shows the same specifications but this time analyzing the two corruption measures. We see no real change in the incidence of hidden assets based on whether the opposition held control over a council. Similarly, there is no effect of the opposition taking control on corruption when a continuous ratio of all car values (disclosed and hidden) to total family earnings is analyzed in columns 4–6. However, the coefficients are all negative suggesting perhaps that this time of corruption might be curbed.

In sum, we see strong evidence that opposition control affects the amount of official income that ruling party deputies earned during their time in power. Interestingly, this effect is only present for the deputies' reported income, and not that for their spouses or their hidden income and earnings. The absence of effects from the analysis of hidden assets reveals that ruling party deputies are also not deliberately lowering their reported income to avoid being audited by the opposition; if they were, their ratio of income to cars would increase during their time in power.

Control over procurement

First, why does power-sharing with the opposition limit opportunities for rent-seeking? Though limited in their responsibilities, municipal deputies do have

TABLE 2 Opposition control and hidden earnings in office.

	Corrupt index (binary)			Hidden earnings ratio		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Opposition-held council × Post-2017	0.009	−0.006	0.033	−0.370	−0.217	−0.314
	(0.016)	(0.007)	(0.049)	(0.288)	(0.251)	(1.024)
Municipal population (log)	0.058	0.074	−0.953	0.006	0.226	−3.632
	(0.053)	(0.051)	(0.584)	(0.651)	(0.577)	(15.230)
Number of council members (log)	−0.110	−0.128^{+}	0.237	−0.064	−0.231	4.760
	(0.069)	(0.068)	(0.324)	(0.551)	(0.537)	(4.414)
Vote percentage	−0.009	−0.009	−0.031	−0.168	−0.463	1.483
	(0.046)	(0.049)	(0.095)	(0.668)	(0.670)	(2.965)
Council head	0.004	0.006	0.063^{+}	−1.194**	−1.170*	−1.298*
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.036)	(0.454)	(0.512)	(0.614)
Total assets (ihs)	−0.013	−0.016	−0.005	−0.092	−0.076	−0.170
	(0.013)	(0.010)	(0.059)	(0.094)	(0.101)	(0.312)
Married	0.001	−0.015	0.089	−0.282	−0.173	−1.461
	(0.022)	(0.021)	(0.085)	(0.363)	(0.350)	(1.707)
Number of children	0.000	−0.010	0.032	0.088	0.191	−0.121
	(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.037)	(0.221)	(0.256)	(0.565)
Opposition majority in 2012	−0.043	−0.008	−0.062	0.276	0.330	0.308
	(0.030)	(0.010)	(0.066)	(0.343)	(0.431)	(0.792)
R^2	0.816	0.831	0.764	0.629	0.639	0.601
Observations	2,418	2,107	311	1,501	1,297	204
Subset	All	Ruling party	Opposition	All	Ruling party	Opposition
Deputy fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: This table analyzes the two hidden earnings measures. The unit of analysis is the deputy-year. Columns alternate between the full analysis sample and subsets based on ruling party or opposition affiliation. Columns 1–3 analyze all deputies that submitted disclosures, while columns 4–6 only analyze deputies that disclosed cars. Standard errors are clustered on the deputy level.
$^{+}p < 0.10$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

oversight powers over several areas of policymaking. For example, deputies monitor the implementation of capital investments and public procurement, two of the most significant founts for corruption in Russia (Barsukova, 2019; Mironov & Zhuravskaya, 2016). Recent estimates suggest that roughly 6.2% of GDP is lost to kickbacks around state contracts.[24]

To test whether opposition control over councils affects this rent-seeking channel, I collected data on procurement from the public portal ClearSpending (ClearSpending Data, 2024). Using tax identification numbers, I collected all contracts signed by municipalities from 2012 to 2021.[25] Over this period, the 124 municipalities signed 11,297 procurement contracts totaling 6.7 billion rubles ($134 million). Online Appendix Table A2 (p. APP-2) shows that most spending went towards sports, entertainment, and other types of recreation, but that councils also spend on infrastructure and information technology (IT).

Even with this limited purse, municipal governments have experienced their fair share of corruption scandals (Detkova, Podkolzina, & Tkachenko, 2018). Officials manipulate procurement by buying goods through a single-bidder system where only the preferred supplier is allowed to participate. A portion of the marked-up contract price then flows back to officials as a kickback. The use of open, electronic auctions is believed to be the best deterrent for this type of collusion. But government officials have a choice about whether to use this less corrupt auction mechanism.

I first calculate the percentage of all contracts (both by number and by volume) that each municipality procured using electronic auctions. In almost 45% of municipality-years, electronic auctions were never used, a clear indicator that procurement was not being opened up to all bidders in a transparent, competitive

[24] *The Moscow Times*, "Public Procurement Kickbacks Total One-Third of Russia's Budget Revenue - Survey," May 26, 2023.
[25] The analysis ends in 2021, due to the Russian government's efforts to classify data beginning in 2022.

TABLE 3 Opposition oversight over procurement.

	Auction held		Anomaly found	
	Contract percentage, number	Contract percentage, volume	Contract percentage, number	Contract percentage, volume
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Opposition-held council × Post-2017	0.105**	0.122**	−0.051	−0.033
	(0.034)	(0.039)	(0.060)	(0.061)
Municipal population (log)	−0.069	−0.031	0.084	0.242*
	(0.075)	(0.070)	(0.097)	(0.094)
Number of council members	−0.005	−0.005	−0.020	−0.020
	(0.014)	(0.013)	(0.016)	(0.016)
Contract number (log)	−0.032^{+}	0.013	−0.028	−0.032
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.026)	(0.028)
Contract volume (log)	0.044**	−0.003	0.007	0.015
	(0.015)	(0.016)	(0.023)	(0.024)
Expenditures (log)	−0.031	0.013	0.082*	0.053
	(0.035)	(0.034)	(0.040)	(0.047)
Opposition majority in 2012	0.029	0.037	0.099	0.100
	(0.065)	(0.061)	(0.094)	(0.069)
R^2	0.440	0.413	0.397	0.357
Observations	1,175	1,175	1,175	1,175
Municipality fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: This table analyzes outcomes related to procurement at the municipality-year level. Columns 1 and 2 analyze the percentage of contracts using electronic auctions by number and volume, respectively. Columns 3 and 4 analyze the percentage of contracts where an anomaly was identified in the contract process by number and volume. Standard errors are clustered at the municipality level.
$^{+}p < 0.10$; $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$.

fashion. Yet some municipalities still used auctions regularly; in 5% of municipality-years, electronic auctions were used to procure over three-fourths of all goods and services.

Next, I calculate the percentage of contracts (both by number and volume) flagged as having potential for corruption or collusion. ClearSpending.Ru has developed an automated system that assigns up to eight red flags indicating possible manipulation, wasteful spending, or limited competition. For example, one red flag identified contracts concluded too quickly to allow sufficient participation, while another flags contracts signed with a supplier labeled as "dishonest" by the Federal Anti-Monopoly Service. Overall, 22% of municipal contracts in the analysis data contained at least one red flag, the vast majority of containing inaccurate or incomplete information about the item being procured.

Table 3 applies the DiD approach at the municipal-year level. We see first in columns 1 and 2 that opposition-held councils in the post-2017 period saw a significantly higher percentage of goods and services being procured using electronic auctions. Roughly 10% more contracts (totaling 12% of state expenditures) were signed using auctions when the opposition was in power. Although the sums were small, these results show that oppositions change the ways councils do business with suppliers. In columns 3 and 4, I examine the likelihood of contracts signed by municipalities being red-flagged as vulnerable to corruption. The sign on the interaction effects is negative but imprecisely estimated. The magnitudes are large, suggesting that with greater statistical power we might see better evidence that opposition control leads to fewer procurement anomalies.

These effects are also seen clearly in Figure 4. Up until 2018, treated and control councils followed a very similar trajectory. But following the opposition's ascendance in 2018, there is a sharp divergence in the use of electronic auctions between opposition-held and regime-controlled councils (panels A and B). The evidence regarding anomalies is less clear-cut and perhaps affected by the change in procurement caused by the pandemic in 2020. Taken together, these plots reveal strong evidence that procurement patterns changed quickly after the opposition took control over councils in 2017.

Control over budgets

Procurement data capture only a small share of total municipal spending (e.g., goods or services bought from external suppliers) while missing other items such as salaries and infrastructure costs. By changing the way that budgets are both allocated, opposition councils may also be able to deprive ruling party deputies of rent-seeking opportunities. On the other hand, budget politics also may be a key tool for the regime to fiscally starve opposition-held councils. Curbing funding could limit the opposition's ability to invest in public-facing projects that could improve their image and attract voters. Budget data allow us to test whether the regime responds to electoral losses by handcuffing the ability of opposition councils to function effectively.

Data on municipal budgets are collected independently from the procurement contracts and come from the Russian State Statistics Agency for the years 2012–2021.[26] Budgets average roughly $500,000 per council per year. The DiD design is identical to the municipal-level regressions from the previous section. Figure 5 plots the changes over time for four key budget-related outcomes: revenue (panel A), expenditures (panel B), deficit (panel C), and administrative expenses such as municipal salaries (panel D). Regression results can be found in Online Appendix Table A7 (p. APP-12). We see strong evidence again of the opposition changing the way municipal institutions are run.[27] Rather than being deprived of resources, opposition-held councils actually see slightly faster growth in revenue while also decreasing expenditures. This increase also does not come from larger transfers from higher level governments, who might be intervening to shape municipal politics. Opposition-held councils, in fact, derive the same percentage of revenue from taxes versus transfers. Expenditures in opposition-held councils also declined, creating large surpluses and suggesting that wasteful spending declined in these places.

Qualitative evidence

Qualitative evidence from interviews with former opposition deputies illustrates how they worked to combat rent-seeking and corruption.[28] First, many deputies spoke at length about the importance of closing down channels of unnecessary spending that lined the pockets of officials. One opposition council head remarked that several deputies uncovered a "suspicious corruption story" where municipal administrations were blatantly overpaying for electricity.[29] Indeed, the budget surpluses enjoyed by opposition councils were likely not due to political paralysis or an inability to pass spending bills, but rather a function of increased monitoring of government expenses.

Often times this type of scrutiny required acquiring investigative skills about the procurement process. Several deputies remarked about learning the art of cost estimates (smeta) and compiling detailed lists about how much goods cost (such as asphalt, cable, etc.) in order to double-check supplier bids.[30] The work at times was not glamorous. A deputy from the Aeroport district commented that "you have to go to all these stupid commissions, spend a lot of time, use your strength to climb into attics, basements filled with bedbugs and smeared in paint, in general, all the charms of repairs."[31] Council heads had been used to shoveling through their preferred projects and suppliers through uncompetitive contracting procedures; now they had to deal with galvanized opponents checking details and uncovering corrupt schemes.[32]

Other deputies identified redundant or even fictitious projects that were only designed to reward deputies and firms connected to them, such as canceling a $6 million construction contract that duplicated other work done and stopping state funds from being used to rent a car for officials.[33] In Khamovniki, a firm run by the former municipal head operated the municipality's website at great expense to the taxpayer (and only 37 visits per day).[34] Shortly after taking office, opposition leader and municipal head Ilya Yashin cited an example of 37 million rubles (roughly $740,000) being spent on the renovation of a small square; one of his first priorities in office would be to review the contract and monitor capital investments.[35]

Finally, opposition deputies frequently mentioned taking steps to reduce the inflated compensation that deputies received while in office. In several interviews, deputies noted that they closely followed and tried to block unnecessary budget items, such as large bonuses paid to municipal employees; however, deputies with only a minority on the council were

[26] Data for 2021 were collected by hand, with some slight missingness. Data for 2022 have not been released.
[27] Data come from Council of Municipal Governments in Russia (2024).
[28] To contact deputies, I first located their email addresses, Telegram handles, or phone numbers using publicly available information (mainly their websites) or my personal contacts. I then adopted a snowball style approach, asking each deputy after the interview to suggest other deputies also living abroad that might be willing to speak to me. All interviews were conducted over Zoom, and I have withheld names to protect their privacy. Two deputies still living in Russia declined to be interviewed because of concerns about violating foreign agent laws.
[29] Interview with municipal council head, July 2024.
[30] Interview with former municipal deputy, July 2024.
[31] Interview with former municipal deputy, July 2024.
[32] Interview with former municipal deputy, July 2024.
[33] Bobrinskiy, Nikolay, "Uspekhi i neudachi nezavisimykh deputatov v Ramenkakh," February 4, 2019.
[34] Karnaukhova, Alekseya, "Otchet deputata Soveta deputatov munitsipal'nogo okruga Khamovniki Alekseya Karnaukhova," Moscow, 2018
[35] BBC News, "Chto smogut sdelat' v Moskve oppozitsionnyye munitsipal'nyye deputaty? Ne tak mnogo," Russia Service, September 11, 2017.

often out-voted and struggled to reign in excess compensation schemes.[36] Yashin also attempted to halt a one-time remuneration ("golden parachute") for retiring municipal employees that would have cost his municipality at least $10,000.[37] Other work involved directly preventing abuse of authority. In one district, a UR deputy illegally appropriated basements in a housing block, stole communal electricity, and ran a small cryptocurrency mining operation; opposition deputies helped write letters and bring the case to the attention of the authorities.[38] The presence of opposition deputies on these councils seemed to scare ruling party deputies straight by increasing scrutiny of different types of financial flows and using social media and other platforms to raise the public stakes of embezzlement and self-dealing.

Systemic versus nonsystemic opposition

Finally, we might expect that councils controlled by members of the nonsystemic opposition, who both demonstrated an ability to coordinate electoral activities and stronger antipathy towards the regime, to be more successful in curbing rent-seeking than their counterparts from the systemic opposition. In Online Appendix Table A8 (p. APP-13), I separately analyze councils where the nonsystemic opposition held a majority on its own. Importantly we see that ruling party deputies earned less income in councils controlled both by the nonsystemic opposition and those where the systemic opposition is needed for a majority. The difference between councils of different opposition affiliations is small and not statistically significant.

This suggests that the important driver behind controlling rent-seeking among ruling party deputies is empowering any politicians not affiliated with the party, regardless of whether they coordinate with a centralized body or commit to a nonsystemic challenge to power. The systemic opposition may be best understood as a "swing" group in Russian politics. Although its allegiance to Putin's regime has withstood many critical tests, after winning control of Moscow municipal councils, systemic opposition deputies behaved quite similarly to those from the nonsystemic opposition in constraining the regime and ruling party. This suggests a more fluid sense of allegiance: the systemic opposition may be open to co-optation not just from the regime but also from its most vocal challengers.

OPPOSITION GOVERNANCE AND VOTERS

Even if the Moscow opposition was able to curb corruption during its brief time in municipal office, a larger question looms about whether any of its anti-corruption efforts mattered for its future electoral prospects. In other words, does better governance help opposition parties launch off that "springboard" into higher office? Unfortunately, for this case, the window of opportunity for moving upward was slammed shut by Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Putin's regime crushed all dissent against the war, bringing criminal charges against opposition leaders, journalists, and activists. This repression escalated during the run-up to the September 2022 Moscow municipal elections, where the regime blocked opposition candidates from running and used fraud to ensure ruling party's victory.

This level of repression and breadth of fraud makes it very difficult to evaluate, using either survey or electoral data, how constituents retrospectively evaluated the Moscow opposition's time in power. But this specific shock to Russian politics should not negate the fact that oppositions more generally can benefit from their time in office under autocratic regimes. Voters may prefer opposition candidates that show a willingness to work alongside the regime in order to improve society and gain governing experience.

To get a sense of how opposition participation in government affects voter preferences, I placed an original vignette experiment on a nationally representative survey of 2,980 Russians three months before the Russia's 2022 all-out invasion of Ukraine (Russian Election Survey, 2024). The experiment prompted respondents to consider two hypothetical candidates to the Duma running for election the next year. One candidate represented the ruling party UR, while the other ran as an independent, not affiliated with any political party with seats in parliament.[39]

The main treatment randomly added information on the political background of the independent candidate. One group of respondents learned that not only had the independent candidate won election as a municipal deputy five years earlier but since then had worked closely with the regime on governance issues. This "held municipal office" treatment captures the potential for municipal office to act as a springboard into higher office. The second group of respondents received information that the independent candidate had criticized the election system and never run for

[36] Interview with former municipal deputy, July 2024. Interview with the former municipal deputy, July 2014.
[37] Miller, Liza, "Il'ya Yashin khochet lishit' munitsipal'nykh deputatov 'zolotykh parashyutov,'" *Kommersant*, October 27, 2017.
[38] Interview with former municipal deputy, July 2024. Morozov, Vitaliy, "Byvshiy deputat «Edinoy Rossii» voroval elektrichestvo dlya mayninga bitkoinov," Coinside.ru, December 25, 2017.

[39] Question wording and survey details can be found in Online Appendix Section H on page APP-17.

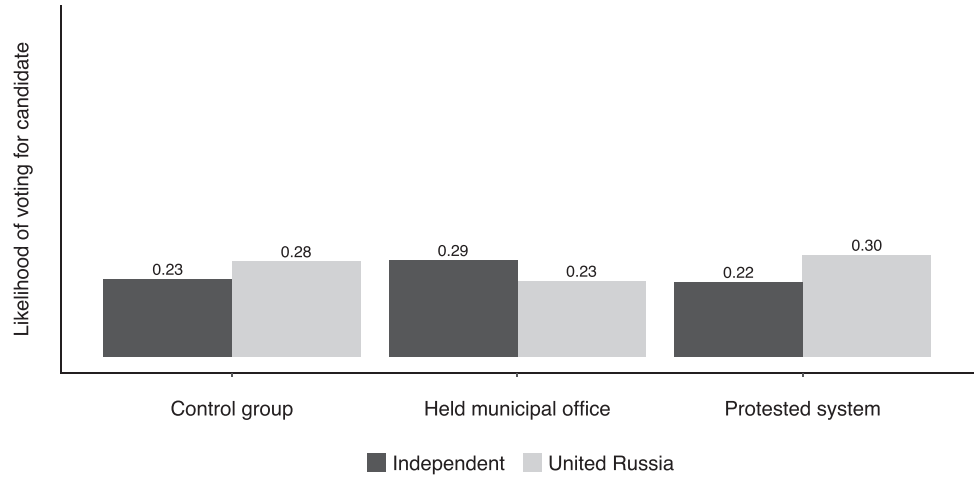

FIGURE 6 Experimental evidence about opposition governance. *Note*: This figure plots the means for whether respondents would vote for the United Russia candidate or the independent candidate for each treatment arm. The *y*-axis is scaled from 0 to 1, in which 1 indicates the respondent would vote for the given candidate. Respondents in the control group received no additional information on the independent candidate, those in the held municipal office treatment learned the independent candidate had won municipal office before and worked with the regime, and those in the protested system treatment learned the independent candidate had criticized elections and never run before.

office before (the "protested system" treatment). The last group of respondents received no additional information about the independent candidate.[40] Respondents were then given a choice of supporting the UR candidate, the independent candidate, or neither.

This experimental design has both strengths and weaknesses. Fielding the survey throughout Russia also helps clarify whether voters around the country, and not just in its large urban centers, value opposition collaboration with the regime. Recent work has shown that 50% of all autocracies included members from the opposition in their cabinets, while 80% of electoral authoritarian regimes saw multiple parties included in their legislatures (Bokobza & Nyrup, 2024; Miller, 2015). The experiment sheds light on voter preferences for opposition participation in authoritarian institutions, using an increasingly repressive political setting.

But the survey does not precisely mirror the main research question, which evaluates the governance impact of opposition majorities. First, I opted not to include any information about how candidates performed in office within the experiment, as I was concerned its inclusion would introduce clear bias: respondents would unsurprisingly gravitate to any candidate described as being successful in combatting corruption.[41] Instead, the focus was on how voters evaluated opposition activists that had occupied any political positions within an authoritarian power vertical. This helps us understand the broader question of whether oppositions are well-served politically by participating in regime institutions, even without explicitly addressing their performance in office. Is it worthwhile to challenge the regime electorally at lower levels (bearing in mind the potential for improving governance)? Or is the opposition better off refraining completely from challenging the ruling party in fraudulent polls?

Figure 6 plots the means of respondent support for each candidate by treatment. Since respondents were asked to choose between the candidates, the bars show the means of binary indicators for whether the respondent chose that particular candidate (UR or independent).[42] Respondents overall preferred UR to independent candidates by roughly five percentage points when no additional information was given about either candidate.

But when respondents are informed that independent candidates had held office prior and worked with the regime, their support flips and independent candidates command a six percentage point lead. Having previously protested the system, however, does not provide any advantage. Online Appendix Table A11 confirms these effects in regressions that include demographic controls (p. APP-19). The effect sizes are large and statistically significant: voters prefer such experienced independent candidates to their UR rivals by roughly 5%. Winning elections at the municipal

[40] No additional information was provided about the UR candidate. This choice was made because of the difficulty identifying a symmetric treatment for Treatments #2 and #3, since UR deputies are both part of the regime and unlikely to have criticized the system. An additional treatment varied the economic platform of the candidates but is collapsed in the analysis.

[41] The regime also dominates all municipal councils outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg, and voters may not relate to a hypothetical that asks about opposition control.

[42] Analysis of those who chose "neither" is in Online Appendix Table A11 (p. APP-19).

level can help opposition politicians convince voters of their seriousness for higher office, even if governing required working alongside the regime.

CONCLUSION

This paper analyzes the case of Russia to show that when autocrats share power with the opposition at the subnational level, governance may improve. Importantly, how much the opposition can constrain the regime depends on whether it controls versus just participates in formal institutions. The Russian opposition had less success driving down rent-seeking when it occupied a minority of council seats; holding a majority was critical to execute oversight. Electoral accountability may not be sufficient to improve governance in autocracies. Instead, control over policy-making is necessary to change regime behavior. Experimental evidence shows that voters reward opposition politicians who pursue elected office, even if it means collaborating with the regime.

That the Russian opposition could achieve any anti-corruption gains in such a difficult and repressive setting, and with limited resources and responsibilities, suggests there could be similar dividends to be had from opposition participation in governments in other settings. Importantly, the success of the opposition's "Political Uber" strategy was not a one-off in Russia. Applied again during the 2019 St. Petersburg municipal elections, this tactic helped the opposition win 40% of council seats, a huge improvement on past contests.[43]

But outside of Russia, there are two clear scope conditions that affect the ability of other oppositions to achieve similar improvements in governance. First, the electoral authoritarian regime in Russia has relied not on ideology but rather access to corruption and rent-seeking as the main tools for co-opting elites. This ubiquity of corrupt activities provided opposition activists ample opportunities to challenge the government electorally and upend the rent-seeking structures once in power. Other variants of dominant parties may be more aware of their electoral weaknesses and less dependent on corruption to govern, giving the opposition less room for maneuvering both before and after elections.[44] In other words, authoritarian regimes that govern more effectively and transparently may be less vulnerable to opposition parties trying to establish themselves as a credible alternative for governing.

Second, even though municipal authority has been decimated by President Putin's centralization efforts, there are still some levers of power available to elected deputies at the local level. As the interviews demonstrate, despite meager budgets, municipal councils in Moscow could still perform their oversight role and disrupt the corrupt schemes used by the ruling party. Although the Kremlin tried to undermine opposition governing efforts, ultimately this paper demonstrates how constrained the regime was in the pre-pandemic period from completely overturning electoral results.[45] Other authoritarian regimes leave no such window open at subnational levels, with federal authorities intervening early and often to undermine the autonomy of such institutions before they become a problem for the ruling party. Therefore, we should expect opposition politicians to have a much stronger impact on governance processes when the institutions they control have at least some teeth, and are not completely under the thumb of regime elites.

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[43] Unfortunately the COVID-19 pandemic makes it difficult to undertake the same analysis of corruption and other outcomes.

[44] In post-war Italy, the Italian Communist Party won a series of victories in "Red Bologna" (Jäggi, Müller, & Schmid, 1977), pursuing a successful political strategy of anti-corruption and organizational efficiency, in contrast to the ruling party Christian Democrats (Forlenza, 2010).

[45] Talanova, Darya, "Dazhe satanu podklyuchili," *Novaya Gazeta*, January 12, 2022.

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