IS PUTIN'S POPULARITY REAL?

Timothy Frye[*]
Scott Gehlbach
Kyle L. Marquardt
Ora John Reuter

ABSTRACT

Vladimir Putin has managed to achieve strikingly high public approval ratings throughout his time as president and prime minister of Russia. But is his popularity real, or are respondents lying to pollsters? We conducted a series of list experiments in early 2015 to estimate support for Putin while allowing respondents to maintain ambiguity about whether they personally do so. Our estimates suggest support for Putin of approximately 80 percent, which is within ten percentage points of that implied by direct questioning. We find little evidence that these estimates are positively biased due to the presence of floor effects. In contrast, our analysis of placebo experiments suggests that there may be a small negative bias due to artificial deflation. We conclude that Putin's approval ratings largely reflect the attitudes of Russian citizens.

Key words; public opinion, Russia, autocracy, approval ratings, item-count technique, preference falsification

[*] Frye: Columbia University and International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development of the National Research University–Higher School of Economics; Gehlbach: University of Wisconsin–Madison; Marquardt: V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg; Reuter: University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development of the National Research University–Higher School of Economics.

Machiavelli famously argued that it is better for a ruler to be feared than loved. However, being loved also has its advantages. Research suggests that popular support for the leader is a key determinant of the tenure and performance of autocratic regimes (Magaloni 2006; Dimitrov 2009; Hale 2014; Guriev and Treisman 2015). Such leaders are thought to be better able to withstand challenges to their rule, while also being less dependent on coercion to maintain power. Recognizing the importance of popular support as a source of authority, leaders such as Turkey's Erdogan, China's Xu, and many others have invested heavily in efforts to cultivate a positive image of the ruler.

A prime example of this phenomenon is Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, who has managed to achieve strikingly high public approval ratings throughout his more than 15 years in office. Kremlin spin doctors carefully manage President Putin's public image via a heavy dose of propaganda in the state media, punctuated by the occasional shirtless photo or publicity stunt to demonstrate his masculinity (Sperling 2014; Wilson 2005). Whether or not these methods are effective, there is little doubt that the Kremlin cares deeply about the level of popular support for President Putin. Indeed, observers in Russia are quick to point to President Putin's high approval ratings (often in contrast to those of other leaders) as a source of legitimacy for the President and his regime.

Yet, as in other autocratic regimes, there is a nagging suspicion that these approval ratings are inflated because respondents are lying to pollsters. Although repression is typically not the first option for contemporary dictatorships, the possibility remains that citizens will be penalized for expressing disapproval of the ruler. Even a small probability of punishment may be sufficient to dissuade survey respondents from expressing their true feelings about the ruler. Alternatively, and not mutually exclusively, respondents may lie to pollsters to conform to what they perceive as a social norm—in this case, supporting Putin.

Determining the extent of dissembling in public-opinion polls is a challenge not only for researchers studying public opinion, who have used Russian polling data to explain patterns of regime support (e.g,. Colton and Hale 2009; Treisman 2011, 2014), but also for autocrats themselves, who typically lack the tools of free and fair elections or open media with which to gauge their "true" support among the public (Kuran 1991, 1995; Wintrobe 1998). Indeed, although Western politicians in democracies are often portrayed as obsessed with polling, in some ways it is in less democratic regimes that credible survey responses are most important.

To explore the extent to which survey respondents truthfully reveal their support for President Putin when asked directly, we conducted two surveys in Russia in early 2015 employing a version of the item-count technique, often referred to as the "list experiment." The idea of a list experiment is to give respondents the opportunity to truthfully reveal their opinion or behavior with respect to a sensitive topic without directly taking a position that the survey enumerator or others might find objectionable. Previous work has employed the item-count technique to study a range of sensitive topics, including race relations in the U.S. (Kuklinski et al. 1997), vote buying in Lebanon (Corstange 2009), and voting and presidential approval in contemporary Russia (Kalinin 2014, 2015).

Estimates from our list experiments suggest support for Putin of approximately 80 percent, which is within ten percentage points of that implied by direct questioning. Various considerations suggest that this figure may be either an over- or underestimate, but our analysis of direct questions about other political figures and of placebo experiments suggest that the bulk of Putin's support typically found in opinion polls appears to be genuine—at least as of March 2015. Of course, respondents' opinions may still be shaped by pro-Kremlin bias in the media and other efforts to boost support for the president, but our results suggest that Russian citizens are by and large willing to reveal their "true" attitudes to pollsters when asked.

Background

According to opinion polls, Vladimir Putin is one of the most popular leaders in the world.[1] As illustrated by Figure 1, since becoming president in March 2000, Putin's approval rating has never dipped below 60 percent. Indeed, it has usually been higher than 70 percent, and it has frequently crested well above 80 percent.[2]

Political scientists have attributed Putin's apparent popularity to his personal appeal; to popular approval of the policies advocated by Putin; and to Russia's strong economic performance over Putin's tenure (e.g., Colton and Hale 2009; Treisman 2011, 2014). Interpreted through these lenses, the ebbs and flows of Putin's popularity make sense. Putin's approval rating was very high at the beginning of his first presidency, a period that coincided with the beginning of Russia's post-collapse economic boom and popular enthusiasm for the president's hard line on the conflict in Chechnya. It declined somewhat in 2005 on the heels of unpopular social reforms that monetized many social benefits, but grew again from 2006 to 2008 as oil prices reached historic highs and economic growth accelerated. Putin's popularity sank somewhat on the heels of the 2008–2009 economic crisis, was buoyed briefly by a "rally around the flag" effect from the 2008 war in Georgia, and then fell much more precipitously in early 2011 for reasons that are not well understood.[3] After stabilizing for several years, Putin's ratings rebounded dramatically in Spring 2014 following the annexation of Crimea. Since then, they have remained at very high levels, peaking at 89 percent in June 2015.

Putin's astronomically high approval ratings since the conflict in Ukraine began are of particular interest. One the one hand, Putin may be benefiting from the same surge in public support that

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[1] See, for example, "Vladimir Putin's Approval Rating at Record Levels," *Guardian*, 23 July 2015.

[2] It is worth noting that public attitudes toward President Putin along other dimensions are somewhat less rosy. For example, in our March 2015 survey, when asked to name the five or six politicians in Russia whom they most trust, only 62 percent of respondents included President Putin in this list. Similarly, in a June 2015 survey by the Levada Center, 66 percent of respondents indicated that they would like to see President Putin retain his post after the next round of elections (http://www.levada.ru/24-06-2015/vybory-gotovnost-golosovat-perenos-elektoralnye-predpochteniya). We see no a priori evidence in the responses to these questions—which measure attitudes about trust and reelection, not approval—that Putin is less popular than suggested by opinion polls.

[3] Treisman (2014) finds that Putin increasingly lost the confidence of two groups during this period: those dissatisfied with the state of the Russian economy and those with a negative attitude toward the West.

other leaders experience during times of crisis—witness the sharp spike in approval for President George H. Bush at the start of the first Iraq war (Berinsky 2009). But from another vantage point, Putin's persistently high ratings are puzzling, as his approval rating seems unaffected by economic sanctions, a precipitous drop in oil prices, the collapse of the ruble, and Russia's deepening economic crisis.[4] "Rally around the flag" effects in public opinion are usually short-lived (Mueller 1970; Brody 1991), but more than eighteen months have now passed since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis and the jump in President Putin's apparent support. Why haven't Putin's popularity ratings collapsed?

One possible answer is that the numbers do not reflect "real" levels of support for President Putin. Such a critique comes in three versions. First, it could be the case that the numbers are simply made up, with Russia's polling agencies pressured by the Kremlin to present fake numbers in order to convey an image of Putin's popularity. This scenario seems unlikely, for while it is true that two of Russia's main polling agencies—FOM and VTsIOM—have close ties with the Kremlin, the third major polling agency in Russia—the Levada Center—is widely seen as independent, with a strong reputation for integrity and professionalism. Further casting doubt on this potential explanation, Putin's high approval ratings are routinely confirmed by polls carried out by Western researchers.[5]

A second critique is that public opinion is manipulated by the Kremlin. State control of major media outlets and restrictions on the opposition limit the ability of Russians to hear alternative viewpoints (Gehlbach 2010, Gehlbach and Sonin 2014). This is undeniable; Russia is an electoral authoritarian regime and these are the main tools it uses to create an unbalanced playing field between it and the opposition. But, strictly speaking, this does not imply that Putin's approval ratings are not reflective of popular attitudes, *as they exist*. It simply means that those attitudes can be molded by the Kremlin. As we note below, this distinction has important implications for regime legitimacy and, ultimately, regime stability.

A final possibility is that the numbers are distorted because survey respondents misrepresent their true preferences when answering survey questions. That is, Russians who do *not* support Putin are reporting that they *do* support him when asked in surveys. This might happen because respondents fear that the authorities will persecute them for failing to support the regime. Alternatively, and not mutually exclusively, respondents may misrepresent their preferences to conform to what they perceive to be a social norm—in this case, supporting Putin. At slight risk of confusion, we classify both of these motivations as "social desirability bias."

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[4] See, for example, Adomanis, Mark, "Putin's Poll Numbers Are Skyrocketing, But They Aren't Going To Last," Center on Global Interests, 10 April 2014, accessed at http://www.globalinterests.org/2014/04/10/putins-poll-numbers-are-skyrocketing-but-they-arent-going-to-last/.

[5] See Colton and Hale (2013) and "Public Opinion in Russia: Russians' Attitudes on Economic and Domestic Issues," Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, accessed at http://www.apnorc.org/projects/Pages/public-opinion-in-russia-russians-attitudes-on-the-economic-and-domestic-issues.aspx.

Social desirability bias is common in all forms of research that involve interviews with human subjects, and a large literature has been devoted to the subject (e.g., Edwards 1957, Noelle-Neumann 1984, Nederhof 1985). In political science, social desirability bias has been identified as a problem in studies of voter turnout (Holbrook and Krosnick 2010), vote buying (Corstange 2009) and racial prejudice (Kuklinski et al. 1997), among others. Although much of this work has been carried out in democracies, it is plausible that self-censorship is at least as common in autocracies, though there has been comparatively little empirical work on the topic (see Lyall et al. 2013; Blair et al. 2014; Kalinin 2014, 2015 and Jiang and Yang 2015 for exceptions).

In commentary on Russia, one frequently encounters the view that Putin's high approval ratings are attributable to self-censorship. Appearing recently on CNN, author Ben Judah offered the following perspective on Russian polling: "So what that opinion poll is, is not a poll of approval but it's a poll of fear. An opinion poll can only be conducted in a democracy with a free press. In a country with no free press, where people are arrested for expressing their opinions, where the truth is hidden from them, where the media even online is almost all controlled by the government -- when a pollster phones people up and asks, 'Hello, do you approve of Vladimir Putin,' the answer is overwhelmingly yes.'"[6] Similar perspectives are often encountered in the Russian press, and some have even suggested that even the Kremlin itself does not believe the polls.[7]

In support of this view, recent scholarly work has found evidence of self-censorship in reports of voting in Russia (Kalinin 2014, 2015). Moreover, surveys indicate that a sizable minority of the Russian public believes that respondents can face persecution by the authorities for opinions expressed in public-opinion surveys. According to an August 2014 poll conducted by the Levada Center, six percent thought this could certainly happen and a further 22 percent though it was possible.[8] Similarly, in a March 2015 Levada Center poll, respondents were asked whether they thought people might hide their political views in order to avoid "trouble" with the authorities.[9] Fourteen percent thought that many people did this and 34 percent thought that "some people, but certainly not all" did so.

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[6] "Vladimir Putin's Approval Rating? Now at a Whopping 86%," CNN.com, 26 February 2015, accessed at http://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/26/europe/vladimir-putin-popularity/index.html. The Levada Center polls cited here use face-to-face interviews at the home of the respondent rather than phone interviews.

[7] See "Pochemu ne stoit doveryat' mnenii grazhdan," Slon.ru, 22 August 2014, accessed at http://slon.ru/russia/pochemu_ne_stoit_doveryat_mneniyu_grazhdan-1146924.xhtml, and "O logichnosti popravok v zakon o FSB," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 7 July 2015.

[8] The exact phrasing was "Do you think that people who are critical of the authorities in public opinion polls can be persecuted by the authorities for these opinions?" See http://www.levada.ru/18-08-2014/oprosy-obshchestvennogo-mneniya-interes-doverie-i-strakhi.

[9] Author-commissioned survey. Note, however, that this question did not ask specifically about opinions expressed in public-opinion surveys. The exact phrasing was "What do you think about the opinion that people in Russia try to hide their political views in order to avoid troubles with the authorities?"

At the same time, there are also persuasive arguments to suggest that Putin's approval ratings reflect the state of public opinion in Russia, or, at the very least, that self-censorship in Russia is relatively limited. Russia is not a totalitarian regime that exercises social control primarily through intimidation and terror. Its security services do not penetrate and monitor society as they did in the Soviet period. Although tightly circumscribed, public criticism of the regime is permitted, and this criticism is sometimes harsh. Opposition elites are often persecuted for their public positions, but it is uncommon to encounter reports of charges being brought against citizens who are not politically active solely for expressing oppositional views. This makes Russia different from some of the regimes studied by Kuran (1991).

Indeed, it is important to note that there is a flip side to the polls cited above. While 28 percent thought that respondents could face persecution for their responses in opinion polls, 61 percent thought this was impossible or very unlikely. Likewise, while a large minority thought that it was at least possible that people hid their political views in public, 52 percent thought that this did not happen.

In addition, it is noteworthy that indications of self-censorship in Russian polls have not changed much over the past few years, even as the regime has become more authoritarian. When the Levada Center asked respondents in 2009 about the possibility of persecution for responses in opinion polls, about the same proportion thought that such persecution was possible or certain as in 2014 (23 vs. 28 percent, respectively).[10] Furthermore, as the Levada Center notes, other indicators of self-censorship, such as the percentage answering that they "don't know" or the percentage that are willing to provide contact details for follow up interviews, have not changed much over the past 10–15 years.[11]

Political scientists, meanwhile, have tended to defend the quality of Russian polling data for many of the reasons listed above (see Rose 2007, Treisman 2014). A number of scholars have used Russian polling data to explain patterns of regime support (Colton and Hale 2009; Treisman 2011, 2014). If the data were biased heavily by self-censorship, then it would be harder to identify and replicate such regularities.

Why does all this matter? Recent scholarship on authoritarianism has emphasized that the popularity of the autocrat is central to regime stability. When the autocrat appears popular, opposition voters and candidates become demoralized and ruling elites are dissuaded from defecting (e.g. Magaloni 2006, Simpser 2014, Hale 2014, Gehlbach and Simpser 2015). In addition, such popularity may legitimize the regime in the eyes of voters. Distorted poll numbers may help to convey this image of popularity, but it is clearly better for the autocrat to be genuinely popular. Not least, autocrats rely on accurate information about society to calibrate policy concessions and cooptation; distorted poll numbers would weaken the regime's ability to react to threats.

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[10] See http://www.levada.ru/18-08-2014/oprosy-obshchestvennogo-mneniya-interes-doverie-i-strakhi.

[11] See http://www.levada.ru/08-07-2015/reiting-putina-realnost-ili-vymysel-sotsiologov.

Identifying the "true" level of support for President Putin is also important for understanding the possible dynamics of public opinion and political change in Russia. If respondents are hiding their "true" opposition to President Putin on a large scale, cascade-like changes in public support are possible, with the potential to destabilize the regime (Lohmann 1994). If, however, respondents are by and large truthfully revealing their preferences to pollsters, then such sharp swings in public support are less likely. In order to gauge the extent of regime stability in Russia, it is therefore important to understand the true nature of Putin's popularity.

Empirical Strategy

Basic research design

Our research design involves the estimation and comparison of support for President Vladimir Putin using two methods: direct questioning and the item-count technique. We included both sets of questions in two rounds of the nationally representative survey (the "Courier") conducted monthly by the Levada Center, a polling agency with more than twenty years' experience working in Russia. We fielded the first set of item-count questions in January 2015. After some minor adjustments, we repeated the exercise in March 2015. There were approximately 1,600 respondents in the sample for both the January and March surveys. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at the home of the respondent.

To gauge direct support for Putin, we employed a variant of the standard approval question that has been included in every Courier since 2000:

> In general, do you support or not support the activities [deiatel'nost'] of Vladimir Putin?

As discussed above, responses to this question have implied consistently high levels of support for Putin during his tenure as president, prime minister, and again president. We repeated this question for the various other political figures mentioned below.[12]

Our research design addresses the concern that respondents might misreport their support for a political leader when asked directly. To gauge the extent to which survey respondents actually support Vladimir Putin, we utilize the item-count technique, often referred to as the "list experiment." The idea of a list experiment is to give respondents the opportunity to truthfully reveal their opinion or behavior with respect to a sensitive topic without directly taking a position that the survey enumerator or others might find objectionable.

The list experiment is implemented by providing respondents with a list of items and asking not *which* apply to them, but *how many*. Thus, in a classic example, Kuklinski et al. (1997) ask respondents how many of a list of events ("the federal government increasing the tax on

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[12] For consistency with the direct questions for other political figures, we omitted the phrase "as president of Russia" from the standard Levada question that gauges support for Putin. In practice, the two versions of the question (which both appear on each survey instrument) produce nearly identical responses.

gasoline," "professional athletes getting million-dollar contracts," "large corporations polluting the environment") would make them angry or upset. The list experiment is an *experiment* in that randomly-assigned respondents in a treatment group receive a longer list, which includes the potentially sensitive item, than do respondents in a control group. Continuing the example from Kuklinski et al., respondents in the treatment group, but not the control group, see a list that also includes the item "a black family moving in next door." Respondents in the treatment group thus have the option of indicating that they would be angered if a black family moved in next door while maintaining ambiguity about whether it is this or one of the other items on the list that would make them angry: they merely include that item in their count of upsetting events, as opposed to reporting this sentiment directly.

Given the experimental design, interpretation of results from a list experiment is straightforward: differences in the mean responses for the treatment and control group, respectively, provide an estimate of the incidence of the sensitive item. In the example above, Kuklinski et al. (1997) find that the mean number of items provoking anger for respondents living in the U.S. South who were randomized into the treatment group is 2.37, vs. 1.95 for the control group, implying that 42 percent (2.37-1.95) of Southern respondents would be angered by a black family moving in next door.

In our setting, the potentially sensitive attitude is *not* supporting Putin. To judge the extent of any such sensitivity, we implemented two versions of the list experiment.[13] The first version, which evaluates support for Putin alongside previous leaders of Russia or the Soviet Union, reads as follows:

> Take a look at this list of politicians and tell me for how many you generally support their activities:
>
> • Joseph Stalin
> • Leonid Brezhnev
> • Boris Yeltsin
> • [Vladimir Putin]
>
> Support: 0 1 2 3 [4]

Members of the control group receive the list without Putin, whereas members of the treatment group receive the list with Putin. The wording "support their activities" mirrors that in the direct questions of approval discussed above.

The second version of the list experiment places Putin alongside various contemporary political figures:

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[13] In the January survey instrument, the direct questions follow the list experiments, whereas in March the direct questions come first. As we demonstrate below, our results are quite robust to this change in question ordering.

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Take a look at this list of politicians and tell me for how many you generally support their activities:

- Vladimir Zhirinovsky
- Gennady Zyuganov
- Sergei Mironov
- [Vladimir Putin]

Support: 0 1 2 3 [4]

Vladimir Zhirinovsky is the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, a nationalist party that often votes the Kremlin line in the Russian State Duma. Gennady Zyuganov is the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, a nominally opposition party that is widely viewed as coopted by the Kremlin. Sergei Mironov is the leader of the Just Russia party, a center-left pro-regime party. Other than a handful of lesser-known individuals who would likely provoke non-response in a survey context, these politicians and the parties they lead constitute the mainstream political "opposition" in Russia.

Additional considerations

Although the basic research design is straightforward, there are a number of additional considerations. First among these is the use of two experiments to capture the same underlying concept. Analyzed separately, the historical and contemporary experiments allow us to check the robustness of our results to the set of political figures included in the control list. In addition, as Glynn (2013, following Droitcour et al. 1991) suggests, analyzing list experiments together (as a *double list experiment*) provides efficiency gains to the extent that responses to the control lists are positively correlated. We follow Glynn (2013) in randomly assigning every respondent to the treatment group for one list experiment and the control group for the other.

An additional design consideration is the possibility of *floor effects* or *ceiling effects*. List experiments can fail to guarantee privacy if none or all of the items on the list apply to respondents in the treatment group. For example, a member of the treatment group in the example from Kuklinski et al. (1997) above who indicated that she was angered by all four items (i.e., is at the "ceiling") is identifiable as someone who would be upset if a black family moved in next door. In our setting, *not* supporting Putin is potentially sensitive, implying that floor effects are the primary concern: respondents in the treatment group who indicate that they support none of the figures on the list implicitly reveal that they do not support Putin.

Common advice for minimizing floor and ceiling effects is to include items on the control list whose incidence is negatively correlated, thereby ensuring that the typical count lies somewhere between none and all of the items on the list. Unfortunately, our analysis of responses to direct questions regarding support for various historical and contemporary leaders suggests that public approval of virtually any pair of political figures is positively correlated among Russian

respondents.[14] Further complicating the issue, Russians appear to be generally unsupportive of contemporary politicians—with the possible exception of Putin, support for whom is the question of this paper. In contrast, approval ratings for Brezhnev and Stalin are comparatively high (roughly 53 and 54 percent, respectively, in the January survey), implying that their inclusion in the historical list may mitigate floor effects.[15]

A final concern is the possibility of *artificial deflation*, in which "estimates are biased due to the different list lengths provided to control and treatment groups rather than due to the substance of the treatment items" (de Jonge and Nickerson 2014: 659).[16] In our setting, artificial deflation could arise if the inclusion of Putin provides a strong contrast that reduces the attractiveness of other figures on the list, such that (for example) respondents underreport support for Sergei Mironov when listed alongside Vladimir Zhirinovsky, Gennady Zyuganov, and Vladimir Putin (the treatment condition) but not when listed alongside only the first two figures (the control condition). Alternatively, deflation may occur if respondents systematically underreport the number of political figures they support when provided with a list, and moving from a shorter to a longer list results in a proportionately greater incidence of underreporting.[17] In either case, artificial deflation reduces the estimate of support for Putin derived from the list experiment and therefore increases our estimate of social desirability bias

To identify possible bias resulting from artificial deflation, we included two "placebo" experiments in the March survey.[18] The idea in each case is to examine the incidence of artificial

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[14] In the January survey, in addition to the seven political figures mentioned above, we directly asked about support for former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, Russian oligarch Mikhail Prokhorov, Patriarch Kirill, Belorussian President Alexander Lukashenko, Nelson Mandela, and Fidel Castro. The only negative correlations, all very small in magnitude, were between Stalin and Prokhorov ($r = -0.02$), Brezhnev and Prokhorov ($r = -0.01$), and Yeltsin and Putin (-0.02).

[15] In the January survey, roughly 20 percent of respondents indicate that they support Putin but not Stalin, Brezhnev, or Yeltsin, whereas 27 percent of respondents indicate that they support Putin but not Zyuganov, Zhirinovsky, or Mironov.

[16] Adopting the framework of Imai (2011), the two scenarios described in this paragraph involve violations of the assumptions of "no design effect" and "no liars," respectively.

[17] A more analytic description of this form of deflation is as follows. Assume that the probability that any individual indicates support for a political figure is reduced by p in a list, relative to the individual's actual support. The expected count is thus "too low" by Np, where N is the length of the list. Estimating support by subtracting the mean response for the control group from the mean response for the treatment group therefore results in an underestimate of support (in expectation) of $(J+1)p - Jp = p$, where J is the number of items in the control group. It is worth noting that this is not an idle concern; as Tsuchiya and Hirai (2010) report, this type of bias has been observed in a number of published studies that use the item count technique.

[18] As an additional strategy, we followed Tsuchiya and Hirai (2010) in randomly assigning half the respondents to the January survey to receive a version of each list experiment in which they were asked not only how many political figures they support, but also how many they do *not* support. For both the historical and contemporary lists, estimates of support for Putin and the underlying mean responses were nearly identical in the two versions of experiment. As we are unable to distinguish between an absence of artificial deflation and a failure of Tsuchiya and Hirai's strategy to correct for artificial deflation in our setting, we employed only the standard version of the list experiment in the March 2015 survey. In our analyses, we pool results from the two versions of the January 2015 experiments.

deflation by including a "potentially sensitive" item that is not in fact sensitive, thus isolating deflation from the effect of social desirability bias and thereby allowing comparison with direct questions about the same items. In the first placebo experiment, we retain the focus on political figures but present a list of non-Russian leaders:

> Take a look at this list of politicians and tell me for how many you generally support their activities:
>
> • Alexander Lukashenko
> • Angela Merkel
> • Nelson Mandela
> • [Fidel Castro]
>
> Support: 0 1 2 3 [4]

We assume that respondents will be willing to reveal their "true" support for Fidel Castro, the "potentially sensitive" item in the list experiment, when questioned directly: he is well known in Russia but has little connection to contemporary political debates that might lead to social desirability bias. In the second placebo experiment, we present a list of respondent characteristics, which we can verify directly from responses to the standard battery of demographic questions:

> Take a look at this list of statements and tell me how many of them apply to you:
>
> • I am male
> • I am female
> • I am married
> • [I am over 55]
>
> Apply: 0 1 2 3 [4]

Before turning to our results, we note that floor effects and artificial deflation, if present, will work in opposite directions, with floor effects producing overestimates of support for Putin and artificial deflation producing underestimates.

Results

Table 1 provides estimates of support for Putin from both the direct question and list experiments across both waves of the survey. With respect to the former, an overwhelming majority of respondents state that they support the activities of Vladimir Putin: 86 percent in January and 88 percent in March. This high level of articulated support represents a continuation of the trend illustrated in Figure 1, which includes these waves of the survey.

Our list experiments also suggest a high level of support for Putin. The point estimates from the four experiments (historical/contemporary, January/March) are in fact quite similar, ranging from 79 percent support in both rounds of the historical experiment to 81 percent support in the

January contemporary experiment.[19] Examined in isolation, the 95-percent confidence intervals for all four experiments are fairly wide, encompassing the point estimates from the direct questions. Analyzed as a "double list experiment," as discussed above, the estimates are substantially more precise, with support for Putin somewhere in the high 70s or low 80s, given standard levels of uncertainty.[20]

Taken at face value, these estimates imply a small but not trivial degree of social desirability bias among respondents to the two surveys. Depending on the survey wave and experiment wording, estimates of support for Putin from the list experiments are six to nine percentage points lower than those from the corresponding direct question, with a high probability that the true value of social desirability bias is greater than zero.[21] As discussed above, however, floor effects and artificial deflation could lead to over- and underestimates, respectively, of support for Putin in the list experiments. We address each concern in turn.

With respect to floor effects, in the January survey, 33 percent of treatment-group respondents indicate that they support precisely one of the four historical leaders on the list, and 37 percent of treatment-group respondents indicate that they support precisely one of the four contemporary politicians on the list. In principle, some proportion of these respondents may in fact support *none* of the four political figures on the list but nonetheless indicate that they support one so as not to reveal that they do not support Putin.[22] We indirectly examine this possibility by comparing the relationship between responses to the direct questions and those to the list experiments. As Figure 2 illustrates,[23] the difference in mean response to the list experiments for the treatment and control groups, respectively, is largely independent of the number of control-

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[19] Appendix Table A1 provides the full distribution of responses for each of the four experiments.

[20] Our estimates of support for Putin are substantially higher than those of Kalinin (2015), who also uses the item-count technique in nationally-representative surveys of the Russian population. Three distinctions in our respective experimental designs are relevant in explaining the different results. First, our list experiment mentions Vladimir Putin by name, as in the direct question used by the Levada Center. In contrast, Kalinin asks about approval "of the job of the President of the Russian Federation," which may also capture approval of the government—an institution far less popular than Putin. Second, our list includes only three non-sensitive items, whereas Kalinin's includes four. Longer lists may be harder to remember, potentially biasing results. Third, the non-sensitive items in Kalinin's list experiment include a heterogeneous mix of opinions and factual statements ("medical care should be free," "in our family we have a car," "environmental issues are a priority for me," "I am satisfied with the level of my income") alongside a potentially sensitive political attitude. Our research design adopts the more typical practice of including non-sensitive items that are similar to the construct being measured.

[21] We calculate confidence intervals for social desirability bias using the *list* package (Blair and Imai 2011, 2012).

[22] If we assume that this is true of *all* treatment-group respondents who indicated support for precisely one political figure, then estimated support for Putin in the January experiment drops to 47 percent in the historical experiment and 44 percent in the contemporary experiment. These sharp lower bounds are derived by recalculating the mean count for members of the treatment group under the proposed assumption and subtracting the mean count for members of the control group. Similar results apply to the March experiment, though in that round of the survey the proportion of treatment-group respondents indicating support for precisely one political figure was greater in the historical than contemporary experiment (40 vs. 37 percent, respectively).

[23] Graphics created with the package *ggplot2* (Wickham 2009).

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group figures (e.g., Stalin, Brezhnev, and Yeltsin) supported when respondents are asked directly (i.e., the curves run parallel to each other). Were floor effects driving our results, we would likely see an especially large gap between the two curves for values at the left end of the horizontal axis, as treatment-group respondents who support none of the control politicians *and* do not support Putin falsely indicate that they support precisely one political figure. The absence of such a pattern in the plots suggests that our estimates of support for Putin are not biased upward.[24]

Moreover, as previously discussed, the possibility of artificial deflation cuts in the opposite direction of floor effects, creating the possibility of underestimates, rather than overestimates, of support for Putin from the list experiments. To explore this possibility, we analyze the two placebo experiments discussed above.[25] Each experiment is constructed such that the "sensitive" item is in fact non-sensitive, allowing us to focus on the effects of survey design. We begin by examining the Castro experiment, in which members of the treatment but not control group receive a list that includes Fidel Castro. Table 2 demonstrates that the difference in estimated support for Castro between the direct question (60 percent) and the list experiment (51 percent) is nearly identical to that for Putin—even though social desirability bias is unlikely to inflate support for Castro in our setting.

Turning next to the "over 55" experiment, both the direct question and the list experiment indicate that 28 percent of respondents are over 55 years of age. The contrast with the Castro experiment—no deflation with the "over 55" experiment, nine percentage points with the Castro experiment—suggests that there may be something distinctive about the list experiments that are used to gauge support for political figures. Indeed, for both the Putin and Castro experiments, respondents in the *control group* tend to underreport support for political figures when presented with a list, relative to what they report when asked directly, suggesting that the list format encourages respondents to compare political figures to each other.[26] As discussed above, such

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[24] In a simple linear regression of the number of figures supported in the list experiment on a) treatment status, b) the number of control-group figures supported in the direct questions, and c) their interaction, we find no significant interaction effect for any of the four experiments illustrated in Figure 2. The effect of including Putin in the list is largely limited to raising the intercept of the regression line. Full results are available in Appendix Table A2.

[25] As discussed above, one form of artificial deflation involves a violation of the assumption of "no design effect," that is, the assumption that responses to control items are unaffected by the inclusion of the sensitive item (Imai 2011). Blair and Imai (2012) provide a test for design effects, the essence of which is to check that, on average, 1) scores in the treatment condition are not lower than those in the control condition, and 2) scores in the treatment condition are not more than one plus the scores in the control condition. Using this test, we reject the null of no design effect for the January historical experiment but not the other three experiments. Clearly, however, design effects may be present without these two conditions having been violated. Given the conservative nature of Blair and Imai's test, we proceed to examine other evidence for artificial deflation.

[26] For the Castro experiment, the mean number of political figures supported among Lukashenko, Merkel, and Mandela is 1.32 among control-group respondents when they are asked directly, vs. 1.14 when they are presented with a list of the same individuals. In the March contemporary Putin experiment, the mean number of political figures among Zhirinovsky, Zyuganov, and Mironov that control-group respondents directly support is 1.28, vs. 1.13 when they are presented with a list of the same individuals.

underreporting can lead to artificial deflation—an underestimate of support for the sensitive item and thus spurious evidence of social desirability bias—if it carries over to the treatment group.

In summary, although the survey design does not preclude the possibility that our list experiments overestimate support for Putin due to floor effects, we find no signs of such bias in the relationship between responses to direct questions and those to the list experiments. At the same time, there is evidence that the list experiments underestimate support for Putin due to artificial deflation. Indeed, we cannot exclude the possibility that Putin is as popular as implied by responses to the direct question.

Conclusion

Understanding public support for the ruler is an important task even in an autocratic environment such as Russia's. Whether expressed in terms of landslide electoral victories or high public-approval ratings, visible measures of popular support are thought to encourage cooperation and deter challenges from within the political elite, as well as to reduce incentives for popular mobilization against the regime. Yet respondents in autocracies may be afraid to directly express their opposition to the ruler to survey enumerators. To address this concern, we use the item-count technique to determine the "true" level of support for Putin.

Our analysis of data from a pair of list experiments conducted in Russia in early 2015 suggests that approximately six to nine percent of respondents hide their opposition to President Putin when asked directly. These estimates are robust to design of the list experiment and to the survey wave. We find little evidence that these estimates are positively biased due to the presence of floor effects. In contrast, our placebo experiments suggest that there may be a small negative bias in our estimates of support for Putin due to artificial deflation. Taken in total, we conclude that much of the support for Putin is genuine and not the consequence of social desirability bias.

It is beyond the scope of this study to determine the extent to which Putin's popularity is driven by economic circumstances, Kremlin public relations, "rally around the flag" effects, or the president's personal characteristics. Nonetheless, a primary implication of our findings is that previous research that explores these---and other---determinants of approval for President Putin (and perhaps of authoritarian leaders more generally; see Geddes and Zaller 1989) using conventional survey questions is not plagued by substantial bias in measures of support for the ruler. More broadly, our results suggest that the main obstacle at present to the emergence of a widespread opposition movement to Putin is not that Russians are afraid to voice their disapproval of Putin, but that Putin is in fact quite popular.

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Figure 1: Vladimir Putin's Approval Rating: 2000-2015
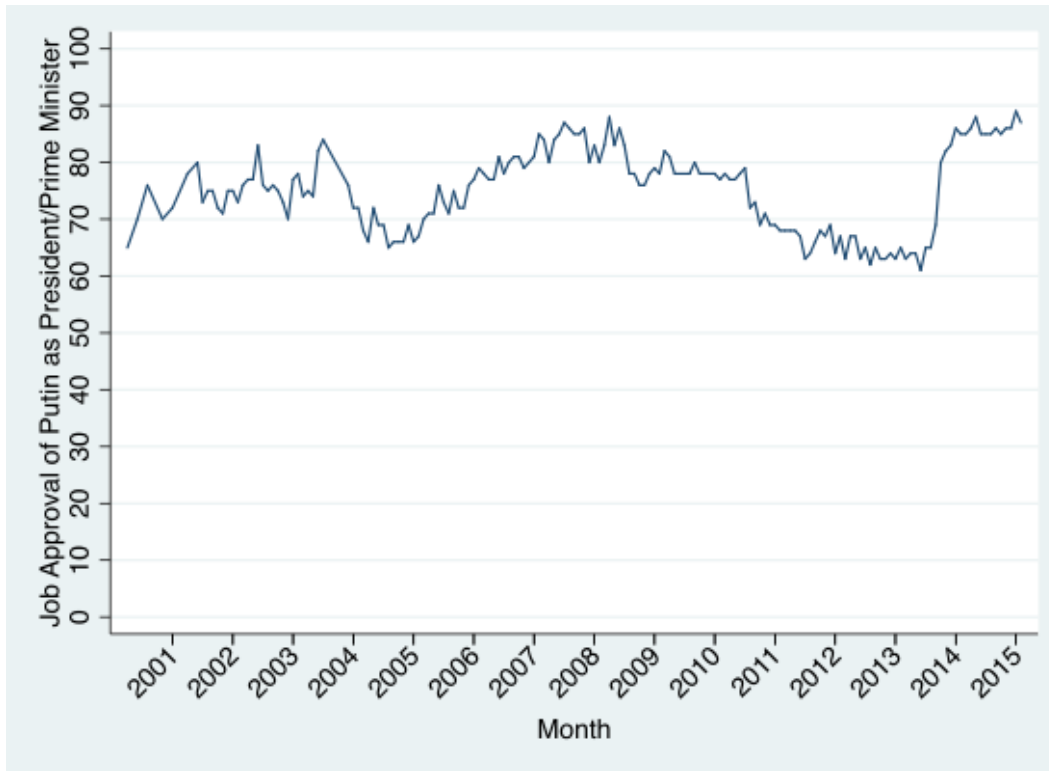
Source: Levada Center Omnibus Surveys. Data from Russia's two other major polling agencies, VTsIOM and FOM, paint a similar picture.

Table 1: Estimates of support for Putin

| January 2015				
Direct support			86% (*n* = 1585)	
	Control	**Treatment**	**Estimate**	**SDB**
Historical experiment	1.18 (*n* = 813)	1.98 (*n* = 786)	79% (69%, 89%)	-7% (-17%, 3%)
Contemporary experiment	1.11 (*n* = 784)	1.92 (*n* = 813)	81% (70%, 91%)	-6% (-16%, 5%)
Double experiment			80% (74%, 86%)	
March 2015				
Direct support			88% (*n* = 1591)	
	Control	**Treatment**	**Estimate**	**SDB**
Historical experiment	0.98 (*n* = 788)	1.77 (*n* = 811)	79% (70%, 88%)	-9% (-18%, 0%)
Contemporary experiment	1.11 (*n* = 810)	1.91 (*n* = 788)	80% (69%, 90%)	-8% (-19%, 2%)
Double experiment			79% (73%, 85%)	

Notes: For estimates of support and social desirability bias (SDB), 95% confidence intervals in parentheses.

## Table 2: Evidence of deflationary bias

	Putin experiments		Placebo experiments	
	Historical	**Contemporary**	**Castro**	**Older than 55**
Item prevalence (direct)	88%		60%	28%
Item prevalence (experiment)	79% (70%, 88%)	80% (69%, 90%)	51% (41%, 61%)	28% (23%, 34%)

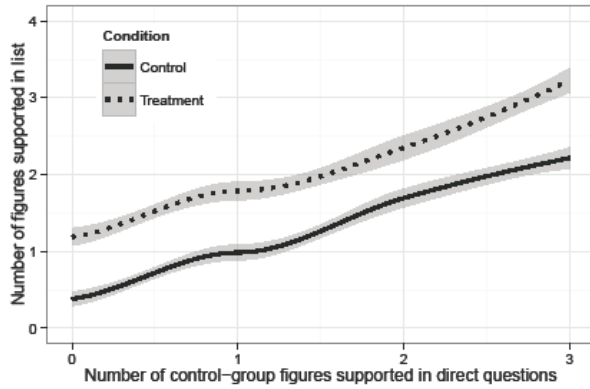Notes: Results from March survey. 95% confidence intervals in parentheses.

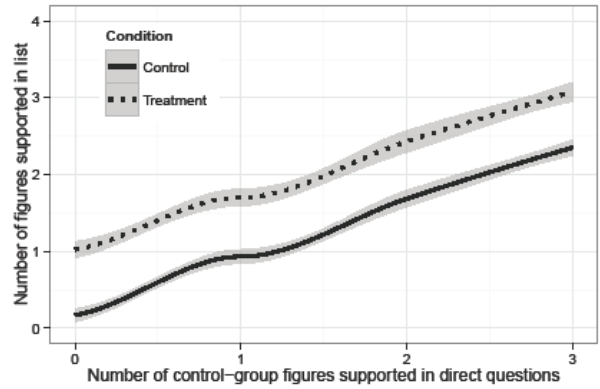**Figure 2: Comparison of Direct Questions and List Experiments**
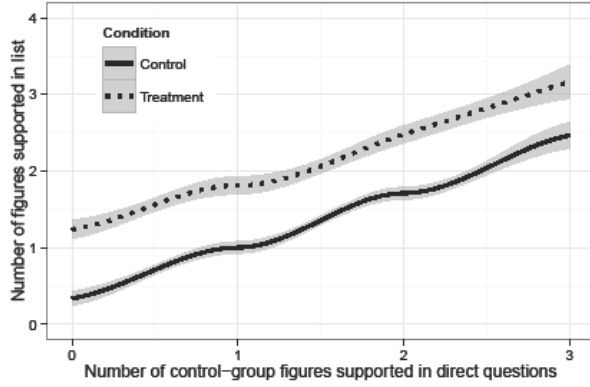
Historical Figures (January)
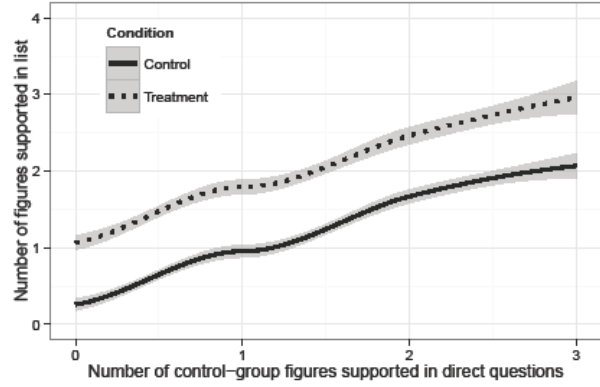
Historical Figures (March)

Contemporary Figures (January)

Contemporary Figures (March)

Notes: Line slopes estimated using LOESS local regression.

Appendix

Table A1: Frequency distributions

	January				March							
	Contemporary		Historical		Contemporary		Historical		Castro		Over 55	
	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment
0	255	56	210	43	292	50	274	42	202	162	3	3
1	281	297	303	256	256	290	291	324	343	230	293	201
2	153	237	240	247	140	231	185	274	206	207	494	458
3	95	103	60	156	122	115	38	119	45	151	7	139
4	N/A	120	N/A	84	N/A	102	N/A	52	N/A	53	N/A	1

Table A2: Determinants of number of figures supported in list experiment

	January		March	
	Contemporary	Historical	Contemporary	Historical
Intercept	0.38 (0.05)***	0.32 (0.05)***	0.19 (0.04)***	0.29 (0.04)***
Treatment	0.77 (0.06)***	0.89 (0.07)***	0.84 (0.06)***	0.81 (0.05)***
Number of control items	0.62 (0.03)***	0.70 (0.03)***	0.73 (0.02)***	0.66 (0.03)***
Treatment x Number of control items	0.03 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)
N	1551	1572	1549	1561
R^2	0.48	0.47	0.59	0.53

Notes: Ordinary least squares regressions. Standard errors in parentheses. *** denotes confidence at the level of 0.001.