

Boris Yeltsin Faces the Electorate: Findings from Opinion Polling Data

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The ambiguous benefits of incumbency are common to leadership in every political system. In established democracies, presidents and prime ministers expect to see their popular support move up as well as down during their period of office. A graph of approval is like a roller coaster, with many big ups and downs. Any attempt to fit a straight trend will be arbitrary, for poll readings are literally all over the place. The idea of “average” support becomes meaningless for a leader is either much above *or* much below the mean. For example, in his first three years of office, President Clinton’s popularity has ranged from 37 percent to 59 percent; in four years the distance between the high and low of President Carter’s approval was 47 percentage points; and during George Bush’s four years in office his popularity fluctuated from a high of 89 percent to a low of 29 percent.

For a politician campaigning for re-election, the important point is not average popularity, but his or her current standing. In one respect, President Yeltsin’s decline has been fortunate—it places a floor under his rating. The average is now so low that it can hardly fall further. In the narrow statistical sense, there is more scope for going up than further down. This is illustrated in the “flattening out” of Yeltsin’s rating. Between January 1995 and January 1996, it ranged four-tenths of a point, between 2.7 and 3.1 on the ten-point All-Russian Center for the Study of Social Opinion (VTsIOM) scale. However, even at its best during the period, it was below any rating before the beginning of the Chechnya war.

The fifth New Russia Barometer (NRB) survey, conducted between 12-31 January 1996 with a nationally representative sample of 2,340 persons, documents in detail President Yeltsin’s standing at the commencement of the presidential campaign. Principal findings include: (1) the public blames constitutionally responsible rulers, not remote forces, for the country’s problems; (2) large majorities favor Yeltsin’s departure from office; (3) the “new” Communist alternative is not always feared; (4) most Russians had yet to identify a “lesser evil” candidate; and (5) gridlock is preferred to “too strong” a government.

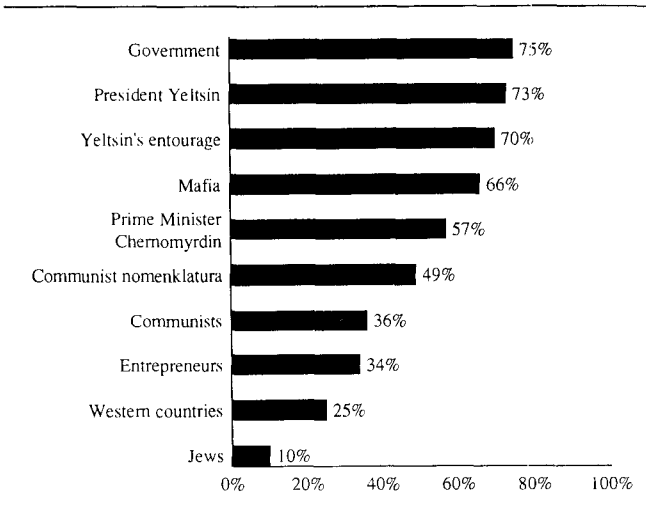
Public Blame

Constitutionally responsible rulers, not remote forces, are blamed for the nation’s problems. In legal form, the 1993 Russian Constitution is undoubtedly presidentialist. However, the unpopularity arising from economic

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transformation, social needs, and separatist demands creates political incentives for President Yeltsin to distance himself from ministers in charge of policies and sometimes to engage in public criticism of "their" government. When problems persist, a demagogue can point a finger at remote or imaginary forces, for example, "foreigners" or "Jewish imperialism," as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy does.

Figure 1. WHO IS TO BLAME FOR RUSSIA'S ECONOMIC PROBLEMS?



Source: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. NEW RUSSIA BAROMETER V. Nationwide sample survey by VTsIOM: 2,340 respondents interviewed between 12-31 January 1996.

In fact, Russians are not fooled by attempts to evade constitutional responsibilities. When asked who is to blame for the country's economic problems, they criticize officials and individuals who are formally responsible for government (Figure 1). The government, President Yeltsin, and Yeltsin's entourage are each blamed by more than two-thirds. The prime minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, does not serve as a lightning rod for criticism; 57 percent blame him. Nor do Russians dump so much blame on the Communist Party or on its privileged stratum, the nomenklatura. Least likely to be blamed for Russia's difficulties are the most remote groups, Western countries and Jews.

Antipathy Toward Yeltsin

Big majorities would welcome Yeltsin leaving office. A free election generates competition, and this in turn creates anxieties among politicians. In autumn 1995 there were reports from Moscow of groups urging that the Duma elections be delayed or canceled. Now arguments are voiced by defenders of the status quo against the "dangers" of holding a presidential election in June. The mass of the Russian people reject such views. The fifth New Russia Barometer found only 6 percent favoring postponement of the election; 73 percent think a presidential election must be held in June, and the remainder are uncertain.

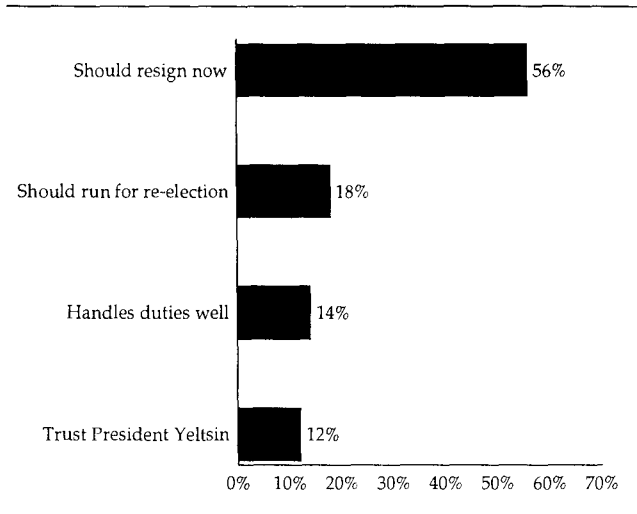
Incumbency makes Yeltsin the central figure in the presidential race, but given his unpopularity, many Russians see it as an opportunity to remove him from office (Figure 2). At the start of the year, an absolute majority said that

they would like Yeltsin to resign before the election, and only 18 percent favored him running for re-election. Only 14 percent think President Yeltsin has handled his duties well, and even fewer trust him.

Fear of Communist Resurgence?

The “new” Communist alternative is not feared. The front-running challenger to Yeltsin is Gennady Zyuganov, the head of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF). Formally, that party is not the same as the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Nor is it the only party claiming to be the heir of the CPSU; others usually do so from a more extreme Marxist-Leninist or imperialist perspective. To describe the KPRF as led by ex-Communists is not very informative, for virtually every Russian political party today is so led. Yeltsin is himself an ex-Communist *apparatchik*.

Figure 2. RUSSIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD PRESIDENT YELTSIN



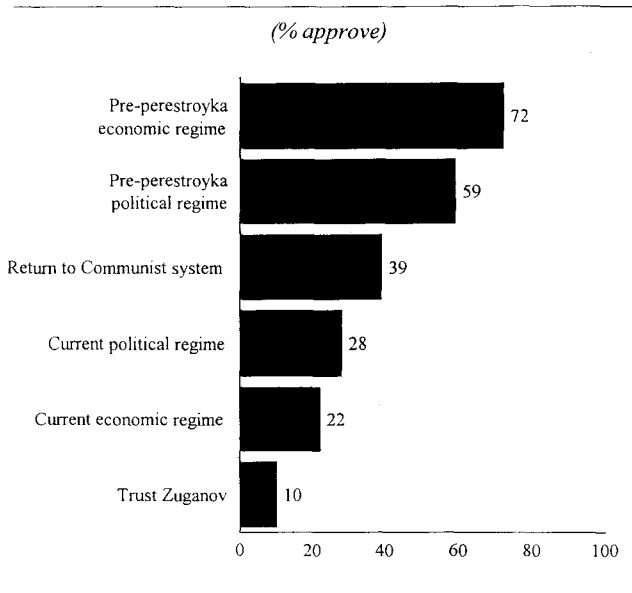
Source: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. NEW RUSSIA BAROMETER V. Nationwide sample survey by VTsIOM: 2,340 respondents interviewed between 12-31 January 1996.

A critical question for appraising the character of a Communist presidency is: What kind of “ex”-Communists are the leaders of the KPRF? How “new” are they? On the one hand, the party leadership is not an uncritical defender of the past. On the other, the leadership is divided about which parts of the past should be rejected, and which parts offer practical guidelines for future government. Zyuganov’s candidacy indicates recognition within the party that a moderate candidate has the best chance of gathering votes.

By contrast with the peoples of central and eastern Europe, Russians do not reject the old regime: a majority are positive about both the old economic system and the old political regime (Figure 3). The endorsement of the past is not a longing for a “golden era,” for the old Soviet system was not as liberal as the old Hungarian Communist regime, nor did it deliver the relative prosperity of “goulash” socialism. The endorsement of the past is relative, inasmuch as the

current political and economic systems fail to win support from more than two-thirds of Russians.

Figure 3. ATTITUDES TO COMMUNISTS



Source: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. NEW RUSSIA BAROMETER V. Nationwide sample survey by VTsIOM: 2,340 respondents interviewed between 12-31 January 1996.

Nostalgia for the past is not sufficient to support a totally reactionary regime. Hardly half of the Russians in favor of the old regime would like to see a return to the Communist system of rule, and many also distinguish between approving the old political regime and wanting it back as it was. If a large number of Russians are to vote for the KPRF, they will want some reassurance that it is a “new” party, with unpleasant elements of the past removed. Skepticism is also shown in the NRB survey by fewer people saying they trust Zyuganov than are ready to vote for him as a presidential candidate.

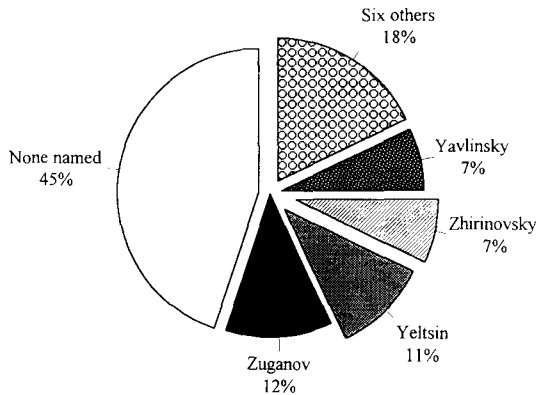
The Lesser Evil

Most Russians have yet to identify the “lesser evil” candidate. In the days of the Soviet Union, elections were totally predictable: 99.9 percent turnout and 99.9 support for the party. Individuals did not have to take time deciding whether or how to vote: the party did that on their behalf. The consequence today is the demobilization of the electorate, with widespread distrust of politicians and parties of every variety.

About half the Russian electorate is still undecided whether or how to vote in the presidential election. In the Duma election, only 37 percent said that they had made up their mind about whether to participate or how to vote before the parliamentary election campaign began. An additional 20 percent made up their minds during the weeks of campaign. A total of 27 percent made up their minds

about voting only during the last days before the election or when they had a ballot in their hand, and some remained “don’t knows” even after the event.

Figure 4. PUBLIC OPINION OF PRESIDENTIAL HOPEFULS



(Note: Other candidates are Lebed, 6%; Rutskoii, 3%; Gaidar, 3%; B.Fedorov, 2%; Govorukhin, 1%; Gorbachev, 1%)

Source: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. NEW RUSSIA BAROMETER V. Nationwide sample survey by VTsIOM: 2,340 respondents interviewed between 12-31 January 1996.

Pre-election presidential opinion polls are subject to many forms of misinterpretation. The “horse race” element in the contest leads the media to headline the name of the candidate who ranks first in the most recent opinion poll, however low the percentage of voters endorsing the candidate.

The percentage of Russians positively endorsing a presidential hopeful is usually very low indeed, because a large portion are don’t knows, won’t votes, or ready to cast a plague on all candidates, and there are a large number of potential candidates from whom electors may choose (Figure 4). The actions of the don’t know or won’t vote bloc are sufficiently great to be decisive between the time a poll is taken and the day of balloting.

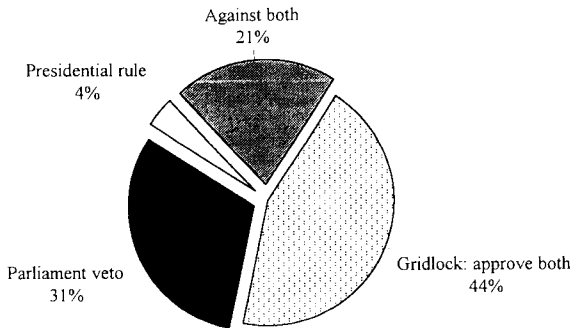
Leading in the polls does not promise victory; to win the presidency a candidate does not need to finish first in the first round of balloting. As long as the front-running candidate does not get an absolute majority, which is most unlikely, the two top-ranking candidates then face each other in a runoff ballot. The vote to qualify for the second round ballot depends upon the number of candidates nominated. The more candidates entering the presidential race, the lower the threshold is likely to be.

In the first round of the 1995 French presidential election, the eventual winner, Jacques Chirac, finished two points behind the front-running Socialist candidate, Lionel Jospin, taking only 21 percent of the vote. This was enough to place Chirac two points ahead of the third place candidate, Prime Minister Edmund Balladur. Even though Chirac had initially won only a fifth of the vote, he nonetheless was elected president, winning 53 percent of the vote in the runoff contest with Jospin. Chirac owed his victory to securing more support

from the 56 percent who had voted for one of the other seven candidates in the first round ballot. As the "lesser evil," Chirac added 32 percent to his first-round ballot, whereas Jospin could only increase his first-round support by 24 percent.

In the second-round runoff for the Russian presidency, the preferences of those who initially voted for other candidates and non-voters will be decisive. In a second-round contest between Yeltsin and Zyuganov, the logic of a runoff will encourage both candidates to appeal for support from nationalist and reform voters. It is unlikely that any ideologically or intellectually coherent program will emerge.

Figure 5. MOST RUSSIANS FAVOUR GRIDLOCK



Source: Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. NEW RUSSIA BAROMETER V. Nationwide sample survey by VTsIOM: 2,340 respondents interviewed between 12-31 January 1996.

By default, the runoff candidates are likely to engage in negative campaigning, portraying their opponent as the greater evil. President Yeltsin can invoke the past, casting doubt on the commitment of the KPRF to democracy, given the character of some of Zyuganov's associates, and warn that a Communist victory would mark a return to the past, threatening freedoms that Russians prize. Zyuganov can point to current conditions, emphasizing that Yeltsin cannot disassociate himself from unpopular features of a regime that he created and has headed for the past five years. Confronted with such a choice, Russians divide into three groups. An early March VTsIOM poll asking people who they would not like as president found 39 percent saying they would not like Yeltsin, 26 percent explicitly rejected Zyuganov, and the remainder uncertain who they would choose or whether they would vote if confronted with these alternatives.

Gridlock vs. Order

Gridlock is preferred to "too strong" a government. Because free elections are a new institution in Russia and the Constitution is just two years old, the new regime is at risk in June. One possibility in a presidentialist regime is to move to dictatorship. The fifth NRB survey shows two-thirds of Russians reject the view that a tough dictatorship is the only way out of the current situation.

Moreover, the intensity of rejection is strong; 37 percent completely reject the call for a dictatorship, compared to 12 percent endorsing dictatorship strongly. And neither the public nor Russia's political class could agree who the dictator ought to be!

Although the 1993 Russian Constitution is "presidentialist," Russian public opinion is anti-presidentialist. The fifth NRB found 69 percent think the Duma should have the right to stop the president from making decisions that it considers wrong. Yet 48 percent think there are also circumstances in which the president might be permitted to suspend the Duma and rule by decree if this is considered necessary. The apparent inconsistency shows the tension between a desire for a representative Parliament strong enough to check the president, and a chief executive capable of taking actions that he thinks necessary and effective.

Russians are inclined toward government being weaker rather than stronger. When the views of individuals about the rule by decree and parliamentary veto are combined, there is a majority for gridlock. The largest group favors the Duma having a veto over presidential actions and opposes presidential rule by decree (Figure 5). The median group favors a system of mutual checks, endorsing both Duma veto and presidential decree. Only one-sixth of Russians approve denying the Duma the right to veto presidential actions and letting the president rule by decree. Furthermore, the proportion endorsing rule by unchecked decree has fallen by almost half since the summer 1993 NRB survey, and support for the Duma veto or mutual checks has risen.

Conclusion

The state of mind of Russians today echoes views of the American Founding Fathers. They recognized that government was necessary, but because men are not angels, checks on government are needed. In the United States, the result is a constitutional system of checks and balances. Such a system need not result in inaction in the face of great difficulties—but it does require endless discussion, negotiation, bargaining, and compromise to arrive at an agreed policy.

In Russia, authority has historically been unchecked; politicians today embrace competitive elections with a vengeance. However, a presidential election is very different from electing a Duma by proportional representation; it is a winner-take-all ballot. The form and the practice of the Yeltsin presidency show the winner can take a lot. The American and French constitutions confer power within the law; the very act of invoking the constitution to justify or challenge actions recognizes a higher power, the rule of law. In Russia today, power is not a formal legal concept. The term often used to describe political power, *vlast*, is not derived from constitutional norms; it refers to dominion of the powers that be. But democracy is not about unchecked domination; it is about taming power. In Russia today, there is a need to tame *vlast* on a continual scale.