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Photo: kommersant.ru

Referendum Strategy Yields Constitutional Majority

The results of Russia’s parliamentary elections on December 2 demonstrated that United Russia’s November strategy to frame the Duma elections as a referendum on President Vladimir Putin achieved its goal of securing a constitutional majority. Rather than focusing on political parties, the elections were seen as a vote of confidence in the president personally and in his political course in both domestic and foreign policy. A vote for United Russia signified a vote for stability and predictability, namely in the person of President Putin. At the same time, however, United Russia received far fewer votes than Putin did in the 2004 presidential election, and its performance in several major cities did not reach expectations.

Administrative measures alone could not have raised the election’s profile to the extent that recasting it as a referendum did. Turnout on Sunday was 63%, which is 7% higher than the 2003 Duma elections, and trails only the 1995 contest in the percentage of voters participating in parliamentary balloting.

The combination of turnout and the strong showing by United Russia means that the Duma elections have afforded President Putin a broad mandate to continue influencing Russian politics after he steps down as president. Having suggested that the outcome of the parliamentary elections would determine his future involvement on the national scene, Putin now has considerable room to maneuver in selecting a presidential successor and defining his role in 2008 and beyond.

Russian politics will now move into presidential campaign mode. The presidential contest unofficially began

on November 26, when the Federation Council approved March 2, 2008 as the date of the presidential election. Candidates must declare their intention to seek the presidency by December 23. Each of the four parties represented in the next State Duma may put forward its nominee without an additional signature requirement, while independent candidates face the daunting task of collecting 2 million signatures in support of their candidacy before December 18. All candidates must submit their registration documents for verification by January 16, after which the presidential campaign will officially commence on February 2.

When speaking to the Cabinet on December 3 in his first post-election appearance, President Putin asked the Cabinet and Presidential Administration to prepare a decree calling the next Duma into session early, stating that the traditional 30-day wait “would not be appropriate.”

Implications for the Parties

Although pre-election polls suggested the possibility that three parties – and perhaps only two – would pass the 7% threshold and be seated in the next Duma, the results were much less radical than some forecasts. With four parties attaining the 7% minimum – United Russia, the Communist Party, LDPR, and Fair Russia – the Duma will largely retain its current composition. In the national voting, United Russia succeeded in drawing small segments of support away from the other three major parties when compared to the 2003 balloting. However, due to Russia’s proportional representation system, all four parties will receive additional seats in the next Duma, many of which were previously held by smaller parties and independents.

Implications for the Parties (continued)


Particularly noteworthy is the dramatic decrease in “reallocated” votes in comparison with past Duma elections. For example, in 2003 just under 30% of the vote went to parties that did not surpass the 5% barrier. In Sunday’s election, only 8.3% of those casting ballots voted for parties that did not attain the 7% threshold. This indicates that the electoral reforms introduced by the previous Duma achieved their aim of narrowing the political field and consolidating around several larger parties. On this point, the new Duma can claim to be more legitimately representative than its predecessor, since more than 90% of the electorate cast their votes for parties that cleared the bar.

The lack of foreign policy discussion in the Duma campaign was not surprising, as all four major parties

passing into the State Duma emphasize anti-Western rhetoric and the resurgence of Russian national pride to motivate voters. The major parties’ positions on international issues differ in style only and not in substance. The embrace of the West and European values by the liberal “democratic” parties – SPS, Yabloko, Democratic Party – received virtually no support from the electorate.

Opposition parties on the left and right and international election observers have cited numerous irregularities and the use of “administrative resources” to influence Sunday’s outcome. However, it can also be said that there was very little in the way of surprises, and the results were basically in line with independent polls conducted throughout the fall.

Duma Election Results: 2007 vs. 2003

Party		2007 (%, total number of votes)	2003 (%, total number of votes)
	United Russia	64.26% 44,339,051	37.56% 22,774,274
	Communist Party (KPRF)	11.59% 7,997,098	12.61% 7,674,820
	Liberal-Democratic Party (LDPR)	8.15% 5,626,628	11.45% 6,943,885
	Fair Russia*	7.76% 5,351,737	8.6% 5,469,556
	Agrarian Party	2.31% 1,590,788	3.63% 2,205,704
	Yabloko	1.59% 1,100,283	4.3% 2,609,823
	Civil Strength	1.06% 729,032	-
	Union of Right Forces (SPS)	0.96% 663,258	3.97% 2,408,356
	Patriots of Russia	0.88% 610,438	-
	Party of Social Justice	0.22% 152,847	-
	Democratic Party	0.13% 89,187	-

* Rodina (2003)

Source: Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation

United Russia: 64.26% of the vote → 315 seats (70% of Duma)



United Russia's victory was of course long expected, with the only question being how close to a two-thirds constitutional majority the party would come in direct balloting (prior to reallocation).

With 64% of the vote, United Russia finished close to the top of the expectation range (65-66%) and well above the minimum acceptable to the ruling elites (55%).

With the election framed as a referendum on President Putin, United Russia appears to have pulled in large blocs of undecided voters. The party's success was fairly evenly distributed across Russia – however, its numbers were noticeably lower than expected in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Samara, Altai and Kirov. United Russia tallied only 50% in St. Petersburg, where Fair Russia outperformed at 15%.

KPRF: 11.59% of the vote → 57 seats (12.7% of Duma)



The Communist Party considers itself to have suffered the greatest disadvantages in Sunday's elections and plans to protest the results, claiming

administrative resources were employed to siphon off votes to LDPR and Fair Russia.

Not only did the KPRF not solidify the anticipated "protest vote," it also experienced a 1% drop in support from 2003. The results confirm the slow but steady decline in the KPRF's electoral base, and the party's appeal to less radical socialists has been dampened by the presence of Fair Russia (Rodina in 2003).

LDPR: 8.15% of the vote → 40 seats (8.9% of Duma)



The LDPR finished in line with projections. The party once again succeeded in attracting a protest vote, albeit to a lesser degree than in 2003. The charisma of party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy,

combined with considerable media access and campaign themes that resonate with a certain strata of the electorate, enabled the party to take its place in parliament for the fifth consecutive election.

Fair Russia: 7.76% of the vote → 38 seats (8.4% of Duma)



As the only real unknown in the campaign, the fate of Fair Russia was in question right up to election day, since its performance was in some ways

inversely correlated with United Russia's. Nationally, the party managed to attract enough voters who are not favorably disposed toward United Russia but do support President Putin, and ultimately Fair Russia

was able to draw voters away from the Communist Party and other parties that could not come close to the 7% threshold. The key to Fair Russia's success was St. Petersburg, the hometown of party leader Sergei Mironov, where low overall turnout (51%) helped the party double its national performance to receive 15% of the vote, largely at the expense of United Russia (50%).

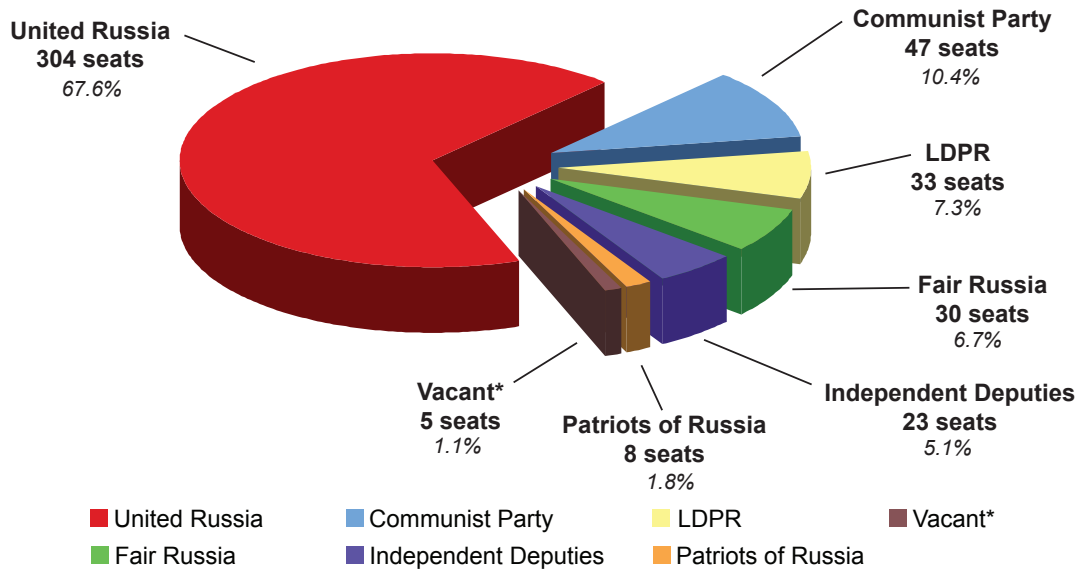
Other Parties

Pre-election polling results accurately predicted the vote tallies for those parties falling below the 7% threshold, as those that failed to achieve the minimum did not come close. The Agrarian Party had the best showing "below the line" with 2.3%.

The liberal (democratic) parties experienced a continued erosion in voter support from their peak in

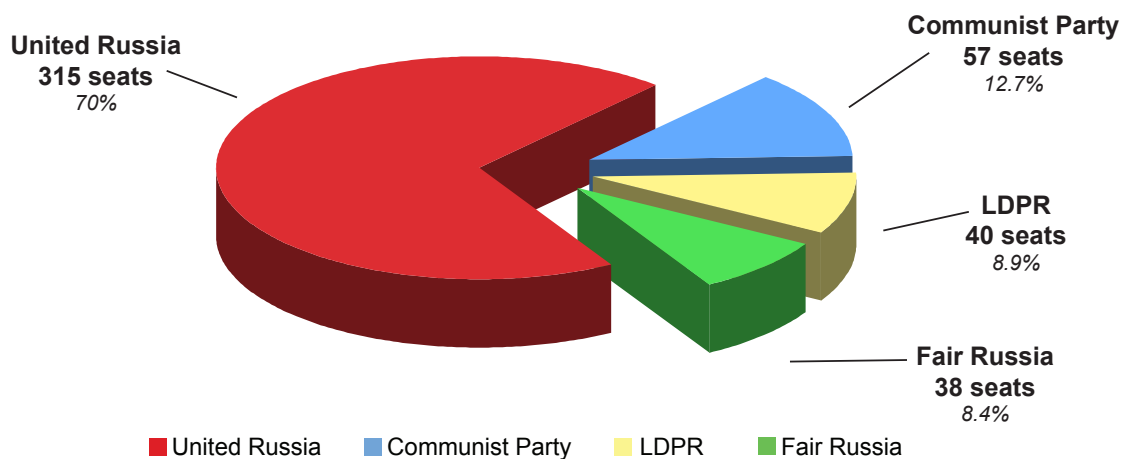
the 1990s. Yabloko drew more votes than its direct competitors, yet mustered only 1.6%. The strategy of SPS to appeal both to business on the right and economic populism on the left resulted in a mere 1.0% of the vote, marginally less than the spoiler party Civil Strength.

Composition of the 4th State Duma (2004-2007)



*The seats of Deputies who vacate in the year before an election remain vacant until the next general election.

Composition of the 5th State Duma (2008-2011)



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