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Citizen-initiated Contacting in the Russian Federation: Approaches from the Citizen  
Perspective

by

Melissa D. Samarin

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Professor M. Steven Fish, Co-chair

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Professor Jennifer Bussell

Summer 2023

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## Abstract

## Citizen-initiated Contacting in the Russian Federation: Approaches from the Citizen Perspective

by

Melissa D. Samarin

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Jason Wittenberg, Co-chair

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This dissertation examines why citizens in autocratic contexts engage in robust forms of citizen contacting. Citizen contacting is a foundational democratic practice, yet several authoritarian regimes, including Russia, have been heavily adopting institutions that facilitate direct citizen contact with the state. Analysis from the state's perspective reveals the many reputational, informational, and administrative benefits these types of institutions can provide. However, such analysis does not explain why citizens engage with these institutions, which for them may be perceived as political window-dressing or a highly risky enterprise in identifying oneself and one's criticism directly to state officials. Despite these concerns, citizens in Russia are increasingly engaging in this practice, through both the state's extensive citizen appeal and e-government systems. Through data collection from state-issued sources and an original survey, I explore the citizen's perspective on what motivates them to interact with the state. Ultimately, I argue that the prevailing models through which Russian citizens view these systems are a Resource-based Approach and an Approach of Everyday Resistance. What my findings demonstrate is that citizens in authoritarian regimes view contacting channels as vehicles through which one can apply one's personal resources to improve one's own welfare and more safely exercise and express their own political voice to the state and regime.

To My Mother

For never ceasing to remind me of how much you love me.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 The Paradox

During a trip to Moscow in 2018, by chance, I passed by the Presidential Reception Office, just in time to witness the aftermath of a citizen appeal gone wrong. At this office, any citizen can come to express a concern, lodge a complaint, ask a question, or make a request directly to an official from the Presidential Administration.<sup>1</sup> A woman had just left the office, apparently unsatisfied with whatever response she received from the officials inside, and so hurled a rock into the front window of the office on her way out. This being a central neighborhood in Moscow, she was quickly apprehended and whisked away, the shattered window was hurriedly boarded up, and the incident was never reported on by any news outlet. But, it left a lasting impression upon me. It offered me, a foreigner, a rare glimpse into the everyday side of Russian politics, and simultaneously conveyed to me the gravity with which Russian citizens consider the act of contacting their government. What this encounter indicated to me was that citizen-initiated contacting in Russia is not mere window dressing for the centralized state; rather it is a political practice that Russian citizens themselves take quite seriously.

Within Russia's increasingly authoritarian climate, lodging a complaint or proposing a request directly to an official of government may seem counter-intuitive. Openly voicing any criticism of an authoritarian regime carries an element of risk for the individual claimant. This is especially true within personalized autocracies like Vladimir Putin's Russia, which are notoriously sensitive to opposition. The power imbalance between political elites and citizens in Russia and other authoritarian contexts does not endow an individual citizen with much influence, so communicating a problem to a political elite may appear to be a minimally impactful action. In contexts where politics are highly managed and elite interests dominate political outcomes, citizen contacting, at first glance, seems superfluous and a mere

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<sup>1</sup>This office, the 'Reception of the President of the Russian Federation for the Reception of Citizens in Moscow', accommodates in-person appeals from Russian citizens, who can access information about its location and hours at: <http://letters.kremlin.ru/receptions/list>.

formality in the relationship between citizens and their state.

From the state's standpoint, allowing citizens to engage in citizen contacting, critiquing the regime and its governance practices, is also contradictory to the logic of autocracy. The premise of these institutions encourages people to identify and expose flaws and shortcomings in the regime, which may invite further skepticism toward the state or system itself. Available institutions of citizen contacting, which allow citizens to pinpoint weaknesses along different dimensions of state administration, may also make the regime vulnerable to potentially salient issues escalating into larger grievances, or even into collective action.

Nonetheless, contemporary authoritarian regimes, like China and Russia, are increasingly investing in and promoting forums that solicit citizen feedback and input. In Russia's case, the government has established and expanded several institutionalized channels for citizen-initiated contacting at the federal, regional, and municipal levels. These channels include reception rooms, like the one I came across in Moscow, where citizens meet with officials face-to-face to express their concerns or articulate requests. They also include public phone numbers for citizens to reach officials or their offices directly and addresses where they can send appeals by mail. Reception rooms and phone lines for different government offices and ministries are scattered across the country and are often accessible for citizens at set times and days. The landscape of citizen contacting also includes forms of even more routinized state interactions. Putin's annual Direct Line televised call-in show engages citizens directly with the president, who listens to and responds to citizen concerns from across the nation once a year. The Direct Line is highly performative and, in pre-screening which appeals will actually be broadcast, it does not accurately represent the panoply of citizen concerns in Russia. Nonetheless it remains an important example of a venue for citizen contacting and confirms that this practice occurs even at the pinnacle of the political structure.

Beyond these more regularized interactions, citizen-initiated contacting has also proliferated in Russia on the online space. Practically every federal ministry, agency, and administration across branches and levels of government in Russia now hosts an online channel through which citizens can reach government entities at virtually any time of day. Electronic appeals are hosted and handled by officials through government websites, e-government portals, and sometimes via social media. The online space has multiplied both the opportunity and accessibility for direct citizen-state interactions. This increased supply of online channels has consequently coincided with a push from the central state toward digital government and 'smart city' designs. As a result, the Russian government has advanced a widespread campaign promoting citizen contacting, particularly through online methods.

Government entities regularly advertise outcomes from interactions with their citizens, a practice that is commonplace across levels and branches of government in Russia. They often report the volume of appeals submit to their office, highlighting those made by electronic Internet-induced means. Reporting also often boasts responsiveness rates, indicating what steps that government entity is doing in response to citizen requests. The varied and increased spaces, particularly online, for direct citizen contacting, in addition to the government's public reporting on these systems attests to the priority that the Russian state has placed upon citizen-state interactions.

Although counter to foundational understandings of authoritarianism, which suggest that power is concentrated at the upper rungs of politics and is limited amongst non-elites, the study of institutions in authoritarian regimes offers insight into the usefulness of democratic-like institutions in sustaining authoritarian regimes [168, 65, 132, 22]. Democratic institutions - legislatures, political parties, elections, and even these venues of citizen contacting - allow autocrats to overcome fundamental dilemmas of dictatorship regarding incomplete information and the need to maintain control over the population [199, 177]. These institutions often take on contours of their own outside of a democratic setting, but they do typically operate as more than just political facades for autocrats. Institutions are key in generating legitimacy and reinforcing credible commitments amongst all regime stakeholders in an autocracy. They also help coordinate politics in such a way that suppresses, or at least detracts from, opposition forces or upsurges in collective action. Ultimately, when implemented and managed properly, democratically-inspired institutions in autocratic settings may help sustain an autocrat's tenure in office. Therefore, in line with these institutionalist arguments, platforms of citizen contacting correspond to a strategic logic, whereby autocratic rulers maintain power through institutions that restrain, co-opt, or manage other political actors, including the citizen population.

There is sound logic behind why authoritarian governments host platforms for citizen contacting, but what I find more paradoxical is the logic behind why citizens living under authoritarian rule engage in contacting officials at all. Citizen-initiated contacting - a behavior most associated with democracies - is becoming more frequent amongst populations within numerous autocracies, especially in Russia. Both domestic and international polls, suggest that the practice of citizen-initiated contacting has been on the rise within Russia. Surveys have found that nearly one-fifth of the Russian population has made an appeal to an official [100].<sup>2</sup> As a political behavior, Russians are also more likely to engage in citizen contacting over other forms of political participation and in comparison to citizens of other countries [79]. The Higher School of Economics (HSE) Digital Economy Indicators, citing data from Rosstat, suggest that as of 2020, 72.5% of Russians have interacted with state authorities, and nearly 60% of these interactions are conducted online through online appeals or e-government usage [2]. This particular upward trend in citizen contacting behavior is even more notable given the growing decline in interest in politics and political participation amongst Russians in general [105].<sup>3</sup> That a substantial and growing proportion of Russians are willing and actively turning to platforms that connect them to government officials is remarkable.

What incentivizes and drives citizens to use such institutions of contacting is not fully understood. In a democracy, citizen-initiated contacting serves as a fundamental form of political participation that provides a conduit for the populace to shape political outcomes. As a form of participation, it is identified as one of the key forms of engagement in sustaining

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<sup>2</sup>According to the Levada Center, in 2021, 17% of respondents admitted to filing an appeal in the last year, an increase from 13% and 12% in 2020 and 2018 respectively.

<sup>3</sup>A 2021 Levada Center poll notes that 35% of Russians are not at all interested in politics, 45% admit to not taking part in political life, and only 3% support and consciously participate in politics.

a democracy that keeps elected representatives accountable to their electorates and transmits citizen preferences into policy [191]. Without neither reelection pressures and the promise of accountability over officials - as a sizable amount of political offices in Russia are appointed - nor the expectation that appeals will be transmuted into policy, Russian citizens are faced with a very different incentive structure when deciding to contact an official.

Higher rates of citizen contacting may be attributed to a supply and demand logic. As the state continues to flood the market with more methods to contact officials, especially via online arenas, the action becomes more convenient and accessible to average citizens. However, merely providing a space to engage with a governing body does not mean that individuals will necessarily turn to them. Even in democracies, which openly host channels for citizen-initiated engagement, rates of robust citizen contacting are declining [193]. Very likely then, the individuals who do decide to contact the Russian state are motivated by specific and personalized reasons. What those motivations are and the dimensions under which this occurs are the focus of this research.

Based upon both existing research and my own observations, I offer four general incentive structures that may explain what is driving this citizen behavior in an autocratic context. These four models are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as citizens may be drawing upon multiple rationales when engaging in this practice. But these approaches do identify four distinct underlying individual-based motives that may drive a citizen to reach out to an official in an autocratic context, where we might not otherwise expect this behavior.

A Trust-based Approach proposes that citizens who initiate contact are more likely to be regime supporters. The underlying logic of this approach is that engaging with the state presupposes an acceptance of the state as legitimate and capable of and willing to handle requests from a citizen. Especially as an institutionalized practice, the upsurge in citizen contacting may be driven by those who carry greater confidence and pride in the regime. A group that is more accepting of pro-state agendas may be more likely to internalize the Russian state's campaign encouraging citizen-state interactions and digitized government and thus utilize these channels more frequently.

Otherwise, research points out that committed activists and members of political opposition forces within autocracies often resort to using quasi-democratic institutions for political purposes. These activists do so as a means to enact reform from within or harness the institution to expose flaws in the regime [134]. Making an appeal to the government, especially one negative in content that outwardly critiques state practices, may be considered an act of 'everyday resistance' or even 'rightful resistance' [170, 135]. Indeed, under an Approach of Everyday Resistance, citizens may be utilizing these platforms as vehicles to subtly express dissent to the regime, acts which may accumulate into larger grievances or actual policy changes.

The juxtaposition of Russians' general apathy toward politics alongside the widespread use of this system, makes it unlikely that only political reformers or those with subversive intentions are making appeals to the state. The practice is much more comprehensive in Russia, and state-published statistics show that a great deal of people far outside urban centers, where mass political opposition and activism is typically concentrated, are also

sustaining contact with officials. Therefore it is unlikely that the surge of citizen contacting is driven solely by those with strictly anti-regime sentiments. However, users taking this approach may be motivated to engage with the state as a means to express genuine political voice. Citizens may view this proliferation of methods to contact political entities as an opportunity to assert their own political agency.

Theories of citizen contacting in democracies have identified a Resource-based Approach, contending that this political practice is a product of an individual's personal resources. The classic resource model attributes political participation, both institutionalized and contentious forms of it, to greater amounts of time, money, and civic skills [21, 119]. This model stands in contrast to socioeconomic status models correlating political participation to wealth, educational attainment, and social class. Within autocracies, observational analysis suggests that education and class identity, particularly middle class identity, may play a role in explaining political participation. A notable example is the fact that many of Russia's recent protest movements have been significantly comprised of upper-middle class participants and are most prevalently supported by urbanized, educated, and professional individuals [75, 151].

Democratic theory understands the middle class as a critical source of democratic advocacy. The middle class is often espoused as the class most in favor of democracy, because of the many benefits in property, commercial, and political rights that a democracy has to offer the middle class. It may be that middle class citizens contact the state en-mass as a way to try and obtain some of these political rights and flex their democratic muscles. However, Rosenfeld (2020) examines this relationship in Russia, concluding that the middle class there is often less receptive to democratic change, and more supportive of the incumbent regime, largely as a function of the group's dependency on state resources [158]. There is no evidence to suggest that individuals contacting the state are of a particular social class, since all existing data points to the widespread nature of this practice, meaning it is probably not isolated to middle-class adherents.

A Resource-based Approach may therefore be appropriate when thinking about citizen contacting in an autocracy. The practice may be a function of an individual's unique set of resources. I argue that these resources do not correspond to the canonical variables of time, money, and democratic civic skills that are associated with elevated levels of participation in democracies. Tsai and Xu (2018) cite political connections as a salient resource that motivates political participation in China [185]. I add to their model by suggesting that a certain set of civic skills attuned to autocratic constraints and one's political literacy, or ability to navigate the political and social system, are also key resources that may motivate one to engage in citizen contacting. Possessing these resources - personal networks, societal skills, and political literacy - may make a Russian citizen more likely to seek out an official, as they may be able to leverage these resources in obtaining an outcome and feel more capable when enacting this behavior.

Finally, citizens may be seeking out the state merely from a Needs-based Approach. Rather than interacting with officials as a manifestation of regime support, everyday resistance, or the resources at one's disposal, citizens may be using these systems as vehicles to

address their immediate and pressing needs. This model implies that the majority of appeals are likely related to constituency service claims, rather than larger systemic questions or requests. There is some indication that appeals are not limited to service claims in Russia, as federally published data demonstrates a large portion of appeals are made with regard to constitutional reform, concerns about security and law enforcement, and larger questions of legal justice. Yet, housing, transportation, and social welfare remain highly popular topics about which citizens do make appeals. In this respect, citizen contacting in autocracies may be primarily about constituency service needs. With regard to constituency service, rates of authoritarian state responsiveness are often higher than one might expect [46], and the Russian state has been reinforcing this message by regularly reporting rates of responsiveness to citizen appeals. Individuals taking a Needs-based Approach may therefore anticipate a response from the state and be more inclined to engage with it about basic issues and service needs.

In order to better understand how citizens approach the state in an autocracy like Russia, I aim to explore the related concepts of identifying who these citizens are that contact state officials and what motivations underlie their behavior. Identifying the individual-level impacts that citizen contacting may impart upon a participant in an authoritarian context is an important question, but one that I will not be taking up in this paper. Rather, I will seek to establish who these participants are, building a profile of the typical citizen most likely to get involved, or not, in citizen contacting. I will also consider this behavior within these four models, exploring what incentivizes citizens to make an appeal and what strategies they may be employing when actually engaging in the practice of citizen contacting in Russia today.

## Importance of the Question

Knowing more detail about the practice of citizen contacting in an authoritarian regime from the citizen's point of view is an important endeavor. It contributes to research that emphasizes the individual as a political actor with agency inside authoritarian regimes. It also highlights the varied methods through which these individuals navigate the political landscape under which they live. Understanding whether citizens are more likely to contact the government as a first or last ditch effort, what issues they feel most and least comfortable making a complaint about, and their preferred channels for contacting the government are all significant, under-explored questions that offer insight into both the political strategies behind citizen engagement and the overall function of these systems themselves.

How citizens use channels of citizen-contacting in autocratic contexts contributes to several overarching questions in the study of authoritarian politics. Official contacting platforms that facilitate citizen interactions with government officials serve critical roles in information gathering, managing political discourse, overseeing sub-national bureaucrats, and providing greater visibility and legitimacy for incumbent regimes. Since these platforms serve specific political purposes for an authoritarian state, it is therefore valuable information to know who is being monitored, where the gathered information is coming from, and to which audience the government might be demonstrating its capacity as a legitimate and responsive state.



Depending upon who is using these platforms and how they use them may determine to some degree the effectiveness of the institution itself for the state's prescribed purpose.

For example, if the state intends to gather data on which issues are most salient amongst the population, yet a specific demographic is more or less likely to use these systems, the state may be overlooking larger underlying, yet equally important issues or groups of people. These platforms have the potential to magnify certain voices that may skew the state's responses at the expense of others, who are disinclined to make contact, thus exposing the autocratic state to a different set of vulnerabilities. Citizen contacting has taken a prominent role in the Russian government's approach to governance and therefore identifying how well this strategy maps onto the population indulging this practice may help identify gaps in the state's approach.

These channels also provide key avenues for understanding particular political attitudes or concerns amongst the Russian population. Preference falsification and social desirability bias are constant concerns within authoritarian polities, particularly with regards to politically sensitive questions. Forums of citizen contacting, largely because they are state sanctioned - as opposed to other forms of contentious politics - and because they are widespread across the political spectrum, may produce less filtered expressions from users with regards to their views on state administration.

This research raises many questions regarding the citizen-state relationship in an autocratic regime, calling attention to the importance of understanding how these interactions play out on a daily basis. Such interactions provide a unique perspective on authoritarian institutions and how democratically-inspired institutions function outside of democratic settings. Understanding the practical foundations of the citizen-state relationship and how it is mediated through institutions like these is critical in better understanding authoritarian politics and the durability of a regime, both of which are paramount questions in contemporary Russia.

Given the background of citizen contacting in Russia and its expansion in the last decade, especially in the online space, understanding more precisely why Russians are engaging in this practice is particularly relevant. As this political activity continues to grow and popularize itself across the country, identifying which citizens are more likely to be the main users of this system and under which conditions they might be more comfortable doing so is tantamount to understanding the purpose of this practice as an institution of Russia's authoritarian state control. In moving beyond the motivations for the Russian government to implement these channels, this dissertation will provide more descriptive data on why citizens actually utilize these platforms, and subsequently indicate the political functionality as well as limitations of these systems.

Particularly within the context of Russia's increasingly authoritarian political setting, citizen appeals offer a rare insight into the everyday political life of average Russians. Greater analysis into the practice from the citizen's perspective offers both practical and theoretical implications for the study of authoritarian state politics. On the theoretical side, how citizens initiate contact in a polity not underpinned by democratic accountability speaks volumes as to how these systems underpin state legitimacy, or not. Citizen perspectives on

these state-sanctioned channels may also demonstrate how these systems operate in order to support regime objectives. Comparing the approaches of citizen contacting in democracies and autocracies is also important for the fundamental understanding of how this practice may work to sustain both types of regimes. Since institutions of citizen contacting have been largely co-opted by autocracies without resulting in serious democratization, examining the details of their use may help more succinctly identify the mechanisms by which these institutions are delaying, rather than shoring up democracy building.

On the practical side, citizen appeals, buttressed by underlying e-government structures, have been a major political campaign for the Putin administration. In the last decade especially, the Russian state has emphasized and cultivated their use across levels of government. Therefore, practically speaking, knowing how citizens utilize and approach these systems will help explain how effective they are or identify certain areas where they may be lacking in capacity. Understanding citizen contacting from the citizens' perspective may also shed light on how exactly this political project has been translated on the ground.

Because of both the asymmetrical nature of these administrative systems in Russia, as well as the dearth of publicly available and reliable data on political subjects within the country, existing data regarding these systems and their pattern of use is not comprehensive. Subsequently, existing research on this topic is also not fully conclusive. The Levada Center, the most reliable source of polling and sociological research in Russia, has found that women, younger Russians, university-educated citizens, and those with greater amounts of political awareness are more predisposed to political participation, including citizen contacting [102]. The organization has also found that poorer, more politically aware individuals are likelier to sustain political activity in Russia [101]. However, the Levada Center has not been consistent with reporting demographic metadata in their studies and rarely examine these trends across regional, national, and local levels. Looking specifically at online citizen contacting for service provision and public goods, the Higher School of Economics has collected indicators that suggest that age is not as significant a factor in terms of receiving public services, as is urban locale; younger participants may even be slightly less active than middle aged populations in online public service provision interactions [2].

Ultimately, there are conflicting narratives with regards to who is more likely to be politically involved in Russia, and who is more likely to reach out to the state. Whether interactions and political engagement is conditional upon other factors is also not fully understood in the Russian context. Even less attention has been paid to examining why any patterns in such behavior might exist.

Russia poses a unique setting in which to study how citizens approach the practice of citizen contacting. A generalized contradiction lies at the core of citizen-state relationships in the country, as Russians tend to believe that resolving social or political problems is inherently difficult and exacerbated by inefficient government, yet they are also skeptical of advocates and activists who might assist in procuring such solutions [104]. Russians are particularly hesitant toward NGOs and third party mediators in bringing about sociopolitical developments. As a result, regularized state platforms are well-poised in Russia to serve as viable arbiters for citizens to consider issue resolution. Coupled with the population's gener-

ally simultaneous preexisting low expectations for state performance, how citizen contacting channels are utilized provides a key way to disentangle these contradictory sentiments. For instance, citizens in China with extant low standards and expectations of democratic governance tend to view these channels that encourage citizen feedback in a relative manner, citing their mere existence as a significant improvement in governance quality [184].

Given the rather nebulous nature of citizen contacting in Russia, which can span governing bodies and levels of government, citizens may also have nuanced views of their usefulness and function. They may consider contacting an appropriate action for addressing certain issue areas over others. Some channels may be viewed as more or less effective. The degree to which lackluster or irregular response rates from officials play into their behavior is also not fully understood, if it plays a role at all.

Essentially, an individual's decision to initiate contact with an official is the result a particular calculus. Do individuals who decide to make contact tend to be more supportive of the incumbent regime? or are they more prone to use these portals as ways to subtly voice expressions of discontent as mini acts of resistance? Are users of these systems reliant on them simply on an ad hoc needs-basis? or are they perhaps more likely to be individuals with greater systemic resources and social clout? Through a series of data collection efforts and survey distribution, I set out to answer these questions and offer a more comprehensive picture of this democratic political behavior well outside of a democratic context.

## 1.2 Operationalization

### What is Citizen Contacting?

Citizen contacting is a form of political participation and a principle expression of the citizen-state relationship. The term describes an “act of individuals approaching government officials in order to obtain some specific-related benefit from government” [85, p. 553]. Verba and Nie (1972) specify the behavior as ‘citizen-initiated contact’ and highlight its individualized nature, whereby a citizen with a particular concern can initiate contact with a government official, exerting agency over the timing, target, and substance of the interaction [191, p. 47]. The critical dimension of citizen contacting is in its quality as a form of participation activated by the citizen.

In practice, citizen contacting can encompass several types of political action. For Verba and Nie, citizen-initiated contacting comprises narrow, individualized concerns or broad community-based concerns, and substantively may touch upon a wide variety of issue areas. Ultimately they conceive of the practice as a fundamental form of democratic participation that both inserts the political voice of citizens into policy and decision-making and produces, as Pitkin (1967) calls it, a ‘manifestation of representation’ [145]. The practice is embedded in traditional concepts of democracy, for its primal characteristic as a transference of information to a political representative and for being a key mechanism through which democratic voice and accountability can be manifested.

Parallel to this concept of citizen contacting as a bedrock of democratic practice, is its potential role as what the social movements literature calls ‘claims making’. In this process, a citizen articulates a claim or request to an addressee, through either verbal or physical action [109]. Claims making can, and often does, encompass a form of contentious politics, but its verbal component means that contacting a representative to express a demand or request can equally be considered claims making. As I operationalize these terms, the key difference between citizen contacting more generally and claims making more specifically is that the intent of the latter action is to make an additive request to the government, demanding something that one is not yet entitled to and believes they ought to have. In the rendering of citizen contacting as claims making, the citizen reaches out to a member of the government in order to vocalize a demand outside of the scope of existing political parameters, seeking larger political changes or reform.

In many contexts, particularly in autocratic contexts, claims making and citizen contacting are concordant. Citizen contacting, as a broad term that describes the act of approaching the government with a request in mind, may often simultaneously be a form of claims making. This overlap may occur when the citizen requests something that calls for greater policy or decision making reforms; it also may occur as a by-product of the act of seeking a particularized benefit. Initiating contact with an official to gain assistance or resolve a concern, especially in an autocracy, may also be a form of political demand making. For instance, in China, appealing to the state for basic goods and services may also simultaneously be considered an attempt at demanding deeper political reform [186].

The way I conceptualize these concepts and apply them to this research, citizen-initiated contact, which is the focus of the study, is the broadest term that defines any citizen approach to the government with a particular request in mind. This may and often does include requests that fall under the category of claims making. I do conceptualize my study as one that focuses on citizen contacting, but recognize that this behavior, under certain conditions, may also be a form of claims making.

Citizen contacting can also be either an individual or collective act. Collective opportunities of contact, which are outside the scope of this project, often take the form of petitions or public deliberation. A petition presents a policy stance to the government and is typically supported by a group of advocates. Although a petition need not be collective, they often are; these collective versions of petitions are outside the scope of this research. Similarly, forums of public deliberation which involve multiple individuals are also outside the scope of this work. Verba and Nie (1972) refer to ‘cooperative activities’ as a form of non-conflictual political participation involving multiple individuals who enact democratic activities in the public space. With the absence of open arenas for completely open discussion on political ideas within authoritarian regimes, consultative institutions are often established by the state. In China, deliberative institutions often take the form of public consultations, public hearings, or public opinion polls. In Russia, the key deliberative platform is the Russian Public Initiative (ROI), established in 2015 as an arena to facilitate societal-wide discussion on a variety of issue areas. Unlike citizen contacting, however, deliberative institutions are also intended to foster discussion amongst citizens. Consultation may occur during or as a

by-product of citizen contacting, but it is not the principle focus of the action and thus not the principle focus of this study.

The scope of this project then is individualized, not collective, forms of citizen contacting. This research may touch upon parallel institutions of public deliberation, petitions, and claims making, given how interrelated these activities often are. In practice, there is significant overlap amongst petitions, deliberative consultation, claims-making, and citizen contacting; these actions often operate in-tandem. The main action I am interested in are individual interactions that occur directly between a citizen and the state. I exclude all forms of contact that are collective activities. I do this in order to isolate the action as a political behavior that is individually initiated. Individually-initiated contact, I argue, more genuinely expresses a citizen's request, as compared to an aggregated or secondary expression of political voice through collective means. I also do so because any action collective in nature has been viewed as particularly sensitive and thus more susceptible to repression by the Russian government. As a result, for the population collective contacting may also be viewed as a distinct political activity.

Even within an democracy, of the many different forms of citizen participation - voting, campaign support, cooperative activities - citizen contacting is unique in its individual approach and its ability to exact an individualized outcome. Citizen contacting represents one of the more individual political activities, both in terms of it being an act that does not require other participants and in terms of the substance of the act being unique to the citizen and their needs. These actions can reveal which issues are most salient for citizens and even which citizens are most vocal about them. For authoritarian states which suffer from a dearth of quality information from their population, the individualized characteristic of citizen contacting is particularly valuable.

## Responsiveness and Citizen Contacting

Citizen contacting as a political behavior is one part of a two-sided coin, the other side being state responsiveness. The input of citizen-initiated contact is dependent upon the output of a state's level of responsiveness. Responsiveness traditionally comprises four key dimensions: service, allocation, policy, and symbolic responsiveness [52]. Although a 'response' from the government and 'responsiveness' are not exactly the same [52], responsiveness, particularly in the realm of *service responsiveness*, in which a representative obtains advantages and benefits for particular constituents, presupposes that the government will address or at least attempt to address issues raised by citizen-initiated contacting. In this sense, responsiveness is the democratic product of citizen contacting, insofar as political preferences from citizens are manifested by representatives.

The dimensions of responsiveness are limited within an autocratic context. Citizens do certainly exert influence upon political outcomes and exert a degree of accountability over non-democratic states [194, 116, 184], but shifts in policy or allocation are still narrower as compared to their potential under democratic conditions. Furthermore, the extent to which this influence is a result of citizen-initiated contact is a product of what Truex (2016) calls

“representation within bounds” [184]. Amid the confines of within-bounds representation, autocratic government or legislative officials exert top-down responsiveness toward citizen requests, but only for a subset of issues bases. Within this arrangement, authoritarian states can reap the political benefits that citizen contacting institutions may provide, without exposing itself too deeply to democratic vulnerabilities.

Although state responsiveness is a key component of the full story of citizen contacting as a manifestation of the citizen-state relationship, it will not be focus of this study. This project is an undertaking to examine citizen motivations for contacting officials, not an analysis of state motivations to respond. However, a degree of state responsiveness is implicit in this approach, since without a basic belief in the state’s ability or willingness to address one’s grievance, citizens would likely not be inclined to make contact at all. The state therefore must demonstrate some capacity for responsiveness and establish institutional self-enforcement in order for citizens to not view these institutions as hollow or ineffectual. In the context of this project, I conceptualize the level of state responsiveness, as an underlying assumption for citizen contacting, as the extent to which a citizen feels the state is able to resolve their issue or concern.

## Government Online

Government is increasingly evolving to shift toward the online space, and with this trend the modicum of citizen contacting is also changing. Traditionally, citizens contact officials in person, via mailed letter, or over the telephone. These formats still exist, even in Russia, but are increasingly being replaced through a variety of internet based correspondences. In Russia, citizen contacting, claims making, petitions, and deliberative activities are all finding digital homes. The prevalence of engaging with these political actions online has coincided with a rise and emphasis upon ‘e-government’ or ‘digitized government’ by the Russian state.

E-government is a loose term that describes the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to improve government efficiency, provide government services online, and conduct a wide range of interactions with citizens [188]. Governments across the world - both democracies and autocracies - have been offloading themselves onto digital platforms. Some authoritarian regimes have been leaders in this trend, as several autocratic states were early adopters of e-government [8]. The digital shift and online state presence adds an additional dimension to the practice of citizen contacting, especially within authoritarian contexts.

From the citizen perspective, online platforms may change the nature of their participation in politics. On the one hand, political engagement can be more widely exercised online, and lead to what is termed ‘e-participation’. E-participation allows citizens to use ICT to contribute to administrative practices, decision-making, and service delivery [48]. In its ability to provide real time feedback to administrators on policy considerations, e-government and e-participation allow citizens to exert upward accountability upon decision makers [140]. Because the online space is available virtually any time of day, citizens have greater opportunity to insert themselves into the political process, should they chose, and exert accountability upon political authorities more readily and comprehensively. On the

other hand, the online space is highly atomized, which may confine and disincentive broadening a citizen's political awareness. If a citizen only engages in politics online, they may not feel as connected to other citizens, which may lead to political apathy or disengagement. As a relatively new phenomenon, the specific impacts that digital government is having upon the political process and the citizens who participate in it is still indeterminate.

From the state perspective, e-government presents several qualities that are particularly politically appealing. Sequestering government services, information, and citizen requests into the virtual space reduces person-to-person interactions and limits contact amongst citizens with similar concerns or requests, who might otherwise meet in public reception rooms or spaces. The online platform is a much more accessible format for many people, especially those who do not live in urban centers or might exist outside of mainstream politics. Online spaces allow the state's presence to reach a greater span of the population, which boosts its capacity to monitor and gather information from previously hard-to-reach segments of the population. E-government also grants an authoritarian regime international visibility as a modernizing state competitive with globalization trends and thus serves as a legitimacy boosting mechanism, both internationally and domestically [114, 8].

The adoption of new technologies by governments is not limited to autocratic states. Most governments do accept and incorporate new digital technologies and the successful implementation of ICT is often attributed as being a product of corruption perception indicators [25]. A prevailing view suggest that more transparent governments are more likely to see successful e-government outcomes. What this explanation of digitization in government does not account for are the several benefits that e-government can serve high-capacity authoritarian states, such as Russia. Therefore, while autocracies might not seem plausible contenders for hosting robustly successful e-government platforms, many of them do exert the effort to establish them and several have experienced their successful implementation.

What e-government means for citizen contacting in autocracies is that citizens have at their disposal significant opportunities to approach the government with a grievance. E-government, in Russia for instance, often embeds clear platforms for citizen contacting right into the website, meaning that citizens often navigate apps or government portals in order to communicate a request. Furthermore, e-government itself represents a vehicle of citizen-initiated contact, as citizens will often turn to these platforms in order to address a concern or need that they have. In this understanding of digital government, the website may be seen as a proxy for a government official. In addition, the citizen can exert an extra amount of agency in the timing and substance of their appeal and, regardless of their geographic location, they can do this at a variety of government levels - federal, regional, and local.

For the purposes of this study, I will examine e-government usage in parallel with citizen-initiated contacting. I consider them separate political activities, but acknowledge their close relationship. The overlap in e-government and citizen contacting again demonstrates the difficulty in isolating this practice in the modern context. I conceive of citizen contacting as an approach to a government official, either directly or through an online surrogate, and recognize that this often occurs via e-government portals. I do not qualify these actions as necessarily leading to e-participation, as it is dependent upon the nature, intent, and

responsiveness of contact. E-participation may be a by-product of online citizen contacting, but I remain agnostic as to whether citizen contacting necessarily results in a larger political consciousness within the participant. Instead, I fixate my study on the act of citizen contacting itself, recognizing its concentration on online spaces.

The presence of the the online arenas and citizen-state interactions that occur upon them in non-democracies, have been referred to as ‘participatory technologies’, ‘consultative authoritarianism’ [81, 183], ‘participatory authoritarianism’ [138][35], and ‘digital participatory governance’ [71]. I do not dispute these terminologies and in many ways what I describe corresponds to these same concepts. However, my emphasis is on these platforms as government extensions that facilitate a citizen-state relationship through citizen-initiated contacting.

I use the term ‘citizen-initiated contacting’ or ‘citizen contacting’ to describe the broad phenomenon of direct citizen-state interactions that I am researching. My conception of the term captures interactions that occur through both non-digital and digital means, although in practice prominence is given to digital methods because of their growing popularity and use. Citizen contacting may encompass e-government usage, when the citizen utilizes the e-government platform in order to actively reach out to an official or to vocalize a concern or need. Again, I also do not narrow my understanding of this activity as necessarily being a form of ‘claims making’, petition, or deliberation, although some of this activity is. With this operationalization that includes individual acts of contacting through both non-digital and digital means, I broaden the scope of my research and am able to capture the most comprehensive understanding of citizen contacting as an act between a citizen and the state apparatus at any level of government, through a variety of channels, and to a variety of targeted officials. The practice itself within an autocracy faces much overlap in political behaviors that by defining my study as looking at cases of citizen contacting, in all its forms, I hope to illuminate the behavior, strategies, and attitudes underlying the practice amongst participants as the principle focus of this research.

## Contacting in Russia

In Russia, citizen contacting is often referred to as *obrascheniye grazhdan*, or citizen appeals. This is the title given to the process of contacting an official of government to express a concern, complaint, or request. Mandated by federal decree, each federal, regional, and municipal government unit must host a platform for citizen appeals. The Russian system of contacting is sharply segregated by federal, regional, and municipal levels, one of its defining characteristics [17]. Citizen appeals are listed in the Constitution as a political right and so nearly every ministry and governing body at each level of government hosts their own system of accepting citizen appeals. As of now, appeals making is still a decentralized process in Russia, but it is universally understood as a valid individualized political action.

Also embedded in the Russian lexicon of citizen contacting is the act of signing a petition *podpisats’ petitsiyu*. Although presently understood as a collective act, petitions during pre-Revolutionary times were often made individually, representing a type of proto-appeal. Currently, petitions in Russia are widely understood as collective undertakings, whereas



citizen appeals are recognized as and action executed by one individual. In contemporary Russia, petitions also often carry a slight element of contentious politics, as they have been used to express oppositionary political sentiments.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps for that reason, petitions are rarely hosted by Russian government platforms, but rather housed by third party, media, or social media outlets such as Change.org or Telegram.

Both petitions and citizen appeals are popular forms of political participation in Russia, although citizen appeals are a slightly more prevalent form of engagement. A 2021 Levada Center poll demonstrates that 13% of respondents had signed a petition, as compared to 17% who had made an appeal [100]. Like petitions, making an appeal derives from and has evolved from a long, Russian-specific history of contacting behavior that roots itself in political practices enacted during both the Soviet Union and Pre-Revolutionary Russia [61, 60, 131]. Although some appeals may be considered forms of claims making or petitions, in practice, citizen appeals do not inherently carry connotations of contentious politics.

In Russia, many avenues for citizen appeals are hosted in tandem with e-government websites. The most comprehensive example of e-government in Russia is GosUslugi, an acronym meaning ‘State Services’, which serves as the e-government portal for the federal government. It was launched in 2009 and, on this platform, citizens can process permits and applications, pay fees and fines, secure health care and insurance, confirm school enrollments, and gain access to a wide variety of other public services. In 2020, a ‘Public Services Complaints’ application was added to the website, which built citizen contacting right into this e-government interface [163]. Directly through this e-government portal, a citizen can make an appeal related to 12 specified topics.

The city of Moscow also has a robust e-government presence that it runs out of its main website Mos.ru. Called Nash Gorod or Our City under the url Gorod.mos.ru, this website was launched in 2010 and is a comprehensive digital government platform. It includes ample spaces to request municipal services, cater to neighborhood specific requests, process documents,<sup>5</sup> and submit a citizen appeal.<sup>6</sup> Moscow city’s e-government is considered a general success story, having been ranked as the top local e-government platform in 2018 and remaining high on the UN’s Local Online Service Index ever since [189].

As e-government continues to spread across Russia, adopted now by most regions and major metropolitan areas in the country, the propensity for citizens to use these platforms seems to also have increased. According to the State Services, 228 million individual e-government transactions were processed in 2020 and there were 126 million e-government users in Russia [163]. Nash Gorod also reports that as of 2023 over 1.9 million Muscovites use their system and that through this e-government administration over 7 million user requests have been resolved. These figures do suggest that the online space is increasingly becoming

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<sup>4</sup>For instance, in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, petitions became a popular way to express anti-war sentiments amidst Russia’s changing social climate [165].

<sup>5</sup>Moi Dokumenti or My Documents is the specific branch of Moscow’s e-government system to handle documentation.

<sup>6</sup>Citizens can contact the Moscow city government online through the Elektronaya Preyomnaya or Electronic Reception Room, or in person at two specified reception offices in the city.

the norm in terms of dictating citizen contacting practices in Russia.

### 1.3 Chapter Outline

In this dissertation, I focus on citizen-initiated contacting within Russia, as a political practice. In Chapter 2, I outline and contrast the theoretical pillars under which citizen contacting occurs within both democratic and authoritarian regimes. I decipher the dimensions of this institution in non-democratic settings, by showcasing them as information-gathering, monitoring, and legitimizing venues. I then establish theoretically why citizens would be inclined to make contact with their authoritarian states, presenting four models which might explain the incentives and motivations underpinning this behavior. Finally, in this chapter I establish the history and contemporary background of citizen contacting as a practice within Russia, providing evidence of its long-standing and widespread nature, as well as descriptive data about prevailing trends in the topics, methods, and sources of citizen contacting within both Moscow city and at the federal level.

In Chapter 3, I introduce and present findings from a novel survey distributed online to a representative group of Russian citizens regarding their views and approaches on citizen contacting. I take a comparative approach and address trends amongst those engaged specifically in citizen appeals, e-government, and non-participants. In gathering individual-level data, in addition to open-ended responses, the survey findings shed light on the profile of a typical Russian most likely to initiate citizen contact and the finer details on the conditions under which they are most likely to engage with the state in this way.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I conclude with a discussion of findings and a proposal for further extensions to this research project. In my discussion of the research findings, I review any major characteristic distinctions that those who have contacted the state exhibit. I also return to the four models of citizen contacting that I originally propose. I suggest that the data supports two prevailing models as plausible primary explanations for why citizens in Russia are willing to appeal to the state, underscoring the implications this practice may have under these approaches upon broader contemporary Russian politics.

# Chapter 2

## Background

### 2.1 Citizen Contacting within Democracies

Citizen contacting is fundamental to democracy. It is a foundational dimension of the democratic process and constitutes an important interaction between citizens and their representatives. Citizen-initiated contacting is one of the main pillars of democratic political participation, which principally allows citizens to influence their government, ‘set the agenda’ in politics, and impose electoral accountability upon their representatives [191, 85]. For elected representatives, being receptive and responsive to citizen contacting is a professional expectation and an integral method for reinforcing one’s positive political reputation and building stronger ties with constituents [55, 29]. Citizens who appeal or make claims to a democratic state often do so through varied channels and with regards to widespread issue areas, highlighting the multi-dimensional and active participatory nature of citizen contacting in a democracy [94, 93]. This behavior is a direct channel through which a democratic citizen-state relationship is developed and a crucial method in facilitating democratic political outcomes.

In the classic ‘resource model of participation’, an individual’s ability and willingness to initiate citizen contact, as with all forms of political participation, is a function of time, money, and civic skills [21]. This model implies that political participation is not evenly distributed across a population. Therefore, citizen contacting as a channel of communication between citizens and representatives may present a biased flow of information from individuals with greater amounts of these resources and ultimately lead to imbalanced democratic responsiveness. On the other hand, institutions of citizen contacting represent robust forms of electoral accountability. Because citizens have direct access to their representatives, those same representatives are more incentivized to act on behalf of their electorates across policy frameworks and enact more widespread responsiveness toward all citizens.

In a democracy, citizen contacting also principally serves as a central mechanism in transferring policy preferences upward. State responsiveness to citizen appeals has been found to be the decisive factor in constituents’ voting behavior and electoral outcomes. Particularly

in municipal elections, where the distance between voters and incumbents is relatively close, a representative's attentiveness to citizen complaints, over issues like road quality and potholes, can play a decisive role in successful reelection or not [24]. Initiating citizen contacting triggers an 'enfranchising effect', especially amongst vulnerable populations, to become more proactive in voicing policy preferences and demanding better service and policy responsiveness from representatives [182]. In instilling political influence within citizen voters and producing democratic electoral accountability, citizen-initiated contacting is a bedrock of democratic regimes.

The practice is critical in cultivating and perpetuating democracy within a society, not just because it produces democratic outcomes, but also because the behavior itself serves as an instrument of democracy building. Democracy is built by and consolidated upon democratic institutions, attitudes, and especially behaviors, which are particularly important in manifesting democracy [167]. Citizen contacting is a striking example of this; Verba and Nie (1978) even consider citizen-initiated contacting a behavior that is indispensable to democracy and democracy building. Therefore, if enacting democratic behaviors, especially citizen-initiated contacting, is so critical in building a democratic regime, then whether the persistence of citizen-initiated contacting within other regime contexts has the same capacity for democratic development is an outstanding question.

## 2.2 Why Autocracies Permit Citizen Contacting

Russia and China have recently invested heavily in institutions that allow for and promote citizen-initiated contacting. Although neither country is democratic, they have adopted the technology and infrastructure for widespread interactions between citizens and the state in this manner. The system of citizen appeals that both Russia and China have adopted are often flawed by bureaucratic and political constraints, but are nonetheless becoming increasingly prevalent and popular within both of these country contexts [27, 100]. In both states, the institution of citizen contacting serves as a primary platform through which political engagement is managed and controlled.

On the surface, it may seem a risky enterprise for an autocratic state to open up spaces of democratic practice and allow the democratic behavior of citizen contacting to take hold within society. However, there are good reasons the state may authorize these institutions, as their political functionality often aligns with authoritarian interests. As with other democratic institutions, authoritarian states establish and host these platforms because they anticipate certain benefits from doing so, not because they expect them undermine their non-democratic power.

Democratic institutions in general have been increasingly understood to help structure, strengthen, stabilize, and sustain modern authoritarian regimes [23, 168, 177]. Institutions most associated with democracies - electoral systems, political parties, and legislatures - are often vehicles of authoritarian power. These institutions provide credible power sharing arrangements through which autocrats can both distribute patronage amongst political

elites and facilitate political outcomes that help insulate the regime from democratization pressures [65, 132]. Principally, they allow authoritarian leaders to signal regime strength and legitimacy, acquire information from citizens, and monitor their populations [22].

Particularly in electoral authoritarian regimes [166], such as Russia where this study will be based, formal democratic institutions are one of the primary ways in which authoritarian power is manifested and maintained. In Russia, quasi-democratic institutions simultaneously work to support state-building initiatives, as well as undermine democratic governance practices [68]. Some of these outcomes can be attributed to the typically informal nature of Russian institutions. Regardless, institutions are repeatedly used to manipulate political outcomes into ones that correspond with Kremlin interests. As for institutions of citizen-initiated contacting, the Russian state has adopted these as democratic institutional arrangements, but likely only as long as they work for the benefit of the regime. The state apparatus has established this infrastructure, in all likelihood, in order to reap the many specific benefits that it has the potential to provide.

One of the consequences of the problem of ‘authoritarian control’, as identified by Svoboda (2012), is that authoritarian states often lack total information from which to make relevant and applicable policy decisions [177]. By constraining civil society and genuine political expression, authoritarian states are often less clear about the intentions or preferences of its population and thus does not always possess full information with which to make clear, regime-securing decisions. Many regimes solve this problem by allowing pockets of protests to exist under certain conditions [111] or by allowing for a degree of state criticism to emerge amongst the population [87]. However, allotting forms of contentious politics is a sub-optimal solution for the state in information gathering, since these events are irregular and not comprehensive. In theory, the state is most advantaged by steady and unfiltered input from their populations.

Institutions of citizen contacting are especially adept at this steady information gathering [46, 176]. With neither fully free-and-fair elections nor transparent venues through which to accurately transmit citizen preferences to the government, an authoritarian state is susceptible to under- or over- estimating the salience of social issues and is thus vulnerable to political miscalculations. As a uniquely individualized political activity, citizen-initiated contacting provides nuanced and valuable information directly to the central state. The state in turn can then utilize this information, which articulates perspectives on governance and political practices to help a dictator overcome his persistent “dilemma” [199]. Especially since requests and appeals from citizens are voluntarily verbalized, they are also less prone to the preference falsification that often occurs under compulsory information gathering. For an authoritarian state, this unfiltered commentary can prove invaluable when making policy decisions. In communist Bulgaria, for instance, citizen contacting and complaints were signature and primary sources of information for the state, and contributed heavily to centralized political decision making [45]. For an authoritarian state which can design, control, and maintain the platform and parameters around which citizen contacting occurs, these channels become particularly appealing for the governing apparatus.

Citizen contacting and the information flows that emerge from them also serve as im-

portant mechanisms for monitoring both citizens and political officials within the country [38, 116, 45, 36, 117]. These institutions regularly inform the centralized government about conditions on the ground, allowing national authorities to assess how effective junior officials may or may not be in carrying out regime directives. What is so appealing about these institutions is that they offer the central state an opportunity to offload some of its monitoring responsibilities. As Nathan (2003) observes, discontent is often directed at lower-level officials [132], which leaves centralized regime personnel immune to criticism, at the expense of mid-level authorities. As citizens publicly call out mismanagement or gaps in governance practices, the central state can use this information to evaluate sub-national leadership. Pockets of excessive contacting or complaints about particular issue areas may signal incompetent subnational leadership to the central state. To this extent, citizens in authoritarian regimes are able to weakly exert upwards accountability and oversight upon mid-level officials, while the central state can exert downward accountability upon those same figures, if needed. Theoretically, these dual forces produce conditions in which mid-level political authorities are more likely to be invested in managing political affairs and monitoring social situations, or at least containing them [192] before they escalate higher up the political hierarchy or spill over into larger potentially destabilizing collective actions.

For the state apparatus, citizen contacting is also a useful way to exert oversight upon citizens. These platforms help the state identify vocal groups or individuals and keep track of any potentially subversive rhetoric they may espouse. Depending upon the information gathered via citizen contacting channels, both central and mid-level officials are able to maintain a more consistent watch on opposition sentiments or on issues that are particularly sensitive to the regime, as well as upon those who may be sympathetic to these ideas. Authoritarian states are often judicious and selective regarding which issues and individuals they respond to [184, 176, 153], essentially ‘rewarding’ individuals and behaviors that are considered less threatening to state interests, while maintaining oversight on those issues and individuals which are not.

Importantly, institutions of citizen contacting also confer a high degree of legitimacy to an autocratic state [84, 113, 126, 132]. Most autocrats do not ascend to power with a mandate of popular sovereignty, so they must work to convince citizens of their legitimacy in other ways. Service delivery, as a tangible government outcome, is a critical method to bolster and even exponentially develop perceptions of legitimacy amongst populations living within autocracies [32]. Institutions of citizen contacting provide the state valuable data on where service provision can be improved, enough to maintain citizen support or at least acquiescence to the regime.

Allowing for political expression is another method by which an autocrat may boost perceptions of his legitimacy. Authoritarian states do not always fully censor critical or even downright vitriolic political expressions, because it helps decrease cases of collective action and increase state legitimacy [87]. Allowing space for citizen voices to be heard openly by the government - in deliberative settings or as a direct form of citizen contacting - generates credibility for the state as a receptive entity and additionally helps prevent aggregate demands from exploding into collective action [37, 38]. From the state’s perspective, expressing

political concerns or grievances to officials in this manner is also ‘safer’, since these channels are managed and controlled.<sup>1</sup> Institutions of citizen contacting often provide citizens a venue to express political voice and simultaneously accord citizens a feeling that they are contributing to political decision-making as stakeholders. Both of these features may help bolster an authoritarian state’s reputation and offer its population reliable reassurances of its own state authority.

Ultimately, allowing citizen contacting to occur is a primary strategy an authoritarian state utilizes in order to prevent more disruptive forms of public dissent and collective action from developing. Collective action and protests are one of the primary modicums through which autocrats fear that regime change and democratization will be initiated, especially in Russia where the state has felt unease since the mid-2000s that mass mobilization is a direct path to regime change [90, 91, 151, 152, 16]. Authoritarian states are keenly aware that a small spark of social discontent can have a cascading domino effect which may result in regime change [97]. This is why modern states like Russia and China are so sensitive to threats of collective action and are particularly vigilant about monitoring public demonstrations.<sup>2</sup>

Diffusing threats of collective action seems to be one of the core political functions institutions of citizen contacting serve. Autocratic officials are more responsive to citizen appeals or complaints if the content threatens collective action [36, 87]. Platforms of citizen contacting help the state identify potential issues that may catalyze protests. They also simultaneously help divert the population’s attention away from contentious politics and from considering engaging in them by providing this institutional alternative. These institutions help preemptively counteract collective action sentiments from emerging by allowing citizens to channel their frustrations in this more manageable way. These platforms serve to forestall or suppress more serious acts of contentious politics from emerging within an authoritarian society.

Through these institutions’ ability to gather information, provide oversight, and shore up legitimacy, the incumbent authoritarian regime is able to better insulate itself from destabilizing instances of mass mobilization. Along the way, the state is able to reap several reputational, political, and informational advantages, benefits which are conferred without serious risk of destabilizing the authoritarian state’s power base. These channels represent potentially fruitful ways that an authoritarian regime can establish rapport with its citizens, particularly in how well it responds to citizen requests.

## State Responsiveness

Authoritarian regimes subsequently face unique motivations to respond to citizen requests. The legal structures within non-democracies often provide competing incentives which, on

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<sup>1</sup>For example, the city of Moscow suspended its citizen contacting platform temporarily in response to an overwhelming amount of complaints about a particular housing project in 2016 [123].

<sup>2</sup>Russia, for instance, has stringent registration requirements for protests and, except for single-picket protests which do not require a permit, protesting without proper permits from the local government is harshly repressed and punishable by law.

the one hand, encourage citizens to contact officials, while on the other hand encouraging officials to try and limit these interactions as a way to self-censor the flow of citizen appeals [192]. Emboldening citizens too much may force the state to respond to requests that are inconsistent with regime interests. Thus authoritarian states engage in enough responsiveness to curtail larger, potentially more explosive requests or complaints from emerging.

Although not electorally beholden to their populations in the way that democracies are, autocracies still engage in forms of what can be considered *service responsiveness* - providing services and benefits to particular citizens - and *policy responsiveness* - reflecting citizen positions on political issues into policy orientations and decisions [52]. That so many citizens in Russia and China utilize these systems implies that these authoritarian states are exhibiting responsiveness to citizen appeals, requests, and complaints. If not, we would expect citizens to be much less likely to make appeals in the same volume and at the rate at which they are doing so.

Autocratic responsiveness is limited. Authoritarian regimes can only reasonably respond to issues within the parameters that sustain authoritarian power, without risking serious regime destabilization [184]. Nonetheless, autocracies exhibit surprisingly high amounts of service responsiveness on social welfare and constituency service issues [36, 46, 71, 141, 176]. They also exert a fair degree of policy responsiveness in manifesting the policy preferences of citizens into practice [116, 117, 183, 82, 81]. Service responsiveness helps the regime insulate itself from unnecessary backlash from citizens, while policy responsiveness may assist autocratic states in maintaining social stability.

Service responsiveness occurs rather commonly in authoritarian contexts. Adequate service delivery typically equates to the development of performance-based legitimacy for authoritarian states [32]. The performance of authoritarian regimes in the realm of service delivery and social welfare is often essential in preventing other demands for political rights from emerging amongst the population [118]. Citizens are much more willing to tolerate autocratic politics if their basic needs are being adequately met.

Although service responsiveness does exist, it may be exhibited on a conditional basis by autocratic states. This type of responsiveness may be a product of an individual's social or political ties to the state, with well-connected individuals receiving more attention from state officials [185, 201]. The level of service responsiveness may also be commensurate with the nature and content of the appeal. For instance, service responsiveness is more likely to occur toward citizens who profess pro-regime political affiliations [153] or appeal on single-task issues related to economic growth [176].

In terms of policy responsiveness, autocratic governments also do take citizen perspectives into consideration during policy discussions and decision making at the international, national, and local levels [194, 116, 71]. Policy responsiveness may function to co-opt domestic opposition figures, counteract domestic audience costs from unfavorable policies, and ensure smooth and unfettered elections occur within the regime. As authoritarian states work to prevent mass mobilization, they must carefully evaluate their own domestic policy-making decisions. Incorporating some of its population's political preferences into policy outcomes may help buffer itself when other less favorable policies are decreed and enacted.



It also behooves an authoritarian state to engage in policy responsiveness by contouring existing policies along citizen preferences in order to make the state appear more agreeable to the general population. For instance, the state shifted course on a large housing project in Moscow, primarily because so many people took action against the government to reject its proposed redevelopment plans in this neighborhood. This policy response was a small concession on behalf of the state, but significant in maintaining political stability.

Deliberative platforms provide an ideal location to overview policy considerations from the populace, without conceding too much decision-making or political power to citizens [81, 82]. Consultative platforms allow the state to identify universal cross-cutting issues and observe policy divisions amongst the population, without risk of being the ire of these debates [38]. Similarly, channels of citizen contacting are also paths through which states may collect policy preferences that they can then reflect into larger policy responses when appropriate.

Therefore, rather than servicing electoral accountability or representative politics as in a democracy [145], citizen contacting and state responsiveness toward it largely function as politically stabilizing interactions for authoritarian governments.

## Why Autocracies Permit E-Government

E-government, or the role of ICT in facilitating greater transparency and efficiency in government practices, is a growing phenomenon. Although regime type is immaterial to e-government implementation, one of the primary goals and defining aspects of e-government is to enhance inclusivity and transparency in government [188]. As a result, full democracies tend to be stronger adopters of e-government and digital technologies, as compared to authoritarian regimes [89]. The adoption of e-government and other technologies is often understood as a function of a state's level of corruption, with less corrupt societies more successfully adopting digitized platforms [25]. E-government, as a system congruent with transparent political practices, is often associated with democratic governance.

However, digital government is also being widely embraced by several authoritarian states: Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. This group of authoritarian regimes all rank high on the corruption perceptions index and low on institutional quality, yet have relatively successfully implemented e-government systems [48]. These states' successful adoption of e-government suggests that government transparency is not the only administrative goal that digital platforms can achieve, particularly for authoritarian regimes.

The tenuous relationship between authoritarian regimes and the internet means that online government can pose potentially harmful consequences for authoritarian rule. Unmanned and unmanaged online information flows may trigger public discontent or instigate oppositional activities or sympathies [8]. The use of the internet by activists to coordinate opposition against the regime and develop 'virtual civil society' is a contributing factor in empowering marginalized political communities and in destabilizing autocratic politics [15, 129]. In Russia, internet and social media usage is also correlated with increased protest

participation, as digital platforms help overcome the many barriers to entry of collective action that individuals face [49]. Authoritarian regimes may therefore be hesitant about encouraging online activity amongst its citizens.

However, when harnessed and utilized properly, the internet can be a powerful tool in consolidating authoritarian state control. The state can manipulate its population's access to the internet and utilize it as a vehicle in disseminating pro-state agendas. Digital government within an autocracy can increase the infrastructural capacity of the state's power base [70] and expand its opportunities to curb political and social liberties amongst the populace [154]. E-government may also serve as another modicum in enhancing an authoritarian state's legitimacy. Streamlined and accessible digital platforms are commensurate with modernization, which signal a state's competitiveness with globalization trends and enhances the optics of the regime, for both domestic and international audiences [114, 8].

A strong online government presence may also assist in the expansion of authoritarian control. In its quest to induce loyalty, rather than dissension amongst the population, modern authoritarian regimes are increasingly turning to non-repressive and informational measures in order to maintain power and ensure political survival [115, 78]. Sequestering government services, information, and citizen requests onto the virtual space reduces person-to-person interactions and limits contact amongst citizens with similar concerns or requests, who might otherwise meet in public spaces. The online format also allows the state significantly more oversight on citizen rhetoric and discourse. Authoritarian states ultimately observe online interactions, meaning communication on digital platforms, especially state-run ones, is carefully scrutinized by the government, a detail often factored into the substance of a citizen's actual request [28]. Online platforms present a more accessible format for many people, especially those who do not live in urban centers or might exist outside of mainstream politics, which gives the state the opportunity to penetrate segments of society it might otherwise struggle to reach, and subsequently monitor and gather information from them. E-government may thus expand an autocrat's scope and sphere of political control.

Of course, e-government also allows states like Russia and Kazakhstan to initiate greater service responsiveness to its citizens [114]. The adoption of e-government by autocracies has not necessarily been found to increase corruption control or institutional quality within those states [108]. Nonetheless, for authoritarian governments, who are particularly prone to corruption, state capture, and rent seeking behavior, e-government's tendency toward transparency may be a desirable strength. The platform can provide an adequate space for genuine state responsiveness to occur, no matter how limited or calculated that responsiveness is. Through this mechanism, the state may garner greater legitimacy for itself, even when its overall governance practices are not any more transparent.

Indeed e-government as a platform is consistent with institutions of citizen contacting. Citizen contacting has increasingly shifted toward the online space, with more and more of these interactions occurring through the internet. Digitized government works in parallel with citizen contacting, as a primary platform where citizens can access the government with particular needs or concerns. Although the two are distinct, as institutions they both serve similar political functions in terms of boosting legitimacy and offering arenas for additional

information gathering and monitoring, and, in practice, often work in tandem.

These potential outcomes - to both expand authoritarian power and maximize legitimacy potential - are powerful motivators for authoritarian states to adopt e-government and may suggest why some non-democratic regimes are so successful in digitized government initiatives, despite lackluster domestic corruption practices. When viewed through this lens, it makes sense why some authoritarian states have embraced e-government programs so heartily. Nonetheless, even if the regime designs, manages, and manipulates citizen-state interactions through digital government and citizen contacting platforms to correspond to its own political interests, the system still requires users in order to be worthwhile for the state.

### 2.3 Potential Motivations for Citizens in Autocracies to Initiate Contact

The effectiveness of institutions designed to generate citizen-state interactions and foster citizen contacting depends upon the willingness of citizens to utilize these platforms. In a non-democratic environment where holding opposing political views against the incumbent regime is dangerous, approaching the state with negative feedback can be a risky decision. Citizens may be disinclined to voice complaints or concerns, even if they are not directly critical of the regime, for fear of being identified by the state as a disgruntled or unruly citizen.

Additionally, democratic institutions in authoritarian contexts are often flawed institutions, and are perceived as such by citizens. The perceptions that citizens in autocracies carry toward institutions, especially those intended to facilitate citizen contacting, are valuable, as those views are directly related to how successful these platforms are as institutions and as instruments of the state [126]. Citizens might not necessarily expect these platforms to be especially functional and so may disregard them as viable channels of communication. We might therefore expect citizens in autocracies to look upon these institutions with trepidation or reluctance; however, citizen disengagement with these channels has not at all been the case.

In Russia and China, indicators suggest the opposite, that citizen contacting is actually an increasingly popular activity amongst citizens [79, 100, 27]. Citizen contacting has become a venue of robust individual political participation within these countries. If citizens do have reservations about engaging with the state in this way, the perceived risks of making contact with an official appear to be outweighed by the potential benefits they may gain from doing so. While the particular strategies citizens might employ when initiating contact is less understood in authoritarian settings, some findings may indicate what motivations and incentives can be driving this practice.

The prevalence of citizen appeals may at least be partially explained by existing structural factors or the institutional infrastructure of the citizen-state relationship in a non-

democratic context. Distelhorst and Hou (2017) propose a ‘demand-driven’ theory of engagement, whereby a citizen’s prolonged interactions with non-democratic state officials encourage them to demand more from the governing apparatus [46]. Essentially, this theory supports a model of citizen contacting that expands and grows over time, as the product of a feedback loop informed by successes of earlier interactions. While they specifically develop this theory with regards to constituency service, the logic may also be applied to explain more generalized forms of citizen-initiated contacting, and suggests that citizens who have had previously positive interactions with the state are more likely to be participants in this system. While their theory does not fully explain why a citizen may first decide to initiate contact and does not account for variation in contacting platforms, it still may be the case that citizen interactions with the state are exponential, in that one interaction may embolden and perpetuate others.

To expound upon their theory, perhaps a citizen’s willingness to make contact with the state is also the result of a ‘supply-driven’ logic. As the state provides more and more avenues for citizen contacting to occur, including and perhaps especially those online, more and more citizens will be inclined to use them. Accessibility and ease of use may be critical factors that determine whether an average citizen, especially in Russia, decides to approach a government official to resolve an issue. Particularly since so much of Russia’s governance system is dictated by informal structures and interactions that often drive citizens to solutions outside the formal government apparatus [98, 68], the state’s presentation of these platforms as approachable, legitimate, and convenient is critical to overcoming this barrier to entry. Of course, a steady supply of institutions does not fully explain why citizens turn to them, as having a space to complain or raise issues to a governing body does not guarantee its usage. Democracies, which have ample open channels for citizen-initiated contacting, have been experiencing declining rates of citizen contact [193]. Nonetheless, retaining an increased supply of platforms that are user-friendly and reliable may help explain why these systems are so popularly and comprehensively used.

Beyond structural factors, there are likely several other individual-level motivating determinants at work as to why a citizen chooses to engage in this practice. The likelihood of citizen contacting may be a product of how positively an individual views the incumbent regime, or how accepting they are of state rhetoric and state sanctioned initiatives. Conversely, initiating contact may be an expression of ‘everyday resistance’ in subtly voicing opposition or in simply exercising one’s unique political voice. Otherwise, the practice of contacting may be best understood through the lens of individual resources, which may prompt political participation. Or perhaps basic needs and services dominate citizen contacting in autocracies, as citizens seek out the state only when needed and only in order to secure their own general welfare.

## **A Trust-based Approach**

Because citizen-initiated contacting brings citizens and state officials into direct contact, individuals who engage in the practice must possess a degree of acceptance of state authority.

This formal encounter requires that the institution be perceived as legitimate by the citizen. As a practice, it is therefore plausible that those who are particularly accepting of the incumbent state and hold more positive perspectives on it would be more likely to interact with it. In addition, citizens who are already predisposed to trusting the state as a legitimate authority are also more likely to accept and adhere to pro-state messages and agendas, including the government's heavy promotion of venues for citizen contacting.

In the Russian case, it is certainly true that individuals with pro-regime affiliations have been a public and politically active force. Despite the general trend of cultivating political apathy amongst citizens in exchange for economic stability under Putin's administration [74], pro-regime advocates have been supported and harnessed by the state to counter opposition forces and in order to boost the state's own legitimacy and popularity. Following the cascade of colored revolutions in the mid-2000s, pro-Putin youth groups were established and debuted across the country. Part of the objectives of these groups, which were backed by the Putin government, were to mobilize future citizens into a pro-regime narrative and provide them with civic skills in which to collaborate with the state [9]. Kremlin loyalist groups were again mobilized and set upon the streets following the 2011-2012 anti-Putin protests. Based on their media consumption practices, those pro-Kremlin groups were notably comprised of cosmopolitan and tech savvy individuals [174]. Their appearance within the social movement landscape in Russia sought to project an image of a regime supporter as a modern and socially appealing identity.

Although pro-regime movements are largely propped up and micromanaged by the state, they are nonetheless an important aspect of modern Russia's sociopolitical landscape. Pro-regime campaigns have become robust venues of political participation and vehicles for citizens involved in them to articulate individual political agendas [83]. The public face of state supporters has been carefully managed by the Kremlin, but these groups have gained public attention, signaling to the population that regime adherents can be politically active in arenas designed and designated by the state.

Mass mobilization of any kind remains a comparatively rare occurrence in contemporary Russia. The spaces and arenas of protests are increasingly manipulated and managed by the regime, even for pro-regime demonstrations [75, 152]. The state in turn has worked to channel pro-regime political participation into other venues, especially onto the online space [175]. In doing so, the regime has simultaneously shifted focus away from public demonstrations and helped cultivate its own presence within other participation platforms, thus continuing to market its public-facing appearance.

Many of Russia's state-sanctioned political outlets are dominated by involvement from regime supporters. Like-minded and pro-government individuals tend to be more active on state-run online platforms, which often garner livelier discussions and policy debates [56]. Perhaps citizens in general assume that the state will be more attentive to them if they use a state-run forum, rather than an independently-run or third party platform.<sup>3</sup> It may

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<sup>3</sup>There are several independently-run online platforms that operate within Russia and which work to aggregate complaints, appeals, and offer administrative support for citizens. Angry Citizen is a nation-wide

also equally be true that supporters of the regime are more likely to utilize these systems altogether.

Implicit in the act of citizen contacting via a government apparatus is the institutional trust that underpins that behavior. An individual must be relatively confident in the institution and in its ability to procure a solution to whatever issue is at hand. Opposition figures in authoritarian regimes often use non-institutional forms of contentious politics to undermine regime legitimacy; in contrast, an interaction structured through an institution specifically designed and hosted by the state to some degree reinforces the state's primacy.

Although trust is notoriously difficult to measure and the concept is not congruous across entities, amongst Russians there does seem to be a high degree of trust around online, e-government systems. Although Russians actually exhibit low levels of trust in public institutions in general [172], their trust in online systems of government is exceedingly higher. This is strongly illustrated with regards to online voting, in which Russians have expressed a high degree of public trust [10]. Online voting is believed to be less vulnerable to state tampering and offers a more transparent process, a belief that is often attributed to previously positive e-government experiences [10]. Nonetheless, electronic voting systems appear to work to the advantage of pro-Kremlin candidates. In some cases, officials may cushion electoral margins through the electronic vote count.<sup>4</sup> In other cases, the electronic vote may reaffirm pro-Kremlin candidate victories. In 2019, the first year that electronic voting was introduced in Russia, electoral victories were achieved for several pro-regime candidates directly through online votes [190].

The implication for citizen-initiated contacting is that those same individuals most willing to use state sanctioned online voting systems and online platforms, a large portion of which appear to be state supporters, may also be the ones most willing to take part in citizen appeals. Especially when considering online contacting platforms, which may be deemed inherently more trustworthy by Russians, it may be that a cadre of state supporters are most frequently the ones turning to the state in this way. They may be using these institutions a way to manifest their adherence to the state and its governing apparatus. If this is the case, then these individuals may be using the system not because they hope to undermine it, instigate greater democracy building practices from below, or even in order to enact massive changes in the system, but rather because they believe in the system and its process.

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service; Beautiful Petersburg is a regional independent platform founded by an American operating in St. Petersburg; Alexey Navalny also developed 'RosYama' in 2011 that identified existing potholes and how responsive officials were in fixing them across Russia. My own data collection suggests that none of these independently-run platforms are used as widely as state-run platforms, but they nonetheless do exist.

<sup>4</sup>The local Moscow City Duma elections in 2020 were widely considered fraudulent, largely because of digitally cast votes. For many district seats, official results that declared victory for the Kremlin approved candidate were reported off of impossible figures, based upon online and in-person percentage vote cast and voting margins.

## An Approach of Everyday Resistance

In contrast, it may be that citizens who have oppositionary views or are less supportive of the incumbent regime are in fact prominent users of these institutions. Not only do e-government and citizen appeals present effective ways that a citizen may enact change, so long as the state is engaged in responsiveness, they also provide an arena to more openly express one's political voice. Where voting is often performative and acts of protest and contentious politics are highly risky, citizen contacting presents an alternative route through which expressions critical of regime practices can be made and one's political voice can be raised.

In the Chinese context, committed activists and protest leaders are known to actively make appeals to officials [185, 107]. These types of individuals utilize a variety of strategies to enact change. By appealing to the state, activists may work to enact piecemeal reforms or carefully contribute to long-term political reform objectives. Similar to the role of petitions as a viable form of opposition activity in rural China [134], citizen contacting may assist opposition figures in advancing larger political goals.

Additionally, there are some merits to working within the system in order to seek and procure changes. These institutions allow appeals to accumulate and for activists to demonstrate to the state a host of areas where reform might be needed. These channels also facilitate expressions of discontent in much less disruptive ways, which may force the hand of the state to listen to grievances and even respond to them. By calling out mismanagement in state service delivery, citizens and groups may be simultaneously advancing larger political reform agendas [186].

In Russia, opposition figures have also at times advocated for enacting change through institutionalized measures. Russia's leading political opposition figure Alexey Navalny has in the past publicly supported use of the Russian state's digital government systems. He encouraged his supporters to use the state's online deliberative platform, the Russian Public Initiative (ROI), calling it a 'good and right' practice that would provide opposition forces with a viable political voice in the face of the government and assist in holding the central state accountable in responding to them [133].<sup>5</sup> Journalists affiliated with independent media outlets have also admitted to utilizing citizen contacting channels. Ivan Golunov, the independent journalist turned opposition figurehead after he was falsely accused and arrested on drug charges by federal authorities, was using an online citizen contacting platform right before his arrest [120].

Platforms for citizen appeals may be viewed by some users as forums to pursue the advancement of political or social rights. At the local level in Russia, 'activist' type users engage with these platforms differently than do 'residents', who are mostly concerned with immediate public service delivery [95]. Unlike 'residents', this distinct group of 'activists'

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<sup>5</sup>Ironically, the Navalny-endorsed proposals that have been submit to the ROI and which have gained an adequate number of signatures to be considered for review by legislators, were systematically overlooked for policy consideration. Nonetheless, Navalny's opposition-proposed policies are on display on this platform for view by the public and by lawmakers

tends to appeal on city-wide issues and broader public or social rights based concerns. Even if ‘activists’ do not personally identify as such, this differentiation indicates that individuals do use citizen contacting channels in distinct ways. Contacting platforms may not be considered the most effective channels in order to advocate for social rights. In 2020, the Levada Center found that Russians rated the courts and law enforcement agencies as more effective in addressing rights based issues than public appeals [103]. However, citizen contacting is still a viable channel to bring awareness to the gaps in or lapses of social or political rights.

Ultimately, what citizen contacting offers an individual is a platform for political voice. Even for citizens who are not expressly political activists, filing an appeal with a state official is a way of voicing oneself politically. This institutional arrangement allots citizens a space to articulate themselves to the state, a practice which is limited within authoritarian contexts. Even today, the contours of citizen-state interactions within autocracies are often shaped by ideological, symbolic, and expressive reasons [99, 149]. Some individuals may therefore see citizen contacting as an opportunity to verbalize individualized political expression.

In this sense, citizen contacting in an authoritarian regime can be considered an act of resistance. Even if the substance of the appeal is not overtly political, the act itself invites the citizen to critique state governing practices and in that sense may feel subversive. This expression may in some cases result in a manifestation of ‘righteous resistance’ [135], or communicating a desire to improve the performance of, rather than undermine, the existing regime. In other cases, it may amount to an act of ‘everyday resistance’, whereby the individual subtly signals discontent with the incumbent regime [170]. Overt forms of public demonstration or mobilization in opposition to an authoritarian state can be exceedingly dangerous. So expressing resistance toward this type of regime often manifests itself in other ways. In fact, smaller and individualized acts of trouble-making can sometimes be equally, if not more powerful in signaling frustration or defiance with the incumbent state [39]. Appeals may for some citizens serve as a way to express criticism toward the state, and represent a modest, yet expedient opportunity to vocalize resistance, or at the very least to exercise genuine political voice against an autocratic state.

## A Resource-based Approach

Traditional models of political engagement identify socioeconomic status as a predictor of political participation [171]. In this approach, certain attributes associated with the middle class, such as education and income, predispose one to higher rates of political engagement. The middle class itself is associated with greater political activity than other social classes, primarily because this group has more to lose by remaining politically silent. The middle class most benefits from assurances from the state that their status will not be undermined by legal measures or political maneuvers, so they are more likely to advocate for institutional arrangements that ensure robust property and political rights.

In democratization theory, the middle class is often recognized as the crucial force behind democracy building and the mass movements that catalyze it [3, 18, 128]. The higher education levels that tend to correlate with middle class status are seen as facilitating keener



access to information and knowledge about political events and processes that help stimulate and perpetuate political engagement. Structuralist and modernization theories even prioritize education as a prerequisite for democratization, through its role in building up and consolidating democratic practice amongst the population [110].

For this reason, political participation from the middle class is often looked upon by autocrats with apprehension. In Russia's case, Putin usually refers to this group as the 'creative class': the educated, professional, urban, tech-savvy population that has grown in size since the 2000s. The Russian state has remained skeptical about this class, largely because of its outward participation in opposition politics. Russian citizens of professional status and greater educational attainment are more likely to participate in and contribute to state-led online e-petitions [41] and may be more involved in civic affairs [102]. However, they have also been found to be less trusting of Putin and less satisfied with state policies [173]. The majority of protests, especially the 2011-2 protests in direct defiance of Putin, tend to be dominated by members of this 'creative' middle class, those with higher levels of education and professional white collar jobs [155, 159, 156]. More recently, the educated middle class has also expressed a sizable amount of opposition toward Russia's invasion of Ukraine; many have vocalized themselves against the regime while many others have fled Russia as a result of it.

Despite its association with political activity, the middle class may actually be less of a threat to an authoritarian regime like Russia than classic theories of democratization suggest. Widespread political participation from the educated, middle class does not necessarily portend greater anti-regime sentiments or democratic leanings. In fact, the middle class in highly autocratic regimes has long been recognized as a group profoundly supportive of the regime and its policies [67]. Although politically active protesters in Russia are more likely to be of middle class status, these individuals are often not sympathetic to democracy and are not even necessarily inclined to engage in further political action [33]. A strong state-sector may actually reshape middle-class identity in authoritarian states, particularly within post-communist contexts, as this group's dependency upon the state sector may generate aversion to democratic practices and a stronger preference for stable authoritarian rule [158, 157]. For the Russian state, the middle class may therefore actually be an asset, upon which it can rely to support its initiatives and objectives, and otherwise stay out of politics. Even while the middle class may be prevalent in public-facing forms of political engagement, especially in political opposition in Russia, the role they play in prolonged or sustained forms of political activity is much more opaque.

In addition, it is not clear that a heavy emphasis upon education is a helpful predictor of political awareness or political involvement in an autocracy, especially with regards to citizen contacting. On the one hand, educated individuals across regime types are more likely to report misconduct and encourage better behavior from officials [19]. On the other hand, education may bring the innumerable flaws of the state system into sharper focus for an individual and disincline them from engaging altogether. In Zimbabwe, individuals of greater educational attainment deliberately disengage from many forms of political participation, including citizen contacting, as they perceive politics as a futile and corrupt enterprise [43].

In Russia, despite its population obtaining exceptionally high levels of education,<sup>6</sup> it far under-paces other countries of similar capacity in terms of its population's engagement in politics [79]. This widespread apathy toward politics has been exaggerated by the 'patriotic education' that has generally replaced forms of democratic citizenship education within Russia in the last two decades [144].

Education and middle class status may help explain some political participation trends in Russia, but this model does not account for the full picture. In addition to the inconclusive relationship between education and civic participation in Russia, other studies have even found that poorer individuals, those not of middle class status, are in many instances more civically engaged than wealthier classes, a trend that upends the socioeconomic model of political participation [101]. Perhaps a better model in which to assess a citizen's desire to become politically active and contact an official in an autocracy is to consider more closely the available resources at an individual's disposal.

The resource model of political participation suggests that neither interest in politics nor socioeconomic status are enough to explain robust participation levels amongst individuals. Rather, this approach views political participation as a function of time, money, and individual civic skills [21]. Although developed and based in a democratic context, the resource model emphasizes individual assets rather than class-based attributes as precursors to political involvement. The idea that particular resources may work to limit or expand one's potential for and ability to engage in political activity is applicable beyond the democratic context.

Given the constraints of authoritarian politics, whereby the regime retains a high degree of control over decision making, time and money are not necessarily equivalent to an individual's participation potential. What appear to be more important resources in an autocratic environment are skill sets that allow one to navigate political structures and a wide array of political connections and personal networks.

Within authoritarian regimes, individual-level civic skill sets are often honed for the benefit the state. In both Russia and China, engagement and interaction with the state is often framed as a citizen's 'duty' [138]. In Russia, 'civic duty' is a powerful motivator for several forms of political participation, especially voting [149]. In practice, however, developing an authoritarian-specific civic skill set is also often commensurate with dexterity in navigating, or circumnavigating, this same political landscape. Political arrangements in Russia are notoriously complicated and contradictory. Those with the ability or experience in maneuvering themselves within or amidst the circuitous state apparatus in a shrewd and 'wily' fashion [200], are also often the ones with the greatest political wherewithal. In this regard, they may be the citizens who are most likely to engage and make direct contact with the state.

Gaining 'political literacy' in an authoritarian regime entails the ability to successfully navigate state infrastructures and systems. In an environment where political activity is

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<sup>6</sup>As of 2019, 63% of the country's adult population had completed tertiary education, far outpacing the OECD's average of 44% [137].

being increasingly channeled online, political literacy necessitates ease and savvy with new technologies. It also requires greater digital legibility, in order to correctly disentangle and identify state propaganda, narratives, and agendas. The skill can also be developed through greater exposure to alternative influences. Civic engagement in Russia has been correlated with the ability to speak another language, experience abroad, and awareness and access to non-state sources of news and information [102]. These means and capabilities contribute to 'political literacy' by providing an individual with wider perspective when strategizing on how to most effectively approach the state, and thus may be key resources in predicting that type of engagement.

An individual's connections may also serve as an equally important political resource within an autocracy. Especially where institutional transparency is lacking, political connections and personal networks prove valuable resources. In China, these connections are primary motivators for citizen-initiated contacting. One's level of political connections, even more than one's personal network, helps reduce existing informational constraints and allows individuals to better facilitate contact with officials [201]. Having close contacts in the government is a strong predictor of engaging in citizen-initiated contacting in China [185]. In Russia, the elaborate 'sistema' of personal networks and connections to power means that all outcomes are a product of political resources and ties to the center [98]. The elite Russian political apparatus itself is governed by a series of networks [179], implying that connections are not just convenient, but also an effective mechanism through which initiatives might be achieved. Thus, for citizens seeking an audience with an official, the role of political networks is not just facilitating, but also incentivizing this type of political participation cannot be underestimated.

Socioeconomic status, while it may be a contributing factor, does not fully account for individual-level political engagement and citizen-initiated contacting in Russia. Instead, a Resource-based Approach that emphasizes the possession of authoritarian-specific civic skills, political literacy, and political connections as pivotal resources that motivate civic engagement may be a better model. Under this approach, citizens who are more connected to the state and who wield a more developed ability to politically maneuver themselves within the state are more likely to initiate contact with officials. These resources transcend middle or creative class status, and for individuals who possess them, they may serve as compelling motivators to try and seek responsiveness from the government. For individuals contacting the state under a Resource-based Approach, the system of citizen contacting is a venue or strategy through which individuals can navigate the state and deftly access political advantages from it.

## A Needs-based Approach

Finally, citizen contacting may be less a function of certain personal assets or capabilities, and more a manifestation of addressing one's immediate needs. A Needs-based Approach to citizen contacting suggests that citizens will reach out to officials only when they have specific needs to be met, especially in the realm of constituency service and delivery. Under

a Needs-based Approach, it may also be true that those with fewer resources are actually more willing to make contact, as these individuals have limited alternative options when seeking to resolve their concern.

In a needs-awareness model, greater than resources, which may still play a role in determining contact, are levels of perceived needs and self-efficacy [85]. Hirlinger (1992) differentiates between ‘generalized’ and ‘individualized’ needs that are expressed when contacting a representative, conceptualizations that are rooted in a democratic context. The unique citizen-state relationship that predominates in authoritarian society means that the difference between individualized and generalized contacting may not be as pronounced. Nonetheless, in a Needs-based Approach a citizen will make contact when some concern or need arises and the individual feels enough self-assurance that raising their voice to an official will be able to resolve that issue.

Self-efficacy is a critical component of a Needs-based Approach, as it measures an individual’s perception of self-competence. This construct defines the belief in one’s individual agency and ability to influence political outcomes [30]. As far as we can tell, self-efficacy is also a universal construct [169]. As a concept, which can be applied to any form of political action or engagement, we would expect individual assessments of self-efficacy to be lower in authoritarian contexts, because of the intentionally centralized decision making infrastructure that leaves individual citizens feeling that they can exert minimal influence. Nonetheless, opportunities like citizen contacting and other forms of citizen-state interactions that arise in an electoral authoritarian context like Russia implies that levels of self-efficacy may vary across society. The act of making an appeal, especially for instances of constituency service that insist a response or resolution, may reflect one’s level of self-efficacy.

For citizens in autocratic states who have a pressing need, institutions that bring one into contact with government officials may represent for them a reasonable method in which to resolve the issue. It is unclear whether citizens use these channels as a first response to a problem or a last resort effort. However, in the Russian case, contacting an official is actually a generally preferred method of political participation [84, 113]. Citizens may engage in the practice precisely because it is seen as a more efficacious route than other forms of political activity [113]. Otherwise, some Russian citizens, especially those of lesser means, may make an appeal precisely because other options are not available to them [101]. Yet, for many citizens living under non-democratic conditions, citizen contacting may present the most practical method with which to resolve an issue and so they will do so when pressing concerns arise.

Although a Needs-based Approach is heavily rooted in constituency service, addressing service delivery issues may still yield significant political consequences. In the United States, constituency service, namely road quality, is so important that often voters will condition their support for candidates based upon performance outcomes, making service delivery a deciding factor in electoral victory margins [24]. Similar mechanisms have been traced in Russia, where the volume of citizen contacting, also regarding road quality and potholes, corresponds to higher support for incumbent candidates in local elections [71]. In practice, municipal administrators are often ascribed jurisdiction over constituency service issues in-

stead of Russian federal authorities [141]. This arrangement reveals the importance, and even political sensitivity, that these types of issues may present, given that federal authorities are often reluctant to take full responsibility for constituency service delivery.

Constituency service is taken very seriously in contexts outside of democracies, where much of the research has been done on the subject. As a practice, constituency service demands span class divisions [93] and regime context [46]. For authoritarian regimes, a positive track record in the realm of service delivery and social welfare may suppress greater demands for political reforms [118]. As a result, autocratic states are often more responsive toward these types of requests and concerns. For those who have pressing constituency service requests, they may thus anticipate attention and responsiveness from the government. Under a Needs-based Approach, we might expect individuals to view citizen contacting as a viable venue through which to receive service delivery and welfare assistance, exhibit a more robust sense of their ability to use that system to achieve a response, and therefore be more likely to engage in citizen contacting.

## 2.4 Participation and Political Attitudes

Political participation, as a series of behaviors, is strongly connected to political attitudes. Theoretically, preexisting and formulated political attitudes may be the catalysts which induce specific behaviors [4]. In practice, individuals predisposed to civic-minded or ‘democratic’ attitudes may in fact be more likely to participate in political-cultural affairs, especially those that bring about democracy [191, 5]. In fact, the logic that individual-level characteristics incentivize political behavior is a critical aspect of understanding political participation.

Political engagement may also subsequently produce, shift, or reinforce certain political attitudes within individuals. Actually participating in political activities - voting, campaign efforts, community consultations, and citizen contacting - may produce individual-level side effects that are crucial in constructing subsequent political attitudes, views, and preferences. In the democratic context, political engagement precedes feelings of political empowerment within an individual [40]. Several forms of political participation also produce a stronger sense of self-efficacy within individuals, which may galvanize further political action [58, 64]. Overall, engagement may generate stronger support within an individual for the incumbent democratic regime and induce even more favorable views toward the democratic system [139, 14, 58].

Political actions that grant citizens the opportunity to exert their voice and become stakeholders in political outcomes may have an especially close relationship to the formulation of political attitudes. Involvement in deliberative activities often prompts citizens to update prior beliefs and alter opinions on certain issue areas [13, 53, 31]. Exposure to practices of direct democracy may generate within an individual the desire to become a more active participant in the democratic process and more greatly value democratic tenets [20]. Therefore, actively engaging in politics serves as one of the primary ways a citizen is

socialized into democratic culture. The behavior, in this sense, produces significant shifts in political attitudes that cyclically benefit the democratic system and generate further and more widespread support and enthusiasm for democracy.

The role of direct citizen-state interactions is at the forefront of this behavioral-attitudinal nexus. Interaction and dialogue with the state, even more so than economic issues, may engender and condition electoral support for candidates [150]. Direct contact between citizens and representatives from political parties may mobilize individuals to engage in other forms of political activity [197]. In Argentina, contacting the state about constituency service issues has instilled an ‘enfranchising effect’ within individuals that motivates them to become more involved in other arenas of political life and demand more attention from their government [182]. Direct interactions between citizens and the state, especially via digitized government platforms, are also critical in shaping positive citizen perspectives on government legitimacy, efficiency, and quality [196]. Critically, contacting representatives in government may produce particularly important attitudinal and behavioral shifts, which can lead to important political outcomes.

The reality is that the relationship between behavior and attitudes is reciprocal and circular. Particular attitudes predispose one to participation, but participation will subsequently influence one’s political attitudes [57, 146, 66]. In this way, citizens predisposed to particularly civic-minded attitudes may be more inclined to make contact with representatives, which will subsequently heighten their desire to continue being politically involved. In a democracy, this cycle produces greater support for democratic practices and overall enhances and promotes the democratic process.

How this relationship plays out in a non-democratic context is less understood. There is growing evidence that political behaviors, especially those that are inclusive of citizens in the political decision making process or bring a citizen in direct contact with officials, do shape political attitudes within autocracies. Eliciting citizen input on policy making within China, even in small doses, appears to shift one’s opinions on particular policy issues [59]. Chinese citizens exposed to the CCP’s online participation portals that connect citizens to officials express higher satisfaction with the overall regime [183].<sup>7</sup> In Russia, citizen contacting has critically been shown to service support for the majoritarian political party [71]. Citizens who utilize or are even exposed to the existence of the Direct Line to contact Putin are also more likely to exhibit support for the president [35]. Political engagement, especially citizen contacting in an authoritarian regime has the potential to imprint particular attitudes upon citizens who engage with them.

Nonetheless, it is unclear whether the interaction between political attitudes and behaviors in an autocracy may ultimately produce support for democracy over time, as witnessed in democratic contexts. As citizen contacting institutions were being established across authoritarian regimes, He and Warren (2011) suggested that the presence of these particular ‘democratic like’ platforms could usher in democratic attitudes and a push for further democratization from below [82]. Thus far, this type of outcome has not been realized and,

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<sup>7</sup>These effects are heterogeneous and more significant with less educated, politically excluded citizens.

in fact, these systems conversely appear to benefit and contribute to stabilizing incumbent authoritarian regimes, rather than undermine them.

Given the strong association that exists between democratic political behavior and democratic political attitudes within democracies, it is theoretically surprising that citizen contacting has not generated more democratic sympathies amongst individuals, especially those who have engaged in this practice, within authoritarian regimes. Support for democracy within autocratic states may often take forms easily overlooked by traditional assessments of politics [99], and particularly within a fluctuating political landscape like Russia it may be exceedingly difficult to pin down or predict attitudes about democracy [47]. Nonetheless, there is indication that widespread desire for democratic reforms is waning amongst Russian citizens [26]. Despite the fact that citizen contacting as a democratic practice can reinforce democratic attitudes in many political settings, this process does not appear to be at work outside of a democratic context.

Although it is beyond the scope of this research to fully grapple with this subject, the fundamental question of why citizen contacting within autocracies is so resilient against democratizing pressures is an outstanding one. There are a myriad of reasons for why this weak relationship may exist: other institutional factors or constraints within the autocratic system may interfere with this relationship. Regardless, it is still not fully understood how political engagement in an autocracy may interact with political attitude development, or, if it does not, why such non-effect would be the case. It is extremely difficult to measure whether engaging in democratic-like behavior, such as citizen contacting, has any individual-level attitudinal effect, what that impact might be, and how strong its effect. Conducting this type of research in an authoritarian regime is even more challenging. Nonetheless, understanding and identifying this relationship and the mechanisms underpinning it are critical in assessing the impact that citizen contacting as an institution may have upon long-term political outcomes in authoritarian contexts like Russia.

## 2.5 Russia's Approach to Citizen Contacting

The modern Russian state has been particularly emphatic about establishing platforms for citizen-initiated contacting and has underscored the institutional nature of these citizen-state interactions. Russia's system of citizen contacting is rather regularized, and these interactions are increasingly mediated by formal institutional channels. This trend is particularly notable amid Russia's notoriously informal political climate of clan networks [179]. Adopting a broad range of formal institutions is however consistent with the hyper-presidential structures that characterize the Putinist political system and the symbolic state building objectives of the Putin government, which has relied heavily upon formal institutions as central arbiters for the state in garnering political legitimacy [195].

The term used to express the act of contacting the state in Russia is 'citizen appeals' (*obrashhenie grazhdan*), often just referred to as 'appeals' (*obrashhenie*). In the Russian legal system a citizen appeal is defined as "a proposal, application, or complaint sent to a

state body, a local government body, or an official in writing, by an electronic document, or through an oral appeal” [136, Article 4]. The practice of applying personal or collective appeals to state bodies and local governments is enshrined as a legal right for all Russian citizens by Article 33 of Russia’s 1993 Constitution and Article 2 of Federal Law No. 59-FZ “On the Procedure for Considering Appeals from Citizens of the Russian Federation” [42, 136]. By law, if a citizen does make an appeal, the receiving government body must review it within 30 calendar days, or request revisions within 7 days.

Additionally, if the individual submitting the appeal is not satisfied with the response from the state, they can also contest that response through administrative or judicial means. The Russian government has heavily underscored that in these cases, judicial decisions regarding citizen appeals are carried out independently of executive or legislative powers [160]. For its part, Rozkomnadzor, the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media that overlooks communication technologies and is the state’s primary enforcer of censorship laws, also assures that the personal information collected from citizens who submit electronic appeals will be safely stored and processed [54]. The details of how state officials collect and catalog these appeals are not disclosed, but at least on paper the logistics of citizen appeals work in favor of the citizen.

Receiving governing bodies of citizen appeals are mandated to publish reports on these activities. The timing, quality, and thoroughness of each report varies by jurisdiction,<sup>8</sup> but most of them do regularly issue consistent data. These reports serve as veneers of political transparency and rarely cast the government in a negative light. They are also not a completely representative accounts of citizen contacting in Russia, since several governing entities have irregular reporting practices, some of the data is missing or incomplete, and the data is self-reported and raw data has not yet been published.

Nonetheless, as a series, these reports do provide some interesting trends on the practice of citizen contacting, especially from the citizen’s perspective. Regional and city governing apparatuses as well as individual Federal Ministries often publish figures on how many appeals were received, the types of appeals that were received (electronic versus non-electronic methods), the issue area of each appeal, and whether these appeals were resolved. Details on a select group of these reports will be provided in later sections.

Alongside Russia’s legal framework for citizen appeals is a parallel large-scale campaign for integrating information technologies into the Russian government. Legally, a series of laws, decrees, and orders shape electronic government systems and provisions in Russia [73]. These legal frameworks have also been buttressed by several national programs and strategic planning documents that promote digital development across government sectors. Russia originally launched a federal program, ‘Electronic Russia 2002-2010’, that laid the groundwork for building the infrastructure and legal environment needed to cultivate spaces for e-government platforms [198]. By 2003, all federal agencies were required to provide online

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<sup>8</sup>For instance, the city of Moscow’s local government publishes monthly reports, the city of St. Petersburg publishes quarterly statistics on citizen appeals, and the government of Novosibirsk hosts an interactive map that demonstrates where appeals have been addressed and completed.



information about their mission statements and activities. When the federal ‘Information Society Development Strategy (2011-2020)’ was launched, ICT integration began to move directly into the highest rungs of presidential administrative offices, even spawning the creation of a position for Minister of Open Government from 2012-2018.

Russia’s approach toward e-government has primarily been implemented from the top-down, but remains relatively flexible and focused on domestic users. Although Putin is rather tepid toward utilizing digital technologies and tools himself, he has been abundantly proactive in seeking to integrate them into Russia’s governance practices and is consistently adapting the Russian government’s strategy regarding online policies [164]. Substantial resources and state funds have been and are being put toward e-government in Russia. Based on the United Nation’s e-government development index, Russia has experienced an upward trajectory of digital development since 2008; even though it lags behind global leaders on this index ranking 36th in 2021, its digital integration is comparable with states like Italy and Portugal [2].

Russia’s government has adopted a ‘lead ministry’ approach in the implementation of e-government. Unlike other states, e-government initiatives in Russia are uniquely co-led by both the Ministry of Economic Development and Ministry of Digital Development Communications and Mass Media [80]. Evaluating the results of Russia’s digitization drive demonstrates that the state has made significant progress, but that several structural and political constraints inhibit e-government systems from reaching their full administrative or governance potential [143]. Russia’s ad hoc system often creates institutional crossover and redundancy and digital platforms’ ability to enhance governance and administrative efficiency remains sub-optimal.

Regardless, comparatively speaking, Russia is a pioneer and leader of online adoption strategies in the post-Soviet space [89]. A large contributing factor to its relatively successful digitized government is that these systems do not merely serve as a front for international audiences, as seen in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, instead Russia’s adoption of e-government is genuinely targeted at citizen users [114]. The digital drive in Russia is, at its core, a citizen-centric initiative.

The Russian government actively presents digital methods of governance as a staple of everyday politics, integrating electronic practices throughout political arenas. The state is often quick to monopolize on these advancements, in order to boost its reputation and legitimacy. Online platforms are credited with elevating the quality of Russia’s public service delivery, ambiguously ranked at above 92% by the Ministry of Internal Affairs [86].<sup>9</sup> But its e-government infrastructure is nonetheless robust and includes several functioning online forums, including the Russian Public Initiative, Centralized Management Centers, online voting systems, and online citizens appeals.

All of these e-government developments and digital implementations in Russia are led by state-driven, top-down processes, often by direct mandate from the president himself [77].

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<sup>9</sup>HSE’s indicators suggest an approval rating of public service delivery at about 72% in 2020, which has gone up from 57.5% since 2014 [2].

State initiatives that have a strong online presence are often parts of a political strategy to undermine opposition forces, which have been early adopters of online forums to coordinate political activities [181]. Simultaneously, these digital platforms function to bolster the government's claims toward transparency, legitimacy, and responsiveness.

Ultimately, the landscape of citizen contacting in Russia is dominated by online citizen appeals. The joint federal campaigns toward e-government adoption and more channels of communication between citizens and officials means that the world of citizen contacting in modern Russia is increasingly streamlined via digital means. Subsequently, digitization has fundamentally changed society and the nature of the Russia's citizen-state relationship [142]. Citizens are still able to phone in, write in, or be received by a government body in person, but increasingly the primary stream of appeals is received through online formats.

Citizen contacting increasingly occurs through digitized platforms, whether directly through the a state or regional body or through the 'civic apps' designed to connect citizens to governing bodies via smartphones. Civic applications in Russia have allotted a degree of power back to citizens, by helping to overcome many of dysfunctional communication flows that have historically existed between individuals and state officials [51, 50]. However, online platforms, even if they do serve to empower average citizens, are still best suited to resolving issues that have a clear underlying legal basis. Whether and how effectively they may be applicable in initiating larger systemic political reforms is still under-explored.

For all of Russia's highly centralized governance practices, the Russian system of citizen contacting is comparatively decentralized, with individual officials, ministries, and governing bodies each supporting their own version of digitized government services. The distinct e-government and contacting channels that exist at federal, regional, and local levels, are a hallmark characteristic of the Russian contacting system [17]. Regional variations exist in terms of the institutional design [41], availability of information, level of transparency, and in how much input citizens can contribute to the policy making process [44]. Such an assorted institutional landscape can make it tricky to trace the detailed use and function of each system.

The decentralization of structures that support citizen appeals may change with the Regional Management Centers that were established across the country over the course of 2018-2020. These centers were created on mandate from President Putin across Russia's 85 federal subjects. They are being implemented in conjunction with the Ministry of Digital Development, Telecommunications and Mass Media, but will be directly subordinate to the Presidential Office. The Centers are intended to serve as coordinating and centralizing hubs for managing citizen-state interactions and their main goal is to serve as focal points for collecting and managing complaints and appeals from Russia's population [178]. The extent to which these centers are well-functioning or effective is not yet clear. Currently, rather than being hosted on an official government or e-government website, they primarily exist online on social media. These Regional Centers are extremely well-funded, but they do circumvent regional governing structures, so there has been friction between governors and these federal institutions [1]. There is no indication of how many people have used the services of these new Centers, as no data or reports have yet been published, and it is not clear whether

individuals recognize them as distinct institutions from other regional or federal governing appeal structures.

Contacting channels and e-government platforms remain irregular and asymmetrical across the country, across levels of government, and across Russia's 85 federal units.<sup>10</sup> In practice, a Russian citizen has many options when making an appeal, as a wide variety of arrangements exist where these interactions may take place. Depending upon the concern, a citizen may target an appeal toward a mayor, governor, particular official, or to the president himself; contact the federal government administration, an individual federal ministry, a regional or local government, or a regional or local ministry; and can decide to vocalize that appeal verbally, in writing, or online through a varied set of service applications and digital platforms.

Perhaps as a result of both this extensive network of platforms and the state's emphasis upon them, citizen appeal forums remain popular. According to the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media, Russian citizens send about 10 million appeals on various issues to 250 thousand authorities at all levels of government on a yearly basis; about 65% of these appeals are made electronically [12]. Russian citizens have long preferred contacting an official directly over other forms of political communication [113, 84] and consider addressing appeals to authorities as a generally effective method to achieve a solution to their concerns [106]. Citizen contacting is a relatively low-cost, low-risk, available strategy for a citizen to communicate with the state, thanks in large part to its online accessibility.

Additionally, citizen contacting in Russia has links to practices that emerged in Imperial Russia and during the Soviet Union, suggesting that these institutions, like many aspects of Russia's governing system, are rooted in historic legacies. Although a communist authoritarian past has not been identified as a significant factor in explaining political participation outcomes in post-Communist Europe [147], the history and background of the USSR and the tsarist era does play a significant role in understanding the practice of citizen contacting in Russia today.

## A 'Culture of Complaint'

Citizen-initiated contacting is not new in Russia, but is a form of political expression with a long-standing history. Many scholars point out that similar systems existed during the Soviet times, but the practice is actually much older than that and citizen contacting ought to be thought of in continuity across Russia's regimes [131]. This long-standing and Russo-specific political practice has evolved into a "culture of complaint", whereby the act of approaching the authorities is simultaneously a tool of political expression and an instrument to help resolve social issues [131]. Russia's culture of complaint is a product of the highly centralized and authoritarian regimes that have prevailed under the tsarist and Soviet systems.

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<sup>10</sup>The number of federal units - which include republics, territories, regions, and districts - has fluctuated over the years, as units collapse into one another and as Russia annexes new territory. As of this writing there are 85 federal units.

Individuals living within these polities had very little political power or avenues for political expression, and so complaints became a viable alternative form of political voice and communication between individuals and the leviathan state apparatus.

The practice first emerged under the imperial regime, where petitioning the tsar became a codified interaction between sovereign and subject. The earliest proto-petition from a Russian individual to the central regime dates back to the 13th century and the practice predominated throughout the imperial era. During the tsarist regime, the action of approaching the monarch was largely a form of supplication and a way for an individual to present possible solutions to particular issues or concerns. It allowed citizens to voice themselves and seek approval or resources from the state in order to pursue feasible solutions. These interactions helped reshape the citizen-state relationship in the Russian Empire. In fact, it was through iterated petitions and complaints that the peasant class was elevated from being legally referred to as ‘slaves’ to the status of ‘subjects’ in the 18th century [131]. This political activity is a long-standing and central feature of the imperial Russian legal system and political culture that largely laid the groundwork for both Soviet and contemporary Russian forms of appeals and each regime’s approach toward them.

During the Soviet era, citizen contacting took on a broader role. In its early years, the Soviet state encouraged citizen contacting as a way to facilitate information flows from citizens about daily challenges under the new regime, complaints or concerns about newly appointed authorities, and, critically, for making denunciations [61, 60]. Especially during the Great Terror, denunciations from average citizens were a fundamental source of fuel for the notorious political purges of that era. Contacting authorities to make denunciations became a widespread practice that was encouraged by the Stalinist leadership, both as a means to manipulate social dynamics and in order to monitor public opinion and activity [62].

By the later Soviet era, citizen-initiated contacting had become one of the more popular forms of conventional participation amongst Soviet citizens, who often used it to obtain benefits from rather than express discontent with the regime [11]. The practice had evolved into a robust and rather widespread form of political participation by the time of the Soviet Union’s dissolution, challenging many of the stereotypical beliefs about the soviet citizenry at the time [11]. Citizen contacting had also evolved into a method for citizens to manipulate the state in the late Soviet period, as it allowed them the ability to assert political voice within the highly rigid political parameters of the Soviet regime.

Citizen contacting also began to take on the contours of institutionalized justice seeking in the late Soviet era and in the immediate aftermath of its fall. Citizens could utilize this forum to call out institutionalized misconduct and call for greater attention to rectifying malpractices in line with legal domains. In the the post-Soviet era, contacting became synonymous with rights-seeking. Reformers in 1990s Russia were more likely to be politically active as a way to defend human rights and enforce legal protections, than actually vying for widespread political reform or structural change [112]. The legacy of citizen contacting and the culture of complaint that emerged in Russia thus played significantly in the way that the practice was then harnessed by the Putin administration.

## Citizen Contacting under Putin

After the fall of the USSR, citizen contacting did not seem to have served as primary a political function as it had previously. It was not until Putin's rise to power that citizen contacting resumed a more central political role in Russian society. The practice remained fairly ad hoc until Putin's first successful election as president in 2000.

In 2001, Putin launched the first episode of the Direct Line, his annual televised call-in show that displays instances of direct responsiveness by President Putin. The show, which is broadcast on state media each year,<sup>11</sup> features Putin directly receiving and responding to citizen appeals from across the country. The Direct Line has become a showcase of Russian state responsiveness and its ubiquitous presence has encouraged all citizens to take up the practice of citizen contacting more formally.

Episodes of the Direct Line have resulted in Putin's visit to various towns where appeals were made, in order to respond to citizen concerns, set local politics straight, or deliver communities from economic hardship. Of course, one of the integral aspects of the Direct Line is its theatrics and the fact that these appeals are pre-screened and hand-picked before being broadcast. Nonetheless, it had sent imposing signals to Russian society that the state intends to cultivate a strong practice of citizen contacting. There are many indications that the show is no longer met with such enthusiasm as it once enjoyed, especially amongst younger participants who have been particularly vocal against the performative nature of this yearly ritual [200]. Regardless, the Direct Line is an intrinsic part of Putin's personalist leadership style and hallmark of his political persona as president, evidenced by the fact that he still held the Direct Line while serving as Prime Minister from 2008-2012.

The Direct Line, a critical form of citizen contacting in modern Russia, is not a durable system. Viewer numbers have been declining [122] and citizens are experiencing 'fatigue' with the format, questioning its actual function with little desire to get involved with the call-in show themselves [72]. From the state's point of view, the Direct Line may be a key module for reinforcing Putin's political legitimacy, positive image, and reputation as a problem solver and sovereign ruler within Russia. However, from a governance standpoint it is not a sustainable way of monitoring or gathering information from the population. As a system, the Direct Line presents the president himself as directly responsible for action, which means he can claim all the reputation-boosting side-effects from successfully resolved issues, but must also assume the liabilities of blame that come with botched responses. This channel poses potential risks for presidential rule.

The Russian state under Putin therefore simultaneously began emphasizing citizen-initiated contacting outside of the presidential office, across federal, regional, and municipal levels. The administration's emphasis upon citizen-initiated contacting can actually be traced to Putin's second tenure in office, starting in 2012. During the Medvedev Presidency from 2008-2012, when Putin was Prime Minister, Putin was in many ways still considered de facto ruler of the country. But as prime minister, constraints were placed upon his political

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<sup>11</sup>2022 was the first year since 2001 that the Direct Line did not take place, another casualty of Russia's invasion into Ukraine.

power. Even though he retained a great deal of influence, Putin did find himself politically disadvantaged, particularly in maintaining his image and reputation amongst domestic audiences.

Artunyan (2014) chronicles how Putin began to more heavily affiliate himself with the United Russia party during this time, serving as party leader from 2008-2012, and how he began to host citizen appeals campaigns directly through the party system [7]. Although never a United Russia party member himself,<sup>12</sup> Putin encouraged appeals and claims to be directed through the party apparatus during this time. The ‘All Russia Popular Front’, a conservative coalition established by and loyal to then Prime Minister Putin through the United Russia party apparatus in 2011, also at this time became involved in responding to appeals on public service projects. Therefore, in becoming leader of the United Russia party, Putin was simultaneously able to exert surrogate power over domestic affairs while Prime Minister and, in resolving citizen appeals, take additional credit for positive political outcomes.

When he returned to the presidency in 2012, Putin was well-situated to continue this push for citizen appeals on a grander scale. It was an objective that resonated well with the legitimacy building element of his presidency, especially as he sought to regain authority from the thousands who had protested against him in 2011-2. Positioning himself as a president that wanted to listen to feedback from citizens and was supportive of democratic-like institutions detracted from the opposition’s image of him as a power-hungry politician who punished opponents. With the help of the media outlets that Putin continued to slowly amass under the Kremlin’s tutelage, the government was able to shape an image of itself as a responsive and attentive state, one working on behalf of its people.

Additionally, for Putin specifically, appeals and citizen contacting presented an important and cohesive platform from which he could gather critical information from the population regarding issues that might evolve into more widespread social movements. The shadow of the protests of 2011-13 loomed large in the Kremlin’s policy making during this time. Starting in 2012, lawmakers imposed significant limitations upon civil society and restrictions over the spaces in which civil society activities could be manifested.<sup>13</sup> Instead, citizens were channeled toward robust forums of citizen contacting, which two-fold served to detract from mobilizations and as a tool to gather data on and preemptively respond to indications of a public resurgence of discontent with the government, specifically toward the president.

Furthermore, citizen contacting became an important way for the Kremlin under Putin to manage the panorama of its domestic politics. Citizen appeal platforms became an impor-

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<sup>12</sup>Putin, while a Communist Party member during the USSR, has famously never been a member of a political party in the Russian Federation. Although not a member, he largely presides over the pro-Kremlin United Russia Party. Doing so serves as a method for him to maintain a privileged position as a towering politician synonymous with Russia, standing above the fray of domestic politics.

<sup>13</sup>Partially as a result of these restrictions, a new phenomenon of virtual civil society has begun to blossom in Russia. Virtual civil society is not necessarily less potent than conventional civil society, but its presence online may contribute to fragmentation within the opposition and a stymieing of further political mobilization [15].

tant tool for monitoring sub-national officials to ensure their loyalty to Putin and the central government. Consequently, creating channels of appeals to sub-national political bodies also offloaded some of the responsibility of government services to these lesser political organs, shielding the Kremlin from total blame on constituency service and local political or administrative issues. For the state, citizen contacting institutions also became a safer method for including citizens into the fold of politics. The nature of these interactions occurring through formalized institutions ensures that individuals remain committed to the political system, hopefully reducing their likelihood of considering other forms of contentious, potentially destabilizing politics.

Therefore, under Putin's government, the role of citizen contacting has taken on a central political function. During this time, especially during the 2010s, the state increasingly prioritized and expanded channels for appeals, especially online appeals, and the functioning e-government platforms that underpin them. In 2010, the Unified System of Interdepartmental Electronic Interaction, the federal state's unilateral information and software system, was launched. This was followed in 2013 by the National Platform for Distributed Data Processing, which streamlines cloud computations for federal IT programs. These programs linked IT systems to federal and municipal government services, essentially enabling the Russian state's capacity for e-government. By 2010, early versions of Gosuslugie, the federal government services and e-government system, were launched, providing citizens with a wide variety of state services, documents, and information. In 2020, Gosuslugie's services were expanded to include the capacity to accept citizen appeals directly through the platform [127]. In 2010, Moscow launched its first e-government website, which has gone on to be the primary source for municipal service provision and citizen-initiated contacting throughout the city.

Trends toward digital expansion in the realm of government and citizen-state interactions continue to prevail in Russia. In 2020, President Putin signed a decree that featured digital transformation as one of the country's main national development goals [162]. This priority objective was reinforced through an order from Prime Minister Mishutin the following year in 2021 to expand digital forms of public administration across Russia by the year 2030 [161]. Digital development may face certain limitations within Russia's authoritarian regime, but the state's continued emphasis upon it indicates that we should be examining these systems more carefully and closely in the coming years.

### **The Russian Federal Government**

One of the primary avenues for citizen contacting in Russia is through the Russian Government itself. The Russian Government as an executive body functions as the administrative apparatus of Russia. It comprises all Federal Ministries and is distinct from the Presidential Office. Its prime public administration capacity makes it a major target for many citizen appeals in Russia and is therefore a good barometer of the general approaches and trends that citizens exhibit across the country when engaging in citizen contacting.

The Russian Government has been publishing monthly data on citizen appeals since December 2012. These reports are available on the Russian Government website, under the tab ‘Overview of Appeals’.<sup>14</sup> The data published in these reviews is gathered from submissions of online and in-person appeals. The Russian Government website offers information about where and when a citizen might go to address an appeal to an official of the Government of Russia in person, under the tab ‘Personal Reception’.<sup>15</sup> The government also collects electronic appeals under the ‘Appeals’ tab, providing an online form directly on its website.<sup>16</sup> The form collects basic personal data, contact information, citizenship status, profession, regional location of the appeal, and the topic of the appeal in question [see Figure 2.1]. It also provides a text field to write out an appeal of up to 2,000 characters in length and an option to attach an image or file with the form before selecting the ‘send’ button to submit directly to the government.

Figure 2.1: The Russian Government’s Online Appeal Form

The screenshot shows the 'Отправить обращение' (Send appeal) form on the Russian Government website. At the top, there are navigation tabs: 'Обращения', 'Личный приём', 'Губернаторская приёмная', 'Обязательные обращения', 'Кварталы приёмки', and 'Сведения'. Below the tabs, the title 'Отправить обращение' is displayed, followed by a note: 'Поля, отмеченные \* обязательны для заполнения.' (Fields marked with \* are mandatory for completion). A small disclaimer follows: 'Информация и персональные данные авторов обращений, направленных в электронном виде, хранятся и обрабатываются с соблюдением требований российского законодательства о персональных данных.' (Information and personal data of authors of appeals submitted in electronic form are stored and processed in compliance with the requirements of Russian legislation on personal data). The form itself contains several input fields: a checkbox for 'Обязательно' (Mandatory), a 'Имя' (Name) field, a 'Имя отчество' (Name and patronymic) field, a 'Фамилия' (Surname) field, a 'Имя' (Name) field, an 'Отчество' (Patronymic) field, a 'Пол' (Gender) dropdown menu, a 'Удостоверение' (ID) dropdown menu, a 'Специальность' (Profession) dropdown menu, a 'Место работы (участка)' (Place of work (plot)) dropdown menu, a 'Тип обращения' (Type of appeal) dropdown menu, a 'Район' (District) dropdown menu, and a 'Полтавский' (Poltava) dropdown menu. Below these fields is a large text area for 'Текст сообщения\*' (Message text\*). A note indicates a 2000-character limit: 'До 2000 символов'. At the bottom left, there is a 'Прислать файл' (Attach file) button and a 'Файл не выбран' (File not selected) label. At the bottom right, there is an 'Отправить обращение' (Send appeal) button.

The data provided in each published report includes a 1-2 page cover letter outlining a few key facts from the report and a brief overview of its contents. This overview typically

<sup>14</sup>The full set of reports can be accessed at: <http://services.government.ru/overviews/>.

<sup>15</sup>The web page lists a single Moscow address for in-person appeals, information which can be accessed at: <http://services.government.ru/reception/>.

<sup>16</sup>This form can be accessed at: <http://services.government.ru/letters/>.



includes the geographic concentrations and amount of appeals made that month. The cover letter also provides figures on the number of responses given by the federal government to citizen appeals that month, how many were successfully resolved, rejected, or transferred to a regional or municipal body for review.

Every monthly report is also accompanied by three attached PDF documents. Each PDF file is a separate table of data displaying 1) how many appeals were made in each federal unit and district that month, 2) to which department or ministry those appeals were addressed, and 3) about which issue areas predominated that month's appeals (the form provides 22 preset topics, one of which must be selected in order to submit an appeal). No details are given about the content of the appeals or any personally identifying information about which citizens made them. There is also no available data frame with raw figures from which to cross reference these reports. However, there is nothing to suggest that the figures published are inaccurate and, as far as I can tell, the data has not been manipulated.

In order to identify any patterns that might emerge from these reports, I converted the data from ten years of published reviews, December 2012 - December 2022, into a data frame. There was some missing data from particular years or months, but I did not remove or impute any data. I converted all numbers from the Russian Government's PDF reports verbatim onto a spreadsheet. Over the last ten years, government ministries and sub-national regions have coalesced, been added, or changed names. I opted for continuity in naming conventions across the years, but did not eliminate any of the data from ministries or regions which no longer exist.

I also did include data from the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, both of which were added to the reports as federal units in March 2014 following Russia's annexation of the territory.<sup>17</sup> My justification for including data from Crimea is that there has been a relatively large volume of appeals made by citizens from this contested area,<sup>18</sup> which may offer unique insights regarding citizen-state interactions. I did not, however, include data from any of the contested territories in Ukraine, following Russia's invasion in February 2022. Donesk, Lugansk, Zaporizha, and Kherson were added to these tables as federal units by the Russian Government in October 2022, but I exclude these regions entirely from my dataset.<sup>19</sup>

When assessing for quantity, the volume of appeals to the Russian Government has generally increased over time. Figure 2.2 demonstrates that the annual amount of appeals that have been received and recorded by the Russian Government has more than doubled over time since 2013, the first full year of record keeping. I cannot verify whether these figures represent unique individual submissions or if they include repeat users or repeated appeals. Nonetheless, from the perspective of numeric volume, this Figure 2.2 confirms

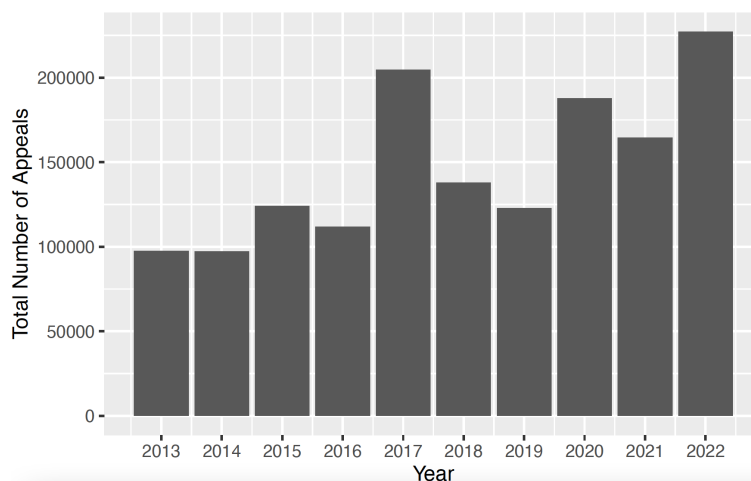
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<sup>17</sup>The Crimean Federal District, Republic of Crimea, and city of Sevastopol emerge in the data in March 2014, but were abandoned at the end of 2018 when the Republic of Crimea was incorporated into the Southern Federal District, where it remains.

<sup>18</sup>From 2014-2018, the Republic of Crimea submit 4,939 total appeals and the city of Sevastopol submit 3,615 total appeals.

<sup>19</sup>Over the course of the last three months of 2022, these regions have collectively submit 436 appeals.

Figure 2.2: Total Amount of Citizen Appeals to the Russian Government, by Year



trends captured by several social surveys and polls that find citizen appealing to be an increasingly popular and frequent political behavior.

The upward trend in the yearly quantity of citizen appeals may also reflect certain current events or domestic affairs that have occurred in Russia over this decade. Figure 2.2 illustrates a spike in appeals in 2020, most likely as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting lockdown and public health measures that were taken in Russia. Healthcare, housing, and family issues dominated appeals to the Russian Government in 2020, consistent with the welfare issues many faced under pandemic conditions and accounting for the jump in total appeals that occurred that year. This data from 2020 may reflect a Needs-based Approach taken by the population in that year, as individuals turned to the government about pressing welfare service needs.

A massive spike in appeals is also recorded in 2017, which at first glance, does not appear to correspond to any particularly notable event. A deeper examination of the data from this year shows that this upsurge in appeals was driven by an enormous amount of activity over the issue area of constitutional reform. Table 2.1 lists the total number of appeals made about constitutional reform around this time and reveals that an exponential outpouring on this topic began in April 2017. A high volume of appeals on constitutional reform was sustained for several months, not returning to normal pre-April 2017 figures until July of the following year [Figure 2.2]. While most monthly reports record a few hundred appeals related to constitutional reform, in April 2017 this figure was over 27,000 and this unusually high quantity were sustained until the end of the year, accounting for the larger volume of appeals made in 2017 in general.

Given the limited nature of available data and the potentially sensitive underlying reasons for this upsurge, I cannot make any concrete assertions as to why citizens suddenly began to reach out to the government on this particular topic at this particular moment. However, the spike does coincide with the Navalny-led 2017-2018 anti-corruption protests

Table 2.1: Total Amount of Appeals Received by the Russian Government about Constitutional Reform, December 2016-July 2018

Month - Year	Total Amount
December 2016	234
January 2017	171
February 2017	191
March 2017	405
April 2017	27,294
May 2017	9,831
June 2017	15,276
July 2017	10,001
August 2017	8,497
September 2017	4,445
October 2017	1,759
November 2017	1,337
December 2017	822
January 2018	997
February 2018	1451
March 2018	1523
April 2018	1146
May 2018	540
June 2018	493
July 2018	281

that exploded onto the streets of dozens of Russian cities starting March 26, 2017. These organized demonstrations explicitly called out systemic corruption in the Russian Government, advocated for major political reforms, and took on an overtly anti-Kremlin stance. The protests were, unsurprisingly, heavily repressed by authorities, some of whom refused to permit demonstrations within their jurisdictions. Navalny retorted by citing a Constitutional Court order allowing for demonstrations to continue even in cases when the governing jurisdiction refuses to sanction them [148]. As a result, the constitutional system became a hot topic issue surrounding these protests, aimed at denouncing corruption in the Russian Government.

Of course, I cannot be sure if these appeals necessarily reflect the grievances of active protesters. The tens of thousands of appeals recorded in this time frame could have been pro-Navalny voices criticizing the Russian Government, but they also could have been pro-Kremlin voices decrying the protests or citizens who had nothing to do with the protests altogether. However, it would be highly coincidental if this uptick had nothing to do with the protests, given how embedded constitutional precedents were to those demonstrations.

The available evidence strongly suggests that these appeals were in fact related to the

Table 2.2: Total Amount of Appeals Received by the Russian Government about International Relations, October 2021-December 2022

Month - Year	Total Amount
October 2021	349
November 2021	261
December 2021	46
January 2022	602
February 2022	1,085
March 2022	10,252
April 2022	3,326
May 2022	5,185
June 2022	4,983
July 2022	4,345
August 2022	4,954
September 2022	6,022
October 2022	5,560
November 2022	5,069
December 2022	4,466

ongoing protests. If true, this pattern offers striking evidence that Russia's appeals system is not limited to simple constituency service issues. If indeed these appeals were complementary to protests calling for deeper political reforms, then online citizen contacting may be considered a conduit for expressing discontent about systemic political issues and exercising individual political voice, an approach consistent with the Model of Everyday Resistance of citizen contacting.

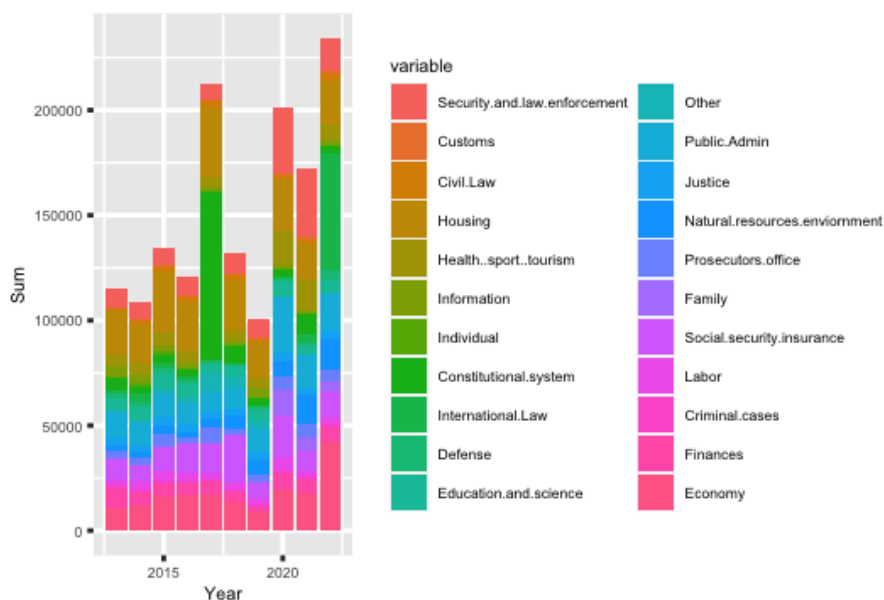
Appealing on issues of larger political systemic consequence is also reflected in the data for 2022, which boasts the largest volume of appeals yet recorded by the Russian Government [Figure 2.2]. An examination of the issue areas most appealed about in 2022 reveals a sharp spike in citizen concerns over international relations. Table 2.2 illustrates the quantity of appeals made under the umbrella of international relations and law. While the ten-year dataset typically records a few hundred appeals each month on this topic, March 2022 - in the immediate wake of Russia's invasion in Ukraine - saw this figure spike to over 10,000 [Table 2.2.]. The issue remained a prevalent one over the course of 2022, even seeing another micro spike in September, which is also the month that mass military mobilizations were announced in Russia.

Again, I cannot assert with total certainty that this upsurge in numbers over international affairs is entirely a reflection of the anti-war movement. However, it seems almost undeniable that this volume is related directly to the war in Ukraine. Citizens may have been reaching out on this topic for several of reasons, even perhaps to show support for the invasion. However, given the volume of appeals in March 2022 that coincided with the

emergence of anti-war protests and the anti-war movement as well as the additional bump in appeals in September that coincided with another round of resistance against mass military mobilization, it does seem extremely likely that a significant portion of these appeals are critical of the Russian Government's foreign policy in Ukraine. If true, again this pattern supports an Approach of Everyday Resistance amongst citizens who may be vocalizing themselves against the regime and its policies.

Beyond these unique issue area events, the topics that are particularly salient for citizens over the course of this ten year period are housing, social security insurance, and the economy. Figure 2.3 illustrates that there is a wide distribution of issue areas that citizens will appeal about, but these four topics are consistently prevalent across the years. This finding - that social welfare and economic issues are the primary topics about which people appeal - is consistent with other reports on e-government usage that suggests healthcare, infrastructure, and social insurance are most popular topics of e-government usage across Russia [2].

Figure 2.3: Total Amount of Citizen Appeals to Russian Government, by Issue Area

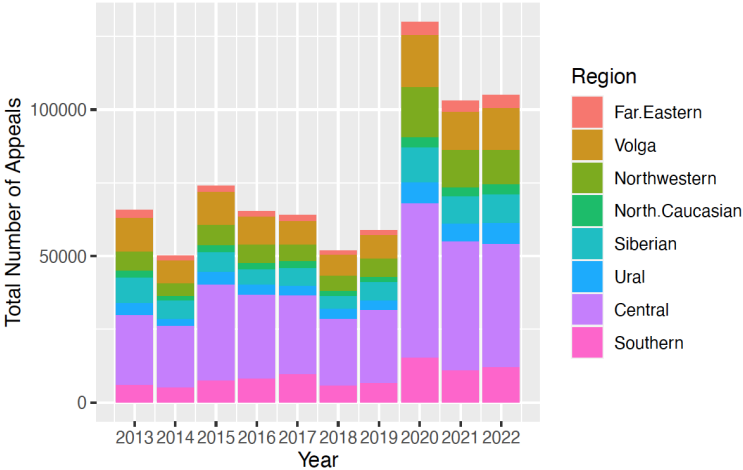


In terms of the geographic distribution of appeals, citizen contacting to the Russian Government is concentrated in urban areas. Moscow, Russia's largest metropolis by far, is the epicenter of political activity in the country, including for citizen contacting. Figure 2.4 displays the spread of appeals each year by federal district.<sup>20</sup> The least active districts are the Far Eastern and North Caucasian Districts, which are also both the least urbanized. Meanwhile, the Central District, where Moscow is located, remains the most active region

<sup>20</sup>The Federal Districts are formal groupings of Russia's federal units. The districts were established in 2000 under President Putin. Currently there are eight Federal Districts.

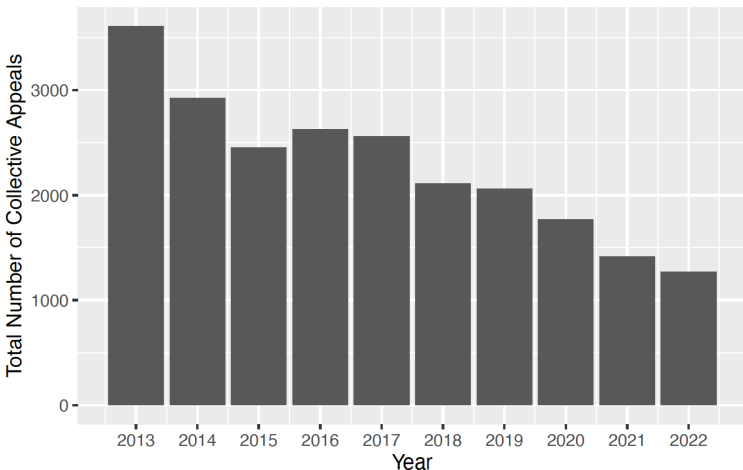
over the past decade. The Central Region is easily the most active district, both in terms of total volume, as well as when weighted by population.

Figure 2.4: Total Amount of Citizen Appeals to the Russian Government, by Region



The Russian Government also collects and publishes data on collective versus individual appeals. While my study specifically does not examine collective appeals, the data on these type of appeals provides further evidence for the function of citizen contacting as a unique and individualized political experience between the state and a citizen. Figure 2.5 shows that the total number of collective appeals has noticeably continued to drop since 2012, indicating that citizen contacting is overwhelmingly viewed by citizens as an individual action.

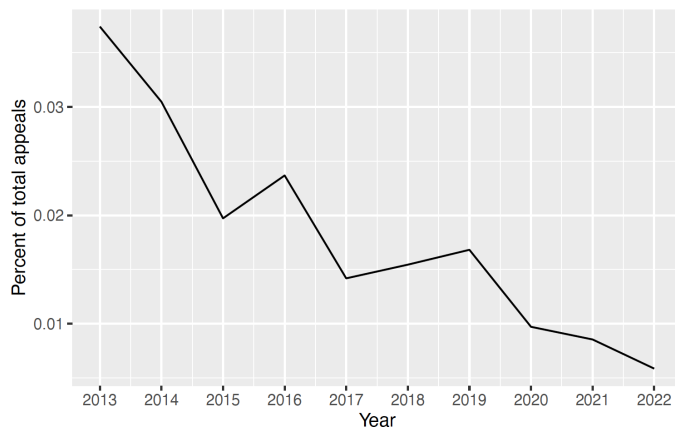
Figure 2.5: Total Amount of Collective Appeals to the Russian Government, by Year



Collective appeals were not a particularly popular form of citizen contacting to begin with, at least toward the Russian Government. As a percentage of total appeals made,

collective appeals are becoming increasingly outweighed by individual contacting practices [Figure 2.6]. Figure 2.6 also reveals that collective appeals were only ever a minute fraction of the total volume of appeals received by the government each year anyhow. These figures demonstrate that Russian citizens almost entirely approach their government on their own.

Figure 2.6: Percentage of Collective Appeals Submit to the Russian Government, by Year



Further compounding the trend toward individualized appealing, is the increasing prevalence of online citizen appeals. The online form for making an appeal to the Russian Government [see Figure 2.1] does not include a collective option for submission. That citizens are increasingly utilizing online formats in order to make their appeals thus channels these interactions into singular activities. The Russian Government failed to provide data on the rates of electronic appeals in 26 monthly reports, from October 2017 to September 2019. Even when omitting these years however, the data shows that more and more citizens are turning to online, digitized formats in order to contact their government. Figure 2.7 demonstrates two-fold that as a percentage of total appeals submit each year, collective appeals are on the decline while online appeals are significantly on the rise. In 2013, approximately only 50% of total appeals made were done so electronically. By 2022, over 90% of appeals were made online. Citizen contacting has become a highly digitized as well as a highly individualized practice in Russia, meaning it is becoming a rather isolating and online political experience for citizens.

Each month, the Russian Government also reports the total number of issues it has resolved. It is unclear whether this figure reflects responsiveness toward that month's appeals only, or whether it also includes issues from previous months. Regardless, the figures reported are fairly substantial, with several thousand issues resolved each year. No data is provided to suggest what these issues are or what the government's own internal metric is for considering an issue resolved or not. But from its own published data, the Russian Government has resolved fewer and fewer issues each year [Figure 2.8]. As displayed in Figure 2.8, at its peak in 2015, the government had resolved around 8,000 appeals, but in 2022 this figure was less than 5,000.

Figure 2.7: Percentage of Online and Collective Appeals Submit to the Russian Government, by Year

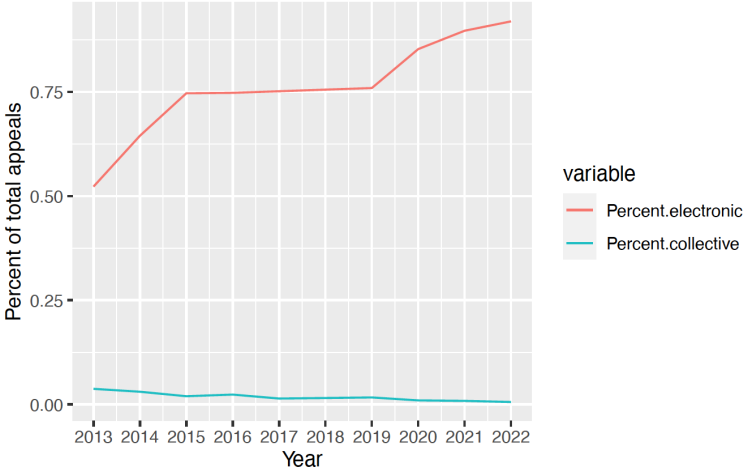
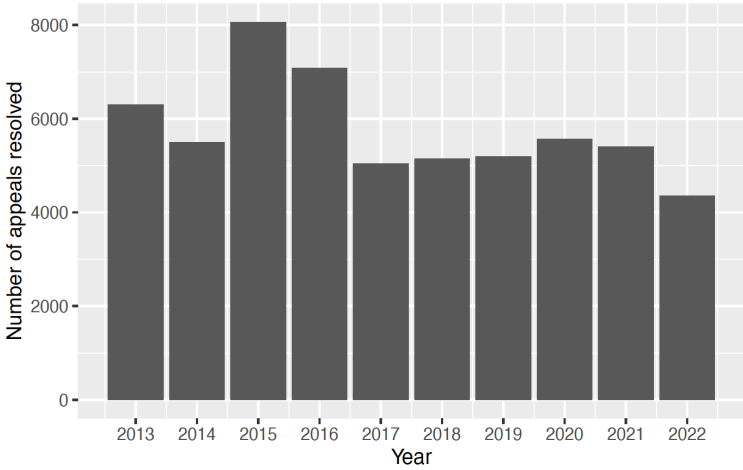


Figure 2.8: Total Amount of Citizen Appeals Resolved by Russian Government, by Year

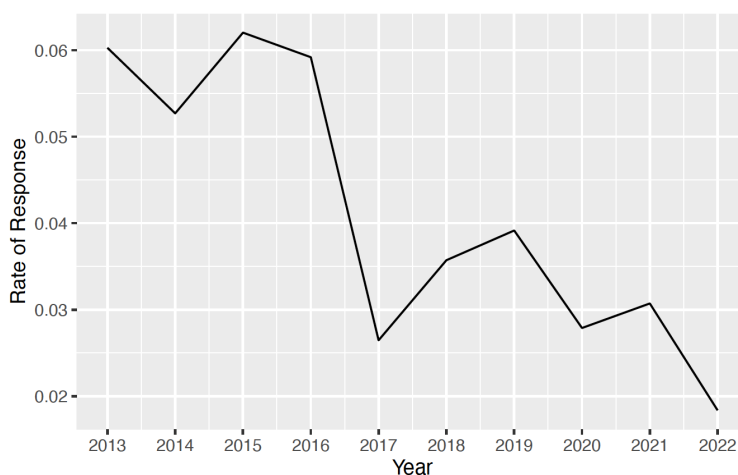


What makes this drop in volume of resolved appeals over time in Figure 2.8 more striking is that Figure 2.2 demonstrates that the total number of appeals has continued to climb. After considering resolved appeals as a percentage of the total appeals submit each year, the Russian Government’s responsiveness rate has declined [Figure 2.9]. Figure 2.9 illustrates that only a tiny fraction of appeals ever even garnered a successful resolution by the Russian Government, but that number has become almost negligible in recent years.

As above stated, it is unclear what the state’s metric is for considering an appeal resolved. The Russia Government also frequently denies appeals or transfers them to subnational governing entities, which this rate does not take into consideration. The government does publish consistent data on how many appeals are denied or transferred each year, nor does



Figure 2.9: Percentage of Appeals Responded to by the Russian Government, by Year



it address the fate of each individual appeal. Furthermore, based on available data, it is not clear how many of the total appeals submit are about unique issues, or if there are overlapping appeals in terms of substance that this response rate cannot capture.

Regardless, analysis of the Russian Government's own data does not showcase it as a highly responsive governing body. Theoretically, an authoritarian regime like Russia must engage in at least a degree of responsiveness, in order to endow these systems with some validity and encourage citizens to use them. By its own admission, however, the Russian Government is becoming less responsive over time, or is at least not providing the full picture of how it addresses and handles citizen appeals. For citizens, this decreased responsiveness may influence the way they approach citizen contacting.

The Russian Government certainly publishes these monthly reports in order to boost its own legitimacy and reputation, but the story that the figures from these reports paint is striking. The state is not exceptionally responsive to citizen appeals and has been less so over time. Particularly when juxtaposed with the fact that citizens remain concerned primarily about service delivery and social welfare issues, it seems counter-intuitive that the population would continue to seek out a state that seems to be increasingly non-responsive to their needs. However, citizens have also exhibited the propensity to utilize appeals in order to express resistance to the regime and its policies and have done so on at least two major occasions. Citizen appeals when harnessed as a vehicle to express political voice can manifest in massive amounts. In addition, appeals are often concentrated in urban centers where political activity is generally concentrated. Citizen contacting might therefore be, in some cases, a robust act of political expression.

I now turn to one of these urban centers and assess citizen contacting practices in the capital city of Moscow.

## Moscow City Government

In some ways, the city of Moscow is an exceptional and unique urban area, as Russia's capital and largest and most cosmopolitan city. Moscow is associated with a more active and vibrant political community than other parts of the country, making it in some ways an atypical case study of citizen appeals in Russia. However, given its nature as an active wellspring of political engagement, Moscow is a fruitful city from which to glean and assess trends in citizen contacting practices.

In addition, Moscow's government websites, Mos.ru, and its sister portal - Gorod.mos.ru - are some of the oldest digital government platforms in the country. The former was established in 2010 and the latter in 2011, both as joint ventures of Mayor Sergei Sobyenin to connect to the city's residents. Sobyenin has presided as Mayor of Moscow since 2010, when he was appointed to the position. The timing of launching these e-government portals on the heels of his appointment to this highly influential political position is not coincidental. Without an electoral basis from which to glean support and legitimacy from Muscovites, Sobyenin has utilized these platforms to endear himself to the city's residents and gain their trust and support as mayor. Both platforms proved critical in his first few years as mayor, and they have since become essential staples of his successful tenure in office.

Although appointed in 2010, Sobyenin was subsequently elected in 2013 and then re-elected in 2018 for another 5-year term. Legally, he is not allowed to run again, limited by the two term limits he has already served. However, there is neither an indication that he is planning to step down, nor that an additional electoral campaign is underway. In all likelihood, he will probably continue as Mayor of Moscow for the foreseeable future.<sup>21</sup> Should Sobyenin continue as mayor under either legal or extrajudicial circumstances, these twin pillar e-government platforms will either way service significantly in justifying his legitimacy to the position.

Indeed, the official title of Mos.ru is 'The Official Site of the Mayor of Moscow', while Gorod.mos.ru is entitled 'Our City Moscow: The Portal of the Mayor of Moscow S.S. Sobyenin'. Both websites are thus directly linked not just to the office of the mayor, but to the mayor himself. Both sites can be considered outreach platforms, although there are some distinctions between the two. Mos.ru functions as a general website for the city, and includes news about the city; its history; its current mayor; upcoming concerts, exhibits, or cultural events; updates on healthcare; and a significant amount of information regarding the city government's ongoing projects, available services, and contact information.

Although its primary function is to provide information and updates about the city, through the Mos.ru website a citizen can file an appeal to the municipal government. Under the 'Feedback' tab is an option for 'Reception of Appeals' or 'Electronic Reception'. The 'Reception of Appeals' tab provides the user with information on the times and locations for

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<sup>21</sup>Novosibirsk's recent abandonment of mayoral elections in 2022 has set a precedent for the overhaul of electoral protocols in other regions. It is therefore not improbable that Sobyenin's time in office will also be artificially extended.

making an appeal manually<sup>22</sup>. Under this tab are also hyperlinks to monthly published reports regarding citizens appeals to the city government. Selecting the ‘Electronic Reception’ tab leads to an online citizen appeal form [see Figure 2.10]. This document provides fields to designate the office or individual to which the appeal should be addressed, personal and contact information, and content and topic of the appeal, alongside any previous correspondence with a governing authority on the issue and any optional photos or documents to be attached. The appeal can be directed toward several ministries or entities within Moscow’s municipal government, including 49 government offices, specialized governing bodies from 11 different districts in the city, or to the Mayor himself.

Figure 2.10: Moscow City’s Mos.ru Online Appeal Form

**Электронная приёмная Правительства Москвы**

В данном разделе вы можете отправить сообщение в органы исполнительной власти города Москвы. Пожалуйста, прежде чем отправить обращение в форме электронного документа, внимательно ознакомьтесь со следующей информацией.

**1 Получатель обращения**

Выберите получателя обращения

Как выбрать наиболее соответствующий теме обращение орган исполнительной власти?

Обращение должностному лицу

**2 Сведения об отправителе**

Обращение от юридического лица

Фамилия Имя Отчество *необязательно*

Контактный телефон Электронная почта

Город

Область Район

Улица Индекс

Дом/Владение Оповещение

Корпус Квартира/Лифт

**3 Содержание обращения**

Рекомендуем указать в тексте обращения адрес: описанного вами места действия, факта или события. Ответ по сути обращения не дается в случае, если в обращении отсутствует текст, даны только ссылки на прилагаемые файлы или адреса интернет-сайтов.

Суть вопроса

Содержание обращения

Укажите, в какие органы государственной власти вы обращались и когда (если обращались)

Органы государственной власти

**4 Отправка обращения**

Я принимаю условия соглашения о пользования информационными системами и ресурсами города Москвы.

**Подтвердить**

В разделе «Статьи на обращения, затрагивающие интересы миллионов людей» вы можете ознакомиться с ответами на аналогичные обращения, опубликованные ранее.

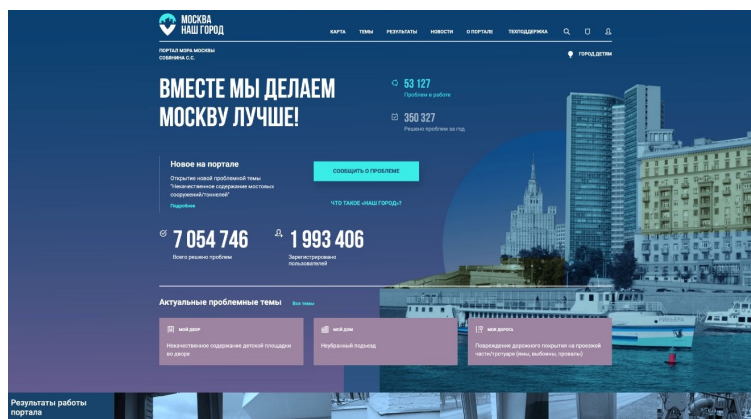
<sup>22</sup>The website provides an address designated for written appeals to be sent and another address of an office where a citizen may communicate their appeal in person. This information can be accessed at: <https://www.mos.ru/feedback/reviews/>

Meanwhile, Gorod.mos.ru is more clearly an interactive e-government platform that gathers citizen appeals and policy feedback on infrastructural and service issues. It describes itself as a “project designed to improve the quality of life of citizens and the image of Moscow through the active participation of Muscovites in the life of the capital,” and its main stated goals are to endow citizens with the ability to report, evaluate, and stay informed about city activities and initiatives [130].

Unlike Mos.ru, the Gorod.mos.ru portal actively encourages residents to report problems to city officials and invites a significant amount of citizen feedback. It does this both through the design of the website and through a variety of accompanying measures, including a points system, whereby users are issued points for each appeal or interaction they make. These points can eventually be redeemed for groceries, event tickets, vouchers, and other goods or services. In the past, highly active users of Gorod.mos.ru have been identified by authorities as key citizens, who have even been invited to meetings with the mayor to discuss, in person, city development projects as selected citizen ‘volunteers’ [125].

The Gorod.mos.ru e-government portal is user-friendly and interactive. The homepage, although it has been redesigned a few times since its inception, is aesthetically pleasing, legible, and up-to-date. Figure 2.11 illustrates the website’s most recent homepage, captured in April 2023. This homepage prominently displays how many users the e-government portal has and the total number of appeals that have been resolved over the portal’s lifetime. As of April 2023, there were nearly 2 million registered users and over 7 million issues resolved. Moscow is a city of nearly 12 million, meaning those registered users represent a fraction of the total eligible population, yet the activity on this website is still impressive.

Figure 2.11: Homepage of Gorod.mos.ru E-government Portal



The homepage also streamlines the process for citizens seeking to contact the municipal government. A bright button is highlighted right on the home screen that directs a user to ‘Communicate about a Problem’. From this link, a citizen can easily address issues along eight general themes to city officials: homes and apartments, courtyards, parks, streets, public transportation, healthcare, the economy, and the city in general. Unlike the federal government which offers the citizen the option to appeal on a wide variety of issue areas, the

Gorod.mos.ru portal limits these topics to issues primarily related to constituency service and delivery. Unlike Mos.ru, the process for filing an appeal through this portal is also slightly more user-friendly. In addition to hosting citizen appeals, this website also showcases the results of those appeals. The site provides an interactive and constantly updated map of where problems have been identified by citizens through the city and the status of those appeals. For appeals that have been resolved, the website managers also offer visual images showing before and after shots of the issue in question.

While Mos.ru is an information-providing platform, Gorod.mos.ru more openly provides the space to take action on issues, especially constituency service type issues. Gorod.mos.ru also boasts a quicker reply rate of 8 days, over Mos.ru's 30 day reply policy. Although Gorod.mos.ru limits appeals to particular issue areas, it is a marginally more streamlined process, while Mos.ru accepts appeals on any topic, but it can feel slightly more cumbersome to use. Essentially, Gorod.mos.ru is bound by constituency service concerns, while Mos.ru can accommodate more widespread expressions or complaints from citizens. Regardless of these functional differences, both websites are directly connected to the mayor, are deeply intertwined city platforms, and share some parallel political capacities.

The two websites are comparable as venues of citizen contacting. Both host accessible arenas to directly reach out to the municipal government. They also both operate under the same personal registration system, run through Mos.ru, that is required in order to make an appeal on either website or participate in any of Moscow's citizen programs. It is not clear whether appeals from each of these portals reach a different or same set of officials from the government, or even whether citizens themselves view these two platforms as distinct or particularly appropriate for distinct concerns.

What is apparent is that Gorod.mos.ru is currently a highly trafficked website. Thousands of appeal submissions are made on a daily basis. Part of this volume of usage is a result of the streamlined website format. In the late 2000s/early 2010s, filing an appeal in Russia required laborious amounts of paperwork. Combined with the prevailing belief that officials would not pay attention to appeals, citizens were disincentivized from communicating to officials, especially about everyday issues. Transferring the appeals process to a streamlined and accessible website was a novelty in Russia and partially brought about this proliferation in contacting over commonplace concerns [187]. To see such an active community using this e-government platform is a testament to the city government's investment in it, but also indicates that citizens have harbored underlying concerns about some of these issue areas all along.

Of course, there are some intrinsic problems associated with Moscow's e-government portal and the system is not flawless. City officials have been accused of photoshopping, falsifying, or only partially resolving issues; they may set unrealistic timelines for resolving an appeal,<sup>23</sup> and citizens are often forced to wait much longer than 8 or 30 days to receive

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<sup>23</sup>One of my favorite anecdotes is from an appeal made through Nash Gorod St. Petersburg, a similar interactive e-government website launched in 2014 in the city of St. Petersburg. A citizen complained about a building in the neighborhood with peeling paint in April 2018; officials responded through that website

a response [121, 124]. Logistically, the website is also susceptible to high traffic and may at times load slowly or experience glitches.

The site has also been manipulated or used as a tool by the city government to pursue certain political agendas. In 2016, making an appeal under the housing category was temporarily suspended on the portal, after a spike of complaints emerged about certain housing projects throughout the city [123]. The Gorod.mos.ru website also appears to have been critical in the public arrest of journalist Ivan Golunov.<sup>24</sup> He was arrested in Moscow, at a location where he had just filed an appeal about a pothole and damaged road sign five days earlier. According to him, it was no coincidence that he was subsequently arrested in this location, since appeals made on this platform are geolocated [120]. Most recently, the federal laws passed in 2023 that allow the state to enlist citizens through electronic means are also planning to harness e-government platforms, potentially including Moscow's website, in order to gather data and serve military recruitment papers to citizens.

Despite its flaws, Muscovites do engage heavily in the city's contacting infrastructure. Mos.ru publishes monthly reports on citizen appeal activity across this municipal jurisdiction and has done so since January 2016. These reports do not specify if the figures presented within them reflect appeals made only through Mos.ru or from both websites. Regardless, they aggregate and account for a large volume of citizen appeals made each month to the city government and to the mayor himself. In order to analyze trends over time in this data, I transferred the numbers reported each month in these PDF documents verbatim into a data frame covering January 2016-December 2022. Moscow's government does not publish data on the content or theme of each appeal, nor which municipal agencies receive these appeals. There is also no corresponding data frame available from which to verify the figures within these PDF reports. However, I have no reason to believe that these numbers are inaccurate or manipulated.

In general, Moscow receives a substantial amount of appeals from citizens each year. Figure 2.12 demonstrates that the majority of citizens direct their appeals, not to the Mayor, but to the municipal government. The graphical representation in Figure 2.12 does not suggest that any drastic fluctuations have occurred in the volume of citizen appeals to the Moscow government. Particularly after 2016, as people became more comfortable with the service, they seem to reach out to the municipal government fairly consistently.

Alongside this stable trend of citizen appeals to the municipal government, is a downward trend in appeals directed to the mayor. Both in terms of sheer numbers and as a percentage of total appeals received, both Figure 2.12 and Table 2.3 reveal that appeals directed to the mayor in Moscow have generally been in decline. As shown by Table 2.3, in the year 2016, 328,838 appeals were specifically directed to the Mayor's Office. In 2022, this figure dropped to 124,676. Although there was an incline of appeals made toward the mayor in 2020, these figures have otherwise been in steady decline since 2018. The increase in appeals

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that the paint job for the building was scheduled for 2039.

<sup>24</sup>Golunov is an investigative journalist with independent media outlet Meduza, who was arrested in June 2019 under fabricated charges of drug possession. His arrest caused a public outcry so fierce that he was actually released shortly after.

Figure 2.12: Total Amount of Citizen Appeals to Moscow City Government and Mayor’s Office, by Year

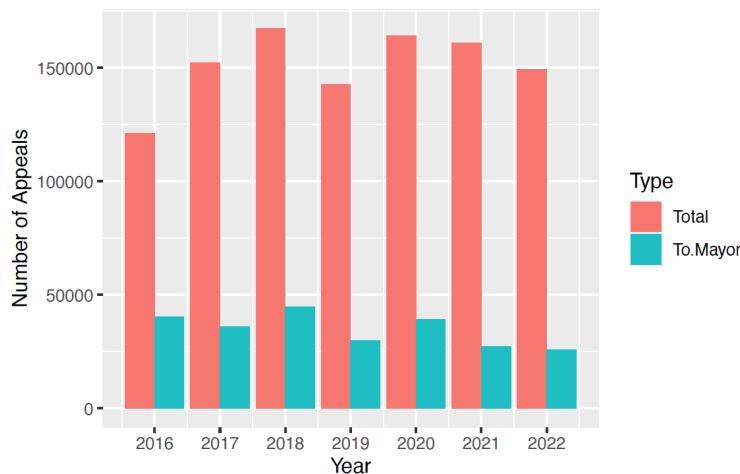


Table 2.3: Total Amount of Appeals Received by the Moscow Mayor’s Office, by Year

Year	Total Amount
2016	328,838
2017	334,937
2018	371,978
2019	283,565
2020	322,596
2021	278,375
2022	124,676

to the mayor in 2020 may also reflect the unique circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic that year, which may have escalated people’s needs and willingness to interact with a variety of government officials.

While I cannot make a conclusive assessment as to why the mayor has become less popular as a target for citizen appeals, this trend does mimic other patterns in the mayor’s political position. Current mayor Sergei Sobyenin remains a relatively popular figure, partially because of his ‘marketing’ strategies around digitalization, modernization, and city rejuvenation, which resonate with younger generations and mid-level professionals [92]. His approval rating has also been fairly steady and positive over his tenure in office, although it has dipped in recent years. Given that Sobyenin has tied himself so closely to these e-government portals, perhaps citizens who are becoming less supportive of him are also less inclined to contact him directly.

Likely because the mayor’s office seeks to bolster its own reputation and legitimacy, these published reports also only provide quantitative detail about appeals directed to the mayor’s office. Appeals directed to the mayor are not comprehensive and only represent a

partial amount of the total appeals submit. Nonetheless, analysis of this available data does showcase some trends that are likely occurring on a more macro level as well.

Of these appeals sent directly to the mayor, the overwhelming majority are submitted online. Figure 2.13 demonstrates that since 2017, online appealing has been a far more prevalent method than written letter appeals. Given the ease of making an online appeal in Moscow in addition to the general push for digitized government in Russia, it is perhaps not surprising to see such a robust volume of online contacting. Figure 2.14 reveals that in 2016, approximately 78% of appeals were submit to the mayor electronically. However, over the last three years, from 2020-2022, that percentage of appeals submitted online has hovered above 90%, even while the total number of appeals to his office has decreased.

Figure 2.13: Total Amount of Online and Letter Appeals to Moscow Mayor’s Office, by Year

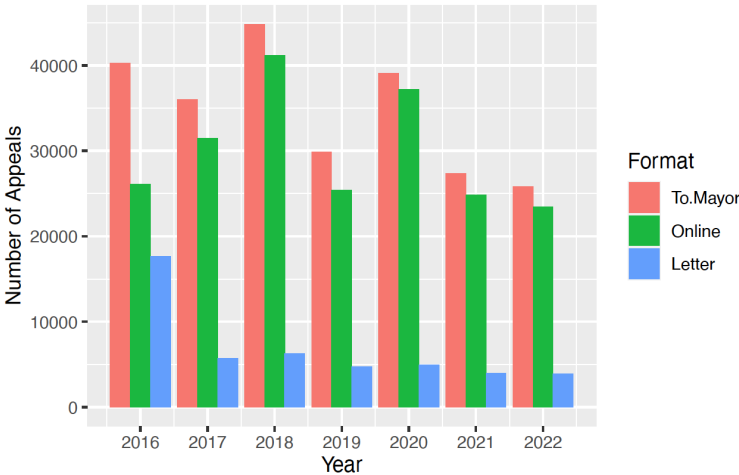
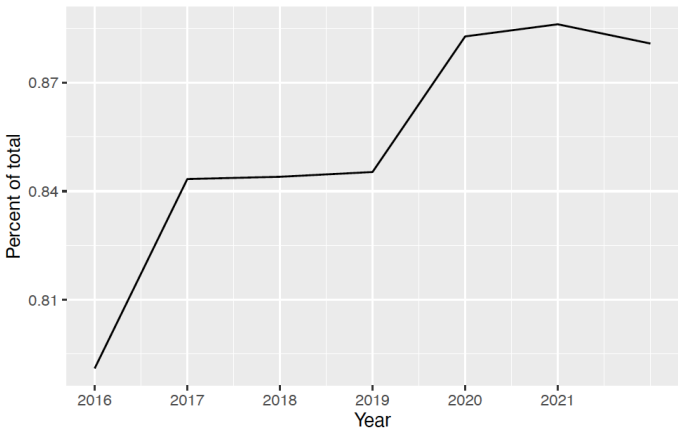


Figure 2.14: Percentage of Online Appeals to Moscow Mayor’s Office, by Year

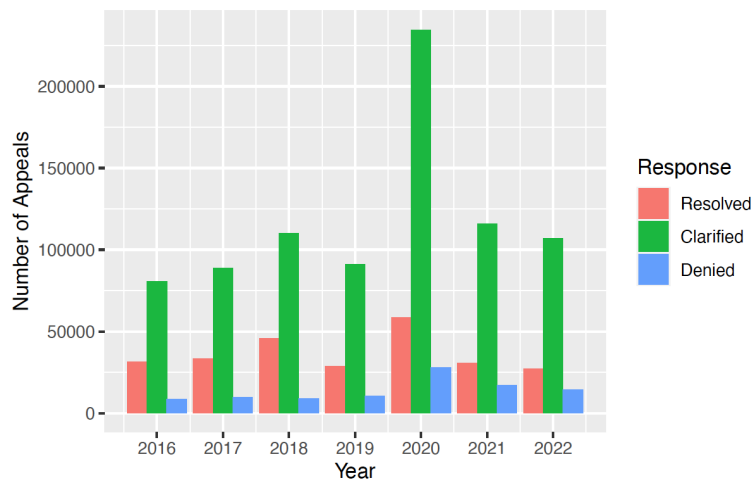


Like the Russian Government, the Moscow Mayor’s Office also publishes data on response rates to citizen appeals. Once analyzed, the data suggests that the Mayor’s Office is also



becoming less responsive over time. Figure 2.15 graphically represents the total number of appeals resolved, clarified, and denied by the Mayor’s Office each year. Each year, for more appeals are clarified than denied or resolved, a pattern that was particularly evident in 2020. Likely, this spike in clarifications was also a reflection on the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic when rules and regulations were in flux throughout the city.

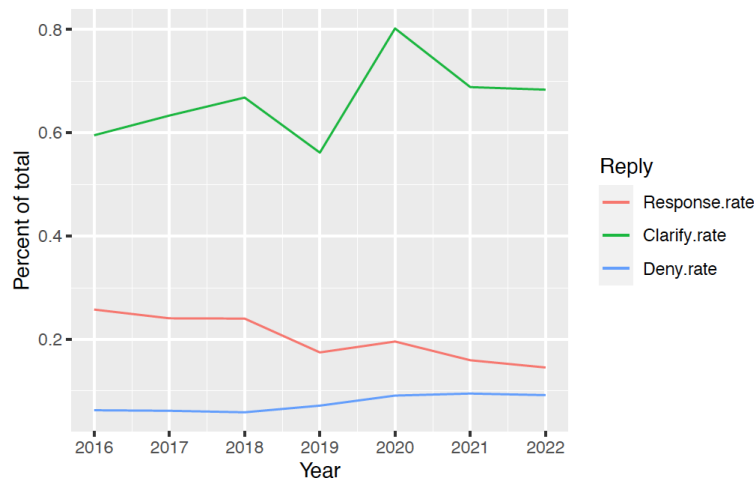
Figure 2.15: Total Amount of Resolved, Clarified, and Denied Appeals to Moscow Mayor’s Office, by Year



Otherwise, the mayor’s office is increasingly denying and not responding to appeals. Figure 2.16 demonstrates the amount of appeals responded to, clarified, and denied as a percentage of total appeals received by the office each year. Over 50% of appeals each year are clarified. Figure 2.16 shows that less than 10% of appeals are denied each year, but this trend has slowly been on the rise. Meanwhile, the most notable pattern is the decline in how many appeals are resolved each year has declined to well under a quarter. While about 25% of appeals were resolved by the mayor in 2016, by 2022, these type of appeals only amounted to about 15% [Figure 2.16]. Of course, there has been no comprehensive data released regarding what types of issues are most likely to be resolved or denied, and these figures do not take into account how many appeals are unique cases versus repeat concerns. But for a mayor whose campaign rhetoric has been so heavily invested in the language of citizen input and responsiveness toward it, these trends are not particularly flattering.

Despite the flaws in Moscow’s e-government, citizens continue to heavily utilize these systems. The city’s e-government infrastructure is highly ranked on the UN’s Local Online Service Index, and for good reason [189]. It is easy to use, interactive, and appears to be responsive enough that people continue to engage with it. Even after his run-in with this online system, Ivan Golunov admitted that these platforms are effective and useful tools [124]. The volume of interactions remains high between citizens and the Moscow city government, and even though people are less inclined to contact the mayor’s office, it is still true that the overwhelming majority of interactions are conducted online. Like the Russian Government,

Figure 2.16: Percentage of Resolved, Clarified, and Denied Appeals by Moscow Mayor's Office, by Year



responsiveness is on the decline in the Mayor's Office, but that does not appear to be driving people away from these platforms.

With the minimal amount of data presented here in the city of Moscow, it seems that a Needs-based Approach may dominate people's motives for making contact. In the case of Gorod.mos.ru, citizens can only reach out about issues that are constituency service based, and even though they can lodge other complaints through Mos.ru, these needs-based issues appear to be rather salient ones for local citizens. Municipal and regional governments often do have jurisdiction over service and welfare delivery in Russia, which means it would make sense that a Needs-based Approach might be taken when contacting the city government. What these figures cannot reveal are any sort of individual-level motivating factors or personal characteristics that may drive this behavior, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

# Chapter 3

## Data

### 3.1 Introduction to a Descriptive Survey

In this chapter, I introduce an original survey conducted in 2022 and present findings from that survey, which explore the approaches and behaviors that Russian citizens exhibit when interacting with an official or governing body. My goal with this chapter is to explore the questions of who makes contact in Russia and why they might be motivated to do so. I aim to paint a portrait of a typical citizen most willing to make an appeal, particularly an online appeal, given that this format is becoming ubiquitous in facilitating citizen-state interactions in Russia.

To understand how individuals themselves view the platforms that allow for interacting with the state, I conducted a randomized, anonymous, online survey of Russian citizens, asking them questions about their own political participation, particularly in the realm of e-government and citizen appeals. The survey was conducted in spring-summer of 2022. In the survey instrument, I ask a series of questions about the individual's political behavior, as well as accompanying questions targeting self-reported characteristics measuring self-efficacy, political awareness, and political involvement in other realms of social life. The objective of this survey is to provide more detail on the type of people most likely to engage with the state, whether we can expect this behavior to be correlated with particular characteristics or other experiences, and whether there is any indication that the group of people most willing to make an appeal are somehow exceptional or distinct from the underlying population.

Although the outbreak of war between Russia and Ukraine was a major disrupting factor in this survey distribution and implementation, additional measures were put into action to ensure that this geopolitical event minimally influenced respondent answers. Extra steps were taken especially with regards to participant confidentiality and neutrality in survey language. Additionally, the timing of this survey distribution was also helpful in minimizing undue influence from the war. During the late spring and early summer of 2022 when this survey was distributed, the full weight of economic and political implications from the war had not yet been fully realized within Russia. The survey was also conducted well before

many of the serious casualties were felt on the battle front and before subsequent mobilization efforts began in Russia in September 2022.

While the war has undoubtedly impacted many aspects of Russians' daily lives, in terms of administrative practices, the state has presented an air of business as usual. The government continues to emphasize the key role of its administrative apparatus in collecting citizen appeals and active e-government platforms continue to be heavily used.<sup>1</sup> Because of how carefully the content of the survey instrument was presented and the benign nature of online government platforms that have not been issues sensitive to the war effort, I do not expect this conflict to have drastically biased outcomes from the survey.

Although data from the Russian Government demonstrates that citizens did vocalize concerns over constitutional reforms in 2017 and most likely about geopolitical events in Ukraine in 2022, the nature of the survey does not invite participants to reveal any politically dangerous sentiments in the survey. Newly implemented censorship bans on language regarding the war, officially the special military operation, has made it extremely dangerous to vocalize any sentiments critical of military intervention in Ukraine. This survey is not presented as an opportunity to express anti-regime or anti-war opinions, but rather explores the motives and approaches citizens take when making an appeal. Even if the survey participant harbors anti-regime sentiments, my survey allows them to respond honestly without revealing these preferences, thus protecting the safety of all individuals involved.

I cannot rule out that this conflict could be a possible confounding factor in people's responses, but I anticipate that it may have only minimally altered the results. Respondents may have felt more guarded than usual in expressing any sort of commentary regarding the state during this time. However, the survey instrument was highly sensitive to these extant geopolitical factors, and the questions presented gathered only descriptive data and minimized the need to divulge any sensitive information.

As a result, the data collected through this survey is not as comprehensive or as fine-tuned as it might have been under non-war conditions. Had the war not occurred, I could have asked more expressly open, targeted, and personal questions about the citizen-state relationship. Regardless, the data I was able to glean from this survey still allows me to offer a more nuanced take on the types of Russian individuals who engage in citizen appeals and generate several inferences regarding the strategies they employ when doing so. Ultimately, the descriptive data collected from this survey, along with the analysis of appeals made to the Russian Government and Moscow City government in the previous chapter allow me to better assess which model is most appropriate to adopt when considering citizen contacting in Russia.

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<sup>1</sup>In Moscow, for instance, Gorod.mos.ru has continued to collect thousands of appeals every day regarding non-war related issues, even well after the start of the war.

## Survey Logistics

The survey was conducted from May-July 2022 by way of an online survey instrument distributed through a Russian-language survey company based in Georgia. I drafted and wrote the survey in Russian and in English during the fall of 2021, at which point I also simultaneously filed for International Review Board (IRB) approval. However, the geopolitical circumstances surrounding the subsequent events of Russia's invasion in Ukraine in February 2022 delayed the survey's distribution, made implementing it particularly tricky, and truncated the scope of the survey material.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, access to Russia has only become increasingly more restrictive, especially for American citizens. Not only did the pandemic significantly limit international travel to the country, but the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces in February 2022 practically ceased visitation to Russia altogether. By the time this survey was ready and approved to be implemented, it had become nearly impossible to travel to Russia, especially under an academic visa, generating even greater constraints to my access over an already limited field research location.

Additionally, due to sanctions on doing business with Russian entities following the war, I was not able to work with any researchers based in Russia at the time. Additionally, all money transfers were blocked to the country, further complicating any research assistance and transactions. Successive restrictions on international collaborations with Russian scholars made partnerships within the country particularly tenuous. In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, there was significant uncertainty over the status of this project, as my application was under final stages of review by the IRB when the outbreak of the war occurred.

Ultimately, I was able to re-channel my efforts and successfully run this survey. I utilized the services of The Bridge Research Network to complete this data collection. The Bridge is a field research and peer-to-peer network platform specializing in European, Russian, Eurasian, and post-Soviet studies currently based in Tbilisi, Georgia. Through them I was able to launch this data collection process without violating international law related to compensation of Russian nationals, and avoid any research complications that had arisen in the aftermath of this conflict. As Russian legislators began to decry foreigners, particularly Westerners, a wave of suspicions befell non-Russian researchers. Subsequent survey research initiated by foreigners and those of us with foreign sounding names were particularly prone to bias by potential participants. The Bridge, as a Russian-language resource with a preexisting reputation amongst Russian academics and universities, served as a critical mediator between myself and the Russian respondents of this survey. Through them I was able to more effectively overcome this potential response bias.

Approval by the IRB also presented a particular challenge for this research. Following the invasion, the Board initially recommended I abandon the project and would not approve the survey in the form I had originally submit it. Even though the survey was already designed to be anonymous, I immediately set about amending the instrument and its design to meet new circumstances and conditions on the ground in Russia. This meant removing some questions

that had directly asked about political support or approval for the government or president, reworking the confidentiality agreement, further ‘de-politicizing’ some of the wording to avoid direct criticism of the state, and significantly limiting the amount of personal data that participants were asked to provide.

The questions I ask in the survey specifically avoid use of the words ‘approval’ or ‘support’ and make no mention of any political actions related to protest or opposition activities. These amendments to the survey were made with the utmost safety of Russian participants in mind, as I did not want potential respondents to divulge opinions or responses that might betray anti-war or anti-government sentiments, or be construed in a way that might land them in serious trouble should the state somehow take interest in and seize my data. Amid the stifling climate around the censorship laws in Russia and because the survey was intended to collect nuanced data on citizen perspectives that implicitly inquired about an individual’s criticism of the state and its service provision, these concerns were not misplaced.

Participant safety took high priority, at the expense of some of the research questions I had originally planned to ask. But I was able to prepare an instrument that still accomplished the goals of the research, while accommodating the concerns and sensitive standards of the IRB. I believe I was also able to accomplish a survey instrument that largely minimized any potential bias from the respondent. Although proficient in Russian myself, I nonetheless had a few native speakers read through my Russian language survey instrument to make sure the questions targeted the survey concepts I was aiming to ask and that the syntax did not give away the fact that the survey was drafted by a non-native speaker. In utilizing a third party mediator to implement the survey, I also minimized potential bias from the respondent, who would likely be more willing to answer honestly to a survey circulated by a reputable Russian source, than from someone affiliated with a well-known Western university. After these significant changes and a prolonged set of conversations between myself and my case officer, I was finally able to secure IRB approval in May 2022.

The survey was finally distributed in the late spring, early summer of 2022. It was initiated in May and survey data continued to be gathered until July. Although my name is still present on the confidentiality agreements and participants were aware that the work was associated with the University of California, Berkeley, the enumerators at The Bridge were indispensable in the success of this survey, by interfacing with participants on my behalf. The enumerators were neither given access to respondent replies, nor allowed access to any identifying data from respondents. They did, however, circulate the survey amongst eligible participants and managed the distribution of the Qualtrics survey on a Russian-language version of the platform.

The distribution of the survey also had to be amended as a result of the war. Initially, we had planned to identify potential participants through Facebook. Prior to 2022, Meta services in Russia - including Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp - were widely used social media platforms for both citizens and officials in Russia. Most governors, mayors, and public facing officials had an active Facebook or Instagram account through which they would interface with citizens directly, up until February 2022. It was also common for cities and regions to have active Facebook pages through which public announcements, regional issues,

and policy platforms could be advertised to subscribing citizens. Facebook users were on the rise in Russia, up until the war in Ukraine, making this an appropriate location to distribute a survey on public administration issues. City group Facebook pages in Russia were widely utilized at the time, so we had originally planned to contact administrators of several cities and regions to post the link of this survey for potential eligible participants.

Once Russia banned Meta services in March 2022, which now requires a VPN to access within Russia's borders, this option was no longer a viable method from which to obtain a remotely representative survey sample. Therefore, we opted to post the survey link on Toloka, a Yandex hosted crowd-sourcing platform that is accessed by a heavy volume of Russians and Russian speaking users. Yandex, as a Russian tech giant, does host and own the platform, but it does not retain ownership of microtasks posted by requesters, meaning the data derived from this survey is secure. Although distribution of the survey through this platform did not fully allow me to control the sample population, other researchers who have distributed surveys to Russian audiences over this platform have determined samples derived from Toloka to be representative based upon platform-specific characteristics [34]. Once the survey was distributed on Toloka, anonymous data collection began and was fully channeled and stored on the secure Berkeley Qualtrics platform.

## Survey Design

The online survey was designed and distributed over Qualtrics. I wrote it in English and in Russian. It was ultimately distributed in Russian, after several proofreads from native Russian speakers, confirming that my syntax and sentiments were correctly conveyed. The final survey consisted of 17 questions, four 'screening' questions, 12 substantive questions, and one attention check question asking participants to copy a six digit number in order to test for genuineness of responses. Additionally, respondents who selected 'citizen appeals' or 'e-government' as a form of participation that they had engaged in over the past 24 months were asked an additional five questions each regarding that activity.

One of the 12 substantive questions presented was also an optional open-ended text box, encouraging participants to write down any other notable comments regarding their experience or perception of this practice. I was warned that long surveys are notoriously highly unanswered by Russian participants, either because they become suspicious after a while or because of a long-standing tradition of in-person surveys in the country. I therefore tried to make the questions as concise and robust as possible and was not anticipating very many responses from the text box field. Surprisingly, about 15% of respondents wrote something in the text box, of which about two-thirds of those responses were substantively of use. The findings of these open-ended responses will be presented in a later chapter.

The distribution of the survey over an online format proved beneficial in several ways. The layout of the survey, which could be accessed on any computer or mobile device, consisted of one question per page, increasing ease of use and legibility. Distributing the instrument online allowed me to easily issue the confidentiality agreement, which participants had to accept in order to continue in any capacity onto the survey. This format also granted

me the opportunity to fairly easily screen eligible participants into the survey sample. I was interested in capturing the widest net possible of Russian citizens who might engage in citizen appeals, in order to assess overarching demographic trends and approaches that citizens take when confronting these platforms.

To participate in the survey required a user to answer four questions about one's age, gender, city of permanent residence, and citizenship status. While I did not specify that participants needed to be located in their location of residence at the time of taking the survey, I did ask for the name of the city in which they permanently resided, which served as an indication of their geographic location. Most contacting platforms, especially federal or regional ones, require a form of registration or verification of Russian residency. I marked each participant's location based upon the city they provided in this field.

Meanwhile, the questions for age and citizenship status required and forced an answer from each participant. Anyone submitting an age that was 17 or below or who was not a citizen of the Russian Federation would not be able to proceed onto the rest of the survey. I had programmed Qualtrics to prevent any respondents who did not meet this criteria from continuing further. Ineligible participants instead received a default notice informing them that they did not qualify for the study. All others were able to proceed onto the subsequent battery of questions.

Online distribution also allowed for specification in recruiting urban dwelling participants into the survey. I wanted to target urban dwellers in particular, since existing data continues to find large divides between urban and rural dwellers in Russia, specifically in terms of socio-political conditions and capital. Russians living in non-urban spaces face significantly different circumstances that quantitatively affect many measured variables including educational outcomes, internet access, and poverty levels [69, 6, 96]. Additionally, figures from 2020 show that rural areas continue to lag behind urban ones by 16% in terms of public service provision [2]. In the context of citizen appeals, which are closely related to issues of constituency service provision, I was concerned that these drastic underlying distinctions would be exacerbated in the data and prevent generalized trends from emerging. Rural areas in Russia continue to disproportionately face conditions of poverty and persistently low access to the internet, factors which would greatly impact both access and answers to this survey, and initiate points of investigation beyond the scope of this project.

In order to minimize undue variance in the data collection process as a result of this urban-rural divide, I opted to limit the sample population to users from cities in metropolitan urban areas. The Toloka platform allows for some parameters to be set when issuing a task, including limiting its distribution to respondents based upon settlement type. I was able to limit the scope of Russian respondents to those residing in mid- to large-sized urban areas. This specified distribution helped me prevent potentially outlying responses from rural respondents who might face very distinct motivations driven by poverty alleviation when becoming politically involved.

By setting this parameter, I aimed to better capture the function of citizen contacting in urban areas, where the state has prioritized their functionality. While my sample was intentionally non-representative in this regard, this decision generated a sample best suited



to assessing these practices on a wider scale. Residents of mid- and large-sized cities face similar living situations and thus, all other things equal, would provide more comparable responses in expressing motives and approaches when reaching out to the state.

The online Toloka platform additionally provided a few other benefits for the project. Although this survey was issued on an open-source platform with limited ways to assess whether the underlying sample population was fully representative or not, Toloka seems to host a fairly comprehensive online audience. Not only is its Russian-speaking audience extensive - it is almost 75% of the user base - but its users also appear to hail from across the board socioeconomically, politically, and demographically speaking [34]. As a result, I do not expect the descriptive outcomes of this survey to have been particularly biased as a result of utilizing this platform. Being online, it was also available to users across regions and time zones in Russia, and indeed it did reach a fairly widespread segment of the population.

Using this platform, like all online platforms, however, did expose the survey to particular vulnerabilities. Certain segments of the population may have been over- or under-represented in the survey sample. As an online platform, Toloka might not be as readily available or known about for individuals who are not typically associated with robust online activity, such as elderly individuals or disenfranchised groups with limited access to the internet. Once again, this is why I opted to limit the sample to citizens in larger urban areas, which is consistently positively correlated with higher internet usage and where internet access is more reliably and readily available in Russia [96].

In terms of the age inclusivity of this survey, I cannot rule out that the platform trends toward a slightly younger audience. Although, while a gap still exists between younger and elderly generations in terms of internet usage, this divide appears to be closing, with middle-aged and older citizens becoming heavy internet users in Russia as of late [76]. Additionally, income levels and rural residency are stronger predictors of internet access than age, with poorer, rural populations facing greater exclusion than the elderly in Russia [76]. Therefore, in general, this website offered a fairly comprehensive platform from which to launch my survey and, combined with my carefully worded instrument, likely helped minimize bias and confounding factors that might otherwise have occurred.

The online format, although beneficial in many aspects, did generate some challenges. There was an early issue in the survey distribution, which resulted in several duplicate answers, which I subsequently removed. I also faced attrition and some potentially fraudulent answers in the survey, all of which, once identified, were dropped from the final dataset. I inserted an attention check question, as a method to identify attrition or automated answers. This tactic did help sift out many blank responses, although this stop gap measure was not foolproof. A few entries in the optional comment box were inappropriate, which were removed. In a handful of cases, respondents entered a questionable answer for age or city of permanent residence in the first set of 'screening questions' that I flagged as unreliable and also removed from the dataset.<sup>2</sup> I screened for these types of responses, which often signaled

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<sup>2</sup>In the field for city names a few entries were curse words; one age answer was also improbably from a 120 year old.

a low-quality submission, and in many cases did reveal a blank or incomplete survey and were dropped from the final dataset.

There were also some responses from individuals who identified as citizens of Russia, but who did not list their permanent residences as cities within the country. One respondent hailed from a city in Kazakhstan and several cited Ukrainian locations. The respondents from Ukraine were also problematically from cities that have been under jurisdictional controversy during the course of war.<sup>3</sup> I subsequently dropped these handful of Ukrainian responses from the dataset, not only because these cities are not fully governed by Russia, but also because the highly contested status of these regions under various military occupations and the unprecedented wartime conditions in which individuals living in these regions are facing make responses from these places unreliable. Nonetheless, their presence is interesting from the standpoint of this protracted conflict, and gives a minor insight into the polarized mentality of residents in these regions, some of whom are very willing to adopt an identity as a Russian citizen, only a few months after the initiation of Russia's invasion. Either way, I dropped all entries from non-Russian residencies from the final dataset.

I designed and launched the survey with an intended sample size of  $n=2100$  respondents. Ultimately, after removing problematic or duplicate answers, I ended up with a final dataset that included  $n=2260$  unique responses. The summary statistics of this data, displayed in Table 3.1, suggest that the sample included a gender and age balance reflective of the underlying population of Russia. There were  $n=1204$  female respondents and  $n=1056$  male respondents. Proportionately, these amounts are consistent with Russia's actual underlying gender distribution of 53.52% women and 46.48% men. Table 3.1 also demonstrates that the average age of the survey sample was 37.08 years (an average age of 36.7 years for women and 37.5 years for men), whereas the average age in Russia is 40.1 years. Respondent ages range from 18 years to one 98 year-old woman. The mode and median age of respondents was 35 years, with the sample trending slightly younger, as 54% of respondents reported ages less than 37, the mean of the sample, while 46% of respondents reported ages 37 and older.

The summary statistics of the survey in Table 3.1 also display the other main variables collected in the survey. All 'participation type' variables are binary variables, whereas the other variables use a Likert-type scale. Not all respondents answered the questions measuring characteristic variables, but non-responses to those questions were minimal.

The regional distribution of survey responses was also widespread and mimics patterns of citizen contacting as reported at the federal level. Similar to the geographic distribution of citizen contacting toward the Russian Government as discussed in Chapter 2, this survey sample was dominated by responses from the Central Federal District, with a much smaller volume of responses from the Far East and North Caucasus Districts. Table 3.2 provides the total number and percentage of respondents in the survey from each Federal District.

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<sup>3</sup>Two respondents listed their city as Donetsk in the far east of Ukraine and one cited Chernihiv in the northern part of Ukraine, both of which have been under Russian military occupation during points of this invasion.

Table 3.1: Survey Summary Statistics

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Age	2,260	37.078	10.883	18	98
Gender (male)	1,056	0.000	0.000	0	0
Gender (female)	1,204	0.000	0.000	0	0
Participation type: vote	2,260	0.535	0.499	0	1
Participation type: donate	2,260	0.165	0.371	0	1
Participation type: volunteer	2,260	0.066	0.249	0	1
Participation type: e-government	2,260	0.311	0.463	0	1
Participation type: citizen appeals	2,260	0.167	0.373	0	1
Participation type: social initiative	2,260	0.147	0.355	0	1
Participation type: none	2,260	0.146	0.353	0	1
Education	2,243	3.047	0.475	1	5
Self efficacy	2,241	3.924	1.030	1	5
Influence	2,225	2.481	1.128	1	5
Political awareness	2,232	2.531	1.098	1	5
Social media usage	2,240	3.450	0.793	1	4
Satisfaction	2,237	3.466	1.011	1	5
Recommendation	2,230	3.397	1.240	1	5

It demonstrates that 38% of all survey participants reside in the Central Federal District, which includes Moscow. The Far East and North Caucasus Districts each represent less than 1% of the survey sample, which is not surprising given the lower rate of urbanization in and smaller populations of both of these Districts.

Table 3.2: Total Amount and Percentage of Survey Respondents, by Federal District

Federal District	Total Amount	Percent of Survey
Central Federal District	856	38%
Volga Federal District	383	17%
North-Western Federal District	359	16%
Southern Federal District	279	12%
Siberian Federal District	209	9%
Ural Federal District	152	7%
Far East Federal District	17	< 1%
North Caucasus Federal District	5	< 1%

The geographic distribution of my survey sample size is also consistent with patterns in federal level data. Table 3.3 presents the percentage of total appeals made to the Russian Government [see Chapter 2], based on its monthly issued reports, for the years 2020-2022.

There is some variation in geographic distribution between the federal data and my own survey sample. But they are consistent in terms of the source locations, and my survey is not disproportionately sampled from one district, based upon this comparison. This distribution makes me more confident that my survey sample is representative, at least in terms of having a balanced nation-wide sample population.

Table 3.3: Percentage of Appeals to the Russian Government, by Federal District and Year

Federal District	2020	2021	2022
Central Federal District	41%	41%	38%
Volga Federal District	14%	13%	14%
North-Western Federal District	13%	12%	11%
Southern Federal District	12%	11%	11%
Siberian Federal District	9%	10%	9%
Urals Federal District	6%	7%	7%
Far East Federal District	3%	4%	4%
North Caucasus Federal District	3%	3%	3%

When mapped, it is apparent that the location of respondents is more heavily concentrated in the western part of the country [Figure 3.1]. The dots in Figure 3.1 indicate all the cities that respondents listed as their location of permanent residence in the survey. Darker dots indicate a heavier concentration of responses from that city. Visually, respondents are clustered in European Russia, which is also where the majority of Russia's urban population resides.

In addition to being consistent with data reported from the federal government, the survey data distribution also maps onto demographic and population trends within Russia. The Central Federal District, where the bulk of responses originate from, is the most populous District in Russia. It is also host to numerous urban locales, including the city of Moscow. Responses from Moscow were particularly prominent, with nearly 30% of the sample originating from this city. This is a somewhat inflated number as compared to data from the Russian Government, which reports Moscow as responsible for on average 21% of citizen appeals each year. However, given the urban criteria I imposed upon survey participants, this heavy response from the highly urbanized capital city is not unprecedented.

In fact, the survey included respondents from all but two of Russia's top twenty most populous urban centers.<sup>4</sup> Table 3.4 lists the top twelve cities of respondents in the survey. Moscow in the Central District and St. Petersburg in the North-Western District represented, by far, the most popular urban centers in which respondents reside. A large quantity of citizens also hailed from major cities in the Volga and Southern Federal Districts [Table 3.4]. Incidentally, these four Districts - Central, Volga, North-Western, and Southern - together make up 83% of survey responses.

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<sup>4</sup>The only two cities from this list from which I did not receive any responses from are Kazan in the Volga District and Barnaul in the Siberian District.

Figure 3.1: Residence Location of All Survey Participants



Table 3.4: Total Amount of Survey Responses, by City

City (Federal District)	Total Amount
Moscow (Central)	670
St Petersburg (North-Western)	336
Krasnodar (Southern)	92
Rostov (Southern)	88
Ufa (Volga)	87
Perm (Volga)	78
Voronezh (Central)	66
Omsk (Siberian)	64
Krasnoyarsk (Siberian)	62
Volgograd (Southern)	60
Samara (Volga)	60
Chelyabinsk (Ural)	50

Meanwhile, the Far East and North Caucasus Districts represent the smallest percentage of the survey sample [Table 3.2]. These two Districts are also the least populous in Russia

and rank below the nationwide average in terms of level of urbanization. Only 50% of the North Caucasus District population is urbanized, meaning that a large portion of the region would have been excluded from even potentially being selected into the survey. While a higher percentage, around 73% of the population, of the Far East District is urbanized, this is also the least populous District in the nation. Neither of these Districts are home to one the top twenty most populous urban centers in Russia either.

Of the 84 federal units that exist in Russia today, I received responses from participants residing in 61 of them.<sup>5</sup> The 23 federal units from which I did not receive responses are primarily either sparsely populated areas, poor regions, or regions that do not host any medium or large urban centers. Of those that were not represented are the ten least populated federal subjects in Russia, as well as several in the North Caucasus Federal District, which are some of the poorest and most rural regions in Russia. A few other of these missing regions have smaller sized urban centers, making them less likely to have been included in the study. There were only a few missing subjects for which a prominent middle-sized urban area exists and for which there were no respondents, including Altai Krai, Kaliningrad Oblast, Khabarovsk Krai, Ulyankovsk Oblast, and Urdmurtia Republic. Otherwise, the survey did capture a relatively widespread and representative regional sample.

The age distribution of survey participants revealed a sample that trends slightly younger. The range of respondents captured in the survey reflects the full adult population, and it was not limited to only younger respondents. But the average age of survey respondents, 37 years, is slightly younger in relation to the average age of Russia's population, 40 years. Table 3.1 confirms the standard deviation of the ages of all survey participants was over 10, suggesting a large variation in ages across the study. When accounting for gender, the age distribution was also fairly evenly distributed. Figure 3.2 illustrates the mean and confidence intervals of the ages of both female and male survey participants. Figure 3.3 illustrates the mean and confidence intervals of the ages of respondents across Federal Districts. These balanced patterns of distribution age indicate that the survey size was sufficiently large to capture a representative sample of the underlying population. I therefore do not expect the results of this survey to have been particularly skewed by region, age, or gender.

The survey was, first and foremost, an anonymous survey. In order to protect the individuals who participated, I fully anonymized all survey responses. I did not ask for names in the survey and the locations, ages, and genders of each participant were all self-reported. In taking extra steps to protect the privacy and confidentiality of survey subjects, I also did not collect some variables of interest that I had originally intended to, including profession, whether the participant had traveled abroad, and whether they or a family member worked for the state. I hope it will be possible to collect this data in the future, but the

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<sup>5</sup>The federal units from which I did not receive any responses from are: Altai Republic, Altai Krai, Amur Oblast, Chechnya Republic, Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, Dagestan Republic, Ingushetia Republic, Jewish Autonomous Oblast, Kaliningrad Oblast, Kalmykia Republic, Kamchatka Krai, Karachay-Cherkessia Republic, Khabarovsk Krai, Magadan Oblast, Mordovia Republic, Nenets Autonomous Okrug, North Ossetia Republic, Novgorod Oblast, Sakhalin Oblast, TransBaikal Krai, Tuva Republic, Ulyanovsk Oblast, and Udmurtia Republic.

Figure 3.2: Age Distribution of Survey, by Gender

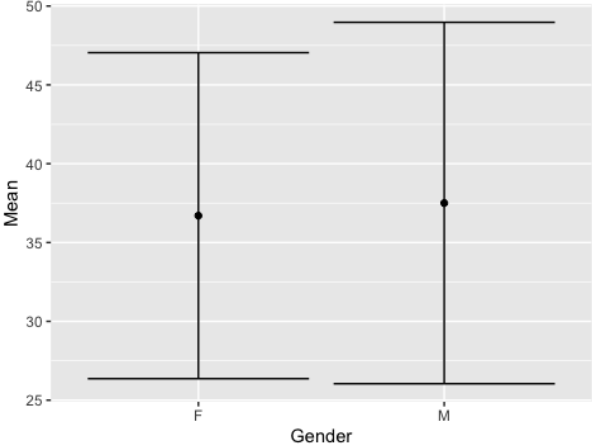
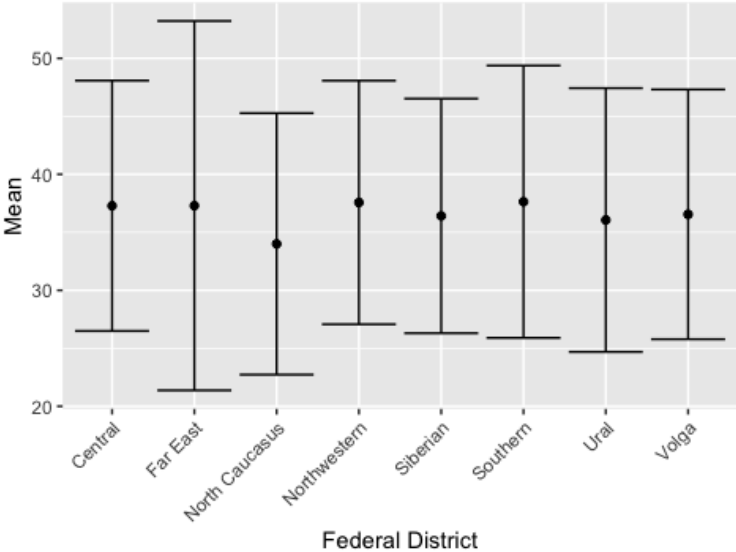


Figure 3.3: Age Distribution of Survey, by Federal District



limited constraints under which I issued the survey meant that these variables were deemed to personally identifying, were not approved, and so were removed from the survey.

In order to account for these limitations, I incorporated into the original design of my research a second component survey that asked some of these more sensitive questions. This second survey was issued only to participants who voluntarily agreed to participate and who voluntarily provided contact information at the end of the first survey instrument. I included a field in my main survey asking all interested participants to provide an email and first name, if willing to be involved in future research. In order to maintain the survey’s anonymity, interested participants were asked to click on a link that would direct them to a separate page

where they could answer questions collecting some of these more identifying variables. In this way, I was able to keep the first survey completely anonymous and distinguish identifying information from the anonymous data in the research.

This second survey, which asked more sensitive questions and included a brief survey experiment, was issued to this sub-sample of willing participants in July 2022. Approximately 30% of original participants voluntarily provided their contact information (n=711). I sent this second follow-up survey to these participants, which also asked further questions about individuals' perspectives on the citizen-state relationship in Russia. Due to a variety of reasons, which I will discuss in Chapter 4, this secondary survey faced several problems in the method and form in which it was distributed and there was a high degree of attrition in this survey. I will not be presenting findings from that secondary survey here. I do hope to redesign and reissue a modified version of it in future research, but for now will focus on the results and findings of my primary anonymized survey.

## 3.2 Survey Results

Once a participant was successfully screened into the survey, they were first asked to select which of the following activities they had been involved in over the last two years. Each respondent was offered six options: voting, volunteering, donating money to a social initiative, participating in a social initiative, using e-government, or contacting an official or governing body. Respondents could select multiple activities, and in fact 34% of respondents were active in more than one activity (n=777). The options I provided were adopted from standard forms of civic engagement and political involvement that social survey in Russia frequently utilize.

By designing this survey to offer multiple activities for participants to potentially select, I was able to contextualize forms of citizen contacting amongst other types of political engagement. I was also able to better isolate the extent to which e-government usage and citizen appealing may be associated with other particular political behaviors or characteristics. At the same time, I was also able to gather data that helped disentangle the purpose, approach, and motivations that individuals take toward both e-government and citizen appeals. In providing multiple options for political activity outside of my targeted area of interest, I was also able to assess how popular forms of citizen contacting actually are as political actions and compare involvement in these activities to other forms of political participation.

Responses from my survey results demonstrate that most individuals are politically involved in at least one way and that many individuals participate across numerous political spheres. Table 3.5 details how many responses were collected for each form of political participation. There were far more people who had engaged in political activity (n=1930) than not. Only 330 respondents selected no political action, reflecting approximately 15% of the survey sample. Figure 3.4 illustrates that voting is by far the most popular form of political activity that survey respondents had engaged in, whereas volunteering is the least frequent behavior amongst participants. Essentially, my survey demonstrates that, contrary

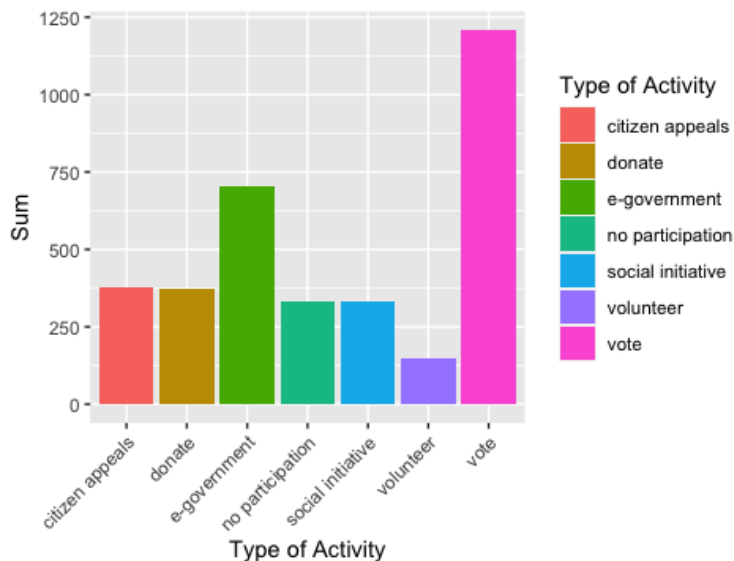


to popular assumptions that Russian citizens are apathetic and uninvolved in politics, they are actually quite civically engaged.

Table 3.5: Total Amount of Survey Responses, by Political Participation

Political Participation	Total Amount
Vote	1208
E-government	703
Citizen appeals	377
Donate	372
Participate in a social initiative	333
Volunteer	150
No participation	330

Figure 3.4: Type of Political Participation



Voting was the most frequent form of political participation in the survey. Over half of respondents admitted to having voted in the last two years [Table 3.5 and Figure 3.4]. Other scholars have noted the high turnout rates of Russians to the voting booth, despite relatively non-competitive elections in the country. Many of them attribute this behavior to a sense of civic duty or to other social pressures that oblige Russians to continue to regularly cast votes [149, 63]. Therefore, that voting was the most popular form of engagement in the survey sample is not surprising.

What was interesting, especially in the context of this project, was that citizen appeals and e-government usage were the second and third most popular activities amongst respondents, respectively [Table 3.5 and Figure 3.4]. Given that the survey was distributed online,

the high rate of e-government usage and citizen appeals, both of which are forms of political participation concentrated on the internet, may be correlated with the fact that participants may have already been internet savvy. However, it also confirms that engaging with the state directly has become an increasingly popular form of political engagement in Russia. Based upon figures shown in Table 3.5, of the survey sample, 30% had utilized some form of e-government and 17% had appealed to an official or governing body. There was also some cross-over between the two activities, as 176 respondents identified as having engaged with both e-government and citizen appeals.

If the participant did select either e-government or citizen appeal as a form of political participation they had engaged in, they were then asked an additional five questions about that experience in the survey. For each of these activities, I asked about how frequently the respondent engaged in that behavior, the level of government with which they interacted, the issue area over which they initiated engagement, what their primary motivation was for doing so, and whether the issue was resolved. Responses from these questions will be presented in the next sections.

All participants were also asked a battery of questions measuring particular individual-level attitudes or characteristics. The questions approximated concepts of self-efficacy, level of political involvement, social media usage, satisfaction with state services, and willingness to recommend these services to others. These variables are significant both in understanding personal motivations for political involvement and in approximating attitudes that we would expect to find in democracies amongst those who participate in politics.

In democracies, self-efficacy is correlated with active political participation, including citizen contacting [40, 30]. Self-efficacy has been shown to be a universal concept, traversing democratic and authoritarian contexts [169]. Nonetheless, Russia's system is unique and so I asked two separate questions related to this concept, which I expected to produce different outcomes. One question asked about a citizen's belief in one's own ability to facilitate the necessary steps to accomplish a goal or need. This question I code as 'self-efficacy'. A second question asks about one's perception in their ability to influence political decision making, in essence their ability to effect change on a larger scale. This question I code as 'influence'. Both variables are reflections of self-efficacy, but in the Russian context, where self-initiated participation in any social setting is very distinct from actual political outcomes, I wanted to be able to differentiate between these two concepts. Additionally, I consider the variable of 'self-efficacy' to be an important indicator of a Needs-based Approach to citizen contacting, while notable levels of 'influence' may manifest amongst individuals applying an Approach of Everyday Resistance.

I also asked a question about political awareness, asking respondents to identify as either highly active in politics, attentive to politics but not participatory, indifferent toward politics, or disliking politics altogether. In democracies, political participation is often linked to awareness or interest in politics. Engagement in politics, especially citizen-initiated contacting, is also likely to lead a citizen of a democracy to become involved in other aspects of politics. Measuring an individual's level of political awareness I anticipated would allow me to gauge whether this relationship also holds in an authoritarian context like Russia. I

coded this variable as ‘political activity’.

I also asked a question about one’s use of social media, ranging from levels of constant use to never using social media. I coded this variable ‘social media’ and anticipated that responses to this question would help me assess the ability of a respondent to navigate online interfaces. Particularly since citizen contacting is increasingly conducted online, I wanted to check whether this was correlated with general online usage. High social media usage may be correlated with age, which might indicate some bias in responses, but it additionally can also be indicative of higher social capital. Those who have a stronger online presence, proxied by social media usage, may be more likely to be exposed to a wider set of social issues and information and retain a higher ability to navigate their way through the online political space. These types of characteristics are emblematic of the sorts of resources that I suggest are important personal assets in the Resource-based Approach to citizen contacting.

Finally, I asked two parallel questions about satisfaction with the state’s online services - a variable I code as ‘satisfaction’ - and one’s willingness to recommend these services to others - a variable I code as ‘recommendation’. Due to the current regime’s highly restrictive censorship laws, asking a direct question about the approval of the state or any of its officials would have been too sensitive and risky. Instead, I asked participants about the state’s services, as a means to measure their willingness to engage with the state’s administrative system and their acceptance of them as functioning and legitimate. By asking participants whether they were satisfied with state services, I hoped to measure their assessment of these systems’ functionality, and to what degree citizens viewed them as trustworthy. I anticipated citizens using a Trust-based approach to feel highly satisfied with state services. By asking if respondents were willing to recommend services to others, I hoped to measure more so how legitimate they felt these systems were. I anticipated that those who considered state services to be highly legitimate would also be much more willing to recommend them to others.

I also asked a question about participants’ education levels, whether they had the equivalent of a high school, college, or professional education, or if they had no education at all. I based these educational categories off of other standard Russian survey instruments. However, perhaps because I targeted urban locations or because active online users tend to be better educated, over 80% of my survey sample were college educated, making correlations based on this variable difficult to ascertain. Russia’s population is notoriously more highly educated than comparable countries and it outperforms other OECD countries in terms of its population’s educational attainment [137]. What would have perhaps been more appropriate for me to ask instead would have been income level as a way to approximate for class status and means. Unfortunately, survey responses did not allow me to clearly determine the relationship between education and political participation amongst respondents.

Finally, one of the last questions of the survey provided space for citizens to provide an open-ended response to include any additional comments on the topic of citizen appeals or e-government. The prompt did not include any qualifiers regarding positive or negative perceptions, but simply initiated space for open-ended responses in which people could convey anything else regarding their experience in citizen contacting. In total 312 respondents

wrote something legible in this text field. Many of these responses were one word answers, typically ‘no’, and did not provide any substantive insight. After removing all one word answers, there were 257 unique substantive comments remaining. These commentaries will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

## Characteristic Data

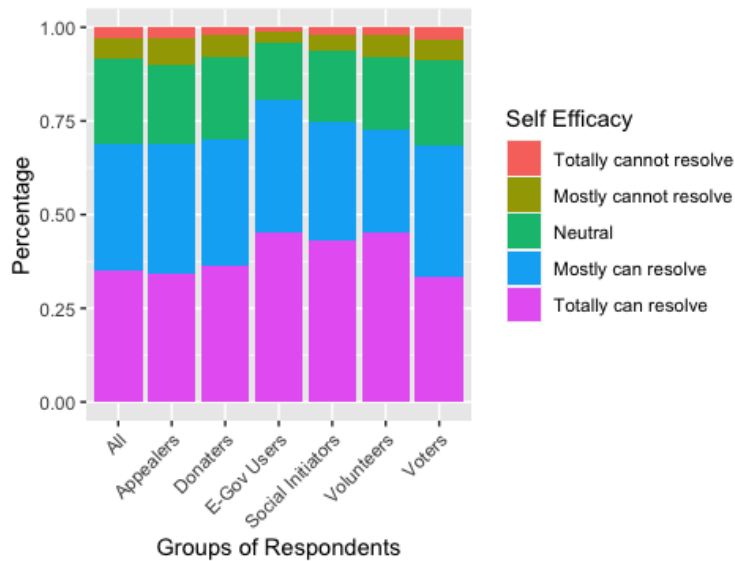
In order to assess citizen contacting as a distinct political action, I first examine how each characteristic variable correlates with each form of political participation. I analyze how the variables ‘self-efficacy’, ‘influence’, ‘social media’, ‘political activity’, ‘satisfaction’, and ‘recommendation’ interact with political engagement in voting, volunteering, participating in a social initiative, donating, using e-government, and making a citizen appeal. This data is descriptive and the relationships I identify are not causal, but they nonetheless reveal some striking patterns across the survey sample. Through a series of regressions and comparative assessments, I determine that notable differences do exist amongst and between groups of respondents and that certain forms of political participation are correlated with shifts in some of these variables.

In this section, I compare responses from participants according to the six forms of political participation offered in the survey, the groups who had engaged in citizen appeals, e-government, donating, voting, volunteering, and a social initiative. Alongside these groupings, I also consider non-participants, or those who did not select any form of political participation in the survey. I also consider the entire survey sample, as a means to provide more comparative context for any marked shifts in variables.

First, I examine ‘self-efficacy’, a variable measuring how well a respondent feels they can resolve an issue at hand. This variable was measured along a 5-point scale, with 5 indicating the highest amount of self-efficacy and 1 the least. Figure 3.5 graphically presents the percentage of survey responses to this question, by each form of political participation as well as for the entire survey sample. The results reveal that the majority of respondents in the survey consider themselves to have a relatively high amount of self-efficacy. Figure 3.5 demonstrates that in the entire survey sample respondents felt that they have the capacity to ‘mostly’ (n=755) or ‘totally’ (n=786) resolve a concern. In other words, approximately 69% of survey respondents felt that they were totally or at least mostly capable of resolving an issue at hand.

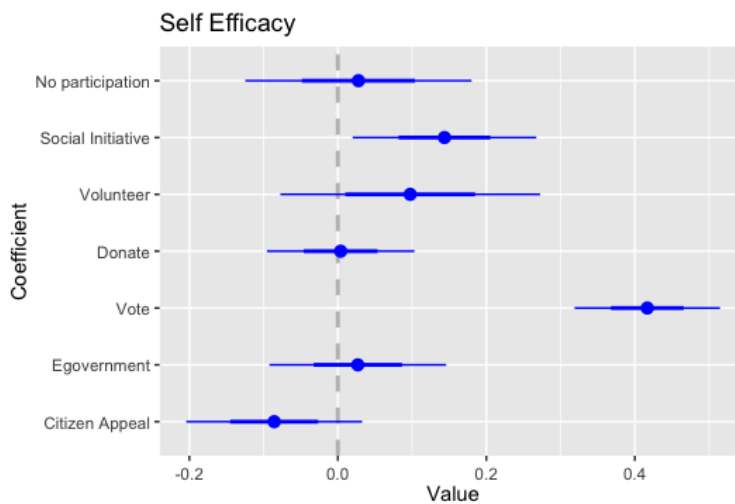
The relatively positive response in self-efficacy is especially true for those who had been involved in e-government. Figure 3.6 provides results from an OLS regression model with self-efficacy as the dependent variable. Of the variables assessed in the model in Figure 3.6, which also includes non-participants, the only two significant coefficients were for those involved in a social initiative or in e-government. Participants who had been engaged in social initiatives were likely to rate themselves 0.143\* points higher on self-efficacy, whereas for e-government users this increase was 0.417\*\*\*. The positive relationship is strongest, by far, for e-government users. Meanwhile, Figure 3.6 shows that involvement in citizen appealing was actually associated with a decrease in self-efficacy of  $-0.085$  points, which

Figure 3.5: Percentage of Survey Responses to Self-Efficacy Measure, by Group of Political Participants



although not statistically significant, nonetheless indicates a negative directionality on this measure.

Figure 3.6: Plot of OLS Estimates of Self-Efficacy, by Group of Political Participants

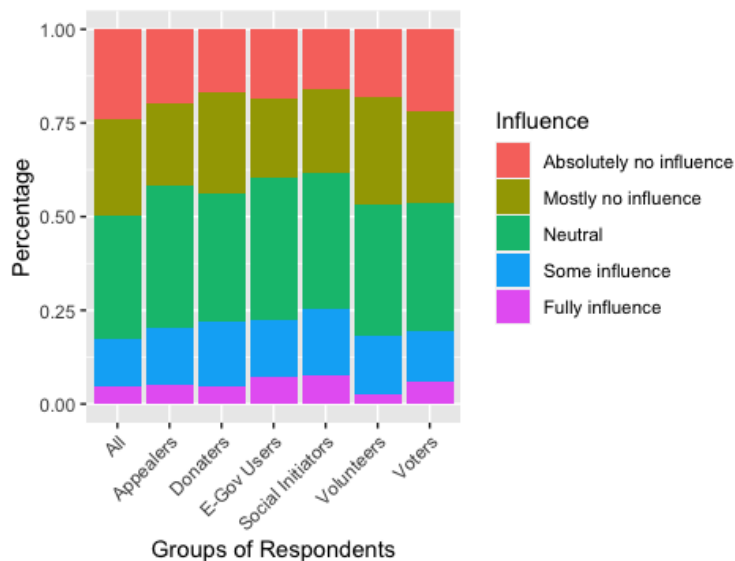


The two activities of interest - citizen appeals and e-government usage - sharply diverge along levels of self-efficacy. While those who use e-government are significantly more likely to be associated with elevated levels of self-efficacy, the opposite is true for those engaged in citizen appeals. Citizen appealing is actually the only political action negatively correlated

with self-efficacy. Even non-participants still had a positive estimate on self-efficacy in this model. The downward trend in this group suggests that unlike all other forms of political involvement, those who have initiated direct contact to the government through a citizen appeal are less likely to believe they had the ability to resolve their issue. Determining whether this relationship is a result of the action or whether people predisposed to feeling less capable gravitate toward this form of involvement is beyond the scope of this project. But, the distribution of the self-efficacy variable suggests that there are distinctions between citizen appeals and e-government, and thus divergent approaches to citizen contacting.

In terms of ‘influence’, a measure of one’s belief in the ability to influence political outcomes, as predicted, responses were quite different from ‘self-efficacy’, conceptualized as personal resolve. The influence variable was also ranked on a 5-point scale, with 5 as fully influential and 1 as having absolutely no influence. Figure 3.7 illustrates the percentage of survey responses to this measure, by political participation and for the entire survey sample. According to Figure 3.7, across the board, most respondents felt they did not at all have much political influence. In the entire survey sample, very few - slightly less than 5% of the survey - expressed feeling that they had total influence over political decision making (n=108). Most felt neutrality toward (n=734) or a general inability to influence politics, which in terms of quantity of responses, appears to be true across all types of political participation.

Figure 3.7: Percentage of Survey Responses to Influence Measure, by Group of Political Participants



Despite an overall trend in the survey of participants expressing less-than optimistic responses about their personal influence over politics, OLS regression reveals that the major factor in whether one felt more or less influential is simply being engaged in a political action. Figure 3.8 presents results of an OLS regression model with influence as the dependent

variable. Similar to analysis on measures of self-efficacy, the results of the OLS model show e-government usage and participation in a social initiative as associated with the largest positive correlations with the influence variable. These two activities appear to be strongly related to measures pertaining to an individual's perception of their own personal capacity to act and make a difference. But overall, the results of the OLS model in Figure 3.8 demonstrate that the major distinction in a respondent's perception of one's own influence lies between participants and non-participants.

Figure 3.8: Plot of OLS Estimates of Influence, by Group of Political Participants

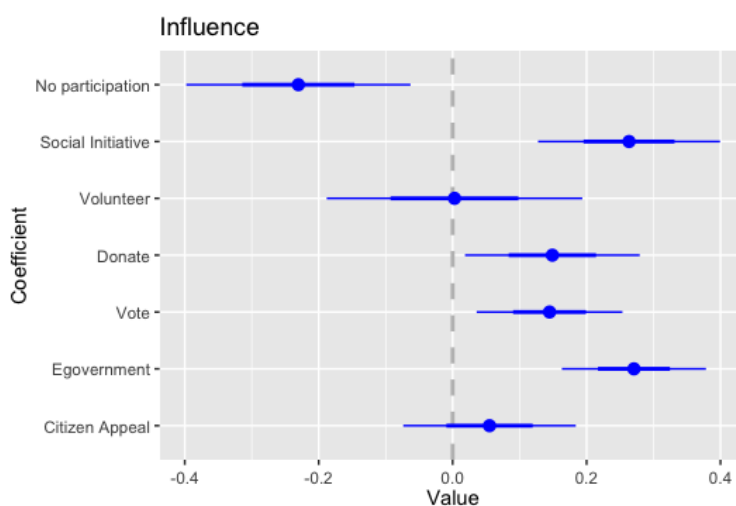
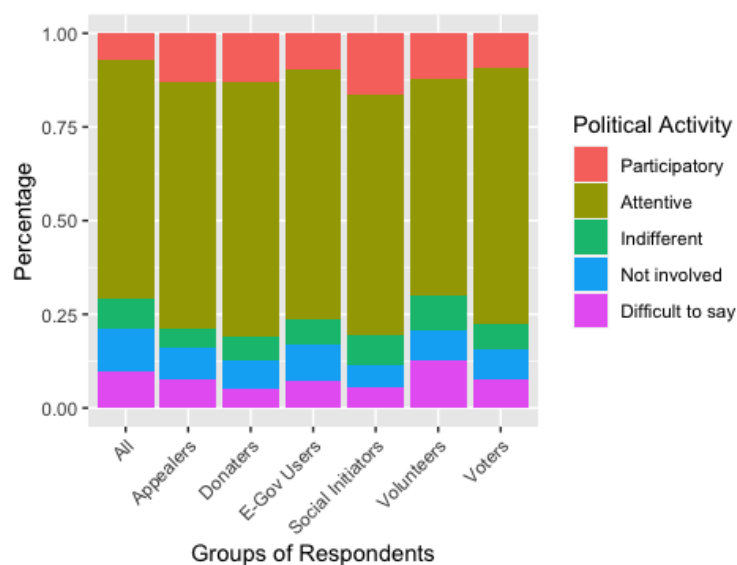


Figure 3.8 reveals that all forms of political activity result in a positive estimate of influence, most of which are significant. In terms of influence, involvement in e-government is associated with a 0.271\*\*\* point increase, voting a 0.155\*\* increase, donating a 0.141\* increase, and involvement in a social initiative a 0.260\*\*\* increase. Citizen appealing and volunteering also resulted in positive estimates, although neither were significant. Non-participants, however, are associated with a significant decrease in influence, with an estimate of  $-0.237^{**}$  [Figure 3.8]. What this analysis implies is that an individual who is not civically or politically engaged (at least in the last 2 years) is significantly less likely to feel that they have any effect over political outcomes or decision making. Engaging in some way, however, will more likely boost one's belief that their involvement can have a political impact.

The analysis found that almost every form of political involvement was also associated with a positive shift in the variable 'political activity'. This variable was measured on a 5-point scale, with 4 as not at all involved politically and 1 as fully participatory in politics. On this scale, a lower score indicates a higher level of political activity. I also included a 5th option of 'difficult to say' as a potential response for this question. I do not model this response, essentially resulting in political activity as a 4-point measurement. I offered this 5th response as a safety measure for those who felt it too risky to admit their level of political engagement, given the current restrictive sociopolitical climate in Russia.

Figure 3.9 displays the responses participants provided to this question. Slightly less than 10% of the total survey sample did select the option of ‘difficult to say’ for their political activity status ( $n=220$ ). Otherwise, Figure 3.9 reveals a large share of respondents across all forms of engagement feeling either fully participatory in politics ( $n=155$ ) or at least attentive to them ( $n=1429$ ), representing about 71% of all survey respondents. In total, the majority of participants were at least aware of current politics.

Figure 3.9: Percentage of Survey Responses to Political Activity Measure, by Group of Political Participants

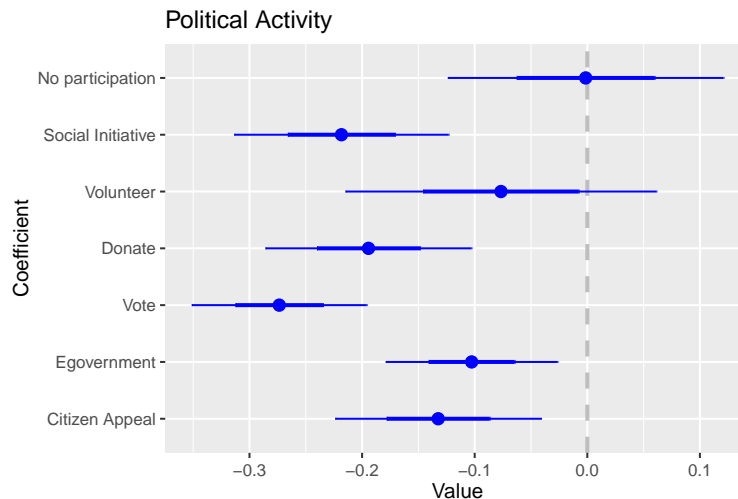


Despite the large share of respondents admitting to being attuned to politics, estimates from an OLS regression model with political activity as the dependent variable demonstrate that the biggest division between those who are most and least active in politics is whether one participates in them. This OLS model does not include those answers of ‘difficult to say’. Figure 3.10 displays the outcomes of this OLS model, where it is apparent that those who are less engaged or aware of politics are non-participants. All forms of political engagement are associated with more political activity. Voters are nearly 0.3 points more politically active ( $0.274^{***}$ ) while donaters and participants in social initiatives are approximately 0.2 points more politically active ( $0.194^{***}$  and  $0.218^{***}$ , respectively). E-government users and citizen appealers are also comparable on this measure, both associated with about a 0.1 point increase in political awareness ( $0.103^{**}$  and  $0.132^{**}$ , respectively). Contrasted to non-participants, forms of political engagement are associated with a more active awareness in politics.

The wide amount of variation amongst non-participants does indicate that it is perhaps not just political involvement that is correlated with political activity; there are likely many other factors at work as well. Since the majority of the survey - 64% of all respondents -



Figure 3.10: Plot of OLS Estimates of Political Activity, by Group of Political Participants



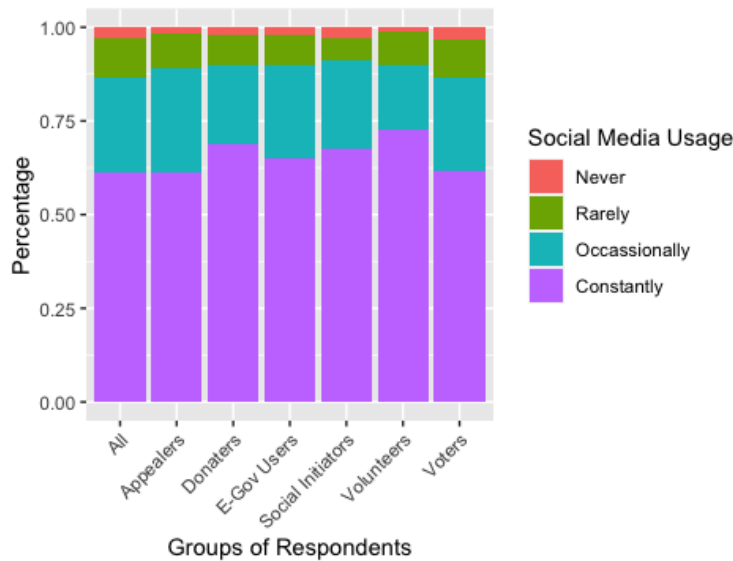
identified as attentive to politics, this measure does not appear to be the most reliable indicator for assessing approaches to political engagement. Nonetheless, it does make intuitive sense that a positive relationship exists between political activity and participation, which is not generally exhibited amongst non-participants. Civic engagement is often more likely to be executed by people who are more politically aware and becoming involved in politics provides greater exposure to political events and discourse. Even within a survey population that highly identified as being politically aware, a pattern supporting the role of political engagement in having a positive impact on political activity still emerges.

Social media usage was also widespread across the survey sample. This variable was ranked on a 4-point scale, with 4 being the most active social media users and 1 being individuals who were not on social media at all. As a variable, social media usage reflects a participant's savviness with online formats and interfaces, and to this degree represents a form of social capital for an individual. Heavier social media users are likely to be more familiar with navigating online spaces, including online government services, and may also be more aware of local social issues that are often circulated on these platforms.

Within the total survey sample, a majority of respondents admitted to constantly using social media. Figure 3.11 depicts responses to the social media variable question, for all groups of participants as well as for the whole survey sample. Of all survey participants, 61% constantly used social media, while less than 3% had never used it. This survey instrument was distributed online, so I had anticipated a high rate of social media usage amongst participants.

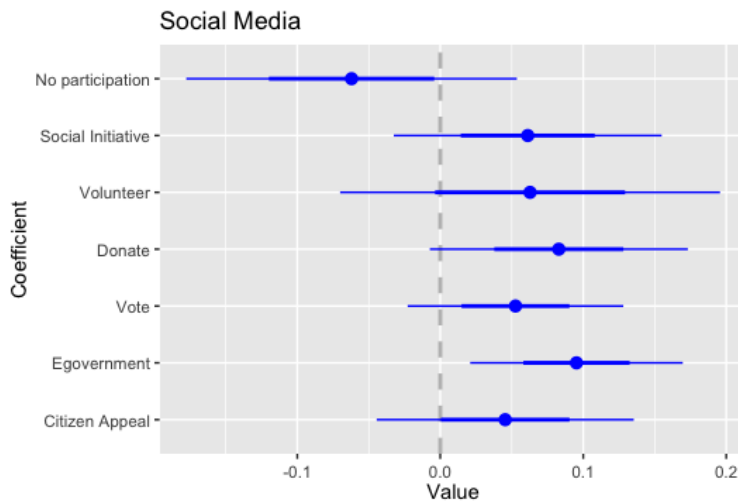
For this reason as well, I am not entirely surprised that the only group which exhibited a significant relationship with social media usage were e-government users. Figure 3.12 displays OLS regression estimates with social media usage as the dependent variable. While most individuals who had engaged in a form of political participation did experience generally

Figure 3.11: Percentage of Survey Responses to Social Media Measure, by Group of Political Participants



positive coefficients, only e-government users experience a significantly positive increase in social media usage 0.01\*. Even age was not a factor in social media usage, with age have a negligible or even slightly negative relationship with social media usage. The skills needed to navigate the digital world may work in parallel with both social media and e-government usage. Supporting my conjecture that social media usage may also be a proxy for a form of social capital that may help facilitate political engagement, the only group associated with a downward trend in social media usage are non-participants.

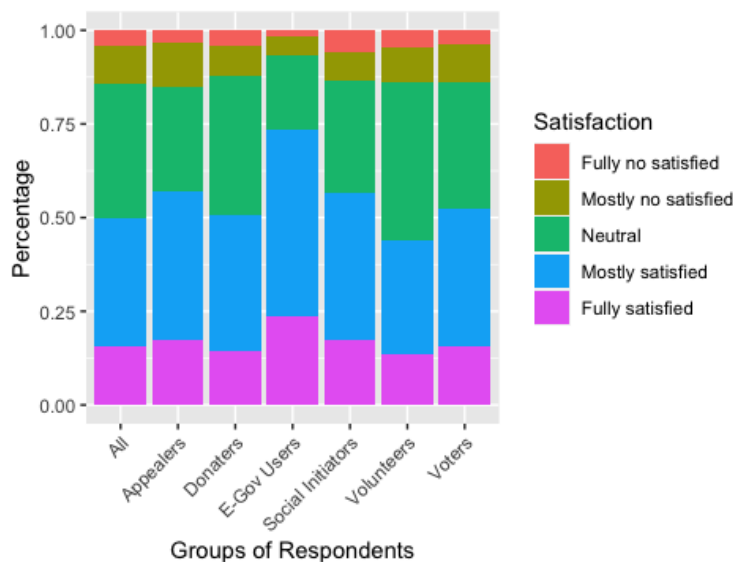
Figure 3.12: Plot of OLS Estimates of Social Media, by Group of Political Participants



Finally, I assess participants' satisfaction with and willingness to recommend state services to others. I did not specify a specific service or level of service in the question, but simply asked it in reference to all online state services. Both questions also avoided language about the regime or state, instead asking specifically about state services. Both of these variables were measured on a 5-point scale with 5 being fully satisfied with and fully willing to recommend state services and 1 being fully unsatisfied and fully unwilling to recommend them to others.

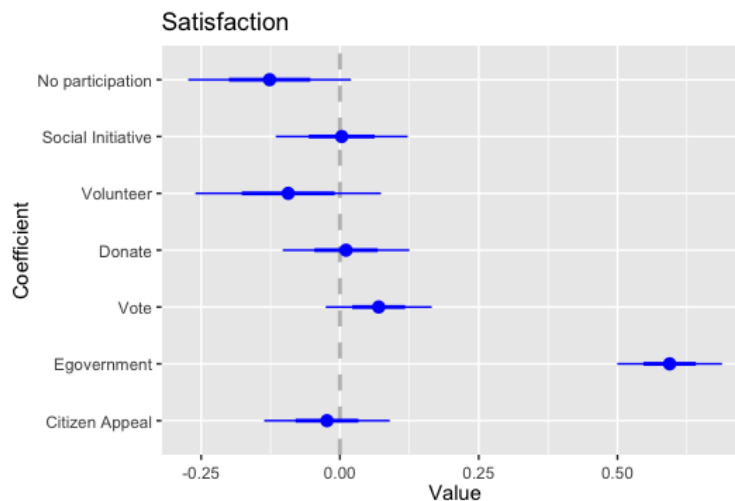
Starting with satisfaction, participants did not exhibit any particularly negative views toward government services. Figure 3.13 graphically depicts participant responses to this question. While there is a great deal of neutral responses - 36% of all users reported neutral levels of satisfaction (n=802) - 34% of total users (n=765) were mostly satisfied and 16% (n=348) were fully satisfied with these systems. As a measure of functionality, most participants are relatively satisfied with government services, indicating that these systems are not totally dysfunctional.

Figure 3.13: Percentage of Survey Responses to Satisfaction Measure, by Group of Political Participants



However, the group most satisfied with government service provisions and infrastructures are by far e-government users. Figure 3.14 offers the OLS coefficients for a model with satisfaction as the dependent variable. The estimate for e-government usage is off the charts, as this group is 0.594\*\*\* points more likely to express satisfaction. Figure 3.13 illustrates that a higher percentage of e-government users are more likely to express full satisfaction, as compared to other forms of political participation or even to the total underlying sample. The significant value of this estimate in Figure 3.14 only further supports how strongly the relationship between satisfaction and e-government usage is amongst participants.

Figure 3.14: Plot of OLS Estimates of Satisfaction, by Group of Political Participants



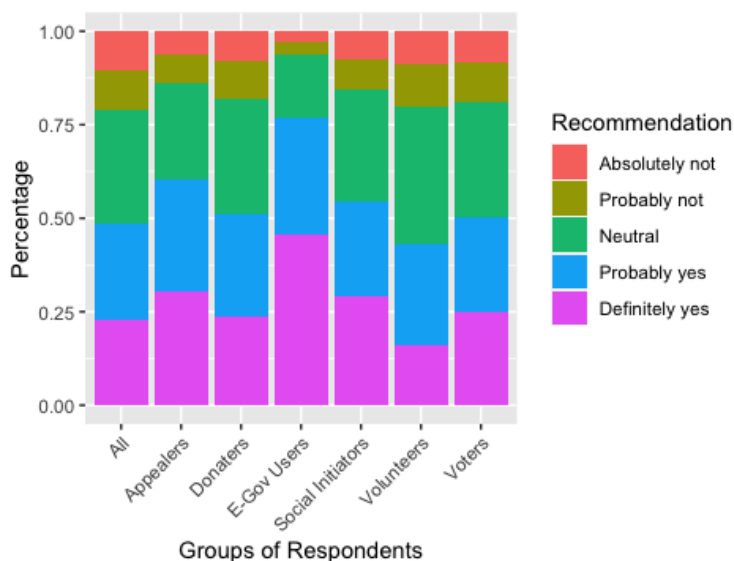
Otherwise, most other participants are not especially satisfied or dissatisfied with online government services. In fact, while not significant, those who had directly contacted the government through a citizen appeal were even slightly less likely to be satisfied. Regardless, political participants (minus e-government users) and non-participants expressed relatively balanced responses toward satisfaction, which may indicate that the state has room to improve their services or perhaps reflects a lack of use of these systems by some respondents. I may have worded the question too vaguely; perhaps participants would have reacted more strongly had I specified a particular service or offered two separate questions for satisfaction with e-government and satisfaction with citizen appeals infrastructures. But by these survey responses, the strongest predictor of being satisfied with the government's service apparatus, and as a result feeling that it is functional and usable, is to engage with e-government.

In terms of recommending state services to others, participant responses were more varied across groups. This distribution is interesting, especially since I consider the recommendation variable to more closely reflect legitimacy of these services. If an individual is willing to recommend these institutions to others, I consider this an indication that they possess a basic belief that the systems are both functional and, more importantly, legitimate. Additionally, a high willingness to recommend state services also captures the extent to which these systems may be bolstering the state's reputation as a responsive or attentive state to citizen needs. High rates of recommendation perpetuate both the legitimacy and reputation of these systems, which is not necessarily congruent with perspectives on the regime or its leadership, but can be harnessed by the state to bolster larger political agendas of enhancing or expanding state authority.

Figure 3.15 shows the distribution of responses to the recommendation variable. Within the entire survey sample, while the most popular response was neutrality to this question - 30% of all respondents answered neutrally - there was not a majority trend within the total

survey responses as to whether individuals felt that they might or might not recommend these services.

Figure 3.15: Percentage of Survey Responses to Recommendation Measure, by Group of Political Participants

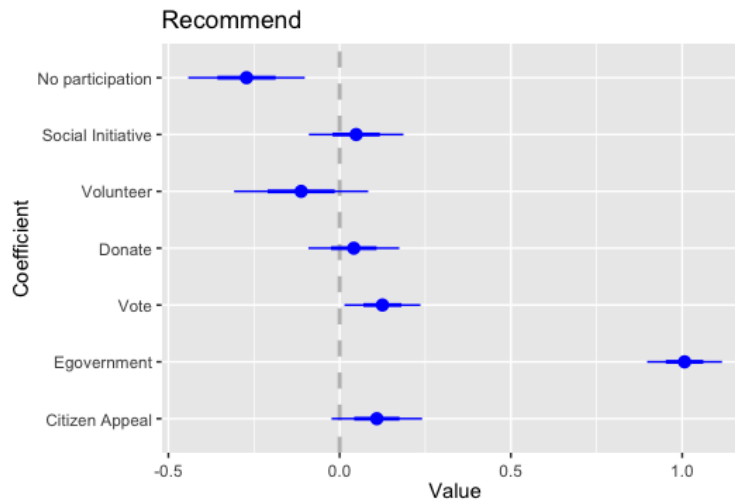


Disaggregating these responses by categories of political participants, however, reveals again that e-government users are an exceptional group in this regard. Figure 3.16 plots the OLS estimates from a model with the recommendation measure as the dependent variable. E-government users are again off the charts more likely to recommend state services to others by a 1.007\*\*\* point estimate. E-government usage has, by far, the strongest relation with this variable, even when accounting for age and other controls.

The estimates in Figure 3.16 show that groups of political participants have varied levels of willingness to recommend state services. Only non-participants are significantly less likely to recommend these systems to others (0.272\*\*). Otherwise, those who have been involved in a political action that directly brings them face-to-face with the state are more likely to exhibit a positive tendency to recommend. Citizen appeals and voting, two other political behaviors in this list in which a citizen is involved with the state, are also associated with a positive estimate on the recommendation variable. They both represent the next two largest positive estimates in the model - 0.125\* for voting and 0.109 for citizen appeals - which is interesting since both actions can be enacted through an online state service. Taken together, these coefficients suggest that actually engaging with the state and its services can induce a greater willingness to recommend them to others, indicating a simultaneous boost of legitimacy and reputation for these institutions amongst these participants.

Along the measures of recommendation and satisfaction, the group with the strongest relationship is clearly e-government users. The estimates for this coefficient are dramatic for both dependent variables. Since their outcomes are so outstanding, it leads me to believe that

Figure 3.16: Plot of OLS Estimates of Recommendation, by Group of Political Participants



individuals who have engaged with e-government services have found them both functional and legitimate. Although the question does not specify e-government, it is likely that e-government is what these respondents had in mind, given their own experience with it. This group's positive correlation with recommendation and satisfaction indicates that the state interactions they received over these platforms were unique in some way to generate such a response. Ultimately, this group, either because of their preexisting attitudes toward state services or their subsequent engagement with them, are strong contenders for circulating a narrative of legitimacy and responsiveness on behalf of the incumbent state.

At first glance, it is somewhat surprising that positive trends in recommendation and satisfaction variables are not as pronounced for those who have engaged in citizen appeals. Making an appeal also brings one into contact with the state, mostly online similar to e-government users, and yet they do not experience a similar increase along these variable estimates. Again, this could perhaps be the result of a vaguely worded question that did not trigger the participant to think of their own citizen contacting as part of online state services. But it might also be a reflection of the fact that, by the nature of citizen appeals, this form of contact can span and encompass a wide array of issues and concerns. Unlike e-government, which as I have shown in the case of Moscow is often limited to specific, pre-approved issue areas, citizen appeals often identify thornier or more elaborate questions that state services are less equipped to handle or less willing to address. As a result, a respondent who has engaged in citizen appeals may have been left with an underwhelming impression of the service.

## Non-Participants

One of the largest gaps in coefficient estimates across the OLS models for each variable presented in the section above is between participants and non-participants. In the survey, there were 330 non-participants, or individuals who had indicated no form of political engagement over the last two years. Before addressing the specific components and descriptive details of engaging in citizen appeals or e-government, I will first look more closely at non-participants as a whole and summarize trends and general traits within this distinct group.

Table 3.6 presents the summary statistics of non-participant respondents. As a group of individuals in the sample, non-participants tended to be younger than the average age of the underlying sample population of 37.1 years old. Table 3.6 reveals the average age of non-participants to be 34.3 years. According to this table, more non-participants were women (56% of non-participants), which is more than the average of women in the total sample (53%). These respondents were not concentrated in any particular area of the country, but spread across federal districts and regions like the rest of the sample. Table 3.6 demonstrates that their level of education is also consistent with the underlying population, indicating that apolitical citizens, at least in this survey, do not differ from others in terms of their educational attainment.

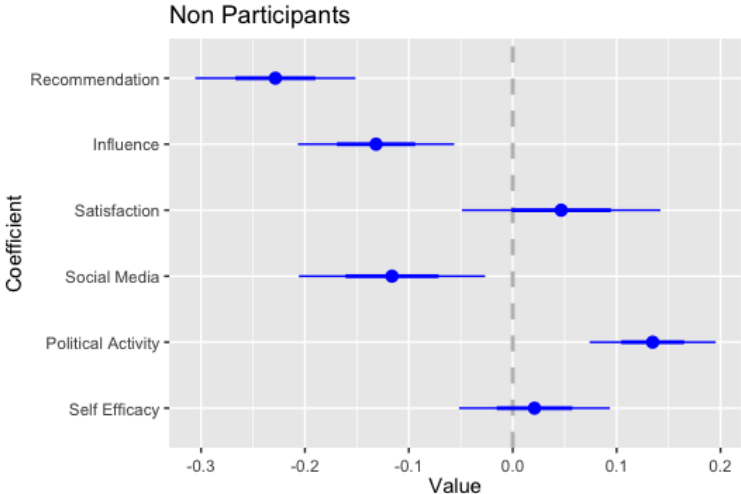
Table 3.6: Summary Statistics of Non-Participants

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Age	330	34.294	9.823	18	71
Gender (male)	145	0.000	0.000	0	0
Gender (female)	185	0.000	0.000	0	0
Education	320	3.016	0.504	1	5
Self efficacy	319	3.824	1.099	1	5
Influence	315	2.048	1.041	1	5
Political awareness	316	2.937	1.228	1	5
Social media usage	319	3.351	0.822	1	4
Satisfaction	318	3.142	0.990	1	5
Recommendation	318	2.745	1.205	1	5

Otherwise, the group of non-participants diverges from the others in the survey who had engaged in at least one form of political action. Figure 3.17 presents the coefficient estimates from a regression model with the binary variable of non-participants as the dependent variable for each of the six characteristic measures collected in the survey. Estimates for non-participants are also displayed in plots in the previous section.

The areas where non-participants are particularly distinct is in their perceived levels of political influence and their willingness to recommend state services to others. They are significantly less likely to believe that they have influence over politics and significantly

Figure 3.17: Plot of OLS Estimates of Each Variable for Non-Participants



much less likely to recommend state services to others, both as shown in Figure 3.17 and when compared to other types of political participants [see Figure 3.8 and Figure 3.16]. Figure 3.17 also illustrates that non-participants are less politically active (represented by a positive estimate) and tend to use social media less. This group doesn't necessarily exhibit particularly high levels of self-efficacy or satisfaction with state services. Yet they are notable as a group that is less likely to be engaged in politics or feel that they can impact politics in anyway, has less online exposure as less frequent users of social media, and is less willing to vocalize support of state services as legitimate political platforms.

Within the context of citizen contacting, the coefficients of non-participants demonstrates the real effects that not engaging with contacting systems may have for the regime. Since non-participants are far less likely to be willing to spread positive reviews about state services, they are also less useful as vehicles in disseminating state legitimacy or reputation building through these institutions. Holding a positive and satisfactory view on state services is a favorable outcome for the regime, but is far less likely to emerge if one is not politically engaged. Without the experience of directly interacting with the state - or even of simply casting a vote or donating to or participating in a social cause - a citizen might be less inclined to accept the state apparatus as a legitimate institution. This situation illustrates the paradox for many autocratic states, who on the one hand prefer citizens to remain out of politics, but, on the other hand, also want citizens to become enough politically engaged to consider and accept the state's legitimacy and authority.

Whether the correlations displayed in Figure 3.17 are a result of non-participants holding preexisting individual-level attitudes or beliefs that predispose them to exhibit these traits, or whether it is political inaction that shifts their responses along these measures cannot be determined from this survey. However, this descriptive data does demonstrate that abstaining from politics, even in an authoritarian context like Russia's is associated with specific



characteristics. The general traits exhibited by non-participants may help stabilize the political regime, as this group by and large does not appear to be one enthusiastic about initiating involvement in politics. But they also may not necessarily be benefiting the regime, as there is no indication that they are willing to recommend, and thus support the initiatives, of the elaborate online administrative apparatus that the Russian state has developed.

I did not measure whether respondents had heard of state services, so it is possible that non-participants have little knowledge about these systems, and even potentially other political processes, and so refrain from engaging with them. In fact, approximately 50% of non-participants selected a neutral answer to satisfaction with state services, and the fact that a significant portion of them are not willing to recommend these services, also indicates that many may do not even know that such services exist. However, around 30% of this group also indicated feeling fully or mostly satisfied and 20% fully or mostly dissatisfied with state services, meaning they are aware that these systems are available. So, not all of these negative variable estimates can be attributed only to ignorance of state services. Many within this group appear to be aware of the state's online presence, and yet they have actively chosen not to engage with it.

Non-participants' disengagement may reflect underlying views of malaise toward the state. If taking a Trust-based Approach, it may be that these individuals do not engage because they do not view these systems as legitimate or do not fully trust the state. However, there are other indications that suggest it is not fully a trust-related issue that is inhibiting their political participation.

The case of non-participants offers insight into the role that online engagement may play in facilitating political participation amongst citizens in authoritarian regimes. Non-participants are less likely to be active social media users. Social media usage is typically associated with younger populations, however, non-participants are already younger than the average age in the survey sample. Table 3.6 demonstrates that the average age of a non-participant is 34.3 years; the median age of non-participants is also 33 years and the mode is 30 years. I would expect individuals in their early 30s to be highly active users of social media, so the fact that they are less frequent users and subsequently have not been civically engaged in the last two years, suggests that there is some unique relationship with these factors.

In this case, non-participants may actually have less social capital or social resources with which to engage in politics. Of course, individuals abstain from social media for many reasons, but assessed together with other indicators in this survey, especially their tendency to feel more antithetical and less influential in politics, this group appears to exhibit traits characteristic of one who has fewer resources for action. This group may have less mastery over the online space and perhaps fewer opportunities through which they can become aware of social issues or be presented channels through which they might become involved in addressing them. The group of non-participants, through a Resource-based Approach, may actually lack adequate skills to engage themselves in any form of political participation, let alone citizen contacting or e-government usage.

## Citizen Appeals

I now turn to the responses of the 377 survey participants who identified as having engaged in a citizen appeal. Approximately 17% of the survey population had appealed directly to an official or branch of government, a figure consistent with other nation-wide polls that also report a similar participation rate in this activity. In this section, I will examine the results from the subsequent questions asked to these respondents who had selected citizen appeals as a form of participation in the survey instrument. These will include questions about the frequency, modality, resolution, and issue area of the appeal, as well as an individual's primary motivation for initiating direct contact.

Table 3.7 presents the summary statistics for all respondents who had engaged in a citizen appeal. This subset of the sample proved to be an older group than the underlying population, with an average age of 40 years [Table 3.7].<sup>6</sup> Regression analysis also confirm that this group of contacters is significantly older than the rest of the sample [Table 3.8], indicating that citizen appeals tend to be less popular among younger citizens.

Table 3.7: Summary Statistics for Citizen Appeals

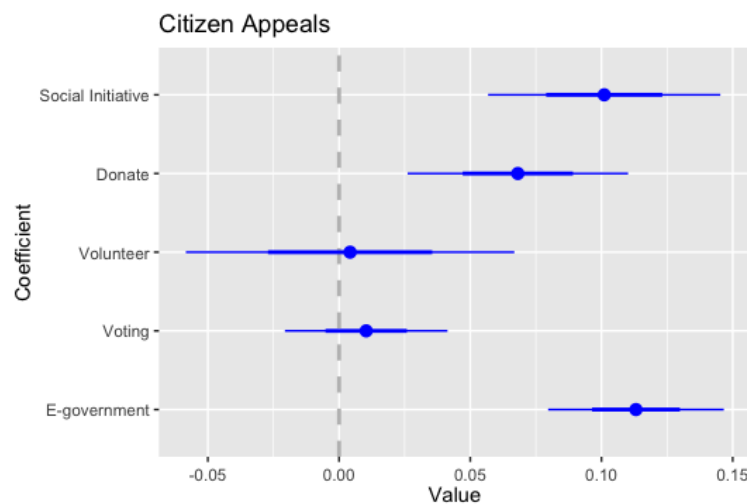
Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Age	377	40.212	10.400	18	80
Citizen appeals + vote	203	0.538	0.499	0	1
Citizen appeals + donate	87	0.231	0.422	0	1
Citizen appeals + volunteer	29	0.077	0.267	0	1
Citizen appeals + e-government	176	0.467	0.500	0	1
Citizen appeals + social initiative	91	0.241	0.428	0	1
Education	373	3.064	0.410	1	5
Self efficacy	373	3.898	1.050	1	5
Influence	373	2.638	1.112	1	5
Political awareness	372	2.317	1.052	1	5
Social media usage	373	3.485	0.732	1	4
Satisfaction	373	3.558	1.016	1	5
Recommendation	372	3.707	1.157	1	5

Table 3.7 also showcases the number of respondents who had made a citizen appeal in addition to another form of political participation. Only 86 individuals indicated having only exclusively participated by making a citizen appeal. The majority of these respondents had also been involved in other forms of political engagement. 176 of those in this group had also engaged in e-government usage, indicating a crossover between these two forms of contacting.

<sup>6</sup>40 years is also the mode age for this group.

Figure 3.18 represents the OLS estimates of each form of political participation on citizen appealing. It demonstrates that those who have made an appeal are also likely to have been civically involved in other ways, especially in e-government. Both e-government usage and participation in a social initiative are strongly correlated with citizen appealing; both of these behaviors are associated with a positive estimate on citizen appealing of around 0.1 (.113\*\*\* for e-government and 0.101\*\*\* for social initiatives). In fact, the relationships between citizen appealing and each form of political participation demonstrated in Figure 3.18 are all positive, meaning it is not unusual for respondents to participate across multiple dimensions of political action.

Figure 3.18: Plot of OLS Estimates of Forms of Political Involvement on Citizen Appeals



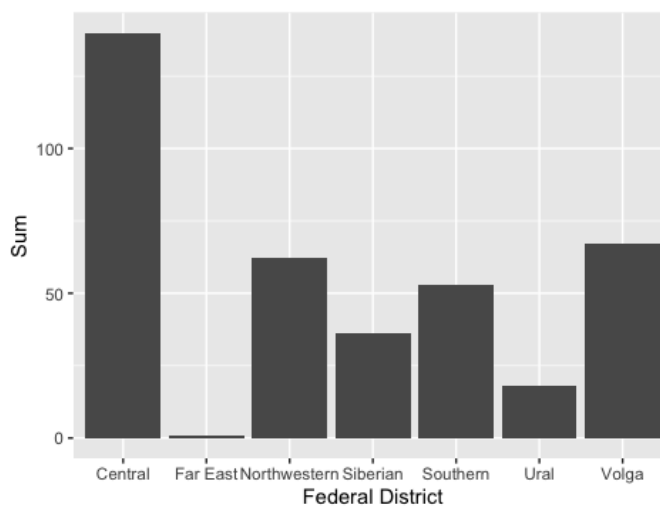
As a group, citizen appellors are unique in a few key characteristic ways. Table 3.8 illustrates an OLS regression table of each characteristic variable, with citizen appealing as the dependent variable outcome. It reveals that, as already mentioned, this group is statistically significantly older than the underlying survey sample. It also highlights that this group tends to exhibit lower levels of self-efficacy, although they do not generally appear to exhibit a low value on the influence variable. Citizen appellors, as a group, are significantly more likely to be expressive of political activity (for this measure a negative coefficient indicates greater political activity). And despite being more dissatisfied with state services, they are also statistically more likely to recommend them.

There are two key takeaways from the descriptive results in Table 3.8. First, these findings suggest that this group of citizen appellors is more likely to feel less optimistic in their ability to address an issue, but simultaneously consider themselves as having influence over political outcomes. Perhaps this is why they turn to citizen appeals in the first place. Since these respondents do not feel highly self-efficacious, they may be more inclined to turn to the state, which they have higher expectations of in assisting them. Secondly, the other key feature of this group that emerges from Table 3.8 is that these respondents are less likely

to be satisfied with state services, but are also significantly more likely to recommend them to others. This finding feels counter-intuitive, but when considered with the group's outlook on self-efficacy and influence, this two-faced response perhaps makes sense. Since this group shares a general belief that they can influence political outcomes, they may exhibit greater willingness to recommend services that facilitate this, but as they are also less certain of their capacity to address an issue, they may express lower rates of satisfaction in those state services.

Citizen contacting, like all other forms of political activity, was geographically concentrated in the Central District and in Moscow specifically. Figure 3.19 illustrates the geographic distribution of citizen appeals in the survey by each Federal District. In terms of quantity, this practice is centralized in the Central District. However, Figure 3.19 also shows that a fair amount of citizen appealing occurred across other parts of the country as well. In the survey, there were no respondents from the North Caucasus District who had engaged in a citizen appeal, not surprising since this Federal District also represents the least politically active district amongst survey responses. The distribution of citizen appeals mimics the distribution of political participation across the entire survey, indicating that it is a widespread practice and that citizens across the country, not just in the capital city, utilize these structures in order to initiate contact with an official or governing body.

Figure 3.19: Total Amount of Citizen Appeals, by Federal District



The first question respondents were asked, following their selection of engagement in a citizen appeal in the survey, was about how frequent they made such contact. Figure 3.20 displays the results from this question. Overwhelmingly, individuals are most likely to make an appeal only once or twice ( $n=311$ ). Frequent appellers, those who return and make an appeal three times or more are quite rare, comprising only 64 respondents. I did not specify in this question whether these repeat users made several appeals regarding the same or different issue areas, regardless, this behavior is not especially common.

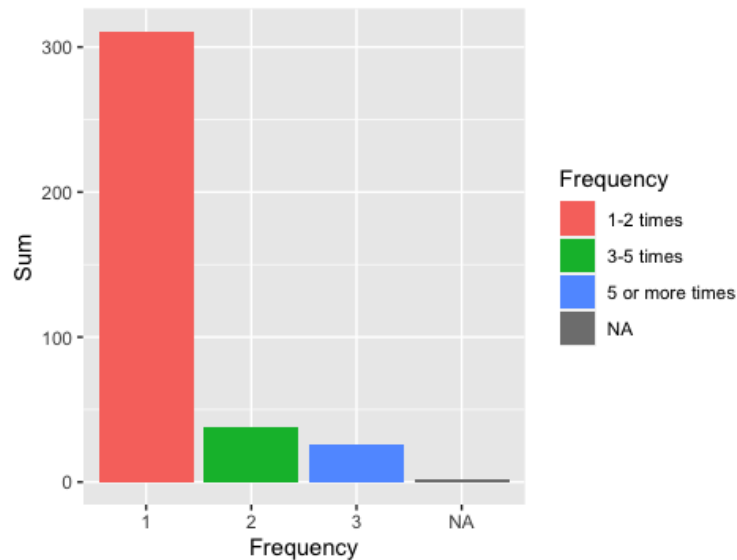
Table 3.8: Regression Table OLS Estimates for Citizen Appeals from Survey Data

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Citizen Appeal	
	(1)	(2)
Self-Efficacy	-0.016* (0.009)	-0.010 (0.009)
Political Activity	-0.024*** (0.007)	-0.021*** (0.007)
Social Media	0.003 (0.010)	0.013 (0.010)
Satisfaction	-0.018 (0.011)	-0.019* (0.011)
Influence	0.007 (0.008)	0.010 (0.008)
Recommendation	0.041*** (0.009)	0.036*** (0.009)
Gender (male)		-0.015 (0.016)
Education		0.003 (0.017)
Age		0.004*** (0.001)
Constant	0.187*** (0.054)	-0.023 (0.084)
Observations	2,206	2,206
R <sup>2</sup>	0.021	0.035
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.018	0.031
F Statistic	7.853*** (df = 6; 2199)	8.937*** (df = 9; 2196)

*Note:*

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Figure 3.20: Total Amount of Citizen Appeals, by Frequency



I would have expected this small group of respondents who did make more than three appeals in the prior two years to the survey to be an older group. Given assumptions that older individuals are often more politically active, I presumed the same might be true in this case. While the average age of these frequent users was consistent with the rest of group of contacters, Figure 3.21 displays a density plot of the ages for this group of frequent contacters and demonstrates that in practice this group also comprises several younger participants as well. That this group is not notably older than average, with a large portion of respondents in their 30s, may reflect the online format in which these appeals are often presented and with which younger participants may be more familiar.

When asked about whether their appeal was resolved, responses were not so straightforward. Figure 3.22 illustrates the status of an appeal for each respondent. Surprisingly, a little less than one third (28%) of this group admitted that their issue was not resolved. Whether they pursued other avenues in order to address their concern or issue is not clear. But a non-responsiveness rate that high, indicates that citizen appeals, at least among respondents in this survey, is not a foolproof method to receiving attention from the state. Figure 3.22 reveals that over 50% of respondents did experience a resolution to their appeal, but the high rate of individuals who felt their issue was not resolved is remarkable.

This disparity in responsiveness is further complicated by the fact that individuals who make citizen appeals are also often very willing to recommend state services to others [see Table 3.8]. Yet by their own admission, not every respondent who contacted the state seems to be reaping tangible benefits from doing so. Such a discrepancy in responses from this group indicates that citizen appeals, as an institution, may function as more than just an avenue to relay concerns to and have them addressed by authorities. Perhaps, taking an Approach of Everyday Resistance, individuals are willing to use these structures as a way

Figure 3.21: Density Plot of Age for Frequent Citizen Appealers

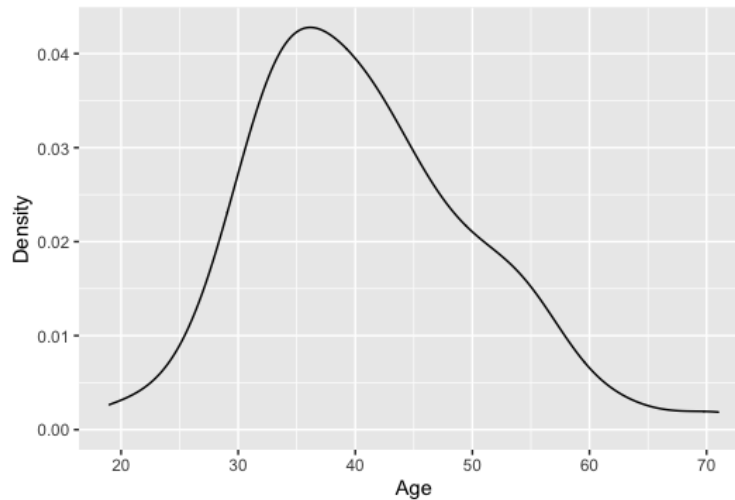
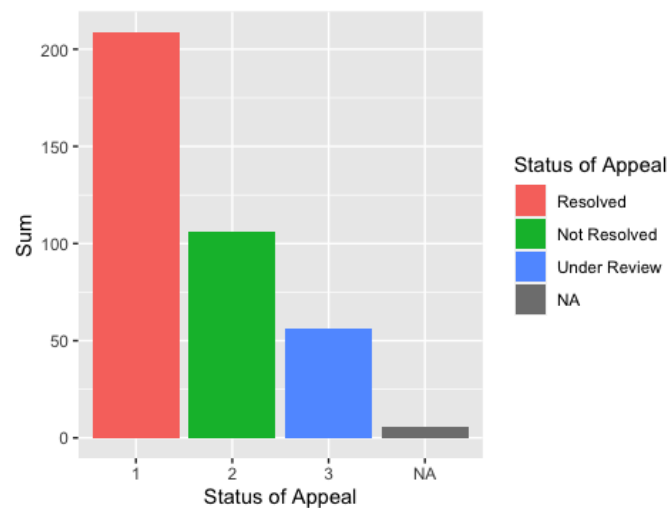


Figure 3.22: Total Amount of Citizen Appeals, by Status of Resolution



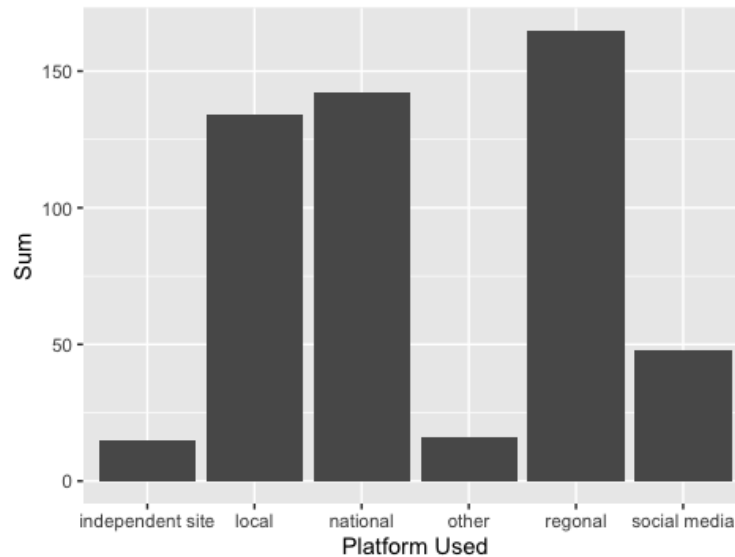
to exercise their political voice and that to merely have their concerns heard is enough to consider these structures worthy of recommendation.

What was surprising to me within this group were the patterns exhibited in the modality of appeals. Figure 3.23 illustrates the amount of appeals made at different levels of government and through different channels. Using independent platforms was quite rare ( $n=15$ ) as was contacting through ‘other’ channels ( $n=16$ ).<sup>7</sup> Although channeling an appeal through

<sup>7</sup>Respondents who selected ‘other’ were invited to expound on this response in a subsequent text box. Based upon those replies, this modality included attending receptions in person and sending written letters directly to officials. Essentially, the ‘other’ category included non-online modalities of appealing.

social media had some popularity ( $n=48$ ), the bulk of respondents used either local, regional, or national level structures. Commensurate with the asymmetrical and ad hoc nature of citizen appealing channels in Russia, there were quite a few appeals made to each of these different levels of government.

Figure 3.23: Total Amount of Citizen Appeals, by Modality



What I had not anticipated was respondents appealing most frequently to officials at the regional level [Figure 3.23]. I had assumed that citizens would view national level structures as most worthwhile in directing an appeal toward, since power is notoriously concentrated in the central government in Russia. Nonetheless, responses indicate that, actually, the most popular method used by respondents were state-established regional-level structures of contacting, to either governors or regional bodies.

Governors have played a key role in recent Russian politics, both in terms of political reforms and outcomes. Governors had been fully popularly elected positions in Russia until 2004, when Putin abolished gubernatorial elections, replacing them with direct or indirect appointments from the central government. Although direct elections of governors were reintroduced in 2012, these elections remain irregular and in many regions governors are still appointed. From a democratic perspective, such tenuous popular elections are alarming, but from the perspective of making an appeal, regional governors and their ancillary governing bodies may be viewed as both capable and approachable. Since these positions are latently associated with centralized power, citizens may perceive them as able to address an issue, without having to face the intimidation that may come from approaching a national-level structure.

Of course, a large volume of appeals are still made at the local and national levels, but the popularity of regional appeals suggests that, in a citizen's political calculus, regional bodies are deemed especially receptive. Even the state's recent establishment of regional hubs to



aggregate appeals indicates that regional institutions are seen as particularly amenable in managing citizen appeals. In the comments presented in a later section of this chapter, respondents also noted that national level officials often punt down appeals to lower-level governing bodies. Perhaps citizens are also aware of this tendency and are simply pre-empting such toss-arounds by directly contacting local and especially regional level officials themselves, where many appeals are consigned to anyhow.

Indeed, regional structures may in fact be more responsive to citizen requests. Since many regional political positions are filled by direct or implicit appointment from the federal government or majoritarian United Russia party, regional authorities have greater incentive to exhibit loyalty to the Kremlin. Regional officials are motivated to listen to and handle citizen appeals and moderate their concerns, in order to help keep social discontent at a minimum within their region and thus exhibit competence and demonstrate fealty to their federal benefactors.

Meanwhile, local level governments are more likely to have candidates from non-majoritarian or regional parties within their ranks. Local level officials are also traditionally understood - with some exception like Moscow - to wield less power than higher up political positions in Russia's vertical power structure. Therefore, among the three levels of government reflected in the modalities of citizen appeals in Figure 3.23, it is not surprising that local level structures were the least used.

From the data gathered in the survey, I was not able to distinguish whether particular levels of government were more likely to receive appeals about certain issues. However, I did collect data on the main issues that citizens appealed about. Figure 3.24 presents a histogram of the total number of citizen appeals by issue area. The categories of issues are derived from the generic list of topics that one can appeal about, based upon the selection options provided by online government appeal platforms. Of course, appeal systems vary widely across the country, but for respondents who had made an appeal, this list would likely not have looked foreign to them. In the survey, respondents were also able to select more than one topic from the 12 options provided in this list.

In order to generate a broader picture of the types of concerns people raise to officials, I conceptualized these topics within four primary categories. I consider the topics beautification, infrastructure, and transportation under the category of 'constituency service' issues; pension, health, and education comprise 'social service' questions; prices and unemployment are included in 'economic' concerns; and bureaucracy, corruption, and police are categorized as 'systemic' issues [see Table 3.9]. Figure 3.24 demonstrates that by volume of appeals, beautification - or concerns about improvements to public spaces - infrastructure, health, and bureaucracy were the most common topics that people appealed about. Stratified by broader category, Table 3.9 shows that respondents were most likely to appeal about constituency service issues, then social services, then systemic issues, and finally about economic concerns.

As a whole, respondents largely utilized the appeals system to express concerns regarding public spaces and what I conceptualize as constituency service issues. Constituency service concerns prevail amongst these respondents, accounting for about 45% of all issue areas

Figure 3.24: Total Amount of Citizen Appeals, by Issue Area

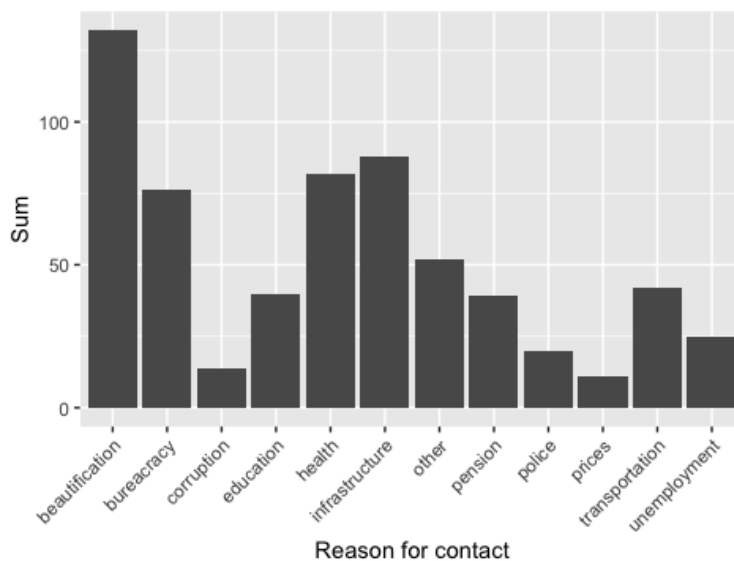


Table 3.9: Categories of Issue Areas of Citizen Appeals

Category	Issue Area	Total Amount
Constituency service	beautification, infrastructure, transportation	262
Social service	pension, health, education	163
Economic issues	prices, unemployment	36
Systemic issues	bureaucracy, corruption, police	111

selected in the survey [Table 3.9]. Respondents are also inclined to appeal about social service concerns, primarily related to healthcare, a trend which may be attributed to the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Economic concerns do not appear to be a priority for individuals who initiate contact, which is surprising since I had expected inflation and the economic fallout from the recent pandemic and wartime conditions to be reflected in an influx of appeals on these issues. Of all the selected issue areas in the survey, systemic issues also represent about 20% of responses [Table 3.9]. The majority of this category was comprised of appeals about bureaucracy, which are important but do not necessarily indicate the person is expressing an anti-regime stance. Appeals made about corruption ( $n=15$ ) and policing ( $n=20$ ), which I consider to correlate more closely as issues that expressly voice opposition to the political regime, are less prominent subjects of appeals, perhaps because they are more dangerous topics. Ultimately, these patterns suggest that citizen appeals as a system is most utilized by the population in order to vocalize ‘residential’ related issues, rather than ‘activist’ type concerns [95].

However, the results of the survey reveal that there are many in this group who appeal in a manner akin to an Approach of Everyday Resistance and express ‘activists’ type issues [95]

when doing so. Figure 3.24 shows that 38 responses were recorded in the ‘other’ category. Respondents who selected this ‘other’ were asked to provide the topic they appealed about in a subsequent text box. Those responses revealed additional issue areas including: 11 appeals about concerns related to housing, 5 appeals concerning taxes or fines, 4 on environmental issues, 4 about incarceration or criminal activity, 4 with regards to passports and documents, 4 that appealed court proceedings, and 1 appeal each about disability benefits, child services, divorce proceedings, animal control, and foreign policy.

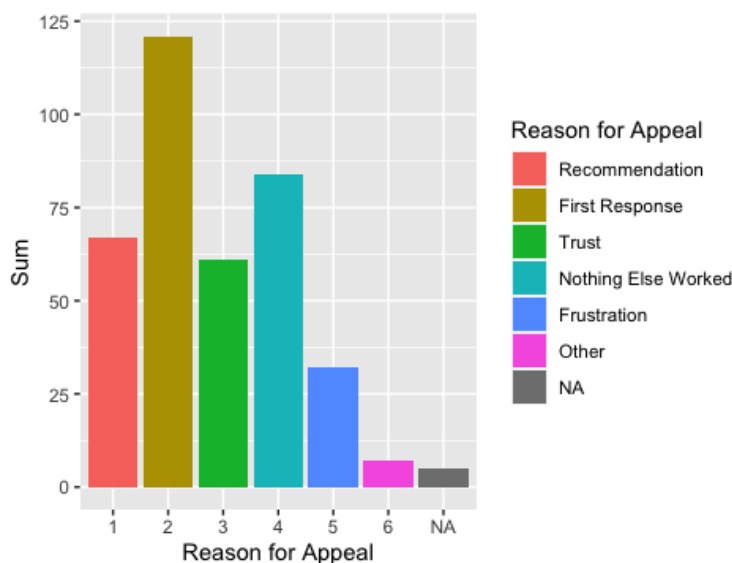
First of all, this list demonstrates the truly broad nature of citizen appeals and the wide variety of issues that Russian citizens are willing to raise to the authorities. Secondly, within this list were a few responses that indicate hints of criticism, not just about state policies or services, but toward the regime itself. Respondents cited appealing about an ‘unfair trial’ and ‘prosecution for discrediting the army’. Under Russia’s increasingly strict censorship and punitive laws after its incursion into Ukraine, appealing about unfair sentences is no small feat. Considering these responses, as well as the volume of systemic issues reflected in responses to the issue area question, there are indeed individuals who do view this structure as a way to express resistance to the regime and its political system.

The fact that some respondents indicate a willingness to vocalize criticism that touches on more systemic political issues is telling of the fact that for some people, the appeals system may function as a venue for political expression, rather than just a policy feedback mechanism. Those who initiate contact on ‘systemic’ issues were also more likely to express doing so because nothing else worked, and less so because they trusted the system. Even though more respondents contacted officials about apolitical constituency service or social service issues, a sizable amount appear to also engage with citizen appealing through an Approach of Everyday Resistance.

Citizens also expressed different reasons for appealing to officials or governing bodies. Figure 3.25 illustrates the six reasons provided by the survey and the distribution of responses to them. The survey was designed in such a way that respondents could only select one answer to this question. Figure 3.25 shows that of those responses, 32% admitted that making an appeal is the first thing they think to do when they face a problem, 22% admitted that they opted to make contact because nothing else seemed to work, 18% did so on the basis of a recommendation, 16% because they trusted the system, and 8% out of frustration. Of the few who selected ‘other’ as their reason ( $n=7$ ), they cited previous personal experience or knowledge of the system as their motivating factor in making an appeal. For most respondents appealing is not commonly viewed as an outlet to vent frustrations, but is rather seen as a relatively standardized response to a problem.

The most common response to this question was that a participant made an appeal as a first response reaction [Figure 3.25]. For these participants, appealing to officials was the first thing they thought to do upon facing a problem. The prevalence of this sort of knee-jerk reaction to issue resolution is telling about the mechanisms by which this system functions. It implies that the state, either because of its prevalent contacting systems or as a general principle, continues to play a highly central role as an arbiter of social concerns. Additionally, it implies that citizens feel the government has the capacity to resolve issues or at least exist

Figure 3.25: Total Amount of Citizen Appeals, by Reason



as a viable pathway through which their concern can be addressed. This frequent response may also reflect the primacy of key officials as decision makers in the country’s political apparatus. Citizens may be inclined to appeal to them first because they perceive political officials as having the largest capacity to resolve issues, rather than utilizing channels that circumvent state structures.

Alternatively, the second most popular reason people cite for reaching out to the state is because they had tried other avenues and nothing else seemed to work [Figure 3.25]. This response indicates the exact opposite of turning to the state as a first-stage response, as these individuals indicate that citizen appeals are a last resort effort when needing to resolve an issue. I did not provide space for these individuals to elaborate on the other steps they took before turning to state, but they at least took one other step on their own before making an official appeal.

Interestingly, both those that turn to citizen appeals as a first and as a last response effort did so in relatively similar ways. Analysis of the survey data reveals both these respondents tended to appeal about the same issues in relatively similar proportions, proportions that are also consistent with the overall trends of which issues people tend to appeal about in general. Those who made this action a last resort were slightly more inclined to appeal about structural issues, rather than constituency service issues, but not significantly so. Therefore, it seems that whether a person turns immediately or belatedly to the state is likely a function of the issue itself and one’s personal perspectives.

Meanwhile, those who admitted to making an appeal because they trust that the government would help them, do exhibit some notable characteristics. This group of respondents were less likely to appeal about systemic issues like corruption or policing, and are far more likely to appeal about social services, like pensions and education. This group was not

particularly old, as I might have thought. The average age was 37 years, standard for the survey sample. But their willingness to appeal about social services, over both systemic or constituency service issues is compelling. .

This ‘trusting’ group of contacters - those who apply a Trust-based Approach - seem to use citizen appeals as a way to reinforce their belief in the state as a legitimate authority. They were less likely to express sentiments critical of the state’s political structures. They also seem to approach the state more as a way to secure services owed to them, rather than engage in any proactive behavior that might encourage social or political reform. Since both constituency service issues and systemic issues include topics that propose making physical or systemic changes - for instance, beautifying a public space, modernizing certain infrastructures, or modifying corrupt practices - and since this ‘trusting’ group is less likely to appeal about these concerns, it appears that this group tends to appeal with a passive, rather than a proactive, reform-minded mentality.

Essentially, what my descriptive data demonstrates is that there is a great deal of diversity in the group of respondents who have engage in citizen appeals, with some emergent patterns. This group is more politically aware and active in other civic arenas. As a slightly older population, they may have more time or resources with which to appeal to officials, but they still rarely do so more than once or twice. They mostly prefer to appeal at the regional level about constituency or social service issues, although there is also evidence that individuals are subtly using these systems to express more systemic criticisms as well.

In terms of how individuals approach citizens appealing, my analysis has identifying a few prevailing strategies. On the one hand are those whose contacting practices are somewhat habitual. These respondents deem appealing a primary strategy when facing a problem, an approach most common amongst citizens. This group tends mostly to appeal about concerns regarding constituency service (45%) and social service (26%) issues. On the other hand, there are others for whom appealing is a last resort. This group tends to appeal upon nearly the same issue areas as those who turn first to the state, but also tend more to appeal about systemic concerns (21%). Although these two approaches are diametrically different in terms of when the individual approaches the state, they both consider appealing in a strategic manner, as a potential step in resolving an issue. They appear to view appealing along a continuum of rational steps, with issue resolution as the primary goal, less as an action of protest or resistance.

A third approach appears to emerge whereby appealing is a way to nudge the state toward delivering on its promises, rather than suggest improvements or changes. This group smaller group of trusting individuals, are motivated to appeal to an official because they believe that the state will help them. Unlike any other, this group tends to appeal more frequently about social service issues (33%) and far less about systemic concerns (14%). As a result, this group appears less concerned with enacting changes and more concerned with securing the pension, educational, and health services they are entitled to. This group includes a significant amount of respondents in their early 30s as well as an older cohort of individuals. Respondents in this category appear to view appealing as more of a mechanism to secure social rights to state services, rather than amending them.

Finally, a modest, but important group of respondents harness citizen appeals as a form of political expression. Especially for those willing to appeal to an official about systemic issues - bureaucracy, corruption, policing practices, or court proceedings - citizen appeals may be deemed as a way for an individual to call out an injustice and vocalize feedback to the state on issues more political in nature. These respondents do not present a predominant group, as vocalizing systemic criticism is probably quite risky for the citizen involved. Nonetheless, a distinct pattern in behavior emerges amongst some individuals who utilize this system as a way to enact forms of everyday resistance and exercise their own political voice to autocratic state authorities.

## E-Government

Now turning to e-government usage, based upon the 703 respondents who admitted to using e-government, participants appear to approach this action slightly differently. E-government usage is the second most popular form of political participation in the survey, with 31% of survey respondents identifying as having used an e-government platform. Both theoretically in an practice, there is a degree of overlap between citizen appealing and e-government usage. However, the profile of a citizen appealer and e-government user is slightly different, indicating that individuals view citizen contacting through e-government as serving a distinct function.

Table 3.10 presents the summary statistics for e-government users. Table 3.10 reveals that e-government users tend to be slightly younger than citizen appealers, with an average age of 37 years<sup>8</sup> and a younger age distribution [see Figure 3.26]. The age of this group is consistent with the underlying sample [see Table 3.11]. That e-government users tend to be younger than appealers might reflect the exclusive online nature of e-government, as younger generations might implicitly be more comfortable turning to online interfaces.

Table 3.11 outlines regression estimates for the group of e-government users. According to these outcomes, e-government possess significantly higher levels of self-efficacy than the underlying sample, although they exhibit significantly lower values in the influence variable. This group of e-government users feel they are very capable of resolving issues, but are much less certain that they can have any impact upon political decision making. It seems that e-government users feel they can utilize the platform to reach a resolution to a specific issue, but do not view it as a conduit to enact policy feedback or broader political change.

This feature is the exact opposite from citizen appeals. The directionality of the variable estimates for self-efficacy and influence are reversed amongst e-government users. Citizen appealers feel less capable of resolving an issue, but exhibit a generally positive view on their ability to enact changes in political outcomes. Conversely, e-government users feel more capable of resolving an issue, and less positive about their ability to impact political outcomes. Thus, the fundamental attitudes that citizens take when using these two parallel institutions are divergent.

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<sup>8</sup>The median age of this group is 36 years.

Table 3.10: Summary Statistics for E-Government

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Age	703	37.340	10.064	18	87
E-government + vote	359	0.511	0.500	0	1
E-government + donate	119	0.169	0.375	0	1
E-government + volunteer	46	0.065	0.247	0	1
E-government + citizen appeals	176	0.250	0.434	0	1
E-government + social initiative	142	0.202	0.402	0	1
Education	701	3.037	0.433	1	5
Self efficacy	700	4.204	0.888	1	5
Influence	699	2.715	1.150	1	5
Political awareness	699	2.382	1.028	1	5
Social media usage	701	3.526	0.732	1	4
Satisfaction	700	3.889	0.885	1	5
Recommendation	701	4.134	0.997	1	5

Figure 3.26: Density Plot of Age of E-government Users

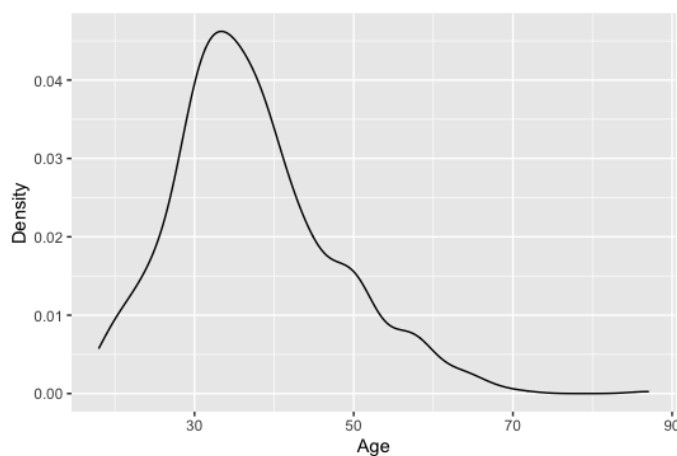


Table 3.11 also reveals the group of e-government users as incredibly willing to recommend state services to others. They may already be predisposed to support state services, motivating their decision to use them in the first place, but it is likely that using the system generates an increased willingness to advocate for them. These individuals are not only viable spokespeople for these systems, but they also in essence help to sustainably legitimize them within society. Being willing to recommend state services helps boost the reputation of these systems, and by extension the reputation of the state. The group's satisfaction with state services is average, perhaps suggesting e-government platforms and interfaces can be updated or improved, but the outcomes of using them are enough to encourage them to

Table 3.11: Regression Table OLS Estimates for E-Government from Survey Data

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	E-government	
	(1)	(2)
Self-Efficacy	0.028*** (0.010)	0.027*** (0.010)
Political Activity	-0.013 (0.008)	-0.012 (0.008)
Social Media	0.013 (0.012)	0.014 (0.012)
Satisfaction	0.006 (0.013)	0.005 (0.013)
Influence	-0.033*** (0.009)	-0.033*** (0.009)
Recommendation	0.152*** (0.010)	0.154*** (0.010)
Gender (male)		0.021 (0.019)
Education		-0.039** (0.019)
Age		-0.0001 (0.001)
Constant	-0.262*** (0.061)	-0.158 (0.097)
Observations	2,206	2,206
R <sup>2</sup>	0.171	0.173
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.169	0.169
F Statistic	75.473*** (df = 6; 2199)	50.956*** (df = 9; 2196)

*Note:*

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01



suggest them to others.

Table 3.10 reveals that e-government usage also occurs in conjunction with other political activities. About 20% of e-government users ( $n=213$ ) had exclusively been involved in only this form of political participation. Figure 3.27 also reveals that e-government usage is strongly positively correlated with involvement in social initiatives and citizen appeals. Coefficient estimates in Figure 3.27 and Figure 3.18 reveal that e-government usage and citizen appeals are significantly correlated and that individuals are likely to be involved in both. Again, political involvement is often not sequestered to one arena or action.

Figure 3.27: Plot of OLS Estimates on Forms of Political Involvement on E-government

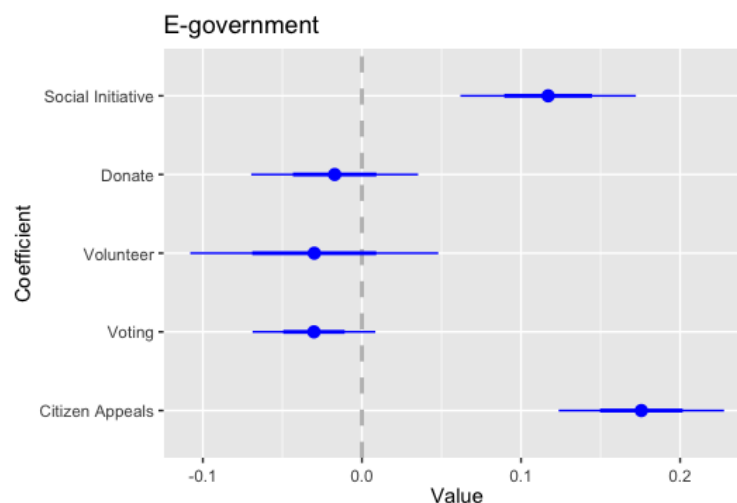


Figure 3.28 reveals that the geographic distribution of e-government users is fairly normal. Like all other forms of political participation, most e-government usage is concentrated in the Central District, with very few users from the Far Eastern or North Caucasus Districts, which both comprise the smallest group of respondents in the sample. The geographic distribution of e-government usage is consistent with participation trends in the entire sample, indicating that this is a fairly widespread form of political action.

Unlike citizen appeals, however, e-government usage is more likely to be a repeat action amongst respondents. Whereas nearly all citizen appellers were one or two-time users, those who have engaged in e-government more commonly admit to utilizing the system more than twice. Although most of these respondents had only used e-government 1-2 times, about 41% were more frequent users. This difference from citizen appealing again serves as a testament to the distinct approach citizens appear to be taking toward these two types of citizen contacting. Again, the survey did not collect data on whether these repeat uses were about unique or the same issues. Regardless, that e-government is often limited to a particular set of issues as defined by the governing body that establishes it, may habituate individuals to repeatedly utilize e-government for issues regarding those set of topics.

Figure 3.28: Total Amount of E-government Users, by Federal District

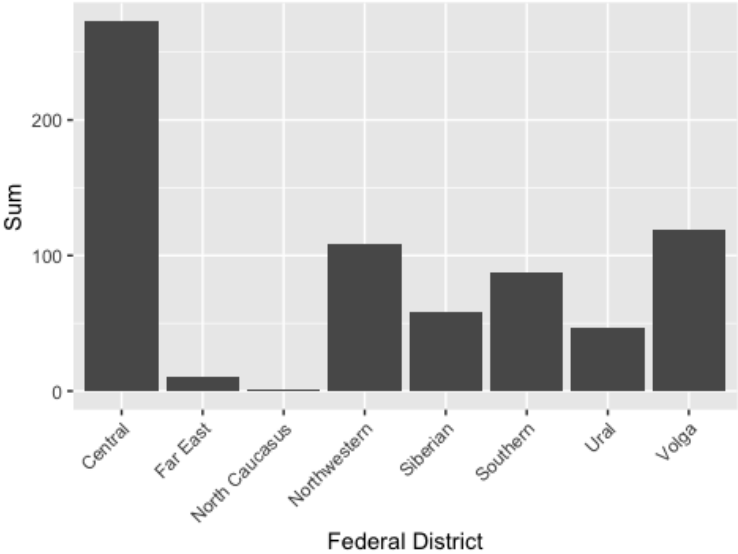
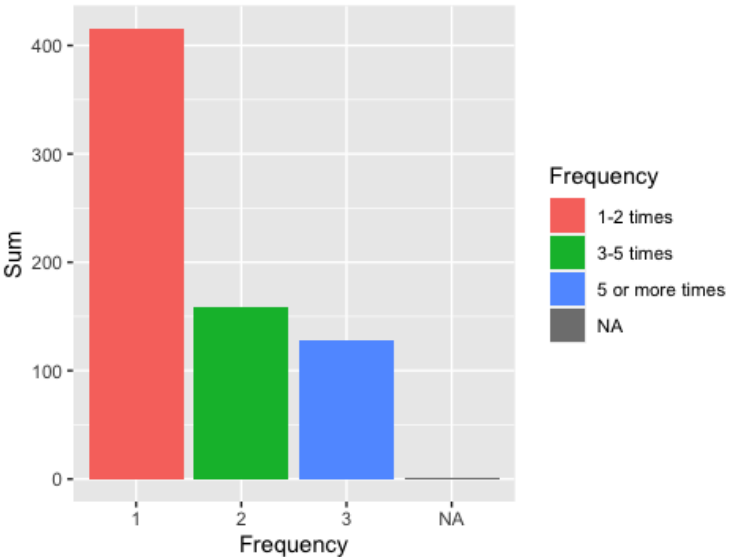


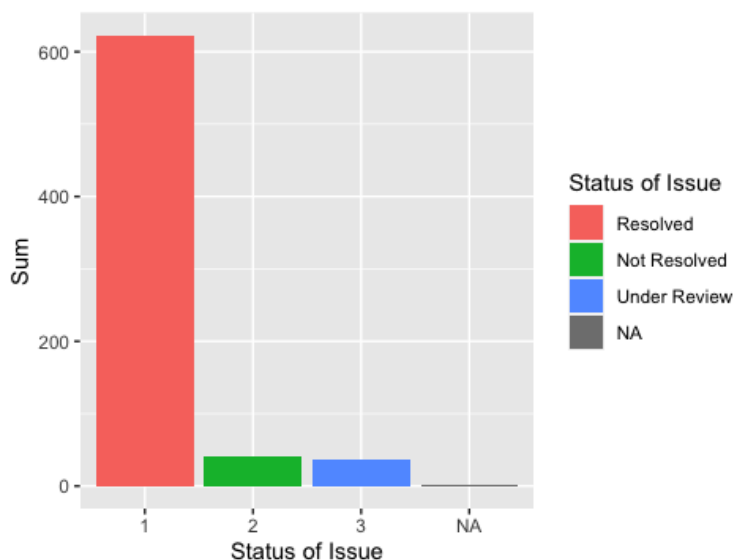
Figure 3.29: Total Amount of E-government Usage, by Frequency



Additionally, e-government users report a much higher rate of resolution of the issue they sought to address. Figure 3.30 plots the responses of individuals to the question asking about the status of their e-government request. Figure 3.30 reveals that almost 89% of e-government users experiences successful resolution to their concern, and only 6% reported that their request was not resolved. Respondents reporting an unresolved or unaddressed issue are a minority. The much higher positive responsiveness rate about e-government

issues, as compared to resolution rates for citizen appeals, is perhaps the primary reason this group is so willing to recommend these services. It may also reflect the fact that e-government is often limited to specific issue areas, per the design of the platform, which the state might intentionally preapprove as issue areas it is already more amenable to handling. Citizen appeals, on the other hand, can span a wide range of topics and through this method of contact individuals may not always identify concerns that the state is inclined to address.

Figure 3.30: Total Amount of E-government Usage, by Issue Resolution

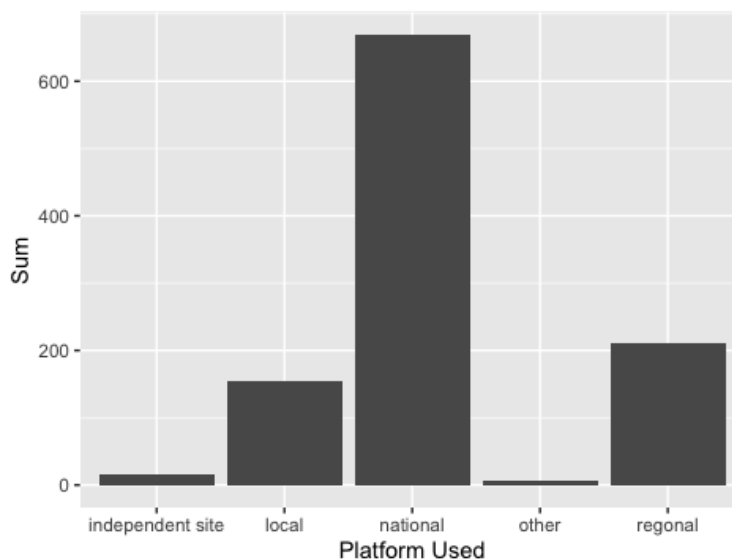


The other striking characteristic of e-government usage, especially as compared to citizen appeals, is the distribution of e-government modalities. Figure 3.31 demonstrates that overwhelmingly, most citizens use national-level systems for their e-government usage ( $n=670$ ), presumably the GosUslugie State Services system. Regional ( $n=210$ ) or local ( $n=154$ ) structures are also used, but with much less frequency. Figure 3.31 reveals that using an independent sites is extremely rare, with only 17 respondents having done so.

Unlike the practice of citizen appeals, which are most likely to be directed to the regional level, e-government usage is dominated by national-level systems. From an administrative standpoint, respondents appear to find national-level institutions most capable for e-government needs. Within Russia's asymmetrical e-government infrastructure, national-level platforms appear to be most popular. Individuals clearly gravitate toward national systems, whether because they are more convenient, easier to use, ubiquitous as e-government structures, or because citizens attribute them as having more administrative capacity than regional or local level platforms.

One potential strategy that may be underlying the distinct patterns of e-government and citizen appeal modalities is that particular issues may be viewed as more appropriate for a specific modality. Citizen appeals, which are varied and can be exceptional nature, may be more likely to be directed to the regional level. Regional structures may viewed as having

Figure 3.31: Total Amount of E-government Usage, by Modality

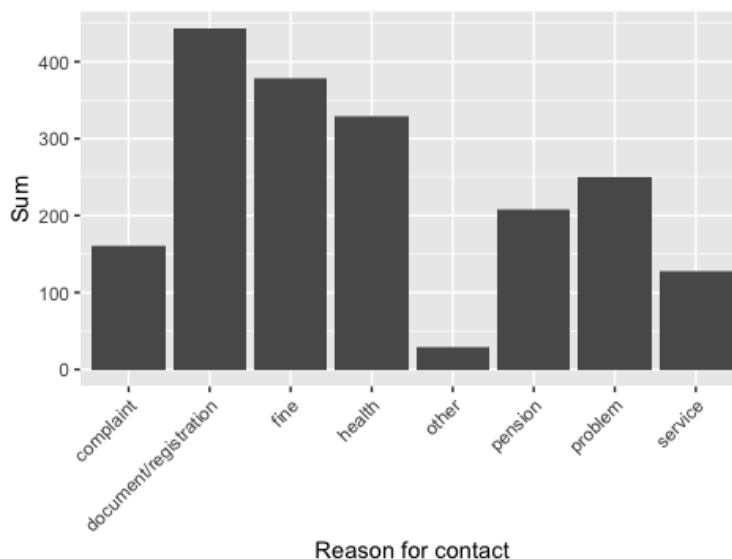


more expertise on specific issues than centralized authorities, and more amenable to hearing citizen concerns.. Meanwhile, for issues that citizens can streamline via e-government, they may intuit that the national-level system is more capable of handling that request, given the concentration of financial and digital resources at the federal level. For the standardized issues that are routinely handled through e-government systems, citizens may deem circumventing sub-national bodies and going right to the central government as most appropriate strategy.

In terms of issue areas, the standard list of areas about which a citizen can use e-government for is rather compact. Figure 3.32 presents the responses to the question asking about which issue areas the participant had used e-government. The eight options provided were derived from the standard topics citizens can select from on actual e-government websites. The seven main options include obtaining help on issues regarding processing documents or registrations, paying a fine, healthcare, pensions or benefits, a particular social service, communicating a problem, or raising a complaint. These last two options are more clearly forms of citizen-initiated contact and parallel the practice of citizen appeals. Participants could also select ‘other’ and provide a written description of the topic in a subsequent text box. Respondents were able to select more than one option, and many did select several topics, which is not surprising given the high frequency with which people use these systems [see Figure 3.29].

Figure 3.32 reveals that indeed the options provided are the most common topics about which respondents use e-government. Only 14 respondents identified other reasons outside of these generalized topics that they utilized e-government. These other reasons include tax payments, construction permits, school enrollment, filing for a divorce, and taking a city issued survey. Otherwise, the seven substantive topics listed in this question are the most

Figure 3.32: Total Amount of E-government Usage, by Issue Area



customary issue areas about which citizens turn to e-government.

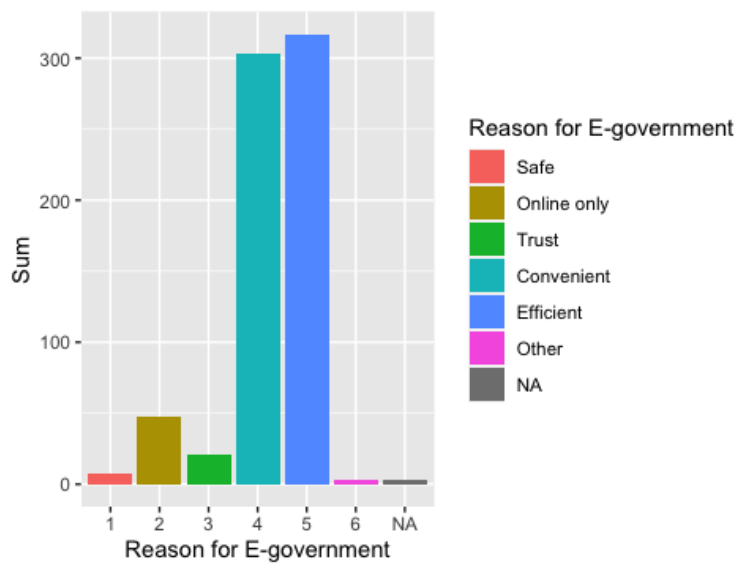
Of this list, I am mostly interested in those who used the system to communicate a problem or raise a complaint. Of these respondents, there were 409 responses that indicated the user had filed a complaint or identified a problem to an official, which is about 22% of all of all the issue areas selected [Figure 3.32]. Overwhelmingly, through e-government most individuals handle administrative or logistic issues related to documentation, fines, and healthcare. Nonetheless, at least 20% of respondents do use these systems to generate an appeal.

Like those who engage in citizen appeals, the respondents who communicate problems or raise a complaint via e-government also held lower levels of self-efficacy and slightly higher levels of belief in their influence over political outcomes, as compared to the rest of e-government users. 43% of those who raised a complaint or problem through e-government had also made a citizen appeal, as compared to 25% of all e-government users. Thus, individuals who seek to voice themselves to an official in the form of citizen-initiated contacting appear to be willing to do so in many ways and through several channels. As a group, these results indicate that those who engage in individualized forms of contact, whereby the individual sets the topic or agenda of the appeal, may universally exhibit certain comparable characteristics in terms of their views on self-efficacy and influence.

Unlike individuals who do make citizen appeals, e-government users are also much less varied in their motivations for doing so. Figure 3.33 illustrates the responses to the question asking participants to identify which factor most motivated their use of e-government. The survey was designed so that a respondent could only select one answer to this question. Figure 3.33 clearly shows that convenience and efficiency are the primary motivating factors underpinning e-government usage. Fully 89% of respondents reported utilizing e-government

because it is convenient or efficient. Very few acknowledged trust or safety of the system as their primary motivation, and even less so used e-government because they primarily thought it was a safer option. Only 80 respondents selected a motivation different from convenience or efficiency. The prevailing sentiment among respondents is that these online systems are streamlined and conducive for use.

Figure 3.33: Total Amount of E-government Usage, by Reason



The general group of e-government users are distinct from those who make citizen appeals, or even those who are communicating problems or raising complaints through e-government, primarily because they turn to these platforms because of their accessibility. The individuals who decide to make an appeal through e-government may share similar traits regarding levels of self-efficacy and influence, as the group of citizen appellars. But in general, e-government users contact officials in this way because it is a quicker, more efficient route to do so. For anyone taking a Needs-based Model to citizen contacting, e-government is a perfect channel for this approach.

The survey results also reveal that e-government usage is quickly becoming a popular form of political participation, being the second most common action only second to voting [see Table 3.5 and Figure 3.4]. Not only do respondents deem these systems convenient and efficient, but an overwhelming majority of interactions over e-government are also successfully resolved. Within the confines of the set of issues that e-government is capable of handling, the system appears to be able to efficiently and conveniently interact with the citizens who have these concerns. This interaction then generates a significant propensity amongst individuals to recommend that service to others, which is not doubt instrumental in helping to build and generate a positive feedback loop that has driven the popularity of this form of engagement.

## Survey Comments

The final question in the survey instrument provided an open-ended text box where participants were prompted to convey anything about their experience with citizen-initiated contacting. Out of all respondents, 321 participants wrote something for this question. Of those 321 responses, 192 were substantive responses; the other 129 answers were either invalid, unrelated, or one-word replies.

The additional responses provided to this question contribute to the richness of the data and offer more detail on the reactions Russian citizens take toward these online contacting systems. Gathering data from this question furthermore revealed some of the motivations and expectations individuals hold when approaching an official or governing body. In this section, I will outline the general themes of these responses, as well as highlight a few notable comments, as they relate to the narrative of citizens' perspectives on this practice.<sup>9</sup>

First of all, the general view amongst respondents to this question was that online contacting platforms function as a method or 'way to communicate' with the government. It was clear from the comments that individuals did differentiate between e-government and citizen appeals. Responses reflected some overlap in these practices and a sense that they are related, but in general respondents do distinguish e-government from citizen appeals. Many comments made clear that there is an awareness about the ability to use e-government in order to directly contact officials, but there was a prevailing notion that e-government platforms were also applicable for other purposes.

A substantial amount of comments were highly positive and enthusiastic about both e-government and citizen appeals. Several reiterated their willingness to recommend these services to others. They applauded these systems of contacting as a 'good idea' and appreciated the capability they offered to interact with the government. The comments that were highly supportive of these systems frequently stressed their convenience and efficiency, as time and effort saving tools. Additionally, the channels were attributed as a mechanism for elevating the quality of government responses, noting that appeals submitted through online formats are quickly resolved and information delivered in a timely manner. Positive responses emphasized that online systems are easy and clear to use, with the added benefit of being able to track the status of a case, a feature less feasible with in-person appeals. As a result, a large group of respondents felt that these online systems had simplified many bureaucratic government procedures and had streamlined the process of citizen-state interactions.

Beyond the convenience and effectiveness of these platforms, other comments offered alternative benefits provided by these systems. Online formats were noted as being especially conducive for those with disabilities or limited mobility. And as long as one has reliable internet, these systems were also praised for their accessibility to a wider array of individuals in Russia.

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<sup>9</sup>All comments were written in Russian by respondents; I translated them into English and quote them in English throughout this section

The next batch of comments were neither fully positive, nor negative, but rather offered nuance about the logistics and functionality of these interactions. One respondent simply said that “small requests work through the portal, larger requests the citizen can neither solve nor influence”. This comment is interesting especially in the context of most citizens in the survey who had made an appeal demonstrating a greater belief in their ability to influence political outcomes. This comment identifies a pattern, whereby many citizens admit to feeling that the effectiveness of these systems is dependent upon several substantive and logistic factors. ‘Large issues’ are viewed as not solvable, but ‘small issues’ might be. What these ‘small’ or ‘large’ issues entail are probably a matter of personal judgment, but this response exposes a strategy at work that one might evoke when approaching the state.

Respondents identified several factors associated with influencing the success of an interaction with the state. The first one was how many times contact is initiated. Some expressed the key to eliciting a successful response from the government is to appeal about the same issue many times. Of course, my survey data suggests that repeat interactions are not common, especially through citizen appeals. Yet, for people seeking an outcome to their appeal, a sense emerged from these comments that citizens understand they may need to expend extra energy to raise the issue to officials multiple times in order to see any results.

Secondly, the format of the appeal was perceived as important. Despite a separate trend within these comments that commended online systems as efficient, other respondents seemed nostalgic for offline, in-person appeals. Some comments insinuated that speaking to an official face-to-face was the best way to obtain an answer or result to an appeal. Some even suggested that initiating both online and in-person contact was the most effective strategy. No respondent provided much context for why they felt in-person contacting was more likely to result in a response, but it may speak to an individual’s ability to wield personal resources over in-person interactions, which online automated spaces do not accommodate.

Finally, others alluded to the fact that the level of government matters in garnering a successful response. Consistent with quantitative findings in the survey, the regional level was overwhelmingly viewed as the most capable level with which to initiate contact. Local level systems were viewed as least functional by respondents to this question, while the federal level was often characterized as apathetic to citizen appeals. A general expectation prevailed that appeals and issues would automatically be channeled to regional bodies regardless, making regional-level structures widely perceived as an especially appropriate target for an appeal.

Because many respondents expressed their views or experiences with successful citizen appeals as conditional upon certain factors, the implication is that citizens employ certain strategies when approaching a state structure. Underpinning several of these factors was also a prevailing sense that implicit knowledge or latent understanding about how these systems work was essential in obtaining a successful outcome. In other words, should a citizen have enough resources and know-how to navigate these online systems, they feel be more likely to receive a positive outcome. Such responses imply a Resource-based Approach, whereby citizens with greater political and online literacy may intuit these factors and apply them when making an appeal. Of course, a more cynical take on all of this, which one respondent expressed, is that getting a successful response simply “depends on your luck”.



Comments also revealed more detail on a citizen's actual experience with responsiveness in Russia. One respondent clarified that they had received a written note from the Ministry of Transportation in response to an appeal over outdated infrastructure. This respondent did not indicate if the infrastructure was actually updated, but made note that their appeal was acknowledged. That governing bodies to whom citizens appeal toward are recognizing and replying to those individuals indicates that the state is actually attuned to citizen appeals. Appeals being made through these systems are attended to by officials in some capacity, confirming that the Russian state does engage in a degree of responsiveness.

On the other hand, a prevailing sentiment suggested that "all appeals are answered, but often with formal replies from officials". Respondents indicated that the state often sent replies back comprised of standardized and unhelpful language. One respondent even copied that language into their response; the state had promised this individual that 'all necessary measures are being taken to address the issue'. Most respondents interpreted this vague and impersonal language not as reassuring, but rather as a sign that nothing would be done. Respondents similarly echoed this belief in relaying that denials of appeals are also typically accompanied by vague, generic, and unhelpful responses. Such formality of state replies, especially in response to highly personalized appeals, may be a liability for the state. The generic, standardized language that several respondents had received led them to question the purpose of these systems and seemed to have eroded their confidence that they were actually even contacting a state official.

A prevailing sentiment from these comments, was the admission that many of these platforms and the responses generated through them are understood to be "just for show". The phrase 'to check the box' was used several times in reference to online contacting institutions, that these interactions between citizens and the state are often not genuine. Many identified these systems as facades of the state apparatus, even though, or perhaps because, they had utilized them themselves. The tension in these systems are palpable, as many comments simultaneously noted that they are "convenient to use", but only there to "check the box" and often do not result in any tangible resolution to the issue.

Finally, the last set of comments can be categorized as expressing a blatantly negative view toward these structures. First of all, many criticized the system's IT interface, citing poorly designed or hard to navigate platforms. The issues of glitches, pages unsuccessfully loading, videos constantly buffering, and sluggish website performance during peak hours were standard complaints. Many also raised concerns about potential data leakages or hacks into the systems, which may explain why there were lower response rates for trust or safety as motivating factors in the survey. Others were concerned that the design of these webpages could be confusing, especially for older users, who had a harder time locating the proper channels to contact the state. These routine complaints perhaps reveal why many survey respondents were not fully satisfied with state services across the board.

Secondly, commenters criticized the organization of these systems. There were several who wished that national, regional, and local level systems were integrated or at least in sync with one another. The asymmetrical nature of citizen contacting institutions in Russia was for many a disadvantage in the functionality of appeals and e-government usage, since

existing arrangements often require going through multiple channels or navigating platforms at multiple levels of government.

Additionally, there was some uncertainty regarding whether online and in-person appeals are interchangeable or complementary actions. Many expressed hesitancy and uncertainty about whether appealing online was meant to accompany or replace in-person interactions. Several respondents also cited the cumbersome bureaucracy underpinning both formats. One comment stood out to me in particular: “Solid bureaucracy, even electronically you can’t do anything, you have to ask for help.” This respondent implies that the bureaucracy is so bad, whether online or in person, that, ironically, one ends up needing to appeal for help in appealing. This Catch-22 scenario and the scattered layout and bureaucracy of these platforms is not lost on citizens in Russia.

Thirdly, there were a plethora of complaints about the functionality of these systems. Many comments aggressively noted that these platforms are dysfunctional, do not have accurate information on them, and do not produce any tangible outcomes. Many lamented the incomplete information provided on these platforms, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when accurate information was imperative. Several respondents were frustrated by long response wait times, receiving a response at the last minute, or only having their issues partially resolved. Frustrations were also frequently relayed about being re-routed back and forth between government platforms, without actually getting anywhere. In fact, ‘runarounds’ were a common criticism of respondents, who, as a result, often felt that appealing was a useless enterprise.

A few telling comments expressed that citizens also feel that these systems are ‘not for the people’. One respondent succinctly summarized circumstances as, “convenient to appeal with a problem, but we do not make the decisions”. Ultimately, many expressed this same sentiment that although they can interact with the state, the citizen has very little agency over subsequent outcomes.

A few comments directly expressed a feeling that responsiveness is actually subject to prevailing big business interests, rather than citizen needs. Many others also indicated their belief that citizens are being manipulated by these larger forces of corporate and political entities. The sentiment that decisions are often made “in the interests of corrupt officials and bureaucrats” and at the expense of citizens was fairly prevalent. Another respondent even noted that they felt these systems were intentionally flawed, so to relieve the state from needing to respond altogether. Additionally, one respondent asserted that although state responsiveness did occur, no one was actually in control. Ultimately, many of these responses expressed a feeling that contacting institutions were just another form of performative politics in Russia.

Putting aside people’s assessments of the design and functionality of citizen-initiated contacting structures, respondents also revealed that these institutions function beyond the realm of responsiveness. Comments revealed that some citizens may employ an Approach of Everyday Resistance when appealing, in order to accomplish two parallel actions. These systems serve both as conduits to amplify individual political voice and as channels to express disapproval of the regime or political system.

Several respondents alluded to citizen appeals as venues of political expression. One respondent notably highlighted that online citizen appeals are a useful tool for “expressing your opinion without being seen by others or in the presence of bystanders”. This same respondent went on to say that this action “allowed one the opportunity to think carefully” about what one said in the appeal. The online format for this participant was a benefit, as it is conducive to displaying a more calculated form of political protest. Their comment indicates that the online format provides space to be more honest in one’s criticism, even when carefully articulated, suggesting that the electronic nature of these appeals may serve to reduce social desirability bias. Implicit in this approach is simultaneous knowledge and awareness of the best methods to be outwardly resistant to the regime, without unduly endangering oneself. Fundamentally, this comment made clear that individuals are invoking strategic rationale when making an appeal.

Similarly, another respondent applauded these institutions as providing the space to “write statements, be heard, and have one’s complaint listened to”. For this participant, the outcome of the appeal was less important than the opportunity provided for doing so. What this comment reveals is that to appeal is to ‘be heard’, which is a valuable action. Political voice and expression is therefore fundamental to the enterprise of appealing, and for some, at least, the allure of contacting the government lies in the ability of these platforms to magnify one’s personal political voice to state authorities.

Some respondents vocalized criticism of the government or authorities in their comments. They called officials “lazy, indifferent, and idiotic”, incapable of addressing any appeal. Many also expressed the sentiment that authorities do not have citizens in mind and do not actually care about them at all, despite the existence of these channels. Several conveyed that the Russian citizen is “practically powerless” in the realm of politics and called out these seemingly participatory systems as phony and meaningless.

Another comment in the survey was even outright critical against the regime. This participant conveyed having utilized citizen appeals expressly to enact a form of protest. The issue this respondent was protesting about was the state’s involvement in a fraudulent company that had openly defrauded public shareholders, and which had not yet been made accountable. The individual contacted the state in order to call out regime corruption, and had utilized e-government and citizen appeals in order to do so; they had even appealed directly to the president on this issue. Looking closely at their survey responses, this individual considered themselves politically active, but felt that they had absolutely no influence over political outcomes.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it seems most likely that citizen appeal channels for this respondent are mostly approached as a venue to express dissent, without expecting much of a response.

Although unrelated to their citizen-initiated contacting behaviors, one respondent wrote about two highly sensitive topics in Russia. In the comment box, they expressed support for Alexey Navalny, Russia’s primary opposition figure, and wrote the words “No War”, currently a highly taboo phrase in the country. This particular respondent had also engaged in

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<sup>10</sup>For the influence variable they rated themselves as 1, or having no influence over political outcomes.

both e-government and citizen appeals as forms of political participation. This respondent's willingness to express potentially dangerous sentiments in an anonymous survey suggests that they are unafraid to protest the regime, at least in rhetoric. Although not conclusive based on their responses, this individual may also be willing to harness outreach channels in order to express political dissent. At the very least, this comment confirms that individuals with opposition leanings do not necessarily boycott these state platforms, but may use them in conjunction with particular political objectives in mind.

These types of individuals who openly express dissent through citizen appeals may be outliers, as citizens hyper-involved and passionate about politics or social injustices. Using citizen-initiated contacting as a channel for overt political protest does not appear to be a widely used strategy. However, that citizens who are more politically conscious and carry views critical of the regime use these outlets, indicates just how widespread and potentially embedded their usage is.

Additionally, rather than boldly verbalize protest, many others are expressing smaller, more subtler acts of everyday resistance through citizen contacting. The general sentiment regarding how useful these platforms are in terms of facilitating political expression and in 'being heard' indicate that many citizens are using these institutions as mechanisms to initiate acts of rightful or everyday resistance toward the regime.

From the citizen perspective, citizen-initiated contacting is often strategically employed within a calculus of political engagement. The overwhelming admission that these systems are often designed for show and are not necessarily at work for the citizen suggests that appealing on a needs-basis is alone not sufficient to explain the prevalence of citizen appeals. The trends found from the analysis of these comments supports that one must either have the necessary resources to navigate the state apparatus or a compelling desire to express one's political voice to the state in order to decide to engage in this manner.

For many respondents, contacting channels are viewed as effective, so long as the individual using them possesses the appropriate resources and expertise. For those who are more literate in the online world and think they understand the inner workings of these structures, it may both be easier for them to reach out to the government as well as easier for them to navigate their way around receiving a successful resolution. One respondent even made note in their comment with regard to citizen appeals that "It is easier for me, as I am a lawyer and have a higher legal education". There appear to be many factors contributing to the successful resolution of an appeal, and one's ability to manipulate or handle those elements may be a big deciding factor in their willingness to use these systems, especially given how bureaucratic, asymmetrical, and dysfunctional they can be.

For others, I find evidence that these systems may operate under an Approach of Everyday Resistance. For these individuals, contacting platforms are not evaluated in terms of state responsiveness, but rather in terms of their ability to facilitate personal political expression directly to the state apparatus. Vocal activists do express direct opposition toward the regime through these channels, but a more common approach is for citizens to display subtler acts of resistance on these platforms. Many respondents recognized these systems as facilitators of political voice, which provide a more conducive and private space to carefully

express one's true(r) feedback to the state. Although implicit in this approach is also one's available resources to be able to articulate that resistance effectively, the opportunity to express political voice is what appears to primarily motivate these individuals.

The analysis provided here of survey comments derives from a small, and not necessarily representative subset of survey respondents. Nonetheless, the individuals who wrote something substantive for this question revealed several insights into how average citizens contextualize and approach these systems. Of course, there were many opposing perspectives, with some who shared vehemently negative views on citizen appeals, while others were more flattering or optimistic about these channels. Mixed in with these perspectives were also many nuanced details about both the prevailing approaches individuals take when deciding to initiate contact and how these systems work in practice.

# Chapter 4

## Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have attempted to provide greater nuance about the practice of citizen contacting, a political behavior most associated with democratic governance, within an authoritarian context. In particular, I have turned the analytic lens upon citizens, by trying to understand why average Russians are willing to engage in these platforms in the increasing number with which they are doing so in modern Russia. I have drawn attention to the limitations of examining authoritarian citizen contacting only from the state's perspective, and I have offered a series of models through which citizen engagement with officials can be assessed.

How citizens living within authoritarian contexts navigate the state under which they live and who actually engages with the state are both relevant questions. Particularly in this landscape of citizen contacting where the activity is increasingly formalized and promoted by the Russian government, drawing greater attention to the types of individuals drawn to this activity and whether it is correlated with particular individual-level characteristics may help better understand the broader scope and political function of these platforms in Russian society.

I have also brought attention to the parallel digital transformations that are increasingly taking precedence in Russia's political landscape. The Russian state's campaign toward digitized government has both reshaped and, in many ways, enhanced the practice of citizen contacting, by both offering more spaces through which citizens can reach out to officials and increasing the availability and convenience of doing so. As the example of the city of Moscow especially showcases, e-government and citizen appeals are often synonymous and intertwined concepts and practices. Thus, as Russia pushes toward a more integrated e-government experience for citizens, they have also emphasized the institution of citizen contacting as a valid and important political practice.

Therefore, notwithstanding significant disruptions to the Russian political apparatus or citizen contacting infrastructure, it is only more likely that citizen contacting will become more prevalent in Russia in the future. My findings suggest that this practice is a readily used system, but one where citizens participate with a variety of approaches in mind. For some, these platforms are used to identify large structural changes and articulate subtle or overt

criticism of the state or regime. For others, these systems are viewed as mechanisms to secure constituency or social services and proactively encourage infrastructural or administrative amendments. These prevailing approaches hint at the stabilizing effects that iterated and consistent citizen contacting can provide for Russian state power and control.

The extent to which involvement in this particular political practice impacts or interacts with political attitude formation amongst individuals is beyond the scope of this project and data collection. However, existing literature finds that these types of interactions can produce attitudinal shifts amongst individuals in both democracies and non-democratic contexts. It is therefore highly plausible that a similar effect is occurring here, and that this increasingly popular practice may be serving a significant role in individual political attitude formation, perhaps even encouraging behaviors that may subsequently shape or impact broader political outcomes in the country.

## 4.1 Further Extension to the Project

Where I envision this research going, the next steps in this project, is to assess the impact of citizens' participation upon political beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes. The arc of the literature establishes that citizens in authoritarian regimes do experience attitudinal shifts based upon political participation or exposure [35, 183], much like they do in democracies. My survey results indicate that citizens are using contacting structures strategically, and I suspect that this strategic behavior can be influential upon successive individual-level political attitudes and practices.

My goal is to subsequently test the impact that engaging in a form of citizen contacting has upon a series of attitudinal variables for each participant. The main issue with this next phase is that it is extremely tricky to test. I need to account for self-selection, that some individuals are more likely to want to become more politically involved, and thus have stronger predisposed political attitudes. Endogeneity concerns and the difficulty in isolating an intervention which can measure this relationship make identifying any causal claims exceedingly challenging.

The relationship between behaviors and attitudes are often reciprocal. Even with a randomized sample, estimating effects can be complicated and outcomes are often unreliable. Theoretically, I would expect involvement in citizen contacting to have an effect upon a variety of individual-level attitudes, but linking these effects to the actual mechanism is difficult. Nonetheless, a research question of this nature that seeks to address the interaction of political participation and attitude formation is relevant and remarkably important, especially within an authoritarian context.

I preliminarily tried to examine this relationship, with a secondary survey instrument, which involved a brief survey experiment. I issued this survey after the data collection from the main survey was completed. However, there was high attrition in this second survey, making any results speculative at best, and the design of the instrument was weak and did not sufficiently identify or test the concepts I am interested in. In order to better assess the

relationship between attitudes and participation and conduct this research in a systematic manner, the research methodology would need to be reconsidered and more data collected.

This secondary follow-up, voluntary survey was issued to those who were willing to take it, as identified in the primary survey. This second survey included an embedded experiment, which attempted to test whether exposure to or actual engagement with citizen contacting impacted a series of individual-level measures on civic mindedness and effectiveness of government. The approach derives from recent work that demonstrates how mere exposure to state responsiveness in Russia is enough to produce significant attitudinal shifts amongst participants [35]. I hoped that by testing not only whether citizen contacting alters one's political attitudes, but specifically whether this effect is dependent upon exposure to or engagement in the behavior might reveal more about how exactly this political practice may be operating as a mechanism for attitudinal shifts.

In my attempted survey experiment, I randomly assigned respondents to three groups - control, treatment 1 exposure, and treatment 2 engagement. Each group was issued one of three versions of the survey. In the control group, I simply asked the respondents a series of questions measuring perceptions of local and regional government efficiency and how civic-minded they felt in relation to society. The first treatment group, meanwhile, was issued an instrument that first presented the respondent with a vignette about a hypothetical issue in one's neighborhood, stating that an individual had appealed to an official about this situation. Then the participant was issued the same battery of questions as the control group. For this treatment group, the intervention was exposure to citizen contacting. The second treatment group was presented with the same vignette as the first treatment group, but instead of being told that someone contacted an official, they were asked to write out a hypothetical appeal themselves of what they might say to an official on this matter. After submitting a brief 'mock appeal' the same questions as the control and first treatment groups were distributed to them. Thus, the intervention for this group was participation in citizen contacting.

I selected a vignette about a common and innocuous issue area for this survey experiment: the existence of an overgrown park that needed routine maintenance. In fact, the vignette was based off of an actual appeal I had uncovered from a citizen in my research. Not only is this concern fairly ubiquitous across Russia, it also represents an issue that is not especially politically sensitive and which most people would be willing to honestly comment on. Respondents in the primary survey were also most likely to appeal about 'beautification' issues, under which this hypothetical park scenario falls.

What I had hoped to accomplish with this experimental design, was to be able to test the progression of how citizen contacting might influence political attitudes. This preliminary design allowed me to compare those who did not appeal at all, to those who were exposed to the practice, to those who had actually engaged in it. I hypothesize that participation, actually writing out an appeal, may produce a more negative impression for the respondent by reinforcing the flaws in the system and heightening frustrations over the issue at hand. I also hypothesize that exposure, in contrast, may suppress those types of critiques, instead highlighting the existence of a system that can address concerns and thus generating a more



positive impression. I anticipate that exposure to citizen contacting will simultaneously subdue one's willingness to cooperate and become more involved in social issues, whereas actually partaking in an appeal would be more likely to elevate one's willingness to cooperate and become involved in social affairs.

Identifying whether there is a distinction between those who actually engage in the practice versus those who are only exposed to it might help determine what mechanism are at work in this activity. It might be that the recognition of a channel which allows for citizen voices to be heard is the primary mechanistic initiative at work, or it might be that the personalized nature of citizen appeals and interacting with an official is what mostly drives this behavior. I am interested in assessing how these actions specifically impact political approval - or a proxy of this given the restrictive conditions in Russia - and the level of civic mindedness within an individual, especially since these two variables appear to be particularly influenced within those who make contact with officials in democratic contexts.

Unfortunately, the design and outcome of this first-cut survey attempt were flawed. There were high rates of attrition, the sample process was biased as a result of confidentiality restrictions, and the questions were imperfectly worded. But I do feel that exploring how a citizen's attitudes and political outlook may change as a result of citizen contacting is still a worthwhile research question. This extension to the research may offer additional insights into the way that this largely democratic institution functions in an authoritarian context. It may also contribute to understanding which groups of people may be most susceptible to attitudinal changes, if they occur at all. Further exploring how this highly individualized political action may yield attitudinal shifts, would also speak to the role that regime type or state control may play within these interactions.

In the future, I hope to be able to test individual attitudes toward government approval or efficiency, a participant's sense of civic-mindedness or willingness to cooperate, whether they would be more willing to participate in this action again, and whether they are more likely to get involved in other activities as well. Basically, I would like to assess how much the action of citizen contacting generates any sort of 'democratic spirit' of cooperation and reform-mindedness amongst those who are exposed to or amongst those who use these systems.

On the one hand, I am optimistic that this practice might produce the seeds of democratic leanings within individuals. On the other hand, I am pessimistic, recognizing that the institutional limitations of these platforms designed by the state may be suppressing this potential. Participation over online systems contributes to isolating participants from one another and may stymie democratic traits from being manifested. From the state's perspective, it undoubtedly hopes for this latter scenario, that these contacting systems are able to confer legitimacy to and serve a reliable oversight function for the state, without exposing it to the vulnerabilities that come with democratic developments.

Moving forward, I hope to test more systematically the extent to which engagement in citizen contacting in Russia translates into practical attitudinal or behavioral outcomes. I am considering redesigning and reissuing another survey or survey experiment that targets these questions and concepts more succinctly. I am also considering potentially conducting a field experiment, a focus group, or a series of personal interviews - depending upon the

accessibility and feasibility of these methodologies - to try and better identify and test this relationship.

## 4.2 Discussion of Findings

Citizen-initiated contacting is a relatively low-cost action for an individual, that, in an authoritarian context, eliminates the high risk that other forms of contentious politics like public demonstrations may incur. Nonetheless, because citizen contacting occurs through an institutionalized format and offers a citizen the space to communicate anything to the government, it can still be potentially dangerous to identify oneself and criticize the state in this manner. As a result, citizens must strike a balance and exert strategic decisions when considering how best to effectively approach the state.

My findings underscore the uneven approach that citizens exhibit toward contacting initiatives. Both citizen appeals and e-government are relatively prevalent forms of political engagement, but the users who participate in them are slightly different from one another and, in general, tend to approach each system with a different mindset and goal in mind. These distinguishing factors are applicable in understanding who is most likely to reach out to officials and under which conditions we might expect them to do so.

Individual users of citizen appeals and e-government in general tend to be more politically aware and engaged in other forms of political activities, as compared to non-participants or even the rest of the sample. There is an amount of overlap between citizen appealers and e-government users, as engaging in one tends to lead to engagement in the other, suggesting that these practices might parallel one another in terms of how citizens consider them in the scope of political participation. Furthermore, both sets of participants are significantly more likely to recommend these systems to others around them, indicating that there is something about actually interacting with the state that drives up one's propensity to endorse these platforms to others.

Otherwise, there are distinctions between the two groups. On the whole, e-government users tend to be younger than citizen appealers and share higher levels of self-efficacy, believing they can achieve solutions to problems at hand. Of course, most of the issues that e-government users are concerned about tend to be documentation, registrations, fines, and other social services - topics that are relatively uncomplicated for the state to resolve. Whether citizens' higher frequency of use or willingness to recommend these services to others after using them is a product of the high rates of e-government responsiveness on behalf of the state or simply a result of having familiarized oneself with the system, it does appear that these individuals are particularly good spokespeople for these platforms.

The motivations that drive usage and the issue areas over which citizens engage with e-government both paint a picture of a user who is more savvy with online interfaces and who thus utilizes a this platform as an available, convenient, and efficient tool to resolve a particularized issue. It appears that for someone who has a very specific concern in mind

and knows that e-government can handle that request, they are likely to take their concern to this platform and utilize this resource to their advantage.

This approach underpinning e-government usage is in stark contrast to the approach taken toward citizen appeals. Users of citizen appeals tend to be older, but they also tend to have lower levels of self-efficacy, feeling less capable of solving an issue on their own. When contacting state officials, these respondents exhibit two main tendencies: either they turn to the state as a first response or as a last ditch effort. Either way, respondents primarily seek out the state to make an appeal at a specific moment. Amongst citizen appealers is also group which expresses trust in the state to assist them and identifies that trust as the main motivating factor for making an appeal. However, the majority of respondents utilize appeals at a particular moment in their political participation strategy, as either a last resort or as their first response when facing an issue.

Unlike the topics addressed through e-government, the issue areas that are raised over citizen appeals are extremely diverse and can vary in terms of the scope and seriousness of the topic. Most issue areas raised by individuals are fairly straightforward; they primarily include constituency service and social service concerns. Yet, they also derive from much more complicated systemic questions about bureaucracy or corruption. The fact that citizen appeals are viewed as a venue to express concerns about more sensitive systemic issues is notable, in and of itself.

A respondent's choice of issue areas to appeal about is also reflective of their primary motivation for contacting the state. Those who trust the state to help them are less likely to raise thorny systemic issues and instead are more likely to communicate concerns about social services like education, healthcare, or pensions. Meanwhile, those who identify citizen appeals as a first or last response when facing an issue are more likely to raise concerns about constituency service as well as systemic topics like corruption, policing, or bureaucracy. There is a correlation between one's primary motivating factor for engaging and the types of issue areas that the participant is willing to raise.

Most citizen appeals are also directed at the regional level, unlike e-government usage which is concentrated at the national level. Survey comments confirm that many citizens assume or intuit that issues will be redirected to the regional level anyhow, or at least that local and national level systems are often seen as less effectual in addressing appeals. Therefore, respondents mostly contact governors or regional governing bodies.

Otherwise, survey findings indicate that individuals who utilize online formats expressly for individualized communication with state officials share a few overarching traits. The group of e-government users who utilized the platform to make complaints or raise problems to officials tends to have less self-efficacy and feel more influential than other e-government users, patterns consistent with the larger group of citizen appealers. That these groups share similar characteristics demonstrates that those who turn to state platforms to communicate an individualized concern may exhibit consistent tendencies. E-government users appear to understand this online platform as an existing tool to solve an issue at hand. Meanwhile, citizens appealers and all those who verbalize complaints or problems to the state are in search of a tool or solution to that concern, and generally feel less capable of solving the

issue on their own. This distinction - between levels of self-efficacy and influence - seems to be salient when considering e-government usage as distinct from citizen appealing.

Taken together, these findings support the prevalence of two approaches to citizen contacting amongst respondents: an Approach of Everyday Resistance and a Resource-based Model. Research findings offered less evidence that a Trust-based Model or a Needs-based Approach is at work amongst participants. Although some respondents may trust the state to handle issues and there may even be pockets of individuals who feel more supportive toward the state, in general, individuals expressed a significant amount of skepticism toward the system and toward officials' ability to assist them. There was a strong undercurrent of suspicion about whose interests were being prioritized in citizen appealing and how responsive the state would be as a result. Satisfaction levels with state services were not stellar and most did not indicate trust as a primary motivator for getting involved. Meanwhile, on the surface, a Needs-based Approach appears appropriate in explaining citizen contacting, as most respondents contacted the state about constituency service needs. Yet there was less evidence to support respondents reaching out to the state only as a by-product of necessity, and much more evidence to support the fact that the strategy of applying one's available resources often trumps contacting based simply on needs.

A Resource-based Model provides the best fit for why citizens initiate contact in Russia. My findings are consistent with Tsai and Xu (2018) who also find citizen contacting to be a product of one's personal resources in China [185]. While I do not attribute political connections as the primary resource at work, as may be the case in their study, I nonetheless find that one's own assets are the strongest predictor of willingness to engage in this activity. It was evident that many respondents applied particular strategies when approaching the state, and many of those strategies are reflective of an individual's level of political literacy and ability to navigate Russia's complex systems.

Those who exhibited an understanding of the mechanics of the appeals system appeared to have particular advantage and leverage over the process. Individuals who indicated they had reached out to the regional level or felt the regional level was most appropriate in aggregating and addressing appeals, demonstrated that they had considered other modalities in their decision-making calculus. The implication is that those who 'know' that the regional level is most amenable to appeals are more likely to reach out, because they perceive this as the most successful route to issue resolution. Respondents who suggested and applied other tactics - submitting multiple appeals, considering in-person and online interactions, and taking into account the timing of the appeal, whether first or last in their endeavor for a solution - are also exhibiting the strategies underpinning their decision to contact an official. These strategies are all products of a set of personal resources, namely one's embedded knowledge of how to most effectively procure a resolution to an issue and one's proficiency in navigating the intricate series of online contacting channels within Russia.

Additionally, social and online capital and literacy appear to be equally important resources. In today's political landscape in Russia, to complete the action of contacting often requires a high degree of digital competency. Particularly because so many respondents relayed frustrations about the difficulties with platform layouts, designs, and functionality,

those who are not as digitally savvy are also less capable of navigating these systems. Of course other resources are also likely at work, including personal connections or having legal or political expertise, but I did not collect data on these variables. Regardless, one's ability to navigate both the political and online worlds in Russia are significant resources that encourage or dissuade individuals from engaging in contacting. This approach is especially true for individuals seeking out state responsiveness to constituency service or social service type issues, which is highly suggestive that a Resource-based Model is the predominant approach underpinning this political behavior.

Although a Resource-based Model is the prevailing approach citizens take toward contacting officials, I also find evidence for an Approach of Everyday Resistance. While survey comments did identify a handful of respondents who appeared to use contacting channels to unequivocally express protest and dissent to the state and regime, I suggest that the majority of those who use an Approach of Everyday Resistance do so in subtle and skillful ways.

There is ample evidence to support the fact that citizen appeals may function as a foundational tactic, both for expressing criticism of more systemic issues as well as for simply expressing political voice. The exponential spike in appeals regarding both constitutional reforms that coincided with widespread anti-corruption protests in 2017 as well as the spike in appeals regarding international affairs immediately following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 directed to the Russian Government suggests that citizens do use these channels to communicate on systemic regime policies. Furthermore, in my survey, respondents who had made an appeal - especially those who exhibited strategizing about when to make that appeal - were also willing to contact the government about more systemic related issues. As commenters confirmed, many of these citizens and respondents may feel more comfortable expressing criticism on these sensitive topics through an online appeal because they can carefully articulate themselves and subtly express their resistance without scrutiny.

In that regard, citizen appeals are also fundamentally used as a conduit to convey one's own voice to the state. For these individuals, the value of these channels lies not so much in the level of state responsiveness to a request, but more so in the channel's ability to accept and transmit individual political expressions. This approach helps explain why many who had made contact in the survey were not satisfied with the service, but were nonetheless willing to recommend these state services to others. This form of resistance is not drastic or radical, but formulating an individual expression in the face of a behemoth authoritarian state can be an empowering action. For a subset of respondents and citizens, an Approach of Everyday Resistance that allows individuals to skillfully offer input that is critical of state practices or regime policies explains their willingness to contact and interact with state officials.

### 4.3 Concluding Remarks

Citizen appeals and e-government systems are increasingly important as instruments through which citizens and the state directly interact. It is no coincidence that in April 2023, the Russian government overhauled its military conscription laws, establishing Gosuslugi, Russia's national e-government platform, as the primary method through which citizens will be recruited into the army. This recent legislation permits the state to use e-government portals to issue compulsory military recruitment notifications. In the wake of these laws, Gosuslugi accounts are no longer able to be deleted, ironically except through personal appeal to the service center [88]. In this way, the state has coerced e-government participation upon a huge segment of the population and has compelled citizen-state interactions on a grander scale.

My survey results indicate that a sizable amount of individuals are comfortable with and have already used online citizen appeals and e-government platforms. They primarily approach this practice through the lens of a Resource-based Approach or an Approach of Everyday Resistance. Based upon these findings and these two approaches as best fit models for this form of political participation, there appears to be a certain type of 'public' interacting with officials through these systems.

Toepfl's (2020) theory of 'authoritarian publics' puts forth an idea that there are three types of 'publics' within and across authoritarian polities: uncritical, policy-critical, and leadership-critical [180]. Both uncritical and leadership-critical publics are potentially threatening to an autocratic regime, as they have the capacity to undermine it in the long-run. But according to this theory, it is policy-critical publics that serve an important role as a state-supporting institution in and of themselves.

Policy-critical publics contribute to state stability in the long-term by offering the government a reasonable and reliable source from which to accommodate population preferences without undermining political power. Policy-critical publics are especially valuable in maintaining the regime's flexibility and ability to respond to new and pressing concerns. The Russian state's many channels of citizen contacting can be considered venues through which the government seeks to accumulate feedback from these policy-critical publics.

My findings from this research, by and large, suggest that the bulk of respondents who engage in citizen contacting are behaving in ways that align with a policy-critical public. They primarily utilize these systems to address constituency service and social service issues, and communicate concerns about topics that are policy-critical, from which the state can benefit. Although there are some hints that respondents may potentially be willing to utilize these systems in line with a leadership-critical public approach, even those who manifest everyday resistance through these channels, often are not directing criticism at the regime or leadership itself. Instead of serving as venues for individuals to exercise accountability and work toward larger political reforms, citizen contacting largely functions as a channel for systematized policy critique and feedback. Ultimately, what this means for the state is that the way citizens view and utilize these structures do not threaten regime survival, and as institutions may be functioning as an effective stabilizing and reinforcing mechanism for

state authority.

Citizen contacting and e-government channels have proliferated in Russia, not just in number, but also in use. How the state designs, manipulates, and implements these institutions is a large part of the narrative. But equally as relevant is the role of citizens in these arrangements. Much of the literature on this topic assesses why an authoritarian state may host such contacting platforms, but I have taken into account why citizens use them and the particular strategies they may employ when doing so. By placing citizen perspectives as the starting point in this project, I bring attention to the agency that they have in exercising political engagement within an authoritarian context.

The role of individuals in authoritarian regimes are often marginalized. In many ways, individuals do exert little influence on larger political processes or decisions under these conditions. Citizen appeals and e-government remain accessible arenas for citizens to participate politically and crucially to be able to set the parameters around that participation. Individuals can approach the state through these online platforms whenever they choose, and essentially can articulate any input and feedback that they want to the state apparatus.

Citizens may understand that state responsiveness to an appeal is dependent upon a variety of strategies and resources employed by each citizen. For many others, the point of turning to these systems is not to receive a response at all, but rather to simply vocalize themselves to authorities. Either way, the citizens who do engage here are exercising agency by choosing to participate in this way. The institutional and structural limitations that Russia's authoritarian state places upon these systems often means that these structures work in imperfect ways and in manners that try and limit an individual's ability to enact political outcomes. Nonetheless, a more nuanced account of these platforms demonstrates that citizens can take strategic measures to try and maximize their political influence or agency over the system.

The overarching narrative of this research suggests that these quasi-democratic institutions ultimately serve as a mechanism for authoritarian state control. Both the quantitative and qualitative analyses point to a scenario whereby these state structures are not always genuinely at work on behalf of the citizenry, and that citizens themselves do not utilize them to enact greater systemic changes. Respondents are less willing to make contact about systemic issues and most reach out to officials in order to try and receive a response from the state, rather than seeking to upend the status quo. In doing so, channels of citizen-initiated contacting serve in exactly the manner that theories about them suggests the state desires: as legitimacy-boosting institutions that allow for additional policy-critical information gathering and monitoring over the population.

Survey results demonstrated that overwhelmingly, those who had interacted with the state were more likely to recommend those services to others, tendency that helps to fortify state legitimacy amongst the population. These platforms are also competent and practical sources of information about average citizens, not only because of people's willingness to use them, but also because of the variety of issue areas that they are willing to reach out to the state about. The state need not even respond to every appeal in order to reap the benefits from these system, as they provide constant flows of information from and overviews about

the population.

Underlying the contemporary political landscape in Russia is a tendency toward a lack of optimism with regard to politics. Busygina and Phillipov (2015) argue that years of iterated distributive failures and corrupt outcomes have caused Russian citizens to automatically expect and anticipate sub-optimal results from their government [26]. Carrying forth their argument into this research is applicable. Citizens who navigate their way through the government's citizen contacting systems are often not fully satisfied and are quick to identify many flaws in these platforms. Survey comments reiterate that many respondents approach the state with a great deal of cautionary optimism.

This prevailing assumption amongst Russians that the state is only capable of subpar outcomes helps to calibrate these institutions in the context of authoritarian power. Any result from an appeal is more likely to be considered in higher esteem by citizens when they have such low expectation to begin with. Therefore, these systems work to additionally stabilize the state, or at least prevent significant disruption in the political relationship between citizens and the state as a result of their use. This balanced set of circumstances is a result, not just of the way that the state has designed systems, but also critically of the approaches and strategies that citizens take when they use them.

My analysis pushes beyond conceptions of authoritarian durability as a result of economic stability or centralized institutional arrangements. Instead, I illustrate how individual citizen perspectives and approaches can similarly contribute to authoritarian stability. Whether because individuals assume any political changes will be unlikely or because they presume these channels are incapable of producing them, the fact is that Russians are resistant to use citizen-initiated contacting for purposes beyond immediate needs or personal political expressions. The resources-driven calculus underpinning most respondent strategies also does not motivate any behaviors that might cause a significant disruption in this cycle. Citizens continue to leverage their resources and political voices when reaching out to the state about non-threatening issue areas, and the state continues to offer satisfactory albeit incomplete responsiveness to those appeals. In this process, citizens are ultimately reinforcing state authority, by leaving the state less accountable and in legitimizing its institutional power in the process.

Since citizens do not anticipate effective outcomes from the state, governing bodies are not beholden to produce particularly exceptional levels of responsiveness. In making an appeal, a citizen is therefore reinforcing their own acceptance of subpar outcomes, which further dampens any prospects of political change or accountability. Plus, in engaging in citizen appeals, the individual is less likely to connect this administrative apparatus to the wider regime. The approaches individuals take toward these platforms, as a policy-critical public, feed into the state's larger political objectives for regime stability. Therefore, citizen-initiated contacting is another example of the authoritarian state apparatus harnessing the power of a democratic practice for its own benefit.



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