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Testing for sources of electoral competition under authoritarianism: an analysis of Russia's gubernatorial elections

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ABSTRACT

What drives electoral competition in competitive authoritarian regimes? Most scholarship has assumed that the outcome of these elections is decided by regime manipulation alone. Using three rounds of newly reinstated gubernatorial elections in Russia's regions, I test this assumption. I identify three distinct measures of competition calibrated to authoritarian elections and assess whether voter preferences or regime manipulation best explain the degree of electoral competition. Relying on new data on protests across Russia's regions, I find that regions with high protest activity have more contested elections with narrower margins of victory. The results also confirm recent scholarship highlighting the importance of voter turnout for delivering pro-regime victories.

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Introduction

What drives electoral competition under authoritarianism? In competitive or electoral authoritarian regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010; Schedler 2013), elections are regularly held, open to all or nearly all participants, and are generally viewed as the only legitimate route to power. Yet, crucial democratic norms are routinely violated in order to deliver an incumbent victory. In examining these regimes, scholars have primarily focused on explaining *why* autocrats hold elections: to mitigate the risk of a *coup d'état* (Cox 2009); to determine the distribution of state resources and to monitor subordinates (Lust-Okar 2006); to collect, distort, and transmit information (Magaloni 2006; Simpser 2013). Meanwhile, voters, insofar as they have been included in the analysis, have been relegated to the role of "passive recipients of patronage and manipulation" (Miller 2015, 649). Yet, numerous studies have shown that authoritarian elections, while they may not lead to turnover or democratization, accommodate social demands in nuanced ways (Shi 1999; Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Blaydes 2011; Miller 2015). Few autocrats can ignore their citizens indefinitely and hope to survive. Regular elections bring this issue of authoritarian responsiveness to the fore by forcing autocrats to control competition while sufficiently responding to social demands so as to avoid widespread public rejection of the election results.

This paper uses the results of 43 gubernatorial elections in Russia's regions to test the relative strength of two alternative explanations for electoral competition under authoritarianism: voter preferences and regime manipulation. Russia's political system provides a good context in which to assess each explanation. On the one hand, Russia has been described as "one of the largest and most successful authoritarian regimes" (Reuter and Robertson 2012, 1026), where elections are carefully managed and lack the important element of risk. On the other, Russian citizens continue to value the act of voting

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and react vocally, as evident in the winter of 2011–2012, to blatant transgressions by the state of democratic norms (see Robertson 2009; Colton and Hale 2014). As such, the newly reinstated gubernatorial elections[1] provide an opportunity to examine the extent to which authoritarian elections are "the joint product of voter choices and regime manipulation" (Schedler 2013, 239).

The analysis shows that Russia's regime is in fact responsive to voters, albeit in a uniquely authoritarian manner. Relying on an original data-set of protests across Russia's regions[2] as a proxy for political preferences, I find that protests are associated with diminished margins of victory for United Russia gubernatorial candidates. I argue that this is because in these "noisier" regions, elites interpret protest as an indication of society's ability to monitor and punish electoral malpractice. Elites then tailor a "package of malpractice" (Birch 2011) to lessen the damage to the legitimacy earned through elections in these politically active regions. In another nod to voters, unpopular or economically predatory governors are replaced in advance of elections in order to diminish the impact of voter disapproval. Despite this responsiveness, elections are nonetheless manipulated in significant ways. Voter turnout is the regime's most powerful tool for ensuring incumbent victories and is, as I show, highly associated with the degree of ethnic homogeneity of a region, suggesting that titular republics are more vulnerable to authoritarian electoral manipulation than other regions.

The results presented here are consistent with the findings of scholars who argue that authoritarian elections are largely artificial contests, performing rather than embodying competition. Yet, this argument is also in need of further refinement. Although competition is managed, authoritarian elections are indeed responsive mechanisms. Protests in particular seem to be taken seriously by the regime. An authoritarian regime's response to social demands is more nuanced and pre-emptive, its tactics subtler, than has been previously argued.

Explaining competition: voter preferences or regime manipulation

Voter preferences

If voters have an impact on the degree of competition in an authoritarian regime, their economic and political preferences should play an important role. Traditionally, studies of elections have highlighted economic considerations in motivating electoral choices. When applied to Eastern Europe and Russia, the economic model of retrospective voting has produced mixed findings. Research conducted in the mid- to late 1990s on post-Communist states found a link between voters' evaluation of economic performance and accountability at the polls, although the effect was sometimes absorbed by other considerations, such as party affiliation (Colton 1996; Clem and Craumer 2000; Tucker 2001). In Russia, some research on sub-national elections has demonstrated that voters not only assess economic performance as part of their decision-making process but also that these individual assessments translate into electoral outcomes (Konitzer 2005). In contrast, analyses using a set of different economic indicators found little or no connection between economic conditions in Russian regions and the outcomes of gubernatorial elections (Solnick 1998; Moraski and Reisinger 2003). The picture also changes when the focus shifts to executive elections and presidential approval ratings. Using results from the Russian Election Studies survey (RES), Colton and Hale (2009, 2014) found that electoral support for both Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev during the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections depended at least in part on a positive evaluation of the national economy. Daniel Treisman (2011) also found that the levels of presidential popularity in Russia reflect the public's evaluation of economic performance; Yel'tsin's popularity suffered as the economy worsened, whereas Putin's popularity soared when the economy rebounded in the early 2000s.

The research summarized above is now dated and was undertaken when the political regime in Russia could be described as an emerging or illiberal democracy. This is no longer the case. Certainly, since the abolition of gubernatorial elections in 2005, Russia can be accurately described as a hybrid regime or competitive authoritarian regime. Whether economic considerations matter in the newly reinstated gubernatorial elections is unclear. I aim to shed light on this by including two economic

indicators in the analysis of electoral competition in gubernatorial elections: the lagged regional unemployment rate and change in monthly income for the year prior to the election.[3] The lagged unemployment rate is commonly used to assess the economic well-being of a region and reflects its relative performance. A measure of the change in monthly income is also included, as it is arguably an indicator of the region's economic performance that is more personally felt by voters. Of course, neither of these proxies is perfect. Russian authorities and businesses have a history of artificially under-reporting both unemployment rates – by keeping people "on the books" without providing them with work – as well as income – by paying a portion of an employee's salary "under the table" to avoid paying taxes and making pension contributions. In addition, the time period covered in this analysis – the three-year period 2012–2014 – may be too short for the impact of the economy to be sufficiently expressed. Although Russia's regions vary significantly by income and unemployment levels, the period between 2012 and 2014 was dominated by events of national significance, such as the Olympic Games in Sochi and the annexation of Crimea, which may have diverted people's attention from the economy. Nevertheless, if economic considerations matter, I expect that voters in regions with higher unemployment and lower incomes should vote with higher frequency against the status quo and punish incumbent governors with more competitive elections and narrower margins of victory.

Findings from research on voters' political preferences in Russia are dispiriting. In the 1990s, scholars focused mostly on Russian political parties and described them as personalistic and undifferentiated (Fish 1995). Voters were shown to lack partisan attachment and to be suspicious of organized politics (see White, Rose, and McAllister 1997). An even grimmer picture emerged during the first Putin presidency, when analysis of voting behavior suggested that elites were largely responsible for the mass support of new political parties such as Edinstvo and Otechestvo (Myagkov and Ordeshook 2002). Most recently, attention has shifted to the emergence of Russia's "dominant party," United Russia (Reuter and Remington 2009), which lacks a programmatic platform and whose support relies heavily on the personal popularity of Vladimir Putin.

Given the current political context, it is perhaps unlikely that the political preferences of voters will have a significant impact on competition in gubernatorial elections. It is possible, however, that anti-regime sentiment may account for lower vote shares for the regime-backed incumbents, especially after the anti-electoral fraud protests of 2011–2012. The recent success of opposition candidates in municipal elections in places such as Moscow suggests that voters motivated to cast their vote against regime-backed candidates can have an impact at the polls. However, gubernatorial elections, with bigger district magnitudes than their municipal counterparts and higher stakes for the regime, may not follow this pattern.

In an authoritarian state, capturing the true political preferences of citizens can be tricky. Surveys performed by Russian survey agencies routinely assess support for political parties and politicians. However, most do not control for response bias. This is a serious problem because, as the 2012 RES survey has shown, actual levels of support for Putin are about 10% lower than those explicitly reported by respondents (Colton and Hale 2014, 18, 19). In this paper, I use United Russia's vote share in each region's last parliamentary election as a proxy for political preferences. This is an appropriate measure for this analysis because the gubernatorial incumbent in each region either represented United Russia or was explicitly endorsed by the party. I hypothesize that if voters' political preferences matter, votes for United Russia in regional parliaments should correlate with stronger support for the incumbents in gubernatorial elections.

However, previous support for United Russia may be motivated by something other than genuine partisan attachment. I therefore also include the total number of political protests in a region during the two years that precede the election as a proxy for voters' political preferences. There is a large and growing literature on contentious politics in authoritarian regimes in general (Tsai 2008; Bourdreau 2009; Slater 2010; Chen 2012) and in Russia in particular (Beissinger 2002; Robertson 2009, 2013; Lankina 2015). A substantial part of this work has been devoted to explaining how and why, after such a long period of inactivity, Russians took to the streets to protest against electoral fraud (Chaisty and Whitefield 2013; Gel'man 2013; Greene 2013; Smyth, Sobolev, and Soboleva 2013). Protests also have been shown

to exert a subtle but significant impact on domestic politics. Protests influence a diverse range of issues from decisions surrounding the appointment of legislators (Reuter and Robertson 2015) to the spread of multi-party elections (Trejo 2014). The frequency and intensity of protests can be the result of a number of things: levels of socioeconomic or political grievances, the density of civil society, or other political-institutional opportunity structures (Lankina 2015). The analysis contained herein does not explain differing levels of protests across Russia's regions. Instead, I argue that protests are expressions of public will and can therefore be treated as an adequate proxy for public dissent. Moreover, since contentious politics in authoritarian regimes is a risky type of public expression of dissent, even relatively low levels of protests should theoretically have some impact.

I expect that the impact of protest on electoral competition, if it exists, operates indirectly by constraining attempts to increase pro-regime electoral margins. This intuition is informed by recent studies of protest and elections in nondemocratic regimes. For example, Lankina and Skovoroda (2014) have argued that street rallies stayed the hand of local officials from perpetrating electoral fraud during the 2012 Presidential election in Russia. Similarly, in a cross-national analysis, Sarah Birch (2011) has shown that protests reduce electoral malpractice. Birch argues that autocrats tend to select a package of appropriate electoral strategies based on their perception of the potential riskiness of each strategy. In addition to being an expression of dissent, protests are evidence of a latent capacity within a state or region to monitor, report, and punish electoral malpractice. As Birch (2011, 58) notes: "The capacity for popular mobilization and protest ought to be negatively correlated with electoral malpractice." In line with Birch's argument and Lankina and Skovoroda's research, I expect that because the potential legitimacy costs of manipulation of the electoral outcome are higher in regions with higher protest activity – what I dub to be "noisier" regions – elections there should have narrower margins of victory for regime incumbents.

A note of caution is in order here. Using protest levels to analyze electoral competition presents a potential problem of endogeneity. Several scholars (Robertson 2013; Trejo 2014; Lankina 2015; Reuter and Robertson 2015) have argued convincingly that elites have incentives to mobilize the public, thereby generating protest activity. It can be, therefore, problematic to assume that protests drive electoral competition if mobilization is in fact a strategy employed by the very elites who are competing at the polls. Nevertheless, political protests are intrinsically appealing as a contributing factor to levels of electoral competition. Especially in electoral authoritarian regimes, where institutional forms of resistance are often inaccessible by design, the street is an attractive avenue for signaling to the state. I propose to use protest activity to gauge one aspect of electoral competition where I can best mitigate the possibility of endogeneity. In order to do this, I only analyze the impact of protests on the winner's vote share above the run-off threshold. Doing so accomplishes two things. First, because the Kremlin appointed all of the incumbents in the elections analyzed here, it is unlikely that these regional elites would organize protests to negotiate with the center as they did before gubernatorial elections were abolished in 2005. Second, in coding the data I have taken care to make sure that the regional protest count does not include pro-government or pro-Putin protests. Since, as Robertson (2013) points out, the Putin regime has become adept at using mass mobilization to demonstrate support for the regime and its policies, these types of "protests" would only cloud the data.

Even with these precautions, the analysis remains vulnerable to the influence of omitted variable bias, specifically, the possibility that a third factor – some general level of "democracy" or aspect of the region's polity – leads to both more protests and more competitive elections. I employ two measures in the analysis to address this concern. First, the expert rankings of democracy across Russia's regions produced by the Moscow Carnegie Center (Petrov and Titkov 2013) capture aspects of each region's polity that may be expected to affect both protest and competition: political pluralism – the number and stability of regional political parties – and civil society. As a second measure, I also use a variable representing the recent persecution of NGOs. The logic behind the appropriateness of such a variable is as follows. After the color revolutions and the Arab Spring, the Russian regime dealt with the perceived threat posed by civil society and NGOs in two ways: first, by creating a "paternalistic model of civil society" (Wilson 2010, 26) that brought certain NGOs under the state umbrella and promoted their activities

through increased funding; and second, by simultaneously fostering a harsher climate for independent and explicitly political civil society organizations through the so-called "foreign agent" law. Elisabeth Plantan (2014, 3) describes this as a "dual strategy of selective repression and selective encouragement of domestic civil society." Despite the fact that the foreign agent law is a piece of federal legislation, its effects have not been uniform across the regions. Plantan (2014) points out that the characteristics of different NGOs – their purpose and religious affiliation – predicts to some extent whether or not they will become targets of state repression. Types of NGOs are not randomly or evenly distributed throughout Russia's regions. NGO development is conditioned by both the presence of funding as well as the receptiveness of local governments. Strong, active, and connected NGOs tend to emerge in regions with a "supportive local environment" (see Sundstrom 2006). Guided by previous research, I operate under the assumption that NGOs of a similar type will develop more actively in certain regions. I expect, therefore, that some regions will be more densely or, alternatively, more sparsely populated by active agents of civil society that may explain, in turn, levels of protest and, simultaneously, levels of electoral competition. To control for this, I introduce a dummy variable capturing the repression of NGOs. This measure does not account for all forms of repression of civil society. It omits idiosyncratic features that may influence the degree to which regime actions such as the suppression of street meetings are more common in one region than another. I believe, however, that this NGO repression measure along with the Carnegie region ratings adequately capture the overall level of democracy in the regions included in this analysis. With these controls in place, and following the logic of electoral malpractice outlined by Birch (2011), I expect that if voter preferences matter in elections in authoritarian regimes, regions with higher levels of protest activity should have tighter contests because the authorities will seek to avoid electoral manipulation.

Lastly, research has posited a relationship between the length of tenure of a governor, his political loyalty, and the economic performance of his region, which can broadly be called the "loyalty-competence tradeoff." In analyzing corporate raiding, Rochlitz (2014) argues that Russian governors are given a certain amount of leeway by central authorities to engage in corrupt practices if they are able to deliver pro-regime results during elections. Similarly, Reuter and Robertson (2012, 1031) find that while economic performance seems to matter very little for the chances of gubernatorial reappointment, "governors who turn in strong UR [United Russia] performances in their regions are likely to be reappointed, while governors who do not are more likely to be replaced." What implications does this track record of valuing loyalty over performance have for post-appointment era regional elections? On the one hand, one would expect that governors who were perversely incentivized to engage in corrupt practices and neglect economic performance in favor of generating votes should attract voter disapproval when polls are once again made into an avenue for assessing regional executives. Under this logic, long tenures, as evidenced by fewer turnovers in the post of governor since 2005, should correlate with lower vote shares for the incumbent. On the other, governors who have proven to be resilient throughout the appointment era will have well-developed political machines they can use to deliver electoral results. If this is the case, long tenures should correlate with better results for the incumbent at the polls. For the purposes of this analysis, a negative relationship between length of tenure and electoral outcome for the incumbent is interpreted as evidence for the voter preference model of electoral competition, whereas a positive relationship supports the manipulation model, which I discuss next.

Regime manipulation

To what degree are authoritarian elections managed by the regime? The need to win elections while maintaining legitimacy presents the regime with the so-called "fraudsters' dilemma": the manipulation required to generate legitimacy actually damages the legitimacy being sought (Beaulieu and Hyde 2009). Electoral malpractice used to generate pro-regime results therefore must be carefully calibrated. As Birch (2011) argues, electoral malpractice can take three forms: manipulation of the rules governing elections, manipulation of vote choice, and manipulation of vote administration (i.e. fraud). The first type of malpractice – manipulation of the legal framework of an election – is arguably the best form

Table 1. Measures of competitiveness.

Measure	Mean	SD	Min	Max
HH Index: measure of competition	0.40	0.12	0.17	0.65
Golosov Score: measure of the effective number of candidates	1.05	0.29	1.09	2.37
Threshold: incumbent's vote share above 50% run-off threshold	25.22	10.07	0.63	41.35

of malpractice because it is unlikely to elicit international or domestic criticism. However, this type of malpractice is not relevant to the present analysis because changes to election rules apply uniformly across the country and cannot explain variation in election results among regions. The third type of malpractice outlined by Birch – manipulation of electoral administration – which takes the form of outright bans on opposition parties, disenfranchisement of citizens, and fraud – has certainly occurred in Russia (for close analysis see Myagkov, Ordeshook, and Shakin 2005; Lukinova, Myagkov, and Ordeshook 2011; Enikolopov et al. 2013). In fact, the 2011 Duma elections suffered from widespread voter fraud (Nichol 2011; Bader 2013). And yet, election observers have not recorded this type of widespread electoral malpractice in regional elections. While it is improbable to claim that absolutely no electoral fraud took place in the regional elections analyzed here, I rely on the election observer reports produced by the well-respected election monitoring organization Golos to suggest that violations, if they happened, were rare. Golos observers did note some irregularities, including unbalanced media access for candidates, interference with election observers at polling places, and generally low interest among voters. However, they only deemed violations in two regions – the Republic of Altai and Tyumen Oblast – to be sufficiently serious to warrant labeling those elections as "dirty." During these elections, Golos observers did not report serious electoral malpractice such as ballot box stuffing, carousel voting, or vote buying. In most cases, violations did not "distort significantly" the electoral results or interfere with the expression of voter preferences.[4]

In order to test for the effect of manipulation on election results, I use a measure that captures the second form of malpractice outlined by Birch, vote choice malpractice, as proxied by the degree to which a region's media is controlled by the state. The media has been shown to play an important role in the Kremlin's interaction with citizens (White, Oates, and McAllister 2005; Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011) and in regions with few independent media outlets, electoral competition should be constrained and the winner's vote margin should be substantial. I also include variables that have been highlighted by election observers and researchers as potentially problematic: vulnerable populations, voting outside the polling stations using absentee ballots, and voter turnout. Several studies have found that elections are won in authoritarian regimes not through fraud but because citizens turn out in large numbers to vote for the incumbent (Magaloni 2006; Colton and Hale 2009; Blaydes 2011; Lukinova, Myagkov, and Ordeshook 2011). I expect, therefore, that if malpractice drives electoral competition, voter turnout should increase the regional incumbent's vote share. Golos has also sounded the alarm about the use of early and absentee ballots as well as pressure tactics used on infirm or elderly populations who are entitled to at-home voting. To test whether these factors contribute to or diminish electoral competition, I include measures for the population of pensioners and the use of absentee ballots. I expect that if electoral malpractice is taking place, both variables should drive down competition.

Measuring competition in an authoritarian regime

There are several meaningful ways of measuring electoral competition. I have chosen three measures that take into account characteristics unique to authoritarian elections (see Table 1). Traditionally, in democratic settings, party fractionalization or the number of "effective parties," also known as the Herfindahl-Hirschman index of industrial concentration (hereafter HH index), is used as a measure of the degree of electoral competition.[5] The advantage of using such an index is that it is a probability measure that encapsulates both the number of candidates and their relative electoral strength. The larger the number of candidates and the smaller their individual vote shares, the closer the HH index

score will be to 1. The fewer the candidates and the more disparate their individual vote shares, the closer the index score will be to 0.

However, as Golosov (2010) has pointed out, the HH index may not adequately reflect competition in an emerging democracy or electoral authoritarian regime, where fractionalization of party systems tends to fall at two extremes: many small parties in systems struggling to consolidate or electoral landscapes dominated by one party to a degree unthinkable in a democracy. Golosov therefore suggests a different formula for calculating the effective number of parties based on the assumption that truly competitive parties are of equivalent sizes.[6] In an election, in which one party receives 80% of the vote and another receives 20% of the vote, Golosov's formula suggests that the effective number of parties is 1.25: one winning party and one party one-fourth its size. The scores produced using this measure not only capture the dynamics of highly concentrated party systems, such as in Russia, but are also arguably more easily interpretable than the HH index (which in the same election specified above would produce a score of 0.32). I have therefore calculated the effective number of candidates for each gubernatorial election. For comparison, while the HH index gives the uncompetitive election in Orel Oblast a score of 0.202, the Golosov formula produces 1.12 effective candidates in that region. In the Republic of Altai, the HH index score is 0.604, with 2.09 effective candidates according to Golosov's formula.

Owing to the fact that authoritarian elections are mechanisms that generate legitimacy for the regime and its regional representatives, I include one final measure of competitiveness: incumbent vote share above 50%. All gubernatorial elections operated under a two-round majority system. Candidates needed to receive 50% in order to avoid a run-off election. Although in a democracy, a victory with a majority of votes can be described as definitive, receiving 50% in a nondemocratic contest carries different implications. As Paul Goode suggests, in Russia, "a genuinely competitive election actually appears as a failure for the regime" (2013, 10). And indeed, electoral results varied from comfortable Soviet-style victories for the incumbent in Volgograd Oblast, with 39 percentage points above the run-off threshold, to less overwhelming victories in Moscow with 1.37 percentage points above the threshold and in the Republic of Sakha with 8.78 points above the threshold.

Analysis and discussion

I use multivariate OLS regression to test for the influence of voter preferences and manipulation on electoral competition. Table 2 presents the results for each set of variables – capturing voter preferences and regime manipulation – separately and then combined together into one model. The reasons for presenting the results this way are twofold. First, because voter preferences and regime manipulation are offered in this paper as competing hypotheses, I test the *relative* strength of each explanation using the overall fit of each model. Looking at the adjusted R^2 statistic, we see that whereas the voter preferences model explains between 21 and 34% of the variation in electoral competition, the manipulation model explains between 38 and 42%, depending on the measure. Second, in order to test the explanatory power of each set of independent variables, I also combine the two models and present those results. While this has the advantage of testing the explanatory leverage of each independent variable against all others, the number of observations in this analysis, 43, means that the degrees of freedom in the combined model are quickly used up and the p-values of each coefficient are less reliable. I discuss each model in turn below, beginning with voter preferences.

One of the two proxies for voters' economic preferences, unemployment, was both substantive and statistically significant across indicators of competitiveness. Growth in the region's unemployment rate produced more competitive gubernatorial elections. Also as expected, growth in the average monthly income of residents reduced the incumbent's vote share above the threshold level, although this result was not substantive or statistically significant. These results are in line both with earlier work on economic voting in Russia's regions (Konitzer 2005) and with the proposed link between economic performance and authoritarian regime stability. As Andreas Schedler has argued: "poverty is a source of electoral security in competitive [authoritarian] regimes" (2013, 243). As with their democratic counterparts, incumbents in an authoritarian regime are punished for rising unemployment. Yet, the security of

Table 2. The influence of voter preferences and manipulation on electoral competition.

Variable	Threshold	HH Index	Golosov score
Voter preferences			
Protest	−0.12***		
	(0.04)		
Previous support for UR	0.11	0.00	0.00
	(0.17)	(0.00)	(0.01)
Unemployment	−2.27**	0.03**	0.06*
	(1.05)	(0.01)	(0.03)
Income	0.00	2.04e-05	3.30e-05
	(0.00)	(1.69e-05)	(5.81e-05)
Turnover	2.46**	−0.03*	−0.04
	(1.16)	(0.02)	(0.04)
Turnover controlling for governor replacement (New)	2.05*	−0.02	0.00
	(1.01)	(0.01)	(0.04)
Constant	27.14	0.34	1.05
	(30.74)	(0.31)	(0.64)
R^2	0.34	0.25	0.21
Manipulation			
Pensioners	0.78	−0.01	−0.03*
	(0.47)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Voter turnout	0.41***	−0.01***	−0.01***
	(0.13)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Media freedom	−1.46	0.00	0.08
	(2.89)	(0.03)	(0.09)
Absentee ballots	0.38	0.00	−0.01*
	(0.27)	(0.00)	(0.01)
Constant	−22.43	1.05***	2.43***
	(20.54)	(0.23)	(0.61)
R^2	0.38	0.42	0.38
Combined model			
Protest	−0.05*		
	(0.03)		
Previous support for UR	−0.15	0.00	0.00
	(0.15)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Unemployment	−1.00	0.00	0.00
	(1.00)	(0.01)	(0.03)
Income	0.00	−1.75e-05	−4.76e-05
	(0.00)	(1.70e-05)	(5.78e-05)
Turnover controlling for governor replacement (New)	3.62***	−0.03**	−0.03
	(1.24)	(0.01)	(0.03)
Pensioners	1.50**	−0.02**	−0.04**
	(0.70)	(0.01)	(0.02)
Voter turnout	0.52***	−0.01***	−0.02***
	(0.17)	(0.00)	(0.01)
Absentee ballots	0.40	0.00	−0.01
	(0.24)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Constant	−35.37	1.23***	2.84***
	(33.35)	(0.30)	(0.67)
R^2	0.64	0.62	0.49

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses.
$^{***}p < 0.01$; $^{**}p < 0.05$; $^{*}p < 0.1$; Obs = 43.

their position is also imperiled by increases in per capita income. The universe of cases examined here is relatively small, however, and future work based on a larger number of cases may see the statistical significance of economic preferences weaken.

The impact of political preferences was mixed. Previous support for United Russia (UR) in a region decreased competition across all three indicators as expected, but the effect was substantively small and not statistically significant. On the other hand, high frequency in the turnover of governors reduced competition across all measures. The coefficient was both substantive and statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

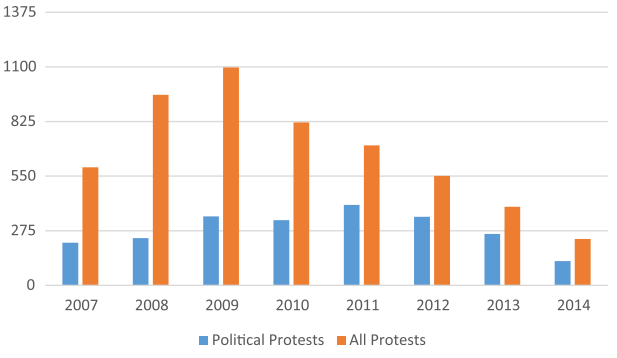

Figure 1. Political protests in Russia, 2007–2014.
Sources: Data for 2013 and 2014 collected by author; data for 2007–2012 collected by Dr Tomila Lankina.

It also increased in magnitude and statistical significance when the voter preference and manipulation models were combined.

In including this variable, I expected that voters would punish established governors because they were more likely to engage in predatory behavior against their own regions (Reuter and Robertson 2012; Rochlitz 2014). Yet, the results point to a different relationship: short tenures correlate with a higher voter share for the incumbent governor. This finding also contradicts the expectations of the manipulation model of electoral competition presented above, whereby political machines established over long gubernatorial tenures facilitate better results for the incumbent at the polls on election day. One explanation for this result may be that a subtler and earlier form of electoral manipulation is taking place that is not accounted for in the design of the original manipulation model.

Before the return of gubernatorial elections, there was speculation in the media that the Kremlin was trying to ensure incumbent victories in vulnerable regions by replacing weak governors (Brennan 2014). Among the cases included in this analysis, 10 governors were replaced by the Kremlin a few months before the election and another three governors were replaced the year before the election. In order to ascertain whether this strategy helped to secure victories, I added a dummy variable – *New* – coded as 1 if the governor was appointed the same year as the election or 0 if the governor was appointed any time before the election. The results, also presented in Table 2, show that controlling for the Kremlin's policy of replacing weak governors diminishes the impact of voter dissatisfaction on electoral outcomes. When the *New* variable is added, the coefficient for turnover is reduced by nearly half a percent and statistical significance is also reduced to 0.1. It would seem that while voters were prone to punishing long-sitting and perhaps predatory governors, the Kremlin was able to anticipate this by replacing these governors before the election.

Finally, mobilization, as captured by protests, had the expected impact on competition. Regions with a history of political protest had more competitive elections with closer winning margins for the incumbent. This result was robust to different specifications of the model.[7] Based on these results, I argue that protest, rather than simply being a proxy for "opposition mindedness" or general popular support for opposition parties in a region, influences electoral competition through a different mechanism. Measures of the overall repression or openness of a region – such as the persecution of NGOs and the "democracy score" of a region – had no independent statistically significant impact on electoral competition. Several studies (see Birch 2011; Lankina and Skovoroda 2014) have posited that protest activity is interpreted by authorities as an indicator of society's ability to monitor and punish electoral malpractice. Outside of the arena of elections, studies have also shown that authoritarian governments are responsive to public complaint-making and public protest in general (on Russia see Petrov, Lipman, and Hale 2013). Importantly, this type of responsiveness does not necessarily lead to regime liberalization. Instead, autocrats strategically adjust repression and malpractice in anticipation of mass public mobilization. The results of this analysis suggest that the frequency of protest makes regional authorities

more cautious in the administration of an election. In essence, protest deters electoral manipulation, fostering more competitive elections.

Although the substantive impact of protests on electoral competition was small – for every one additional protest in the two years preceding the election, the incumbent's vote share would decrease by approximately 0.12% – the potential impact of even a small number of protests should be put in perspective given the Russian context. Protests are relatively rare in Russia. Despite the massive protests during the winter of 2011–2012 against election fraud that took place in Moscow and other major cities, public mobilizations remain infrequent events (Figure 1). On average, over the period 2007–2014, there were 8.6 protests per region per year, only 3.4 of which were political in nature. This is down significantly from the heyday of protests, demonstrations, and strikes during the late Yel'tsin period (Robertson 2009, 2013). In part, the explanation for this change, as Graeme Robertson and others have pointed out, is the changing nature of both the Russian state and the Russian regime. As the state became stronger and the regime coalesced concretely around a powerful center, protests lost their appeal as useful weapons in disputes among elites (see Robertson 2009). Instead, protests are now more genuinely grassroots events. And, as the Russian regime has become more authoritarian, laws regulating freedom of assembly and expression have been tightened, as have the funding and regulatory environments for groups that may foster or support protest or independent civil society in general. Spontaneous protests and mobilizations have also become more difficult to organize because of laws restricting how many people may participate, the requirement to register a protest with the local administration, and the imposition of steep fines on participants of unauthorized protests. As a result, protesters have become creative, expanding their repertoire to include strolls, bike rides, and flash mobs. These types of unconventional demonstrations, however, tend to be less effective at clearly communicating demands to the public and make participants vulnerable to arrest, detention, or violence. As Lankina and Voznaya (2015, 338) note, roughly a quarter of all demonstrations in Russia are dispersed through the use of force. In general, demonstrations are rare, dangerous, and sometimes unfocused events that have decreased in frequency and become centralized in Moscow and St. Petersburg (Robertson 2013; Lankina 2015). Despite this, the results of this analysis show that protests are clearly important in reining in electoral manipulation.

In testing the impact of manipulation on electoral competition, all of the independent variables performed as expected (Table 2). Regions with a higher population of pensioners had less competitive elections. Voting by absentee ballot also dampened competition. However, the coefficients on these variables were substantively small and achieved statistical significance only as measured by the Golosov Score. Media freedom also had the expected effect on electoral competition, lowering the incumbent's vote share, although the effect did not reach statistical significance.

Overall, it was voter turnout and not absentee voting that proved to be decisive in influencing levels of electoral competition. As hypothesized, higher voter turnout benefitted incumbents. Controlling for population, urbanization, ethnic make-up, media freedom, and the special regional status of Moscow and St. Petersburg, an increase of one standard deviation (11.6%) would boost the vote share for the incumbent by almost 5% above the run-off threshold. This effect was statistically significant at the 0.01 level across all three indicators of competition.[8]

I argue that voter turnout is a tool used by incumbents to secure victories and is a form of voter manipulation. Yet, a correlation between turnout and regime vote share can be interpreted in other ways. First, it can signal that voter fraud in the form of ballot-box stuffing or increasing the official number of recorded ballots is happening. Convincing research on Russia's most infamous election – the December 2011 Duma election – has shown that fraud accounted for as much as an 11% bump in the results for United Russia (Enikolopov et al. 2013). In fact, other studies also have suggested that voter turnout has been "consistently and artificially inflated" in the ethnic republics since the late 1990s (Myagkov, Ordeshook, and Shakin 2005, 100; see also Lukinova, Myagkov, and Ordeshook 2011; Simpser 2013). It is possible, then, that turnout is a proxy for electoral fraud. It is also possible, however, that voter turnout is driven by genuine support for United Russia and the regime. Colton and Hale (2009, 2014), using survey research, have recorded growing affiliation with, and partisan support for, United Russia among voters.

Forensic analysis of turnout focusing on patterns in distribution among the precincts to detect fraud is beyond the scope of this paper. Thus, the possibility that turnout was generated by fraud cannot be completely ruled out. However, there is some evidence to suggest that fraud was not a major factor in these elections. The mean turnout across the regions included in this analysis was 44.5%. In 31 of the 43 regions, turnout did not reach 50%; no regions reported astronomical turnout of 80 or 90%, which has been pointed to as clear indication of fraud (Myagkov, Ordeshook, and Shakin 2005). Moreover, as I have already argued, election observers from Golos did not report concerns over ballot-box stuffing or doctored vote totals. In light of this evidence, I argue that voter fraud did not generate the election results analyzed here.

To determine whether turnout was driven by more engaged regime supporters, I regressed electoral support for United Russia in the region's last parliamentary election on turnout with appropriate controls. The results, as summarized in Table A7 in the online Appendix 1, show that while the coefficient for previous United Russia votes is positive, it is small (0.23) and does not achieve statistical significance (p. 0.15), indicating that higher voter turnout, and its effect on electoral competition, is unlikely to be driven by alert pro-regime voters.

Boosting voter turnout makes sense as a tool for electoral manipulation for two reasons. First, in terms of legitimacy, it is a less "costly" way to win an election since no actual fraud needs to be perpetrated. Second, boosting turnout is also useful for maintaining the image of a secure regime. As Alberto Simpser argues: "even when the winner obtains a large proportion of the vote, a small turnout can make it seem like only a small absolute number of people actually supported the winner" (2013, 182). Indeed, media reports of administrative pressure to vote applied to vulnerable populations – including army conscripts, doctors, teachers, and state employees – are common in Russia (see Chen 2015). Recent survey research also bears out these claims. For example, Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi (2014) found that 25% of surveyed respondents felt pressured by their manager or employer to vote and 15% thought their job security depended on voting for the incumbent (2014, 196). Beyond those employees who felt pressured to vote, about a third of workers that were surveyed also thought that their employer could find out how they voted (2014, 201).

The mobilization of voters is an old strategy in Russia, with roots in the Soviet system. Not all scholars agree that administrative pressure to vote "accounts for a significant part" of pro-regime results (Colton and Hale 2009, 501), yet empirical evidence of this phenomenon, beyond observer reports and media accounts, exists. The results of the manipulation model presented in this paper add to this ongoing discussion and suggest that voter turnout is indeed a powerful tool for the regime. Mobilizing vulnerable parts of electorate preserves the form while undermining the substance of elections.

Conclusion

Uncertainty dominates hybrid regimes that combine democratic institutions and autocratic tendencies. This point has been made eloquently by Andreas Schedler: "competition under and over uncertainty [is] the driving force of politics under authoritarian rule" (2013, 6). Engaging with this conceptual point seriously, therefore, requires careful attention to authoritarian electoral competition. This paper does that by systematically testing potential drivers of competition in order to assess the degree to which voter preferences and regime manipulation determine electoral outcomes. The results suggest that while manipulation may still significantly influence the outcome of elections under authoritarianism – especially given the important role that voter mobilization plays in supporting authoritarian incumbents – regime elites are nonetheless responsive to some forms of "noisy" social demand-making by the public.

Notes

1. Gubernatorial elections in Russia's regions were formally instituted in 1991 but did not become common in all regions until 1995–1997. During the 1990s, President Boris Yel'tsin's practice of piecemeal deal-making with governors in order to shore up his political support facilitated the development of strong regional leaders with

extensive and independent patronage networks. Gubernatorial elections were abolished in 2005 as part of an effort to reconnect the regions to the center, thereby ending regional fiefdoms. From 2005 to 2012, all regional executives were appointed by the president. Direct election of governors was reintroduced in June 2012 in part as a response to the demands of participants in the 2011–2012 anti-electoral fraud protests, but also as a way for the Kremlin to install popularly vetted regional leaders who would be better able to deliver pro-Kremlin electoral results in the regions.

2. I express my gratitude to Dr Tomila Lankina for sharing her valuable data on protest frequency and patterns in Russia from 2007 to 2012.
3. See the online Appendix 1 for information on data sources used to construct the variables.
4. Golos compiles reports from observers in each region. The reports can be found on the organization's website golosinfo.org.
5. Originally used in economics, this measure has been adapted in the political science literature and used both in the Russian context and in studies of regional elections elsewhere (see Moraski and Reisinger 2003; Afzal 2014).
6. The formula for Golosov's effective number of parties is $N_p = \sum \frac{1}{1+(S_1^2/S_1)-S_i}$, where S_1 is the winning vote share and S_i are other vote shares.
7. The coefficient for Protest remained at least three times the size of the standard error and statistically significant at the 0.01 level when other predictors and control variables were dropped from the model (see Table A1 in the online Appendix 1). Variance inflation factors for each predictor were <10 (see Table A3 in the online Appendix 1).
8. The coefficient for turnout remained at least three times the size of the standard error and statistically significant at the 0.01 level when other predictors and control variables were dropped from the model (see Table A2 in the online Appendix 1). Variance inflation factors for each predictor were <10 (see Table A4 in the online Appendix 1).

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