Who Is to Blame? Political Centralization and Electoral Punishment under Authoritarianism

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Does decentralization affect how voters attribute blame for poor economic performance? This question is particularly important in authoritarian regimes, where economic performance legitimacy is a key source of regime stability. Using political and economic data from large Russian cities for 2003–12, we investigate how replacing direct mayoral elections with appointments affects the way voters attribute blame for economic outcomes. We find that the ruling party is more likely to be punished for poor economic performance in cities with centrally appointed mayors than it is in cities with elected mayors. This research suggests that having locally elected officials may help electoral authoritarian regimes deflect responsibility for some unfavorable outcomes.

Popular depictions of dictatorship conjure images of a single leader who monopolizes decision making, but authoritarian regimes are not always so monolithic. In fact, many nondemocracies grant significant autonomy to subnational units. Russia, Ethiopia, Malaysia, Venezuela, and the United Arab Emirates are a few such cases. Of course, political power is quite centralized in many other autocracies, such as Morocco, Cuba, Singapore, or Saudi Arabia. These institutional differences raise questions about how (de)centralization affects authoritarian politics. Some effects are clear: centralization allows regime leaders to exercise more control over local officials. But other effects are not so clear. In particular, we know little about how the extent of political centralization affects the relationship between rulers and citizens. Does central control over local officials make it more likely that voters will hold regime officials accountability for local outcomes?

To help answer this question, we examine whether selecting local leaders through appointments—as opposed to elections—affects how citizens attribute blame for local economic outcomes. Given that economic performance is a key source of regime legitimacy (Magaloni 2006), the question of whether

centralization heightens regime leaders' responsibility for local economic outcomes is highly important.[1] Yet, prominent theories generate conflicting expectations about how political centralization affects blame attribution. If elections under autocracy are mere window dressing, then (de)centralization should have no effect: responsibility is clear whatever the formal institutional arrangement (e.g., Powell 2000, 51). Alternatively, recent research asserts that, while institutions under authoritarianism may function differently from their democratic analogs, electoral institutions still can channel political demands and constrain leaders in meaningful ways (e.g., Gandhi and Lust-Okar 2009; Miller 2015). If so, then the presence of local elections may affect how voters attribute responsibility for outcomes.

To investigate the relationship between centralization and blame attribution under electoral authoritarianism, we exploit over-time variation in levels of political centralization across large Russian cities. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, most Russian cities directly elected their mayors. Beginning in the mid-2000s, however, many Russian cities canceled mayoral elections and instituted a system in which local executives were appointed by regime officials. By 2012, the share of large cities with appointed mayors had risen to nearly 50%. This

1. In this article, "political centralization" and "decentralization" refer to the question of who selects local leaders as opposed to how policy authority is divided across levels of government.

shift is viewed by most experts as part of President Vladimir Putin's effort to recentralize political authority in Russia. We use these institutional reforms to examine how changes in levels of political centralization—in this case, the subordination of local levels of government through centralized appointments—affect how voters assign blame for local economic performance. Specifically, we investigate how the change from elections to appointments conditions the relationship between local economic performance and electoral support for United Russia (UR) at higher levels of government.

Our empirical analyses provide evidence that political centralization has made voters more likely to punish UR for worsening local economies. In cities where regional officials help appoint local executives, the ruling party's vote share in regional legislative elections decreases as local unemployment rises. In contrast, in cities where voters elect their mayor, UR vote share does not drop in response to similar economic downturns. Interestingly, this result does not extend beyond the level of government responsible for appointing these local officials; while voters with appointed mayors appear more likely to punish the regional branch of UR for rising unemployment, we observe no conditional relationship between political centralization, local economic conditions, and UR vote share in *national* elections.

These findings have important implications for comparative politics. For scholars of authoritarianism, they point to the need for more research on (de)centralization under autocracy. Most studies of this phenomenon examine decentralization's influence on subnational governance (e.g., Beazer 2015; Landry 2008; Xu 2011). Such studies provide insight into decentralization's effects on government performance, yet we know little about its political consequences. By studying how political centralization influences electoral punishment in a nondemocratic regime, this article opens new opportunities to theorize about the relationship between governance structures and performance legitimacy under autocracy.

This study also raises questions about the stability of Putin's regime. Have Putin's centralizing reforms weakened or strengthened the regime? The answer may depend on economic performance; our results show that centralization can be politically costly when conditions are bad. If Russia's current recession continues, Putin's reforms make it increasingly likely that blame for local economic hardships could eventually hollow out support for the regime.

CENTRALIZATION AND BLAME ATTRIBUTION IN NONDEMOCRACIES

Performance legitimacy, particularly regarding economic performance, is a key source of regime stability in nondemocracies (e.g., Magaloni 2006; Treisman 2011). In fact, the survival of the regime itself is often tied to economic performance (e.g., Gasiorowski 1995; Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Pepinsky 2007). A weak economy can hasten regime breakdowns by triggering elite defection, as opportunistic elites attempt to capitalize on popular dissatisfaction caused by the crisis (Haggard and Kaufman 1995; Reuter and Gandhi 2011).

While existing studies underscore that performance legitimacy matters for nondemocratic regimes, scholars have yet to theorize about how citizens assign blame or credit for such performance. In this article, we focus on one such factor—the degree of political (de)centralization. Nondemocracies vary widely in the degree to which they centralize authority.[2] Regimes in countries such as Morocco, Cuba, and Saudi Arabia have kept political power highly centralized, while regimes in China, Angola, and Kazakhstan have devolved significant authority or created electoral institutions at the provincial and local levels. Meanwhile, in Vietnam and Russia, regime leaders have recentralized authority over the last decade by dissolving subnational institutions or canceling subnational elections.

Despite growing interest in centralization and authoritarianism, social scientists have done little work on its political ramifications. Existing research focuses almost exclusively on how centralizing or decentralizing affects economic performance and public goods provision (Beazer 2015; Landry 2008; Malesky, Viet, and Tran 2014; Xu 2011). Consequently, we have little theoretical understanding about how varying levels of centralization might shape citizen expectations in a nondemocracy. Yet, if performance legitimacy matters for nondemocratic regimes, then it is important to understand how citizens connect the regime to economic outcomes at various levels: in citizens' eyes, does having greater control over local politics make regime officials more responsible for local economic conditions?

Existing research cannot yet answer such questions for nondemocracies, but the large literature on democratic elections and economic voting provides a natural starting point. Economic voting theories treat elections as a disciplining device for voters to sanction and replace unsatisfactory leaders at regular intervals (Ferejohn 1986)—voters prefer a healthy economy to a struggling economy and punish poorly performing leaders at the polls. Myriad studies provide support for this thesis that voters evaluate incumbents, at least in part, on the basis of economic performance (e.g., Kramer 1971; van der Brug, van der Eijk, and Franklin 2007). Recent research suggests that economic voting sometimes also happens in nondemocracies, with national election studies showing that voters punish elec-

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2. Fiscal decentralization also varies among authoritarian regimes but is outside this project's scope. See Dickovick (2011) for more on decentralization outside the world's developed democracies.

toral authoritarian leaders for perceived failures (Magaloni 2006; Treisman 2011).

Yet, the extent of economic voting varies widely across institutional and political contexts. One factor associated with this variation is *clarity of responsibility*. This concept refers to "characteristics of the domestic political context which shape the ability of citizens to apportion responsibility for economic policy decisions to particular institutions, parties, or actors within the government" (Anderson 2006, 450). Many theoretical arguments anticipate that decentralization will reduce clarity of responsibility, since having more institutional layers and more elected leaders complicates voters' task of determining which actors are to blame for poor economic performance. And, when voters cannot determine who is responsible for poor economic performance, they are less likely to punish incumbents for bad economic conditions (Powell and Whitten 1993). Treisman (2007) and others have noted the situation's irony: decentralization is supposed to bring government closer to citizens and their preferences, but multitiered government may actually harm accountability by making it harder for citizens to assign credit and blame.[3]

The cancellation of mayoral elections in Russia presents an opportunity to test a different side of such claims. If elections at lower tiers obscure responsibility and shield higher-tier leaders from electoral punishment, then removing those institutions should focus responsibility upward and lead voters to punish higher-tier officials for deteriorating local economic conditions. In other words, voters should be more likely to blame the central government for poor local economic performance when local electoral institutions have been removed. This is the primary hypothesis that we seek to test.

When extended to nondemocracies, this hypothesis intersects with a broader theoretical debate about the relevance of political institutions under authoritarianism. One long-held view sees these institutions as window dressing. If local elections and other representative institutions truly are a sham under autocracy, then centralizing or decentralizing arrange-

ments should have no meaningful consequences. Such reasoning contends that, even when they can elect local leaders, citizens in an authoritarian regime understand that regime authorities control local agents. In other words, responsibility is already clear in nondemocracies (e.g., Powell 2000, 51): the regime is ultimately responsible for all decision making, and citizens know this. Under this view, centralizing or decentralizing does little to alter the dictator's perceived responsibility. This constitutes our null hypothesis—that formal changes in levels of political decentralization will have no effect on how voters attribute blame for poor local economic performance.

Alternatively, a growing neo-institutional literature asserts that authoritarian institutions, such as parties, legislatures, and elections, can affect political behavior in meaningful ways (e.g., Gandhi 2008; Svolik 2012). Indeed, recent research demonstrates that subnational elections in nondemocracies can be more than window dressing (Beazer 2015; Blaydes 2011; Reuter and Robertson 2012), and national election studies provide evidence of voters punishing electoral authoritarian leaders for perceived failures (Magaloni 2006; Treisman 2011). If correct, such arguments imply that levels of (de)centralization will affect how voters attribute blame for local policy failures.

Regarding our question, the neo-institutional perspective is consistent with the notion that removing local elections will encourage voters to hold higher-level officials responsible for local outcomes. When local leaders are elected, these officials have some real autonomy from higher-level officials, and voters have both means and motive to blame local officials if local conditions deteriorate. By contrast, voters in regions with appointed local leaders cannot punish those leaders directly, so they instead punish their appointees' superiors. Such dynamics complement the notion that centralization may improve clarity of responsibility by merging institutional layers or reducing the number of autonomous political actors who influence economic performance. Decentralized systems make it difficult for voters to make retrospective voting decisions regarding economic performance. In centralized regimes, meanwhile, responsibility is clearer because local appointees ostensibly act at the regime's behest. Thus, voters should target their ire upward within the regime. In contrast to the null hypothesis (i.e., levels of centralization have no effect on how voters attribute blame), this reasoning predicts that voters will punish higher-level regime officials for poor local economic outcomes more in cities with appointed local leaders than they do in cities with elected local leaders.

THE RUSSIAN CASE

Scholars often use cross-national research designs to make inferences about an institution's effects on voting behavior. While the comparative logic in these studies is straightforward, drawing conclusive inferences in a cross-national context is

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3. Empirically, this question has been studied indirectly by comparing results of studies from diverse settings, some more centralized than others. Some researchers find that national authorities are held accountable for subnational economic performance even if subnational governments exist (Orth 2001; Tucker 2006), while others find no such relationship (Gelineau and Belanger 2005). Others studies, meanwhile, find that subnational authorities—often because of partisan attachments across levels of government—are held accountable for national economic conditions (Gelineau and Remmer 2006; Rodden and Wibbels 2011; Stein 1990). One exception is Anderson (2006), who uses survey data from 33 countries to examine how different types of decentralization mitigate the relationship between national economic conditions and incumbent vote shares. Unfortunately, Anderson's focus on national economic results does not provide insight into how voters assign responsibility for subnational economic performance.

difficult. Apart from having different electoral institutions, countries also tend to differ on many other dimensions, such as culture or historical legacies. These factors tend to correlate closely with institutional differences and voting behavior, making it hard to disentangle institutions' unique contribution to the variation we observe.

In this regard, the Russian case offers a special opportunity. As we discuss below, Russia's cities vary in terms of political centralization: some cities have directly elected mayors, and some have mayors who are appointed by regime officials. By analyzing subnational variation, we can hold constant shared political and cultural factors that are difficult to account for at the cross-national level. Moreover, the proportion of cities with directly elected mayors has changed significantly over time and within regions. We exploit this cross-sectional and temporal variation to isolate the impact of local autonomy on economic voting.[4]

Russian law allows city councils to determine how their municipality selects its chief executive. Before the 2000s, roughly 90% of the mayors in Russia's large cities were elected directly.[5] In the mid-2000s, however, a number of cities began to replace their directly elected mayors with appointed chief executives. In most cases, these executives were so-called city managers, appointed by a commission of representatives from the city legislature and the regional administration.[6] The number of cities with appointed mayors increased steadily until, by 2012, roughly half of Russia's large cities had appointed mayors (see fig. 1).[7]

Although city councils are formally responsible for choosing local governance models, most observers view the move to appointed mayors as part of Vladimir Putin's efforts to re-centralize political authority. This impression is supported by the way that cancellation of elections closely tracked the federal center's increasing power over the course of the decade. High oil prices and Putin's soaring popularity shifted the balance of resources away from the regions and toward the center, allowing the Kremlin to pursue institutional reforms aimed at

weakening the de jure power of regional elites. During the 2000s, the ruling United Russia Party gradually gained majorities in the city councils of Russia's large cities. By 2012, 86% of these councils had UR majorities (Reuter et al. 2016). Regional governors worked through UR factions in city councils, pressing deputies into securing the cancellation of mayoral elections (see, e.g., Gel'man 2008; Gel'man and Lankina 2008; Makarkin 2007; Ross 2008; see also Petrov 2010). Governors are the agents of the Kremlin in the regions, and the management of regional politics is delegated to governors.[8] Indeed, most qualitative and press accounts suggest that governors or the regional UR branch were the key initiators of the cancellation process and that regional authorities usually succeeded in removing elections if they tried to do so.

Why were elections kept in some cities but not others? The most comprehensive study of this question is Reuter et al. (2016), which argues that the Kremlin was more likely to allow mayors to retain elections if they had strong political machines mayors could use on the regime's behalf. In this way, keeping elections was a cost-effective way for the Kremlin to coopt local political machines in some places rather than build them anew. The authors find no consistent association between election cancellation and other economic/demographic factors. In this article's penultimate section, we deal directly with concerns about potential endogeneity and the implications of selecting cities into political centralization.

In light of recent history, the question of how voters attribute responsibility for local policy failures is highly salient for current studies of Russian politics. Upon taking office, President Vladimir Putin pursued a series of reforms aimed at recentralizing political authority, which had become highly fragmented and regionalized during the 1990s. These reforms included stripping governors of their ex officio seats within Russia's upper parliamentary chamber, canceling gubernatorial elections in 2004, and waging a multiyear campaign to bring regional laws into line with the Russian constitution.

One key question is whether these centralizing measures have made Putin's regime more stable. On one hand, these reforms made it less likely that regional elites could harness their political machines together and mount a credible challenge to Putin. That very scenario had already occurred in the waning days of Yeltsin's presidency. On the other hand, some have pointed out that Putin's centralization drive has made the regime less agile and undermined its ability to achieve key political tasks. For example, Reuter (2013) argues that the regime undercut its ability to mobilize votes by replacing

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4. The switch to appointments in individual cities was not accompanied by similar changes in levels of fiscal centralization. Regional and local governments lost significant tax autonomy during this decade, but this was done on a national scale and not on a city-by-city basis. Local governments' policy responsibilities did not change significantly over the period of study.

5. Accounts of the 1996 law on local elections suggest that Boris Yeltsin acquiesced to elections as a way to co-opt mayors' political support in his struggle against unruly regional governors.

6. Originally, these commissions were generally two-thirds delegates from the city legislature and one-third regional delegates. In 2014, this composition changed to 50% from each body.

7. For a histogram of proportion of appointment cities per year, please see the appendix, available online.

8. Russia's governors were appointed by the president (subject to confirmation by the regional legislature) between 2004 and 2012. Over the course of the 2000s, an increasing number of governors were members of UR.

Figure 1. Geographic variation in the distribution of appointed mayors, 2003–12

popular elected governors with colorless bureaucrats who had a difficult time mobilizing votes for the ruling party.

Another possibility is that centralization may weaken the regime by making Putin responsible for every policy failure that affects voters. As Russia enters another year of economic stagnation, many are wondering whether the crisis will erode popular support for Putin's regime. The answer to this question depends at least partially on how voters attribute responsibility for economic calamities in their communities. Will they blame local officials? Or will they blame higher-level officials and thereby weaken the regime?

Studies of economic voting in Russia provide limited insight into this question. It seems clear that economic voting occurs in Russia (Richter 2006; Treisman 2011; Tucker 2006), and there is even limited evidence that it occurs at the regional level (Konitzer 2005; Reuter 2013). The closest study to ours is Person (2015), which uses survey data from 2007 to examine blame attribution for regional economic conditions in the period after the cancellation of gubernatorial elections. Person finds that voters with appointed governors who had never been elected were no more likely to blame Putin for poor regional economic performance than voters with appointed governors who had once been elected before the reforms.

DATA DESCRIPTION AND EMPIRICAL METHODOLOGY

To test our hypotheses, we collect data on a number of economic and political indicators for roughly 200 of Russia's largest cities for the time period 2003–12.[9] For our dependent variable, we analyze the Vote Share from a given municipality that went for UR in a given regional legislative election.[10] These data come from Reuter et al.'s (2016) study of election cancellation in Russian cities. The raw data come from the district-level figures reported by the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation. In order to obtain city-level measures, a team of research assistants aggregated these data using information from regional election commission websites (see the appendix for details).

To analyze how political centralization shapes how voters attribute responsibility for poor economic performance, we interact two main independent variables in our statistical models. Our first variable of interest, Political Centralization, is a dummy variable that takes a value of 0 for years in which a city's mayor is elected by local voters and 1 for years when the

9. The initial political data include 205 midsize and large cities. Because of the difficulty of obtaining city-level covariates, including economic data, the sample size shrinks because of missingness.

10. Reported vote totals in Russia reflect a combination of voter choices and regime manipulation. However, as in many electoral autocracies, vote fraud is not the primary driver of vote totals (cf. Magaloni 2006). Estimates of fraud in the 2011 election range from a high of 11–15 percentage points (e.g., Enikolopov et al. 2013) to a low of 2–3 percentage points. Most analysts agree that previous elections saw less fraud. To bias our results, fraud would need to decrease as economic performance worsens but only under appointments. Yet, conventional wisdom predicts the opposite: mayors—particularly appointed ones—should be more likely to use fraud when economic performance is poor, in order to shore up vote totals for the regime.

chief executive is appointed by subnational officials. During the period of study, roughly 30% of the observations come from city-years under appointed leaders.

Our measure of local economic performance is Unemployment. Retrospective voting studies find that the public evaluates incumbents on unemployment, growth, and inflation. Because city-level data on prices and economic growth are not available in Russia, we take unemployment as our sole indicator of local economic performance. To capture the short-run economic trends that tend to color voters' perceptions, we measure the change between the election year and the previous year in the share of the city's working-age population registering for unemployment benefits. We present additional models to show that the baseline results hold when using levels of unemployment instead. Our main hypothesis predicts that increasing unemployment should be more detrimental to UR's electoral support in cities with appointed mayors than in cities with elected mayors. Accordingly, we anticipate a negatively signed interaction between Centralization and Unemployment.

In some model specifications, we also include control variables that theory indicates should be correlated with the ruling party's vote share in regional elections as well as municipalities' economic performance and level of political centralization. To control for subnational variation in the degree to which regional elections take place in a open and competitive environment, we include an ordinal measure of Press Freedom that ranges from "not free" to "somewhat free" and a measure for Regional Political Climate, an index of regional democracy developed by Petrov and Titkov (2013). We also control for Working-Age Population as a percentage of the total city population, Average Income, and Birth Rate, to account for the possibility that poorer cities, locales with more workers, or cities with lower population growth may have different affinities toward UR or may place greater salience on rising unemployment. Additionally, in all models we cluster the standard errors on cities to account for within-municipality correlations, including serial autocorrelation (Angrist and Pischke 2009), and estimate the models using ordinary least squares. The units of analysis are city-years in which a regional legislative election occurred.

To analyze the relationship between political centralization, economic performance, and voters' attribution of responsibility, we employ the following general model specification:

$$\text{URvotes}_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 C_{it} + \beta_2 U_{it} + \beta_3 (C_{it} \times U_{it})$$

$$+ \gamma X_{it} + \theta_i + \eta_t + \varepsilon_{it},$$

where i indexes each municipality and t indexes the year in which the election was held; URvotes_{it} is the share of total votes that United Russia received from that municipality in the corresponding regional legislative election; C is the centralization measure indicating whether cities have an appointed mayor; U is the measure of (change in) unemployment in the municipality; X is a vector of control variables that are included in most specifications to highlight that underlying results remain after adjusting for these factors; α, β, and γ are parameters to be estimated; θ and η are fixed effects parameters for municipality and year, respectively; and ε is the error term. This fixed effects specification represents a generalized difference-in-differences design wherein the cities with an elected mayor in a given election year act as a control group for comparing changes in UR's vote share within those cities that switch from elected to appointed mayors.[11] Under the identifying assumptions of the difference-in-differences framework, the estimates measure the effect of flagging economic performance on the ruling party's vote share conditional on whether voters elect their city's executive.[12] Table 1 reports the statistical results for these analyses.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Is there evidence that political centralization has made voters more likely to punish UR officials for rising local unemployment? The results in table 1 support this claim. In all models, the interaction term's coefficient estimates are negative and statistically significant, indicating that increasing unemployment is associated with lower electoral support for UR in centralized municipalities than in municipalities that still elect their executive. Column 1 presents results from a model that includes only the key independent variables for centralization, change in unemployment, and their interaction, along with fixed effects for city and year. The estimated coefficient for ΔUnemployment is 0.884 with a standard error of 0.615, and the coefficient on Centralization $\times$ ΔUnemployment is equal to -3.845 with a standard error of 1.570. Column 2 shows that this interaction term's coefficient estimate remains negative and statistically significant after controlling for potential confounding factors ($\beta = -4.567$, SE = 1.255). In columns 3 and 4, we see that using levels of unemployment as the main measure of economic performance in analogous models produces coefficient estimates for the interaction that are slightly larger in magnitude (-5.966 and -6.207, respectively) but

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11. The key assumption of this framework is that the observed relationship between rising unemployment and UR vote share in cities that keep mayoral elections is the same relationship we would have observed in cities with appointed mayors had they retained mayoral elections. We provide empirical support for this parallel-trends assumption in a later section.

12. It is important to note that although this design can provide inferences about the reforms' short-term impact, it does not provide clear insight into long-run effects of changing these local institutions.

Table 1. Poor Economic Performance Punished More under Political Centralization

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Political Centralization (dummy; 1 = appointed mayor)	.016	.159	8.618	9.098
	(2.158)	(2.044)	(3.046)	(3.112)
	.994	.938	.005	.004
ΔUnemployment (difference from previous year)	.884	1.573		
	(.615)	(.558)		
	.152	.005		
Centralization × ΔUnemployment	−3.845	−4.567		
	(1.570)	(1.255)		
	.015	.0005		
Unemployment (registered unemployed/working-age pop.)			−.045	.030
			(1.029)	(1.311)
			.965	.982
Centralization × Unemployment			−5.966	−6.207
			(1.855)	(2.006)
			.002	.002
Press Freedom (ordinal; 1 = not free, 3 = somewhat free)		1.104		.328
		(1.323)		(1.371)
		.405		.811
Regional Political Climate (continuous; higher = more democratic)		−.463		−.507
		(.313)		(.329)
		.141		.125
Working Population (working-age pop./total pop.)		.945		.693
		(.540)		(.545)
		.082		.205
Average Income (in constant rubles)		−1.731		−1.768
		(.742)		(.731)
		.021		.017
Birth Rate (births per 1,000 residents)		−3.063		−3.035
		(1.044)		(1.043)
		.004		.004
Number of observations	363	322	366	325
City fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note. Data on Russian mayoral appointments collected by the International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development; all economic data from MultiStat. Dependent variable = United Russia vote share percentage in regional legislative elections. Parameter estimates for fixed effects and model constants not presented to save space. City-clustered standard errors in parentheses; p-values appear below standard errors.

unchanged in direction or statistical significance. These statistical results tell a consistent, substantive story: in cities where local executives are appointed, rising unemployment has negative electoral repercussions for the regional branch of the ruling party. Where voters are responsible for electing their mayor, however, we do not see a similar pattern of electoral punishment.[13]

Figure 2 presents these results by plotting the estimated marginal effects of increasing local unemployment on UR's vote share in regional legislative elections, conditional on the elected/appointed status of cities' mayors. In cities with appointed mayors, increasing unemployment is associated with a reduced vote share for UR in the region's legislative elections. For each percentage point that local unemployment rates increase over the previous year, UR's vote share within such cities decreases

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13. This finding raises a natural follow-up question: Are voters that still elect their local executives punishing incumbent mayors for poor local unemployment instead of passing blame upward? In the appendix we provide evidence of electoral punishment at the local level that fits this scenario. Analyzing

mayoral elections, we find that high unemployment in the year leading up to an election is significantly associated with lower incumbent vote shares and a decreased probability of the incumbent retaining office.
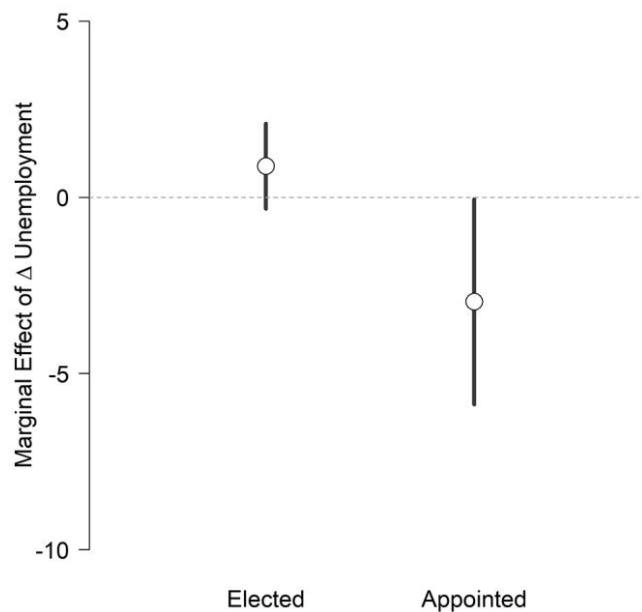
Figure 2. Marginal effects of increasing unemployment on United Russia's vote share, conditional on mayoral appointments. Based on coefficient estimates in table 1. Bands represent 95% confidence intervals. $n_{\text{elected}} = 266$; $n_{\text{appointed}} = 97$.

by an estimated 3 percentage points ($\partial y / \partial x = -2.99$, SE = 1.487). Given that UR's average urban vote share in regional elections is between 45% and 50%, 3 percentage points is not a trivial loss. In contrast, in cities with elected mayors, we do not see voters passing blame for the economy upward to regional officials; statistically, the marginal effects on UR's vote share from increasing unemployment are indistinguishable from zero ($\beta = 0.884$, SE = 0.615).[14]

In addition to our main variables of interest, several of the control variables in table 1 also have significant relationships with UR vote share. We discuss these results briefly for general interest. In terms of statistically significant estimates, Working-Age Population displays a positive coefficient, whereas Average Income and Birth Rate both report negative coefficients. The correlation between UR vote share and either Press Freedom or Regional Political Climate is statistically indistinguishable from zero in these data.

The finding that centralization alters how voters hold higher officials responsible for local economic outcomes is robust to a variety of additional measures and model specifications. Although our preferred model specification relies on city-level fixed effects to account for unobserved heterogeneity, our

results are robust to the alternate strategy of including a lagged dependent variable as a way to account for latent pro-party sympathies in the city and other unobserved factors that might shape aggregate voting patterns. We observe no meaningful differences if we control for additional covariates, such as a regions' ethnic composition, the strength of civil society in the region, cities' regional prominence (population as a share of regional population), or change in the partisanship of the mayor. Likewise, to better isolate the municipal-level conditions net of regional trends, we reestimate the models controlling for regional unemployment trends and, in a more stringent test, regional fixed effects within the subset of regions with more than one city in our data set; the results remain similar. Finally, our results are similar after accounting for the strength of elected mayors' local political machines as proxied by their margin of victory in the last election or the concurrence of regional and national parliamentary elections. These analyses are available in the appendix.

Clarifying the relationship between centralization and responsibility for local-level outcomes

In the previous analyses, we show that voters punish higher-level officials more for a flagging local economy when mayors are appointed than when they are elected. However, important questions remain about the types of economic changes and centralization that are most salient to blame attribution. We investigate two such questions in this section.

First, we investigate whether voters in centralized cities reward regional elites for favorable local conditions, punish them for a declining local economy, or both. To investigate, we replace our continuous unemployment measure with two directional dummy variables that code for rising and falling unemployment, respectively.[15] This model specification allows us to estimate separate relationships between UR vote share and centralization, depending on improving or declining local economic conditions. Table 2 reports the results.

In table 2 column 1, we observe a statistically significant, interactive relationship between rising unemployment, centralization, and UR electoral support. Rising unemployment is associated with UR vote losses that are, on average, 9 percentage points greater in appointment cities than in election cities. While the interaction between falling unemployment and centralization has a positive sign, the attending uncertainty makes it difficult to conclude that voters in appointment cities reward higher-level officials for a prosperous local economy ($\beta = 6.762$, $p = .144$). It appears our main results are driven

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14. In the appendix, we also provide a graph of the interaction's other side—the estimated marginal effects of political centralization on UR's regional vote share, conditional on changes in local unemployment. That plot implies that switching to appointments can be electorally costly when local unemployment is rising but may have electoral benefits during times of a local economic boom. We investigate this proposition further in the next section.

15. The excluded category is stable unemployment, which is coded as being less than a 0.75 point change in unemployment (approximately 1 SD) in either direction.

Table 2. Robustness to Party Affiliation and Alternate Measures of Unemployment

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Political Centralization (dummy; 1 = appointed mayor)	.654	−2.556	−2.541
	(2.037)	(2.586)	(2.587)
	.749	.324	.327
ΔUnemployment (difference from previous year)		1.579	4.072
		(.577)	(1.555)
		.007	.010
Centralization × ΔUnemployment		−4.386	−4.911
		(1.300)	(1.287)
		.001	.0002
Rising Unemployment (dummy; 1 = ΔUnemployment > .75)	−1.855		
	(2.940)		
	.529		
Centralization × Rising Unemployment	−9.037		
	(3.872)		
	.021		
Falling Unemployment (dummy; 1 = ΔUnemployment ≤ .75)	−6.924		
	(3.340)		
	.040		
Centralization × Falling Unemployment	6.762		
	(4.607)		
	.144		
Party Affiliation (dummy; 1 = mayor is UR member)		5.117	4.988
		(2.264)	(2.260)
		.025	.029
Affiliation × ΔUnemployment			−3.018
			(1.731)
			.083
Number of observations	322	285	285
Includes control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes
City fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note. Data on Russian mayoral appointments collected by the International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development; all economic data from MultiStat. Dependent variable = United Russia (UR) vote share percentage in regional legislative elections. Parameter estimates for control variables press freedom, regional political climate, working-age population, average income, and birth rate, fixed effects, and model constants not presented to save space. City-clustered standard errors in parentheses; p-values appear below standard errors.

more by voters in appointment cities punishing regional officials for poorly performing local economies.

Second, although we have interpreted centralization through an institutional lens, these reforms may also have a party-based component. Because appointed mayors are likely to be UR members, voters in appointment cities may punish the regional branch of UR because of the mayor's party affiliation. This hypothesis fits comfortably with American economic voting studies and does not challenge the notion that centralization shifts blame for poor local economic performance upward so much as question which type of centralization is most salient: Is blame passing upward through institutional or partisan channels?

Table 2 provides some preliminary insights into this question. In column 2, we add a dummy indicator for cities with UR-affiliated mayors and note that the coefficient estimate on our main interaction term remains essentially unchanged. In column 3, we interact party affiliation and unemployment to compare the two interpretations more directly. The new interaction is negative but smaller in magnitude than its counterpart ($\beta = -3.018$, SE = 1.731) and obtains statistical significance at the .10 level ($p = .083$). Thus, the data provide some tentative evidence that mayors' partisan affiliation may also influence voters' attribution for local outcomes. At the same time, the coefficient for the institutional interaction remains statistically significant, negative, and of larger magnitude

($\beta = -4.911, \text{SE} = 1.287$). If party affiliation does influence blame attribution in this setting, it does so as a complement rather than as a rival to the institutional changes.

Addressing threats to inference

An alternative interpretation of our findings is that the observed conditional relationship between political centralization, local economic performance, and UR regional vote share does not capture blame attribution so much as it reflects other, unmodeled political differences that prompted the elimination of local elections.[16] In particular, we might wonder whether regional officials targeted some cities to be centralized because of low UR support or opposition to the Kremlin. If appointments disproportionately occur in cities that are a priori more critical or less supportive of UR, then we should not be surprised if those cities also have the most negative electoral response to worsening local economic conditions.

To investigate the concern about cities being systematically chosen for centralization for political or economic reasons, table 3 compares cities that still hold mayoral elections by the end of the data set (nonappointment cities) with prereform observations from the cities that end the data set with appointed mayors (preappointment cities). First, we note no significant differences between nonappointment and preappointment cities in economic performance, whether measuring unemployment in levels ($p = .99$) or changes ($p = .37$). This suggests that cities were not targeted for election cancellation because of local economic conditions.[17]

More importantly, we observe that preappointment cities were not worse at supporting UR in the previous regional election ($p = .40$), in UR's first national electoral outing ($p = .75$), or in electing UR-affiliated mayors ($p = .41$). Likewise, the data do not reveal strong links between centralization and other prereform political characteristics. Compared to nonappointment cities, preappointment cities do not have histories of stronger civil society ($p = .18$) or have a more free press ($p = .16$). Preappointment cities may have been more likely to be in more democratic regions ($p = .10$), but the difference between the two groups is slight (16.00 vs. 17.37) and small relative to the standard deviation (6.30). These findings help reduce concerns that our findings are the product of regional officials canceling

elections in cities that were most likely to be antagonistic toward the Kremlin.

The results in table 3 discount several inferential threats to our main findings.[18] Nevertheless, we pursue additional robustness checks in case some other selection process leads some cities to be both (1) targeted for centralization and (2) more likely to punish regional authorities for poor local economic performance.[19] To begin with a specific example, Reuter et al. (2016) posit that the Kremlin kept mayoral elections in some cities as a cost-effective way to coopt local political machines; local leaders could retain electoral autonomy if they had machines to use on the regime's behalf. The authors find that mayoral elections were less likely to be removed in cities where elected mayors won office by larger margins. Given that finding, skeptics might wonder whether our results really capture centralization's effects or instead demonstrate that popular and powerful mayors (i.e., those most likely to keep their local elections) are better able deflect criticism from the regime during economic downturns.

We can test some implications of the logic behind this concern. If mayors with strong political machines can mitigate economic downturns' effects on UR vote share, then we should observe an interaction between mayors' margin of victory and economic performance, even after dropping cities with appointed mayors. Specifically, rising unemployment should be associated with smaller decreases in UR's vote share under mayors who win by large margins. Table 4 columns 1 and 2 cast doubt on this hypothesis. Whether analyzed over the whole time period (col. 1) or only after 2007, when elected local officials are most likely to have been coopted by UR (col. 2), the coefficient on Popular Mayor × ΔUnemployment is statistically insignificant. The data do not support the idea that popular/powerful mayors do a better job of preserving UR votes during local economic downturns.

We conduct an additional placebo test to look for evidence that our findings are driven by unobserved confounders that

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16. In order to bias our findings, these omitted confounders would need to affect UR vote share differentially, depending on local economic performance.

17. In separate tests, we investigate the inverse concern, that political centralization might influence cities' economic performance. Modeling annual unemployment data as a function of mayors' electoral status, available covariates, plus city and year fixed effects, we find that cities' appointment/election system is not a significant predictor of better or worse economic performance.

18. The appendix performs similar comparisons on a dozen more observable characteristics. We find very few differences: on average, preappointment cities tend to have larger working-age populations (65.4% vs. 63.9%) and be located in ethnic republics (19% vs. 8%).

19. Apart from the tests presented below, sensitivity analyses provide a complementary tool for assessing results' robustness to potential omitted-variable bias. Using the sensitivity analysis suggested by VanderWeele (2011), we find that in order to reduce the marginal effects from table 1 to zero, the unmodeled confounders would have to be both (1) highly correlated with UR regional vote share (with a magnitude comparable to the estimated effects of increasing a city's average salary by more than 50%) and (2) overwhelmingly more prevalent in cities that end up with appointed mayors compared to those that retain elected mayors (i.e., 90% vs. 40%). The improbability that such large and distinct differences across cities would go unnoticed strengthens our confidence in the results. Results and discussion are available in the appendix.

Table 3. Comparing Prereform Differences in Russian Municipalities

	Group Mean			
	Nonappointment	Preappointment	n_1, n_2	p
Electoral history:				
Past Support, regional (UR's regional vote share; lagged dependent variable)	40.03	37.28	99, 23	.40
	(1.39)	(3.25)		
Past Support, national (UR's vote share in 2003 Duma elections)	33.70	34.07	183, 77	.75
	(.60)	(1.06)		
United Russia Mayor (dummy; 1 = elected UR mayor)	48.94	42.59	188, 54	.41
	(3.66)	(6.79)		
Political openness:				
Strength of Civil Society, 1991–93 (ordinal; min = 1, max = 4)	2.91	2.77	205, 79	.18
	(.05)	(.09)		
Press Freedom (ordinal; 1 = not free, 3 = somewhat free)	2.10	2.23	203, 79	.16
	(.05)	(.08)		
Regional Democracy (composite score; min = 0, max = 29)	16.00	17.37	207, 82	.10
	(.43)	(.72)		
Economic performance:				
Unemployment (unemployment rate %)	1.23	1.23	197, 77	.99
	(.06)	(.10)		
ΔUnemployment (difference from previous year)	−.17	−.08	196, 76	.37
	(.06)	(.05)		

Note. Tests compare group means between cities that retain mayoral elections and the prereform period of cities that eventually move to an appointment system. Data on Russian mayoral appointments collected by the International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development, electoral data from the Russian Electoral Commission, expert assessments of civil society and regional democracy from Petrov and Titkov (2013), and economic data from MultiStat. Standard errors in parentheses; p-values are two-tailed.

determine both cities' centralization status and their propensity to punish officials for poor economic performance. To do so, we replace our Centralization measure with Precentralization, a time-invariant dummy indicator taking a value of 1 for cities that have appointed mayors by the end of the data set, but then restrict the analysis to city-years with elected mayors (i.e., only the prereform years for appointment cities). This specification tests for prereform differences in the relationship between local economic performance and UR vote share among cities that keep elections and those that eventually get appointments (but before reforms actually take place). Since future reforms should not affect voters' attribution of responsibility for past economic performance, a statistically significant interaction term here would indicate that some unaccounted heterogeneity across cities—and not actual centralization—produces our main findings.

Table 4 columns 3 and 4 report the placebo test's results. Because of the time invariance of Precentralization, we replace the city fixed effects with either a lagged dependent variable to account for the determinants of past electoral fortunes (col. 3) or else a host of additional time-invariant control variables previously subsumed by the fixed effects—initial support for

UR in the 2003 Duma elections, cities' regional prominence, regions' constitutional status as a republic, ethnic Russians as a percentage of regional population, and historical strength of civil society (col. 4). The placebo test provides no evidence that, prior to reforms, voters in appointment cities were more predisposed to punish higher-level officials for local economic performance. This is reassuring, as it strongly implies that our findings do not stem from unobserved confounding factors that determine both cities' appointment/election status and the punishment of regional officials for poor economic performance.[20]

Additional analyses: The extent of blame attribution

Finally, a question remains regarding the extent to which voters with appointed leaders pass blame upward. The empirical analyses above demonstrate that voters in cities with appointed mayors punish regional-level officials for a poorly

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20. This analysis also tests the parallel-trends assumption of the difference-in-differences framework. Within that approach, the counterfactual assumes that the observed relationship between rising unemploy-

Table 4. Additional Tests Provide No Support for Plausible Rival Explanations

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
ΔUnemployment (difference from previous year)	1.753	9.336	.402	1.446
	(1.001)	(7.754)	(.597)	(.764)
	.082	.231	.503	.061
Popular Mayor (margin of victory above second place)	8.674	8.039		
	(3.869)	(5.327)		
	.027	.134		
Popular Mayor × ΔUnemployment	−1.878	−8.950		
	(2.407)	(9.034)		
	.437	.324		
Precentralization (dummy; 1 = future appointment city)			2.252	−.775
			(2.236)	(1.667)
			.317	.643
Precentralization × ΔUnemployment			−.591	−.896
			(4.088)	(3.073)
			.885	.771
Past UR Vote Share (lagged dependent variable)			.243	
			(.078)	
			.003	
Number of observations	226	149	102	224
Includes control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
City fixed effects	Yes	Yes	No	No
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sample of years	Full	2007–12	Full	Full

Note. Data on Russian mayoral appointments collected by the International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development; all economic data from MultiStat. Dependent variable = United Russia (UR) vote share percentage in regional legislative elections. Columns 1 and 2 present coefficient estimates testing whether more popular/powerful elected mayors insulate UR from electoral punishment for poor local economic performance. Columns 3 and 4 present coefficient estimates testing for prereform differences across cities in the relationship between unemployment and UR's regional vote share. Parameter estimates for control variables press freedom, regional political climate, working-age population, average income, and birth rate, fixed effects, and model constants not presented to save space. In addition, col. 4 includes time-invariant controls for initial support for UR in Duma elections, cities' prominence, regions' republican status, ethnic Russians' share of region's population, and historical strength of civil society. City-clustered standard errors in parentheses; p-values appear below standard errors.

performing local economy more severely than voters in cities with elected mayors. But do voters in cities with appointments also pass the blame to UR at the national level?

On one hand, it is regional officials, not national party bosses, who appoint local executives. As such, voters might be less inclined to blame national-level figures not directly involved in the appointment process. On the other hand, studies of American voting find that voters often punish presidents irrationally for local-level outcomes that have little to do with presidential policies. Given the personalized and increasingly centralized nature of politics under Putin's administration—including the Kremlin's role in selecting regional governors—Russian voters may perceive national officials' hand in local economic outcomes.

To examine this question in the Russian context, we repeat our baseline analyses using UR vote shares from a given municipality in the 2003, 2007, and 2011 State Duma elections as our dependent variables. Table 5 reports the results. Interestingly, we find no evidence that voters in appointment cities are more likely to blame the ruling party in federal elections. Table 5 reports negative coefficient estimates for the interaction term in three out of the four columns, but those estimates are all statistically indistinguishable from zero.[21] These results seem to

ment and UR regional vote share in cities that keep mayoral elections is the same we would have observed in cities with appointed mayors had they retained mayoral elections. This assumption means we should not see differences in economic performance's relationship with UR electoral support between cities that keep mayoral elections and appointment cities before they remove mayoral elections. Combined with the lack of differences in unemployment trends across the two groups of cities, these results bolster confidence that the parallel-trends assumption holds.

21. In the appendix, we show that this finding applies to recent presidential election results as well. We find no evidence that rising local unemployment has hurt vote share for Putin (or his protege, Medvedev) disproportionately in appointment cities.

Table 5. Additional Analysis: Blame Attribution and National Election Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Political Centralization (dummy; 1 = appointed mayor)	−5.113	−4.352	−6.566	−4.002
	(1.410)	(1.568)	(2.045)	(2.281)
	.0004	.006	.002	.081
ΔUnemployment (difference from previous year)	−1.916	−1.647		
	(.961)	(.949)		
	.048	.084		
Centralization × ΔUnemployment	−.806	−1.252		
	(1.546)	(1.704)		
	.602	.464		
Unemployment (registered unemployed/working-age pop.)			−2.403	−1.996
			(.771)	(.800)
			.002	.014
Centralization × Unemployment			1.452	−.097
			(1.333)	(1.550)
			.277	.950
Press Freedom (ordinal; 1 = not free, 3 = somewhat free)		2.796		2.704
		(1.128)		(1.124)
		.014		.017
Regional Political Climate (continuous; higher = more democratic)		.294		.354
		(.228)		(.225)
		.198		.117
Working Population (working-age pop./total pop.)		1.132		1.121
		(.519)		(.538)
		.031		.038
Average Income (in constant rubles)		−.521		−.710
		(.556)		(.563)
		.350		.209
Birth Rate (births per 1,000 residents)		−.612		−.522
		(.780)		(.782)
		.433		.505
Number of observations	473	441	476	444
City fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note. Data on Russian mayoral appointments collected by the International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development; all economic data from MultiStat. Dependent variable = United Russia vote share percentage in Duma elections. Parameter estimates for fixed effects and model constants not presented to save space. City-clustered standard errors in parentheses; p-values appear below standard errors.

indicate that blame attribution does not extend all the way up to federal authorities; the buck stops before it reaches the highest echelons of political authority.

These findings supply fertile ground for speculation. On one level, it makes sense that Russian voters appear to mainly blame the level of government that is immediately implicated in appointing poorly performing local officials. However, since regional authorities themselves were directly appointed or controlled by national authorities during the period of study, one might expect voters to also hold national authorities responsible in a similar manner. As this does not appear to be the case, voters may simply consider the regime's highest echelons

to be too far removed from local appointment decisions. That scenario fits the narrative of Vladimir Putin as a "teflon president" who can maintain broad public support despite underlings' scandals and setbacks. Alternatively, the disparity could arise from differences in policy domains across levels of government. Voters in appointment cities may indeed attribute more blame for poor local economic outcomes to the national party than they would otherwise yet still remain willing to vote for UR in Duma elections because of preferences on national security, foreign policy, pension reform, or other salient federal-level policies. This is an area in which careful survey work and further investigation might yield interesting insights.

CONCLUSION

Understanding why leaders devolve authority to subnational actors (or wrest it back) is an important research agenda for scholars studying institutions and the consequences of decentralization. This article examines a fundamental question in this research area: Does the level of centralization change how citizens assign blame for local-level outcomes? Exploiting longitudinal and cross-sectional variation across Russia's largest cities in the electoral status of mayors, we find robust and consistent evidence that political centralization has made voters more likely to punish the ruling party for their city's poor economic performance. In cities where mayoral elections were abolished, increasing unemployment is associated with reduced vote share for UR in regional elections. In cities where elections remain in place, however, we do not see indications that voters blame the ruling party for local economic performance. These results hold in a variety of model specifications, using different measures of unemployment and while controlling for potentially confounding scenarios.

Intriguingly, while voters in cities with appointed mayors are more likely to punish the regional branch of UR for a flagging local economy, our analyses suggest that the blame does not reach UR at the national level. This leads to a nuanced picture of the linkage between electoral accountability and regime stability in Russia. To some extent, Russia's top leadership has seemingly been able to centralize political authority without bearing the burden of additional electoral accountability—at least not directly. And yet, the findings suggest that regime leaders should keep a watchful eye on local conditions. For leaders in multilayer systems such as Russia's, maintaining control over regional governments is vital since the erosion of subnational support creates openings for the opposition. In a number of prominent cases, the breakdown of electoral authoritarianism has been presaged by local governments defecting to the opposition (e.g., Mexico in the 1990s, Nigeria in the 2010s). Thus, if centralization makes the regime more vulnerable at the regional level—particularly during times of crisis—then it may undermine the regime.

While our study focuses specifically on the Russian case, our findings have important implications for other literatures and countries. For voting behavior scholars, this research provides a unique opportunity to test economic voting arguments using subnational variation in electoral institutions. As such, our findings generate a clearer picture of the degree to which centralization ties higher-level officials to lower-level outcomes in the electorate's eyes.

For scholars of authoritarian politics, this research provides insights into how administrative structure affects regime stability. Centralization may provide greater control over local politics, yet decentralized regimes may ultimately provide better cover for regime leaders if local conditions begin deteriorating. Thus, in a cross-national comparison between centralized and decentralized systems, our argument's logic would predict more blame diffusion in decentralized autocracies. However, it is possible that our findings may apply most readily to autocracies that, like Russia, are either centralizing power in a decentralized system or decentralizing a centralized system. For example, if China's political decentralization over the past 30 years has effectively diffused responsibility for local outcomes, we expect that recentralizing authority—perhaps if the party begins to lose its grip on power—would make citizens more likely to associate central authorities with local policy failures. In this same way, our findings could have implications for a number of other large autocracies, such as Ethiopia, Venezuela, Malaysia, Algeria, Kazakhstan, Iran, and Angola.

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