

**Local Elections in Authoritarian Regimes:  
An Elite-Based Theory with Evidence from Russian Mayoral Elections**

*Ora John Reuter*

University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee  
Higher School of Economics

*Noah Buckley*

Columbia University  
Higher School of Economics

*Alexandra Shubenkova*

Higher School of Economics

*Guzel Garifullina*

University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill  
Higher School of Economics

Abstract: Why do authoritarian regimes permit elections in some settings but not in others? Focusing on the decision to hold subnational elections, we argue that autocrats use local elections to assuage powerful subnational elites. When subnational elites control significant political resources, such as local political machines, leaders may need to co-opt them in order to govern cost-effectively. Elections are an effective tool of co-optation because they provide elites with autonomy and the opportunity to cultivate their own power bases. We test this argument by analyzing variation in the decision to hold mayoral elections in Russia's 207 largest cities between 2000 and 2012. Our findings suggest that Russian mayoral elections were more likely to be retained in cities where elected mayors sat atop strong political machines. Our findings also illustrate how subnational elections may actually serve to perpetuate authoritarianism by helping to ensure elite loyalty and putting the resources of powerful elites to work for the regime.

## **I. Introduction**

Almost all modern autocracies hold elections, and most hold multiparty elections. The prevalence of electoral authoritarian regimes has led an increasing number of scholars to study them (Levitsky and Way 2010; Miller 2014; Lindberg 2009; Brownlee 2010). However, one topic that has received less attention is subnational elections. Subnational officials play a central role in the governance of authoritarian regimes. Regime leaders rely on local officials to maintain political stability, implement policy, and gather information about the provinces. Many of the world's electoral authoritarian regimes hold elections to fill subnational offices,<sup>1</sup> and several of the world's most prominent single-party regimes—e.g., China and Vietnam—have recently begun experimenting with semi-competitive local elections. The decision to hold subnational elections has significant consequences in autocracies. They may directly affect the prospects for democratization, as when opposition parties use subnational elections as staging areas from which to mount broader challenges (Eisenstadt 2004; Cornelius, Eisenstadt, and Hindley 1999). Alternatively, autocrats may use subnational elections to improve their information gathering capacity and entrap voters in state-dependent, clientelist relations (Lust 2009; Reuter and Robertson 2012; Sharafutdinova 2014). Subnational elections may also affect government responsiveness (Malesky, Nguyen, and Tran 2014; Zhang et al. 2004) and the quality of officials that are selected (Buckley et al. 2014a, 2014b). Yet in spite of their importance, there are few studies that attempt to explain why subnational elections are held in some settings, but not in others. This paper helps fill that gap.

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<sup>1</sup> Nigeria, Venezuela, Russia, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Algeria are just a few examples of prominent electoral authoritarian regimes where important regional and local offices are filled through elections.

In addressing this question, we draw upon and contribute to the broader literature on elections under authoritarianism. Much of the recent scholarship on authoritarian elections focuses on the functions that elections perform for autocrats. Elections may help autocrats earn legitimacy (Schedler 2006), gather information on cadres or society (Blaydes 2011; Magaloni 2006), or signal strength (Magaloni 2006; Simpser 2012). However, as we argue, these explanations are not able to tell us when elections will be held and when they will not. A different class of explanations focuses on the role that elections can play in assuaging social demands for representation, spoils, and/or policy concessions (Gandhi 2008; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). This line of literature predicts that elections will be more likely when social demands for elections are pressing. A third line of literature focuses on how elections help autocrats manage relations with other elites (Magaloni 2008; Blaydes 2011). We draw from and build upon this line of literature to argue that autocrats use subnational elections to co-opt and appease powerful local elites. When subnational elites control political machines, entrenched clientelist networks, personal power bases, hard-to-tax economic assets, positions of traditional authority, or other such political resources leaders may need to grant concessions to these elites in order to govern cost-effectively. Elections are a useful way of co-opting elites because they provide elites with some autonomy and the opportunity to cultivate their own independent power bases. Thus, we predict that leaders will allow subnational elections when subnational elites are strong in political resources that the autocrat would like to co-opt.

To test this argument, we analyze variation in the decision to hold direct mayoral elections in Russia's 207 largest cities between 2000 and 2012. Testing cross-national hypotheses about why autocrats hold elections is difficult because the decision to hold elections (or cancel them) is almost always bundled within broader processes of (de)liberalization. Our empirical approach circumvents this problem by focusing on diachronic variation in the decision

to hold individual elections within one country. In the late 1990s, almost all of Russia's mayors were directly elected, but between 2000 and 2012, elections were cancelled and replaced with appointment schemes in almost half of Russia's large cities. This approach allows us to focus narrowly on the decision to cancel elections.

Using an original dataset on mayors and local elections in Russia's large cities, we find that elections are indeed more likely to be retained in those cities where mayors are strong in political resources, as measured by their own margin of victory in prior elections. Where mayors won their elections by large margins, they were less likely to be replaced with appointees. This finding stands in contrast to the conventional wisdom from Russia, which holds that governors sought to eliminate the independent power bases of powerful mayors who challenged them.

In addition, we also find that mayors who have a track record of helping the regime win elections at other levels (regional and national) are more likely to be allowed to retain their elected offices. Direct elections are least likely to be cancelled in cities where the mayor has a large electoral mandate of his own *and* where he has proved effective at mobilizing votes for the ruling party, United Russia. It appears that, in the 2000s, Russia's leaders were keen to co-opt and draw upon the electoral machines of locally-powerful mayors.

Our research has several implications for the study of elections under autocracy. First, our findings add to a growing stream of literature that highlights the elite nature of political exchange under authoritarianism (Svolik 2012; Blaydes 2011). Our approach also suggests that elections can be effective tools of co-optation even if they do not engender high turnover or competition among the elite (c.f. Blaydes 2011). In fact, our argument implies that electoral co-optation is effective precisely because it allows elites to cultivate a political machine that can ensure their political longevity. This is consistent with recent studies of elite appointments in Russia, which find that appointed governors and mayors turn over at a significantly higher rate

than elected officials (Buckley et al. 2014). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our findings illustrate how subnational elections may actually serve to perpetuate authoritarianism by helping to ensure elite loyalty and putting the resources of powerful elites to work for the regime.

## **II. Elections under Autocracy**

Scholarly interest in subnational authoritarian elections is growing. For example, there is now a voluminous literature on local elections in China. Topics such as voting behavior (Chen and Zhong 2002), electoral accountability (Luo et al. 2007; Zhang et al. 2004; Manion 1996), and the effect of elections on citizen efficacy (O'Brien 2001; Manion 2006) have all received ample attention in the literature on China. In electoral authoritarian regimes, scholars have examined how subnational elections help perpetuate the regime (see Sharafutdinova 2014 and Golosov 2013 on Russia and Cornelius, Eisenstadt, and Hindley 1999 on Mexico) and used subnational elections as case studies to draw inferences about how autocrats manage electoral competition (see Aalen and Tronvoll 2008 on Ethiopia; Ross 2008 and 2011 on Russia). And yet, amidst all this recent work, there is little research that seeks to explain why subnational elections are held in autocracies (see O'Brien and Li 2000 for an important exception).

By creating opportunities for opposition forces to organize and challenge the regime, elections create uncertainties for autocrats (Bunce and Wolchik 2010; Teorell and Hadenius 2007). Moreover, holding elections is costly because winning elections requires autocrats to expend scarce resources on buying voter support (or perpetrating fraud) and taking public positions. Hence, it is puzzling that autocrats hold elections at all. And yet, most modern autocrats do hold elections. In the broader neo-institutional literature on authoritarianism, scholars have confronted this puzzle by pointing out that elections provide a number of benefits to autocrats. Some have argued that elections provide leaders with information about either the distribution of support in society (Magaloni 2006; Little 2014) or about the performance of

cadres (Blaydes 2011; Reuter and Robertson 2012; Zaslavsky and Brym 1978). Others have argued that winning elections by large margins helps autocrats signal their invincibility (Magaloni 2006; Simpser 2012). Meanwhile, an older stream of literature holds that elections provide legitimacy to autocrats (Schedler 2002; Schapiro 1964). Such arguments are persuasive but also functionalist. As such, they do not tell us when elections will be held and when they will not. After all, most autocrats, it would seem, want legitimacy, good information, and an image of invincibility. At the very least, the factors that affect an autocrat's need for these things remain undertheorized.

A second set of theories holds that elections are introduced in response to social demands. For modernization theorists, elections are held to assuage demands for representation that emerge in complex, modern societies (Lipset 1961; Deutsch 1961). More recently, scholars of democratic transition have argued that elections may be held to appease the poor's demand for redistribution (Boix 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). Alternatively, scholars of authoritarian politics have written about how elections can facilitate the co-optation of social groups (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006) or entrap voters in clientelistic exchanges (Lust-Okar 2009). Although society-based arguments disagree as to which social actors are being co-opted and how, they all share a focus on the role that elections play in relieving social pressures. We attempt to examine this argument empirically below.

A third set of arguments focus on how elections help autocrats manage relations with other elites. Magaloni argues that regularized elections and term limits can make a leader's promises of future power-sharing credible by "obliging the ruler to promote the rank-and-file to power positions with certain regularity" (Magaloni 2008:274). By making power-sharing credible, elections help the regime co-opt powerful elites. Similarly, Blaydes (2011) argues that elections allow leaders to institutionalize spoil sharing by providing regularized opportunities for

elites to enter office and seek rents. In return for access to these spoils, Blaydes argues, elites use their own resources to fund election campaigns, thus allowing regime leaders to outsource the task of electoral mobilization. These arguments are enlightening but, as with informational and legitimacy arguments, they are functionalist. All leaders, it would seem, want to ensure elite loyalty, so the question of why leaders choose to hold elections in some settings, but not in others remains open.

Our argument builds on elite-based theories of elections by specifying the conditions that prompt leaders to use subnational elections to co-opt elites. Since the holding of elections creates costs and uncertainties for autocrats, it stands to reason that leaders will only allow local elections when they have a pressing need to co-opt subnational elites. By elites, we mean individual actors outside the central leadership of a country who exercise influence over and demand loyalty from other political actors, including citizens. The need to assuage elites, we argue, varies with the political resources of those elites. Such resources may include personal popularity, political machines, clientelist networks, hard-to-tax economic assets, or positions of traditional authority. When subnational elites are weak in such political resources, they may be removed or controlled with little consequence. By contrast, when subnational elites are strong in political resources, regime leaders may need to grant them concessions in order to govern cost-effectively. Indeed, a long tradition of literature in comparative politics emphasizes the ways that elites, and especially subnational elites, use their authority to exercise control over society and cultivate autonomous power bases (Migdal 1988; Herbst 2000; Kern and Dolkart 1973; Lemerchand 1972; Koter 2013; Sidel 1999; Hale 2003). Leaders may be able to remove any local strongman, but the “pattern of social control” that they represent is costly to displace or duplicate (Migdal 1988:141). By co-opting strong subnational elites, leaders can enlist their help in ensuring social quiescence, maintaining political stability, extracting revenue, implementing

policy, mobilizing votes and other such tasks. If these elites are not co-opted, the regime may lose access to the political resources they control. Co-opting these resources may be more cost-effective than expending resources on creating, from whole cloth, new mechanisms for achieving social control. More worrying still, if not assuaged, these elites may conspire against regime leaders or use their political resources to mobilize opposition to the regime.

Elections are an effective mode of co-optation because they provide elites with several benefits. They afford elected officials the opportunity to cultivate their own political machines and personal followings. In turn, elected officials can use their independent power bases and electoral legitimacy as bargaining chips in relations with other elites or even with regime leaders. Elections thus provide some modicum of autonomy from regime leaders. In addition, being elected provides additional opportunities for rent seeking, for while appointed officials must send a portion of corruption rents up the administrative chain, elected officials have more freedom to keep these rents for themselves.

One important implication of this argument is that elections can be effective tools of targeted co-optation even if they do not generate high levels of rotation among the subnational elite (Blaydes 2011). Quite to the contrary, individual elites may value being elected because it allows them to cultivate a political machine that will help ensure their political longevity. Indeed, to the extent that an autocrat needs to draw on the machines of subnational elites to help him govern, the autocrat also has an interest in ensuring stable careers for the architects of those machines. This observation is consistent with recent studies of elite appointments in Russia, which find that appointed governors and mayors turn over at significantly higher rates than do elected officials (Buckley et al. 2014a, 2014b).

Summing up, we argue that a major function of subnational elections under autocracy is to co-opt and/or assuage elites. Elections are more likely to be held when the need for such co-



optation is high. In turn, the need for co-optation is higher when elites control significant political resources. Thus, our main hypothesis is that subnational elections will be more likely in settings where elites are strong in such political resources.

### **III. Empirical Setup**

There are few studies that test hypotheses about when elections are held under autocracy. Some examine the question indirectly by illustrating either the functions of these elections (Blaydes 2011; Magaloni 2006; Lust-Okar 2005) or by showing that regimes with elections persist for longer (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006). Other studies use a bundle of authoritarian institutions – such as parties, legislatures, and elections – as the dependent variable (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006). Only recently have several authors used the holding of elections as a dependent variable (Miller 2014; Seki 2014). Yet one shortcoming of these approaches, and possibly one reason why such empirical tests are so rare, is that it is difficult to separate the decision to hold elections from the decision to liberalize. At the national level, the decision to hold elections is often bundled within broader processes of liberalization such as franchise extension, legalization of political parties, and the expansion of civil liberties. Similarly, the decision to cancel elections is often accompanied by other deliberalizing tendencies. This makes it difficult to analyze (de)liberalization and the holding of elections separately.

In this paper, we address this issue by focusing on subnational variation in the holding of elections across Russia's 207 largest cities. Since 1995, Russian law has allowed local councils to determine how the chief executives of municipal administrations are selected. As described in Table 1, local councils have several different models to choose from.

**Table 1: Models of Mayoral Appointment in Russia's Cities**

| Model | Head of municipality  | Head of administration (also known as 'city manager')  | Years when applicable |
|-------|---|--|-----------------------|
| 1     | One person; Popularly elected; Responsible for all policy decisions.  |  | 1996-present          |
| 2     | One person; Appointed by governor/regional president or Russian president directly; Responsible for all policy decisions.   |  | 1996-2006             |
| 3     | One person; Appointed in by local / regional legislature; Responsible for all policy decisions.   |  | 1996-2006             |
| 4     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Popularly elected, becomes a Chair of local legislative council;</li> <li>- Powers restricted mostly to the legislature, representing the region in external relations etc.</li> </ul>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Appointed by a special commission<sup>2</sup>;</li> <li>- Responsible for most policy decisions.</li> </ul> | 2006- present         |
| 5     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Elected by the members of the local legislative council from its members, heads a local legislature;</li> <li>- Powers restricted mostly to the legislature, representing the region in external relations etc.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Appointed by a special commission;</li> <li>- Responsible for most policy decisions.</li> </ul>             | 2006- present         |

In the 1990s, almost all cities chose to have directly elected mayors, such that by 1999, 90% of the mayors in Russia's large cities were elected.<sup>3</sup> In the mid-2000s, however, an increasing number of cities began to replace their directly elected chief executives with so-called 'city managers' who are appointed by a commission that is 2/3 comprised of appointees from the city legislature and 1/3 comprised of appointees from the regional administration.<sup>4</sup> As Figure 1

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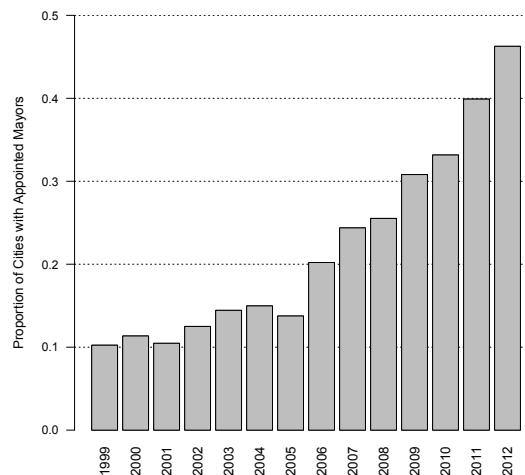
<sup>2</sup>City managers are appointed by a Competition Commission. One third of the seats on the commission are taken by the governor's representatives (the list is approved by regional legislature on proposal of a governor of a region), while two thirds of seats are taken by city council deputies (article 37 paragraph 5, Federal law #131).

<sup>3</sup> Accounts of the negotiations surrounding the 1996 law on local elections suggest that Yeltsin acquiesced to elections as a way to co-opt mayors and enlist their support in his struggle against unruly regional governors. After all, the alternative on the table at the time was that mayors would be appointed by regional governors.

<sup>4</sup> In 2014, this proportion was changed to 50% from the city legislature and 50% from the regional administration.

shows, the number of cities with appointed mayors increased gradually over the course of the decade and, by 2012, almost half of Russia's large cities had appointed mayors.

**Figure 1: Proportion of Large Russian Cities with Appointed Mayors**



Despite the fact that city councils were ultimately responsible for deciding which model would be used, the shift toward appointed mayors was widely seen as part of Vladimir Putin's efforts to recentralize political authority.<sup>5</sup> Over the course of the decade, President Putin's United Russia party gradually accumulated majorities in the city councils of Russia's large cities, such that by 2012 it had a majority in 86% of these councils. Needless to say, these majorities proved instrumental in pushing through cancellations. In addition, regional governors, who, over the course of the 2000s, were increasingly becoming integrated into United Russia, played a major role as well. Working through United Russia factions in city councils and applying informal pressure on individual deputies, governors are often seen by observers as key actors in the push

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<sup>5</sup> See Reddaway and Orttung 2005 on Putin's recentralizing efforts generally, see Gel'man et al. 2006, Gel'man 2008, Makarkin 2007, Ross 2008, and Gel'man and Lankina 2008 on the specific efforts to recentralize authority at the local level.

to cancel elections at the local level. Using similar levers of formal and informal influence, officials from the Presidential Administration are also thought to sometimes play a role.

Unsurprisingly, mayors have fought to keep their electoral mandates. In November 2006, for example, the mayors of 50 Siberian cities organized a conference under the aegis of the Inter-Municipal Movement of Russia and issued a joint statement criticizing efforts to cancel mayoral elections. Several prominent mayors, including Novosibirsk mayor Vladimir Gorodetskii, gave fiery speeches criticizing both the United Russia leadership and Putin.<sup>6</sup> A review of the local press indicates that mayors usually made public protests when their electoral mandates were threatened. For instance, in 2012, Dzerzhinsk mayor Viktor Sopin vetoed the city council's vote to cancel mayoral elections, despite his membership in UR. After his veto was overruled, he quit the party.<sup>7</sup> And in 2006, Samara mayor Georgi Limansky was, surprisingly, able to keep his electoral mandate by appealing to the Justice Ministry.<sup>8</sup>

The dependent variable we use – *Cancel* – captures this variation in the decision to cancel (or hold) elections across Russia's cities during the 2000s. Specifically, this variable is a dichotomous variable equal to 1 in the year when a city cancels direct elections and 0 in years when elections continue to be held.<sup>9</sup> The unit of analysis is the city-year. Thus, our models are

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.lenta.ru/news/2006/11/13/sib/>

<sup>7</sup> “Edinaya Rossiya lishilas’ mera” *Kommersant* 25 September 2012.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.newsland.com/news/detail/id/440972/>

<sup>9</sup> In our primary statistical specifications, we code shifts from Model 1 (see Table 1) to any other model as instances of election cancellation. In the appendix, we show that our results are robust if we treat cities using Model 4 as having directly elected mayors. Our main model counted these as instances of an appointment system, because, under this unusual system, the appointed head of administration (*glava administratsii*) retains authority over the most important policy decisions

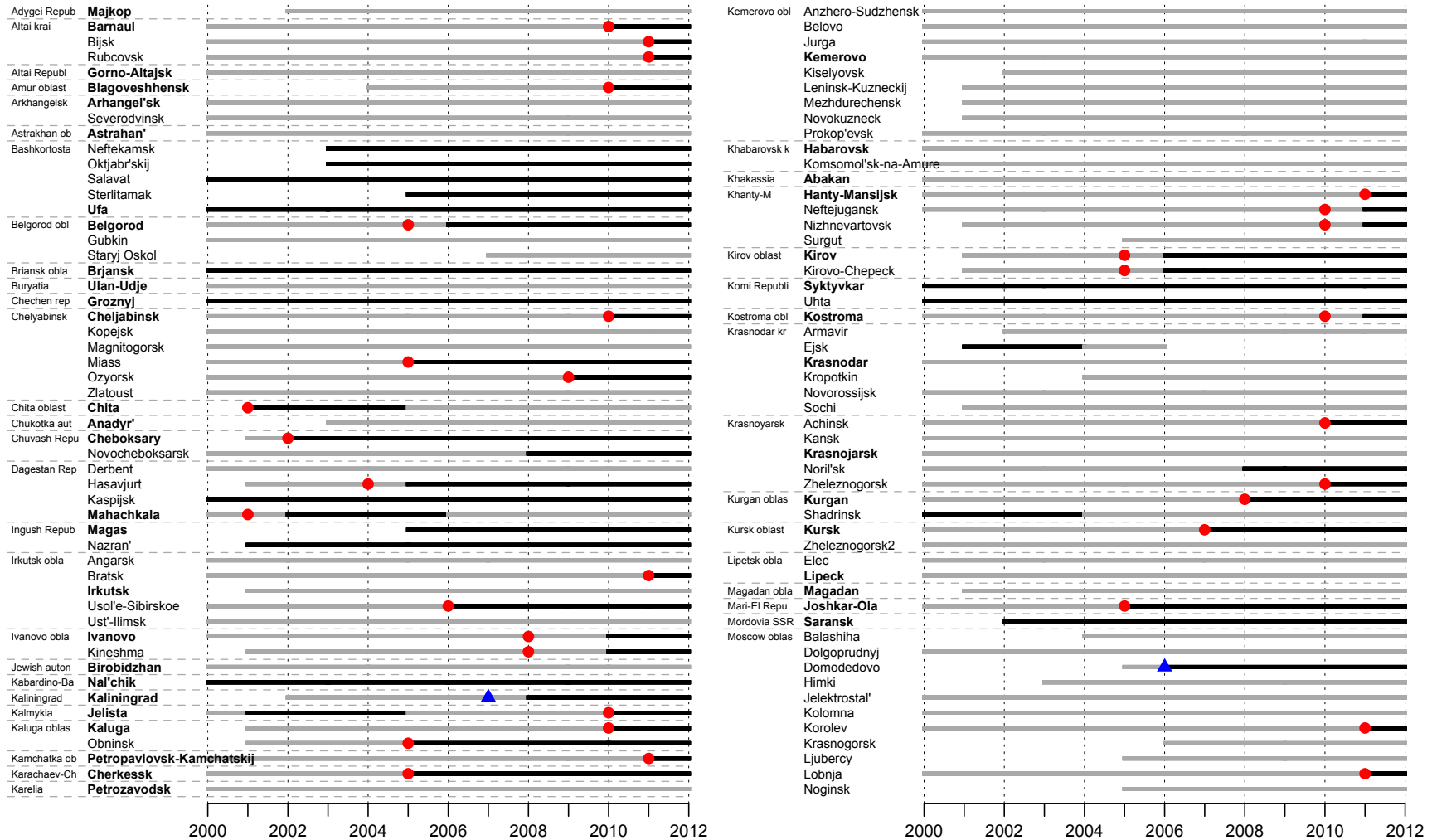
binary time-series cross-sectional (BTSCS) duration models that analyze the time it takes for a city to cancel elections (Beck et al 1998). Naturally, the decision to hold elections is the obverse of the decision to cancel elections. When elections are not cancelled, they continue to be held. If a city never cancels elections, all years are coded as zero. All of these outcomes are captured in our dependent variable.

Figures 2a and 2b illustrate our data structure and show how the mode of selection for the chief executive in each city in the dataset changed over the course of the decade. This data comes from an original dataset collected by the authors, containing information on the biographies, electoral history, partisanship, and method of selection of the mayors and city managers in Russia's 207 largest cities between 2000 and 2012.

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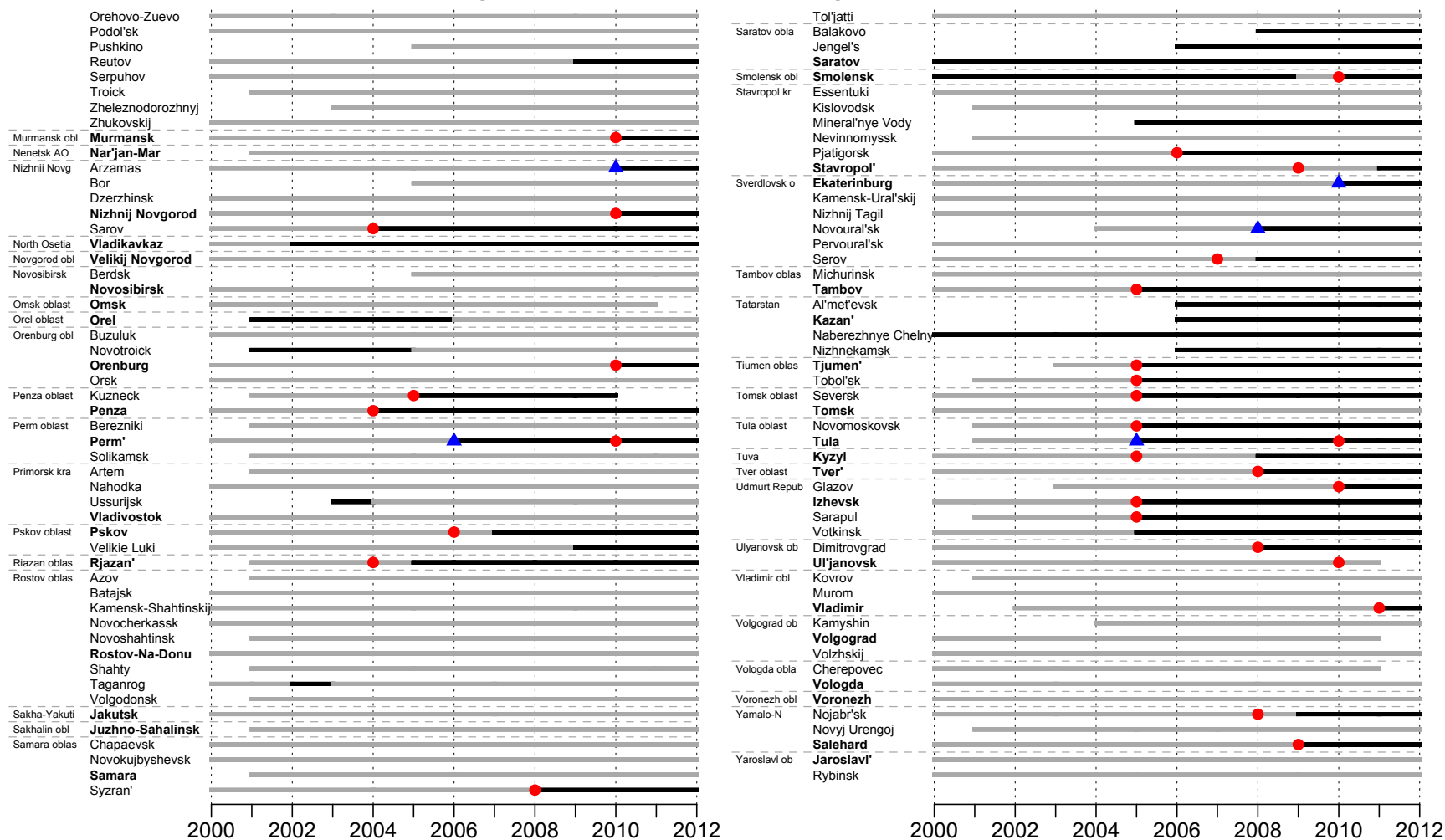
under this unusual system, while the elected head of the city (*glava goroda*) is mostly a figurehead. In any case, Model 4 is rare, occurring in only seven instances.

Figure 2a: Elections in Russia's Large Cities



Gray areas indicate periods of direct election (Model 1 in Table 1). Black areas indicate periods of appointments (Models 2-5 in Table 1). Red dots indicate year when city council passed amendments to switch from Model 1 to appointment Models 2, 3, or 5. Blue triangles indicate years when the city council passed an amendment to switch from Model 1 to appointment Model 4. Transitions from gray to black without a red dot indicate cities for which data on the formal date of cancellation are missing. Gray gaps between a red dot (or blue triangle) and the black bars indicate periods between the year of formal cancellation and the year in which changes took effect. Areas not shaded by gray or black are missing data on the form of mayoral selection.

Figure 2b: Elections in Russia's Large Cities cont'd



This empirical approach is advantageous because it offers the opportunity to analyze a wide range of variation in the decision to hold elections. Autocracies often make one-time decisions to introduce or cancel subnational elections (e.g., the 2004 cancellation of gubernatorial elections in Russia or the 2012 decision to reinstate them). By contrast, our research design allows us to analyze hundreds of instances of election cancellation and non-cancellation. Another key advantage of our empirical approach is that it focuses narrowly on the decision to cancel (or hold) elections. Although observers may rightly judge these cities to be less democratic when an elected mayor is replaced by an appointee, the decision to cancel these elections is not bound up in a larger process of transition to authoritarian rule.

A further advantage of this approach is that it allows us to hold constant some key alternative explanations in the literature. One such explanation is international pressure. Several have argued that autocrats in developing countries hold elections in order to assuage aid donors (Ethier 2003; Knack 2004). Russian cities do not receive aid from international donors, so this explanation can be excluded in the present context.

Another explanation that can be excluded is demands for redistribution by the poor (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). In Russia, mayors do not have the discretion over taxation or social programs that would be needed to effect any appreciable redistribution of wealth. Similarly, modernization-based arguments seem ill-suited to explaining variation in the election of mayors, given that all Russian cities are urban and have a relatively high level of economic development. The same goes for experience with the holding of elections (Gandhi and Przeworski 2006), which is relatively constant across all cities.



Finally, there is some *prima facie* evidence that the decision to permit elections had little to do with popular demands for direct elections, as society-based explanations would predict.<sup>10</sup> Polls from 2006 and 2011 indicated that large majorities of Russians wanted the heads of municipal administrations to be elected. Figure 3 shows the mean number of respondents in each region who were in favor direct elections for city mayors in these years.<sup>11</sup> As the figure shows, a majority of Russians favored direct elections in every region in 2006 and in all but 3 regions in 2011. In the vast majority of regions in both 2006 and 2011, more than 60% supported direct elections.<sup>12</sup>

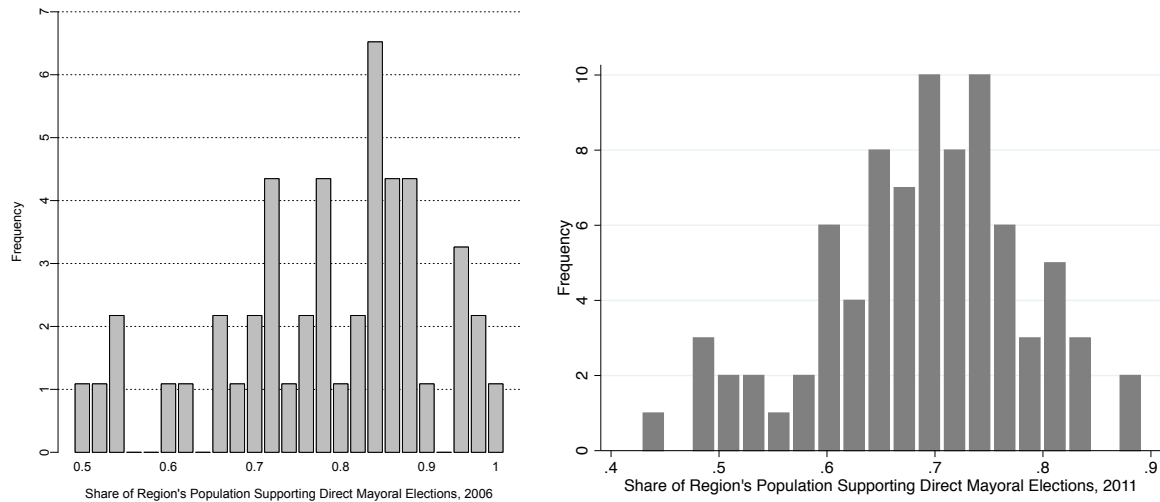
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<sup>10</sup> In one of the most high-profile episodes of election cancellation, citizens of Perm, one of Russia's most civically active cities, organized a grass-roots campaign called "For Direct Perm Elections." The campaign attracted the support of scores of civil society organizations, funding, and even some permanent staff. Rallies, meetings, and protests were held, some numbering in the thousands. In the end, however, the authorities ran roughshod over these demands and cancelled direct elections in 2010. The civic movement persisted after 2010 and continues to organize events in support of a return of direct elections, but Perm's chief executive remains appointed. Similar protest movements in Ulan Ude and Vladimir also ended in failure.

<sup>11</sup> Data are from the Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), which conducts a quarterly survey, called GeoRating that draws representative samples of 400 respondents in each of Russia's 83 regions. Unfortunately, his question on attitudes toward mayoral elections was only asked on two rounds.

<sup>12</sup> These data are post-treatment for many cities, since elections had already been cancelled in almost half of Russia's cities by 2011. However, in Russia, where voting behavior is heavily influenced by elite discourse, one would think that support for appointments would only increase

**Figure 3: Public Support for Mayoral Elections (left, 2006; right, 2011)**



#### IV. Independent Variables and Modeling Strategy

Our main hypothesis is that mayoral elections are more likely to be retained when elected mayors control significant political resources—such as independent power bases and political machines—that regime leaders would like to co-opt. In Russia, the concept of a local political machine is not a foreign one. Numerous scholars have written about the local machines that mayors built over the course of the late 1990s and early 2000s (e.g., Gel'man and Ryzhenkov 2011; Bychkova and Gel'man 2010; Brie 2004; Shirikov 2010). As the heads of these machines, mayors used carrots and sticks to cultivate clientelist networks in local officialdom, extract rents from local businesses, and win votes.

To measure these resource endowments, we use the *Mayor's Margin of Victory* in his or her most recent mayoral election contest.<sup>13</sup> To our minds, this is most intuitive and direct

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in cities that switch to appointments, so these figures likely understate pre-cancellation levels of support for the elections.

<sup>13</sup> Descriptive statistics and sources for all independent variables are provided in the online appendix.

measure of a mayor's power base.<sup>14</sup> A similar measure has been used by others to capture the strength of gubernatorial machines in Russia (Robertson 2007; Reuter 2013; Golosov 2011). We expect the coefficient on this variable to be negative.

A corollary of our argument is that regime leaders will not cancel elections if elected officials are using these political resources effectively and in a way that benefits the regime. In electoral authoritarian regimes, one of main priorities for leaders is to win elections and win them well. Thus, leaders are especially keen to co-opt sub-national elites that can help the regime win elections at other levels. Thus, we hypothesize that the regime will be less likely to cancel direct mayoral elections when the mayor has a proven track record of generating votes for the regime. Cancelling elections would deprive these mayors of the autonomy that allows them to craft an electoral machine capable of winning votes for the regime.

A good indicator of a mayor's ability to generate regime support is the electoral performance of United Russia in the city. To measure this, we gathered data on the share of the the party list vote won by United Russia *in the mayor's city* during the most recent regional *legislative* election held in the region.<sup>15</sup> This variable is called *UR Regional Election Margin in City*.

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<sup>14</sup> This measure is likely collinear with the level of political openness in the city. But, to the extent that one expects elections to be less likely in autocratic settings, this should bias us against finding a positive relationship between the *Mayor's Margin of Victory* and the maintenance of elections.

<sup>15</sup> This data is not directly available from the Central Election Commission website. To gather it, the authors matched electoral precincts to the boundaries of each city and calculated United Russia's margin of victory in each individual city.

We also include in our models several variables that proxy for alternative explanations of election cancellation. Modernization-based accounts predict that elections will be more likely in polities with higher levels of economic development. All of Russia's cities are modern polities, but we nonetheless include a variable, *log Income Level*, that proxies the level of socio-economic development in these cities. Another variety of society based explanation predicts that elections will be more likely in settings where citizens have the organizational resources to press for elections. To proxy for the level of organizational capacity in society we include a measure of the development of civil society in the region taken from the widely-used Titkov-Petrov subnational democracy ratings (Petrov and Titkov 2013). We use the value of this variable that covers the period from 1991-2001 in order to ensure that the measure taps levels of civil society development before elections were cancelled.

We also include an indicator, *UR Majority*, which is a dummy variable equal to one if United Russia has a majority in the city council for a given year. City councils must make changes to the city charter in order to cancel elections. Thus, to the extent that the authorities had an inherent preference for cancelling elections during this period, election cancellations should be more likely when the ruling party has a majority in the city council.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, we also examine a view of the election cancellation process that is often encountered in popular accounts of Russian local politics. In the 1990s and early 2000s, regional governors and mayors often entered into political conflict with one another. Hence, according to some, governors sought to eliminate the electoral mandates of strong mayors that posed a threat

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<sup>16</sup> Gel'man and Lankina (2008) advance a similar hypothesis, but use United Russia vote totals at the region level. Since it is the city council that makes decisions on the cancellation of mayoral elections, using data on United Russia's control of city councils is more appropriate.

to them.<sup>17</sup> This perspective would lead one to expect a positive coefficient on *Margin of Mayor's Victory* (our theory predicts a negative coefficient). But another measure of the potential for conflict between the mayor and governor might be the size of the city. Governors may have been more keen to push for the cancellation of mayoral elections in large cities because these mayors represented more of a threat. To examine this, we include as a control the percent of the region's population that is accounted for by the city, *City's Share of Regional Population*.

As noted above, our data is structured as BTSCS duration data and the unit of observation in our models is the city-year. With a dichotomous dependent variable, we employ logistic regression for all models, and, given the duration nature of our data, we also include a cubic polynomial of each *mayor's* elapsed tenure in office in that year.<sup>18</sup> This captures individual-level time dynamics in a manner similar to a hazard model (Carter and Signorino 2010). We also include time fixed effects – indicator variables for two-year periods. All results presented below are robust to the exclusion of the cubic polynomial and the exclusion of time fixed effects. All models include standard errors clustered at the city level.

## V. Results

Our main results are presented in Table 2. In column 1, we present a minimal model that includes only our main variable of interest, *Mayor's Margin of Victory*, along with the cubic time polynomial and time dummies. The coefficient (displayed as an average marginal effect) is

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Kynev, Alexander “Otmenyaya pryamyie vybory merov, gubernatory ne usilivayut, a oslablyayut vlast kak takavuyu” *Gazeta.ru* 9 September 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Although mayoral cancellations are not particularly rare (there are 75 instances in our dataset), we show in the appendix that our results are robust to the use of a penalized likelihood approach based on the Firth method for addressing small sample bias in MLE models.

statistically significant and negative, indicating that elections are less likely to be cancelled when mayors won office by large margins. In Column 2, we add some basic controls to the model. The coefficient on *Mayor's Margin of Victory* changes very little, remaining negative and significant. Figure 4 shows how the predicted probability of election cancellation changes across values of *Mayor's Margin of Victory*, while holding other covariates at their mean values. When the mayor won his election by 75 percentage points (the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile in the data), the probability that an election will be cancelled in any given year is 0.031. But when the mayor won his election by a narrow margin (5 percentage points, the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile in the data), the probability that direct mayoral elections will be cancelled in any given year more than doubles to 0.075.

It is important to note that these findings stand in contrast to the conventional wisdom from Russia. If Russian governors cancelled elections when they felt threatened by powerful mayors, then we should have expected to see that elections would be more likely to be cancelled when mayor's won their elections by large margins. We find the opposite.

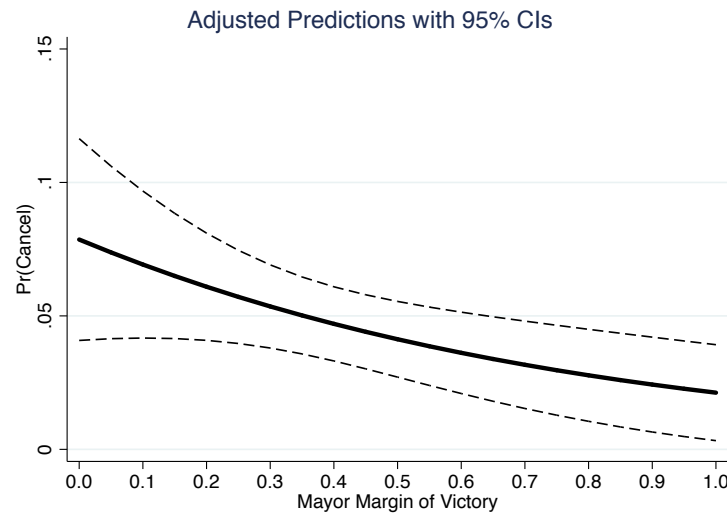
**Table 2: Main Results**

| VARIABLES                                  | (1)<br>cancel        | (2)<br>cancel       | (3)<br>cancel       | (4)<br>cancel       | (5)<br>cancel       |
|--|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Mayor Margin of Victory</i>             | -0.063***<br>(0.023) | -0.072**<br>(0.033) | -0.100**<br>(0.047) | 0.010<br>(0.054)    | 0.001<br>(0.057)    |
| <i>UR Majority</i>                         |                      | 0.022<br>(0.019)    | 0.035<br>(0.024)    |                     | 0.035<br>(0.023)    |
| <i>City's Share of Regional Population</i> |                      | 0.055<br>(0.044)    | 0.028<br>(0.052)    |                     | 0.022<br>(0.050)    |
| <i>log Income Level</i>                    |                      | 0.004<br>(0.021)    | -0.002<br>(0.026)   |                     | 0.003<br>(0.026)    |
| <i>Civil Society 1990s</i>                 |                      | -0.019*<br>(0.011)  | -0.023*<br>(0.012)  |                     | -0.020<br>(0.013)   |
| <i>UR Regional Election Margin in City</i> |                      |                     | -0.038<br>(0.046)   | 0.145**<br>(0.073)  | 0.110<br>(0.075)    |
| <i>Mayor Margin X UR Regional Margin</i>   |                      |                     |                     | -0.427**<br>(0.167) | -0.412**<br>(0.185) |
| <i>Mayor Tenure</i>                        | 0.022*<br>(0.013)    | 0.027<br>(0.017)    | 0.040**<br>(0.020)  | 0.044**<br>(0.020)  | 0.038*<br>(0.020)   |
| <i>Mayor Tenure^2</i>                      | -0.002<br>(0.002)    | -0.002<br>(0.002)   | -0.004*<br>(0.002)  | -0.005**<br>(0.002) | -0.004*<br>(0.002)  |
| <i>Mayor Tenure^3</i>                      | 0.000<br>(0.000)     | 0.000<br>(0.000)    | 0.000*<br>(0.000)   | 0.000*<br>(0.000)   | 0.000<br>(0.000)    |
| Time Fixed Effects (two-year)              | Y                    | Y                   | Y                   | Y                   | Y                   |
| Observations                               | 1,526                | 975                 | 707                 | 768                 | 707                 |
| Log likelihood                             | -272.5               | -201.7              | -141.5              | -156.9              | -139.1              |
| Number of cities                           | 182                  | 167                 | 152                 | 156                 | 152                 |

Average marginal effects shown  
Robust clustered standard errors in parentheses  
\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

The results on other variables are also of note. *UR Majority* is positive, but falls short of statistical significance. This may be, in part, due to the lack of variation in this variable. During the latter half of the 2000s—when most cancellations occurred—UR controlled most city councils. It may also suggest that governors can push cancellations through city councils with informal carrots and sticks, even if UR does not control a majority. Perhaps surprisingly, the coefficient on *Population Share* is insignificant (though positive). Governors are not more likely to cancel elections in larger cities. Nor is *log Income Level* statistically significant. Finally, *Civil Society in 1990s* is negative and statistically significant, though only at the 0.1 level. This may suggest that elections are less likely to be cancelled in settings where society has the organizational capacity to defend direct elections.

**Figure 4: Predicted Probability of Election Cancellation across values of *Mayor's Margin of Victory***



In Model 3, we add *UR Regional Election Margin in City* to the model. Unfortunately, the nature of this variable's construction leads to a significant reduction in the number of observations, so we exclude it from Models 1-2.<sup>19</sup> In Model 3, this variable is positive, but insignificant. It is, as our theory would predict, correlated with Margin of Victory at 0.38, but the variable is still insignificant in a model that excludes *Mayor's Margin of Victory* from the estimation. The insignificance of the variable, we speculate, likely owes much to the small sample size that is used. Nonetheless, one conclusion that can be drawn from the negative and

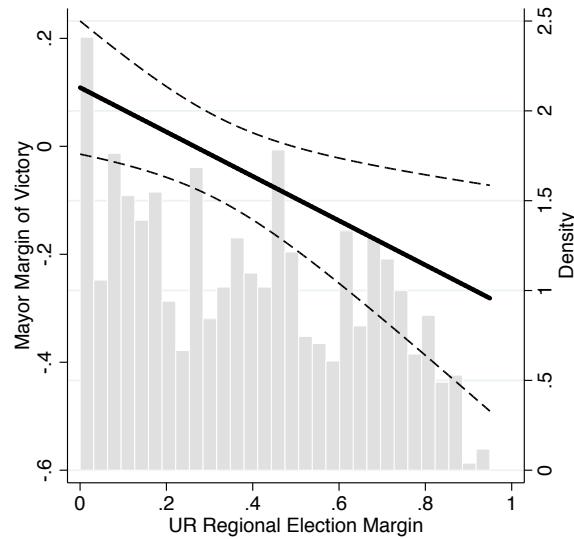
<sup>19</sup> This variable uses the party list vote total for United Russia. Thus, it is missing by construction for all years in a city before the first elections that occurred after the 2003 electoral reform that introduced PR components in regional legislative elections. In some regions, for example, these first elections did not occur until 2007, so all observations prior to 2007 are missing for those cities. Also, by construction, it must contain gaps for those years between the date when a mayor leaves office and the next year when an election is held under the succeeding mayor. After all, it would not make sense for a sitting mayor to be held responsible for the electoral performance of the ruling party under his predecessor.



insignificant coefficient is that elections are not more likely to be retained when levels of opposition to the ruling party in the city are higher, as some existing explanations might expect (Gandhi 2008).

However, in Model 4, we interact *UR Regional Election Margin in City* with *Mayor's Margin of Victory* to determine whether the effect of *Mayor's Margin of Victory* is amplified when a mayor is also turning out the vote for United Russia. The significant coefficient on the interaction term indicates that there is a multiplicative effect and, as Figure 4 shows, it is the case that *Mayor's Margin of Victory* has an even more pronounced negative effect on the probability of election cancellation when the mayor has been successful at mobilizing votes for United Russia. Recalling from Table 2 (Column 3), that the marginal effect of *Mayor's Margin of Victory* was 0.072, we see from Figure 4 that the marginal effect of *Mayor's Margin of Victory* more than doubles to 0.15 when *UR Regional Election Margin in City* is at the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile in the data (0.566). Indeed, when both *UR Regional Election Margin in City* and *Mayor's Margin of Victory* are at the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile in the data (i.e. both are high) the probability that direct elections will be cancelled in any given year is a mere 0.009. When both are at the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile, the probability of cancellation increases more than seven-fold to 0.064. This indicates that the authorities in Russia are least likely to cancel elections when mayors who are strong in political resources are successfully putting those resources to use for the regime by helping the ruling party win elections.

**Figure 5: Predicted Probabilities Conditional on UR Regional Election Margin**



\*Bold line is predicted probability. Dashed line is 95% confidence interval.  
Gray bars (right y-axis) indicate share of sample that has a given set of values.

## **VI. Robustness Checks and Alternative Explanations**

We find consistent evidence that mayoral elections in Russia are less likely to be cancelled when mayors have won their seats by large margins. We believe this is because regime leaders seek to co-opt electorally-strong mayors and put their political machines to work for the regime. But there are several alternative interpretations of our main empirical finding that should be explored as well. One such alternative interpretation is that regime leaders fear losing elections and seek to cancel elections to avoid losing. Under this interpretation, narrow margins of victory are an indicator of a mayor's electoral vulnerability, which increases the chance that regime leaders will cancel elections in order to avoid electoral defeat. Of course, one might object that such a decision would be rash and regime leaders should wait until the opposition wins and then cancel the election—a scenario that has occurred in Russia. But if we assume that losing an electoral contest results in a loss of face for regime leaders or that cancelling elections after the opposition wins reflects badly on the regime, then this alternative interpretation for our findings remains plausible.

The first thing to note about this alternative interpretation is that it assumes elected mayors are regime cadres, such that losing an election would reflect poorly on the regime. And while it is true that many mayors joined United Russia over the course of the 2000s, it is far from true that all or even most mayors during the period under analysis were viewed by local actors as being part of the ‘power vertical’ that was being created by Putin at the time. The 2000s were a time when many regional elites were making decisions about whether to join United Russia (Reuter 2010). In the early 2000s, a clear minority of both mayors and governors were party members, while by late 2007 almost all governors had joined United Russia. Many mayors joined later, however, and most continued to run as independents in elections until the late 2000s. In 2008, only 30% of elected mayors ran with a United Russia nomination, and it was not until 2011 that more than 75% ran under the UR banner. So the first point to be made is that not all elected mayors during this period were clear regime allies.

We move further, however, and exploit this variation to examine the empirical implications of this alternative interpretation. If this alternative explanation were correct, then we should expect to find that the electoral weakness of the mayor has have an especially pronounced impact on election cancellation in cities with mayors that are regime allies. By contrast, we should not expect to find that electoral weakness will have an effect in cities where the mayor is oppositional or independent. The regime would not lose face if these mayors lost, because they are not tied to the regime in the eyes of voters.

To examine this alternative interpretation, we split our sample into two parts: that subset of elected mayors who were nominated by United Russia and the subset of mayors who ran as independents or were nominated by an opposition party. Models 1 (without controls) and 7 (with controls) in Table 3 show results from models restricted to those observations where the mayor

was nominated by United Russia.<sup>20</sup> The coefficient on *Mayor Margin of Victory* is much smaller and statistically insignificant. Models 2 and 8, meanwhile, are restricted to those observations where the sitting mayor was not nominated by United Russia, and we see that the coefficient on *Mayor Margin of Victory* is statistically significant and negative, as in our main models. Thus, it seems that our findings are strong among those mayors that are *less* likely to be viewed as regime allies in the eyes of voters. It is implausible that regime leaders would lose face if these mayors lost their bid for reelection, so we interpret these findings as supportive of our perspective.

United Russia is one of the key actors that drives the cancellation process. The other is the regional governor (although most governors are United Russia members, so it is usually difficult to distinguish between the two). One might object to our above discussion by noting that alignment with the regional governor is a better indicator of regime affiliation than mayoral partisanship. If most mayors were the clients of governors, then governors might seek to cancel elections preemptively if their clients are expected to perform poorly. This is also plausible, and it is certainly true that some mayors are the clients of powerful governors, but it is also true that much of the literature on governor-mayor relations in Russia characterizes these relationships as rivalrous and, often, confrontational. In the 1990s and early 2000s, mayors often entered into direct conflict with governors and the federal center enlisted mayors as allies in their struggle to reign in powerful governors (Slider 2005; Gel'man et al. 2008).

We attempt to capitalize on variation in the extent to which mayors are clients of governors in order to examine this alternative interpretation. To do this, we split our sample into

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<sup>20</sup> Because splitting the sample produces a significant decrease in sample size when controls are used, we show results for all robustness checks both with and without controls.

a set of observations where the sitting mayor entered office prior to the sitting governor and a set of observations where the mayor came to office after the governor. It seems unlikely that a mayor who came to office before the sitting governor would be the client of that governor. By contrast, mayors who came to office after the governor may have obtained their office due to their connections with the governor or they may be independent of the governor. In our view, coming to office after the governor is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for being a client of the governor.

Models 3 and 9 in Table 3 show the results of our main models when we restrict the sample to those observations where the sitting mayor came to office before the sitting governor, while Models 4 and 10 restrict the sample to those observations where the sitting mayor came to office after the sitting governor. *Mayor Margin of Victory* remains negative and close to statistically significant in all models, but the coefficient has a substantially larger magnitude in the subsample of observations where mayors came to office before the governor. Thus, our results are stronger when mayors are *not* the clients of governors than when they are clients of the governor, casting doubt on this alternative interpretation.

In Models 5 and 11, we further investigate the alternative interpretation described above by restricting our models only to those observations where the sitting mayor won his electoral contest by more than 20 percentage points. Our hypothesis about the link between *Mayor Margin of Victory* and the probability of election cancellation is linear, such that higher vote totals indicate a stronger electoral machine, which makes it more imperative that regime leaders co-opt these mayors. By contrast, the alternative explanation offers, in our view, a more dichotomous prediction: when regime-affiliated mayors are in danger of losing, the regime cancels elections in order to avoid that outcome, otherwise, they leave elections in place. According to this

perspective, a mayor whose victory seems assured (perhaps due to reliable opinion polls or a fragmented opposition) and is expected to win by a 25% margin should be no more likely to have his electoral mandate removed than a mayor whose victory is assured and is expected to win by 60% margin. The results in Models 5 and 11 are largely inconsistent with this alternative perspective and consistent with our linear hypothesis: *Mayor Margin of Victory* is still negatively associated with election cancellation when we restrict the sample to mayors who won their elections by sizable margins.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, in Models 6 and 12, we address another alternative interpretation of our findings. One might argue that a mayor's electoral margin is better viewed as an indicator of ideological support for the regime than as an indicator of the mayor's electoral machine. Under this interpretation, our findings demonstrate not that mayors with strong electoral machines are co-opted, but that the regime refrains from alienating its base by cancelling elections where it has high levels of ideological support.

In addressing this alternative, it is first worth noting that this explanation assumes that mayors are viewed by voters as members of the regime such that support for the mayor can be taken as a direct indicator of support for the regime. This brings us back to the discussion above, which made clear that not all mayors during this period could be viewed as regime cadres, and our results appear to hold for those mayors who were independent.

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<sup>21</sup> The coefficient falls slightly short of significance ( $p=0.103$ ) in the model with full controls. This is due to the significantly reduced sample size. Simply removing *UR Majority* from the model, which is responsible for most of the drop in sample size, returns *Mayor Margin of Victory* to significance ( $p=0.037$ ).

Second, this perspective would assume that vote totals in Russia are determined exogenously by voters' ideological preferences. As in most countries, however, ideology and partisanship play a lesser role in Russian second-order elections than they do in national elections. Moreover, such an assumption would seem to ignore the large body of evidence that attributes vote results in Russia's authoritarian elections to non-programmatic factors such as clientelism, administrative resources, and outright electoral subversion, tactics that are usually deployed by regional and local officials (Sharafutdinova 2014; Reuter 2013; Golosov 2013; Hale 2006; Frye et al. 2014). In conjunction with these methods, popular local and regional officials have proven adept at using their skill, charisma, and personal authority to generate support for preferred candidates and parties. In this way, mayors can generate popular support for the regime, such that levels of regime support in the city are partially attributable to those mayors. This would be consistent with the view we offer here.

Nonetheless, it seems clear that 'exogenous' ideological preferences also affect Russian voting behavior, especially in more open and democratic regions. So, to probe this alternative explanation empirically, we interact *Mayor Margin of Victory* with the Petrov-Titkov measure of regional regime type in Models 6 and 12. In the more autocratic regions, vote totals depend more on electoral subversion, machine politics, and clientelism, while in more democratic regions, they may depend more on the ideological and partisan affinities of voters. Therefore, if this alternative explanation were to hold, narrow margins of victory should be especially likely to result in election cancellation in the more democratic regions. We do not find this. In both Model 6 and 12, we find that the effect of *Mayor Margin of Victory* on election cancellation is actually attenuated in more democratic regions. In Model 12, the marginal effect of *Mayor Margin of Victory* is -0.114 (and statistically significant) when the Petrov Democracy Score is at the 10<sup>th</sup>

percentile in the data (more autocratic regions). By contrast, when the Petrov Democracy score is at the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile in the data (more democratic regions), the marginal effect is 0.017 and is not statistically distinguishable from zero. So *Mayor Margin of Victory* has a statistically significant effect on election cancellation precisely in those regions where elections are more likely to be won by dint of administrative resource and clientelist politics. This is consistent with the perspective we offer.

Finally, in Table 4, we examine some additional alternative explanations. As we have noted, society-based theories of elections disagree as to what type of social demands and organizations are to be co-opted with elections. In Section III we pointed out that since all cities in Russia are ‘modern’ societies, theories of elections that focus on modernization-inspired demands for representation are unlikely to be responsible for variation in the decision to hold elections. Nonetheless, in Table 2, we control for the level of income in Russia’s cities. In Column 1 of Table 4, we try another proxy for levels of modernization and include a control for the percent of the population in the region with a higher education. This alternative operationalization of modernization levels also has no effect.

Models 2 and 3 examine the argument that elections are held to co-opt an organized social opposition. In Column 2, we control for the region-level share of the vote received by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), Russia’s largest and most-well organized opposition party, in the 1999 State Duma elections. One might predict that elections will be held when organized political parties are stronger (Gandhi 2008). In this specification, we do not find evidence of this.



**Table 3: Probing Alternative Interpretations of Main Finding**

| VARIABLES                           | (1)               | (2)                  | (3)                | (4)                | (5)                 | (6)                 | (7)               | (8)                  | (9)                | (10)                | (11)               | (12)                 |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Mayor Margin of Victory</i>      | -0.036<br>(0.046) | -0.116***<br>(0.042) | -0.089*<br>(0.048) | -0.045*<br>(0.026) | -0.077**<br>(0.037) | -0.265**<br>(0.105) | -0.003<br>(0.059) | -0.221***<br>(0.070) | -0.136*<br>(0.074) | -0.049<br>(0.035)   | -0.091*<br>(0.056) | -0.296*<br>(0.157)   |
| <i>UR Majority</i>                  |                   |                      |                    |                    |                     |                     | 0.042<br>(0.030)  | 0.048*<br>(0.029)    | 0.071*<br>(0.037)  | 0.002<br>(0.020)    | 0.016<br>(0.019)   | 0.021<br>(0.019)     |
| <i>Population Share</i>             |                   |                      |                    |                    |                     |                     | 0.034<br>(0.070)  | 0.077<br>(0.064)     | 0.021<br>(0.084)   | 0.053<br>(0.050)    | 0.079<br>(0.054)   | 0.036<br>(0.045)     |
| <i>log Income Level</i>             |                   |                      |                    |                    |                     |                     | 0.057<br>(0.039)  | 0.043<br>(0.028)     | 0.001<br>(0.037)   | 0.006<br>(0.026)    | 0.006<br>(0.026)   | 0.011<br>(0.021)     |
| <i>Civil Society 1990s</i>          |                   |                      |                    |                    |                     |                     | -0.008<br>(0.017) | -0.046**<br>(0.022)  | -0.011<br>(0.020)  | -0.026**<br>(0.012) | -0.020<br>(0.012)  | -0.035***<br>(0.012) |
| <i>Petrov Democracy Score</i>       |                   |                      |                    |                    |                     | -0.002<br>(0.002)   |                   |                      |                    |                     |                    | 0.001<br>(0.003)     |
| <i>Petrov Democ. X Mayor Margin</i> |                   |                      |                    |                    |                     | 0.007**<br>(0.004)  |                   |                      |                    |                     |                    | 0.008<br>(0.005)     |
| Mayor Tenure Cubic Polynomial       | Y                 | Y                    | Y                  | Y                  | Y                   | Y                   | Y                 | Y                    | Y                  | Y                   | Y                  | Y                    |
| Time Fixed Effects (two-year)       | Y                 | Y                    | Y                  | Y                  | Y                   | Y                   | Y                 | Y                    | Y                  | Y                   | Y                  | Y                    |
| Observations                        | 405               | 642                  | 500                | 1,026              | 1,049               | 1,519               | 359               | 375                  | 325                | 650                 | 677                | 968                  |
| Log likelihood                      | -84.81            | -93.34               | -107.8             | -158.6             | -170.5              | -270.0              | -73.08            | -63.78               | -82.20             | -112.4              | -126.4             | -197.0               |
| Number of cities                    | 115               | 125                  | 112                | 157                | 155                 | 181                 | 111               | 117                  | 93                 | 135                 | 140                | 166                  |

Models 1 and 7 are restricted to those observations where the sitting mayor was nominated by United Russia in elections. Model 2 and 8 are restricted to those observations where the sitting mayor was not nominated by United Russia. Models 3 and 9 are restricted to those observations where the sitting mayor came to office before the sitting governor. Models 4 and 10 are restricted to those observations where the sitting mayor came to office before the sitting governor. Models 5 and 11 are restricted to those observations where the sitting mayor won his electoral contest by more than 20 percentage points.

Average marginal effects shown

Cluster robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

In Model 3, we operationalize regime opposition with an indicator of whether the mayor was elected by an opposition party. We find no results here, although, this result must be taken with a grain of salt, since true opposition mayors were a very rare occurrence during the period under analysis.

In Model 4, we examine further the hypothesis that governors cancel mayoral elections when they feel threatened by mayors. In all our models we have included the *City's Share of Regional Population* as a control to see whether governors are more likely to cancel elections in large cities. It is positive in all models, indicating some support for this proposition, though it only attains statistical significance in Model 4 in Table 4. But perhaps it is the case that unpopular governors feel especially threatened by elected mayors and thus seek to eliminate their electoral mandates. To examine this, we include the governor's popularity in the region as a variable, *Governor's Popularity*.

We also examine whether *Governor's Popularity* and *Mayor Margin of Victory* interact such that the effect of *Mayor Margin of Victory* is larger when governors are unpopular because unpopular governors feel threatened by popular mayors. The interaction term is significant, but the directionality of the conditional effect is the opposite of what the explanation outlined above predicts: the effect of *Mayor Margin of Victory* is actually much smaller when the governor is unpopular.

Model's 6 and 7 examine the proposition that elections in more autocratic regions are more likely to be cancelled. This argument has been advanced in the literature (Gel'man and Lankina 2008), so we examine it here. In Model 6, we use a three-point scale of regional *Press Freedom*, compiled by the Glasnost Defense Foundation to measure the level of liberalism in the region. The variable is insignificant. In Column 7, we proxy for the level of autocracy in the

region with a measure of the percent of the region's population that is Russian. It is by now a well-established finding that Russia's ethnic republics are more autocratic than ethnically Russian-majority regions, so several studies have profitably used this as a measure of autocracy in the regions (Reissinger and Moraski 2009; Goodnow et al. 2014). Again, however, we find that this measure of region-level autocracy is insignificant. It seems that elections are no more likely to be cancelled in autocratic regions.<sup>22</sup>

In Model 8, we attempt to evaluate the argument, often advanced by Russia's leaders, that elections were cancelled in order to purge the mayoral corpus of unprofessional and criminal elements (Buckley et al. 2014a). Thus, we include a control for whether the mayor had ever been arrested. The coefficient is insignificant. Elections are not more likely to be cancelled when the mayor has a criminal record. However, only 4% of mayors have a criminal past, so this finding should be interpreted with caution.

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<sup>22</sup> We also estimated models that included the Petrov-Titkov measure of democracy in the Russian regions, which is a more direct, but also more tautological, operationalization. The null results remain unchanged.

**Table 4: Robustness Checks and Alternative Specifications**

| VARIABLES                        | (1)      | (2)      | (3)      | (4)      | (5)     | (6)      | (7)      | (8)      |
|----------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|---------|----------|----------|----------|
| <i>Mayor's Margin of Victory</i> | -0.074** | -0.071** | -0.073** | -0.085** | 0.034   | -0.075** | -0.074** | -0.073** |
|                                  | (0.034)  | (0.034)  | (0.035)  | (0.042)  | (0.076) | (0.035)  | (0.033)  | (0.033)  |
| <i>UR Majority</i>               | 0.021    | 0.022    | 0.036*   | 0.027    | 0.027   | 0.023    | 0.023    | 0.022    |
|                                  | (0.019)  | (0.019)  | (0.019)  | (0.019)  | (0.019) | (0.019)  | (0.019)  | (0.019)  |
| <i>Population Share</i>          | 0.045    | 0.055    | 0.030    | 0.099**  | 0.098** | 0.051    | 0.051    | 0.055    |
|                                  | (0.047)  | (0.044)  | (0.039)  | (0.050)  | (0.050) | (0.044)  | (0.045)  | (0.043)  |
| <i>log Income Level</i>          | 0.008    | -0.000   | 0.023    | -0.003   | -0.002  | 0.012    | 0.002    | 0.004    |
|                                  | (0.021)  | (0.021)  | (0.020)  | (0.026)  | (0.026) | (0.021)  | (0.020)  | (0.021)  |
| <i>Civil Society 1990s</i>       | -0.018*  | -0.021*  | -0.019*  | -0.026*  | -0.024* | -0.024** | -0.018   | -0.019*  |
|                                  | (0.011)  | (0.012)  | (0.011)  | (0.013)  | (0.014) | (0.011)  | (0.011)  | (0.011)  |
| <i>Region Level of Education</i> | -0.001   |          |          |          |         |          |          |          |
|                                  | (0.002)  |          |          |          |         |          |          |          |
| <i>KPRF Share 1999</i>           |          | -0.001   |          |          |         |          |          |          |
|                                  |          | (0.001)  |          |          |         |          |          |          |
| <i>Opposition Mayor</i>          |          |          | 0.022    |          |         |          |          |          |
|                                  |          |          | (0.024)  |          |         |          |          |          |
| <i>Governor Popularity</i>       |          |          |          | -0.000   | 0.104   |          |          |          |
|                                  |          |          |          | (0.001)  | (0.074) |          |          |          |
| <i>Press Freedom</i>             |          |          |          |          |         | -0.001   |          |          |
|                                  |          |          |          |          |         | (0.012)  |          |          |
| <i>Percent Russian in Region</i> |          |          |          |          |         |          | -0.036   |          |
|                                  |          |          |          |          |         |          | (0.052)  |          |
| <i>Mayor Criminal History</i>    |          |          |          |          |         |          |          | -0.005   |
|                                  |          |          |          |          |         |          |          | (0.037)  |
| <i>Gov Pop'ty X Mayor Margin</i> |          |          |          |          | -0.322* |          |          |          |
|                                  |          |          |          |          | (0.172) |          |          |          |
| Mayor Tenure Cubic Polynomial    | Y        | Y        | Y        | Y        | Y       | Y        | Y        | Y        |
| Time Fixed Effects (two-year)    | Y        | Y        | Y        | Y        | Y       | Y        | Y        | Y        |
| Observations                     | 975      | 975      | 895      | 793      | 793     | 967      | 975      | 975      |
| Log likelihood                   | -201.3   | -201.6   | -149.3   | -167.9   | -166.6  | -199.8   | -201.5   | -201.7   |
| Number of cities                 | 167      | 167      | 153      | 160      | 160     | 166      | 167      | 167      |

Average marginal effects shown  
Cluster robust standard errors in parentheses  
\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

## VII. Conclusion

Electoral authoritarianism is the most common type of autocracy in the world today. Although an increasing number of scholars have begun studying the functions and causes of autocratic elections, few have examined these questions in a subnational context. This is surprising given

the importance of subnational officials in authoritarian settings, and surprising given the significant effects that subnational elections have on democratization, government responsiveness, and the selection of cadres.

In this paper, we have argued that subnational elections serve as tools for assuaging powerful subnational elites. We argued that when these elites hold significant political resources, leaders may need to co-opt them in order to govern cost-effectively. Elections are useful tools of co-optation because they provide elites with the opportunity to cultivate their own autonomous power bases. Thus, we predicted that leaders will allow subnational elections when subnational elites are strong in political resources that leaders would like to co-opt.

Using an original dataset that taps variation in the decision to hold direct mayoral elections in Russia's 207 largest cities between 2000 and 2012, we find empirical support for this proposition. Russian mayors who won their elections by large margins were less likely to be replaced with appointees. Elections were even less likely to be cancelled when strong mayors demonstrated that they could successfully turn out votes for the ruling party. This suggests that electoral authoritarian leaders put a premium on co-opting the electoral machines of subnational elites, especially when those elites have a track record of putting those machines to work for the regime.

Other possible explanations for the holding of elections perform less well. In particular, society-based explanations drawn from the modernization tradition do a poor job of explaining when elections are held, as do explanations that focus on the puissance of opposition parties. We do, however, find some support for the idea that regions with a history of strong civil society were less likely to cancel direct mayoral elections.

Our findings have important implications not just for the study of subnational politics under autocracy, but also for the broader literature on elections. While our theory was devised to explain variation in the holding of subnational elections, it may also shed some light on the decision of autocrats to hold legislative elections, and relatedly, the choice of electoral rules in those elections. National legislative elections can be useful tools for co-opting powerful regional elites, and we think it more likely that leaders will use elections to co-opt when regional elites are powerful. Furthermore, it stands to reason that leaders will choose an electoral system with a small district magnitude when their goal is to co-opt regional elites. After all, this type of electoral system affords individual candidates the best chance to cultivate local political machines that can help ensure their political survival and be used as bargaining chips in relations with other actors.

Our study fits within a recent line of literature that focuses on how authoritarian institutions are used to co-opt elites (Svolik 2012; Reuter 2010; Blaydes 2011; Magaloni 2008). However, our study points toward a problem that is not well addressed in the existing literature. Authoritarian leaders want local cadres to have the political resources necessary to mobilize votes, maintain social order, and implement policy. They may design institutions that give elites the autonomy necessary to achieve these goals. The problem is that elites may seek to use their autonomous power bases against leaders at some point. Thus leaders must find a way to co-opt elites, while simultaneously guarding against attempts by their number to use regime institutions against regime leaders. This is a problem that deserves further study.

## VIII. References

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