



Shoring up power: Electoral reform and the consolidation of authoritarian rule[☆]

Jennifer Gandhi^a, Abigail L. Heller^a, Ora John Reuter^{b,c,*}

^a Emory University, USA

^b University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA

^c National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia

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ABSTRACT

Why do autocrats adopt proportional representation (PR)? Conventional wisdom suggests autocrats should prefer majoritarian electoral rules because they favor large parties. Yet, since 1945, autocrats have been almost three times more likely to institute reforms towards PR than majoritarianism. Existing literature suggests incumbents institute PR to divide the opposition. We explore another motivation: executives switch to PR to ensure discipline among allies. We argue that such reforms are most likely when autocrats have a particular need to impose discipline — when ruling parties are nascent. Empirically, we examine the conditions under which changes to PR are likely with cross-national data from all electoral autocracies between 1945 and 2012. Additionally, we investigate a prominent case — the 2005 switch to PR in Russia — to illustrate the mechanisms and show how the reform solved the problem of control, allowing the Kremlin to focus on selecting electorally strong candidates.

1. Introduction

In autocracies that allow for multiparty competition in legislative elections, electoral rule changes are frequent: 38% of post-World War II autocracies changed their electoral systems compared to only 19% of democracies (Barberá 2013). The disproportionality induced by majoritarian systems enables autocratic leaders with regime parties to govern with sizeable legislative majorities (Diaz-Cayeros and Magaloni 2001). Proportional representation, in turn, helps keep the opposition fragmented (Higashijima and Chang 2016; Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002). Alternatively, dictators who anticipate that nothing can be done to preserve their power may choose the electoral rules that best provide some insurance to them and their political allies (Boix 1999; Negretto 2006; Rokkan 1970).

Maximizing seats at the expense of opposition parties undoubtedly is a large part of the story behind electoral rule manipulation by incumbents. Here we focus on another — comparatively neglected — part of the story of electoral rule manipulation: the use of rule changes to

manage and control the autocrat's coalition. Autocrats govern with the help of elites who lend important political and economic resources to support the regime. In the context of partisan elections contested by a regime party, the autocrat needs elites within his coalition who can defeat opposition candidates by virtue of their popularity, charisma, name-recognition, skills or efforts at campaigns, or resources (Magaloni 2006; Reuter 2017). But these same characteristics make these types of legislative candidates — strong elites — difficult to control. Strong elites can use their personal resources to defy party leaders and extract costly concessions from the autocrat. This creates a performance-loyalty dilemma for autocratic leaders — a problem for the management of appointments (Egorov and Sonin 2011; Zakharov 2016), but we argue, also of candidates for parliamentary elections.

How do these concerns affect the choice of electoral systems? We argue that when autocrats have not yet consolidated their position vis-à-vis elites, they prioritize addressing the performance-loyalty dilemma regarding their own coalition over the goal of marginalizing the opposition. Control over the coalition is best achieved through proportional

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* Corresponding author. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA.

E-mail address: reutero@uwm.edu (O.J. Reuter).

representation (PR), especially with closed lists.¹ Control over nominations under PR incentivizes party candidates to remain legislatively compliant after the election. Armed with this institutional stick to command loyalty, the autocrat can recruit strong elites as candidates to increase his party's chances of winning, without fear that these candidates will pose a problem later in the electoral or legislative process. PR may result in a smaller seat share for the regime, but amongst its legislative coalition, it will have avoided having to sacrifice electoral performance for loyalty.

We provide cross-national evidence demonstrating that autocrats are more likely to adopt PR in the early years of their regime parties, precisely when their problems of control are more pronounced. We then examine a prominent case — Russia — and demonstrate that the problem of control was an important motivating factor in the switch from a mixed to a proportional system in 2005. We also show that once closed-list PR was adopted, United Russia, the regime party, focused on recruiting strong candidates who could help win elections. In doing so, it used the previous electoral performance of potential candidates as a guide to their prospective electoral strength. With control over the nomination process, party leaders would not need to use loyalty as a criterion for drawing up electoral lists.

Recent work on electoral reform recognizes that seat maximization is not the only goal motivating the choice of electoral rules: party leaders have also promoted the adoption of PR to increase party cohesion through control over the nomination process (Cox et al., 2019; Schröder and Manow 2020). Party backbenchers, in turn, may be motivated and able to resist electoral rule changes in democracies (Leeman and Mares 2014; McElwain 2008). In autocracies, we assume that leaders will more effectively push through rule changes (through side payments or coercive threats), allowing us to focus on the conditions under which leaders may want to enact such change and the way the reform enables them to address the performance-loyalty dilemma (Egorov and Sonin 2011; Zakharov 2016). Scholars of Russian politics have highlighted similar motivations in the 2005 switch to PR (Moraski 2007; Remington 2006; Smyth et al., 2007). Our cross-national analysis shows that controlling electoral and legislative coalitions is a problem that is confronted by many autocratic rulers and the Kremlin's solution to it — the adoption of PR — is not unique. Furthermore, work on the 2005 electoral reform has focused on United Russia's desire for loyalty in their legislative members. But our evidence shows that the electoral viability of candidates was an equally important criterion in candidate selection.

Using various forms of evidence, we show that autocrats choose PR under certain conditions to create coalitions composed of members who are both electoral winners and legislatively compliant. As such, an institution — the electoral system — has important effects on leader-elite relations within autocracies. “Parchment rules,” in fact, can sometimes condition relationships that are fundamentally founded on brute force (Gehlbach and Keefer 2012; Reuter 2017).

2. Manipulation of electoral rules under autocracy

For an autocratic leader with nominally-democratic institutions, a legislative majority enables him to make laws and change the

constitution in order to implement his agenda. To generate legislative majorities, it helps to have a well-resourced organization with candidates who can attract votes. In other words, a regime party composed of elites who have the economic and political resources necessary to obtain votes.² Social and political networks can be useful in coordinating donors to support campaigns, recruiting activists to mobilize voters, and persuading or pressuring voters for support. Material resources can be used directly to buy votes. The personal reputation or charisma of candidates can also serve as an important resource for attracting votes. But the same resources that make elites valuable — whether as candidates or behind-the-scenes supporters — also make them difficult to control. Elites with social, political, and economic resources can behave as independents, form their own factions, or even join the opposition. Kim Söng-gon, a leader of the Gang of Four and the Democratic Republican Party in South Korea, tried to challenge General Park Chung Hee by joining the opposition in a vote of no confidence against the Home Minister (Greitens, 2016). The defection of dissident factions of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) in Mexico and the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) in Malaysia undermined the regime's legislative agenda and popular support. For an autocrat, the members of his own legislative coalition can pose a performance-loyalty dilemma.

What set of institutional incentives enable the dictator to have a coalition of both well-resourced *and* compliant legislators? One way is through partisan control over electoral nominations. By determining which candidates appear on the ballot, parties can wield enormous influence over candidates, inducing them to support collective goals, such as the party's reputation, rather than personal ones, in elections (Carey and Shugart 1995; Chang and Golden 2007). Once candidates have won seats, they also have incentives to comply with the legislative agenda of the party if they hope to secure re-nomination. Finally, control over inclusion and placement of candidates on the ballot also enables the party to set up rules and procedures that rationalize the process of candidate selection. With few options to circumvent the party's selection of candidates, elites are left with little choice but to comply with the demands of the autocrat and party leaders if they continue to value their legislative seats.

Electoral rules vary in the degree to which they enable parties to control nominations and candidates to defy party decisions. In systems without primaries, majoritarian rules give central party leaders the ability to choose candidates. But this control is contingent on a strongly centralized party apparatus that has effective control over local nomination processes. In weak party systems, nomination processes are prone to capture by local elites, such as governors, oligarchs, landowners, and the candidates themselves. In 19th century Britain, for example, such local notables were a constant problem for party leaders who were trying to induce party-line votes within parliament (Cox 1987). Similarly, in Yeltsin-era Russia, the regional branches of pro-presidential parties were controlled not by the president's team, but by powerful regional governors and financial-industrial groups, who used their resources to install their own clients as single-member district plurality (SMDP) candidates (Hale 2006; Reuter 2017). Even if these powerful elites promote candidates who are likely to support the goals of the regime, the problem of coordinating and monitoring nominations across many single-member districts remains (Cox et al., 2019; Schröder and

¹ As we discuss below, our arguments apply both to closed-list and open-list PR (though slightly better to the former). But since open-list PR is extremely rare in autocracies (Brazil and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are the only cases, to our knowledge), we often use the shorthand “PR” or “proportional representation” to refer to closed-list PR.

² We use the term elites to refer broadly to a set of political actors outside the central leadership who exert influence in politics and society. In autocracies, elites may be prominent politicians, party members, ministers, administrators, business magnates, traditional leaders, governors, political bosses, military leaders, intelligence officers, etc. The elites most relevant to our theory are those involved in legislative politics — either as candidates or as behind-the-scenes power brokers. The most relevant elites to legislative politics varies, but are likely to be those with a traditional political profile, such as party members, legislators, and local politicians.

Manow 2020).

Such problems are exacerbated by the fact that — relative to proportional systems — majoritarian rules incentivize the cultivation of a personal vote (André et al., 2016). Once elected, candidates can then use that personal vote as leverage against party leaders. Popular deputies can credibly threaten defection if central control becomes too stringent. When the costs of securing ballot access are small (e.g., low registration fee), for example, elites might run as independents or as the candidates of other parties.³ Alternatively, in party systems that lack a strong programmatic basis, SMDP legislators may defy the party line on legislative votes (e.g., Kunicova and Remington 2008). While leaders in authoritarian systems can coerce and cajole individual deputies into voting with the regime, such measures are costly and not guaranteed to succeed. Therefore, promoting institutions that make party discipline incentive-compatible for deputies is preferred.

By giving executives and party leaders strong control over nominations, closed-list PR is one such institution.⁴ Larger (and fewer) districts make it much harder for local notables to pry ballot control from the hands of party leaders. It also provides disgruntled would-be candidates with limited maneuvering room to get on the ballot in defiance of their parties' decisions. Once leaders determine inclusion and position of candidates on the party's electoral list, they wield enormous power over the political fate of candidates, providing incentives for candidates to follow party strategies in elections and once elected, to follow the party line in legislative voting (Cox et al., 2019). With this stick in hand, the executive and party leaders are free to select candidates who have the resources and skills to win elections. Parties do not need to sacrifice electoral quality for loyalty among those individuals who agree to run as candidates.

As useful as PR is in managing legislative coalitions, it is rarely the optimal rule to achieve seat maximization. Proportionality reduces the seat bonus awarded to large parties, such as the ruling one, and enables smaller opposition parties to gain a foothold within the legislature (Boix 1999; Diaz-Cayeros and Magaloni 2001; Rokkan 1970). Faced with the trade-off between using majoritarian rules to maximize the size of the regime's legislative party and PR to manage the members of that coalition, under what conditions should autocrats choose PR?

We argue that when the problem of establishing control among elites — who can help generate votes — is especially vexing, leaders will, *ceteris paribus*, be more likely to opt for PR. Our approach assumes that the regime's central leadership sets the agenda for rule change and that autocratic leaders will be motivated and capable enough of convincing deputies to pass reform. Legislators likely prefer to maintain the status quo, and deputies — especially those elected through SMDP — may attempt to resist these changes.⁵ Yet they may be disadvantaged vis-à-vis the ruler by collective action problems and overwhelmed by attempts to

³ Under PR, defections also happen, but in these systems defectors must band together to start their own party or gain a privileged position on a different party list (e.g., by appealing to a local notable). Both are much harder than running as an independent in an SMDP system.

⁴ Our discussion focuses on the distinction between majoritarian and closed-list PR systems, the most common electoral formulas used in autocracies. But these arguments apply to electoral formulas that are less frequent in these regimes. Party leaders have less control over candidates in open-list PR, for example, than under closed-list PR, because there are stronger incentives to cultivate a personal vote in the former. Yet the higher district magnitude (and smaller number of districts) makes any form of PR more compatible with party control over nominations than majoritarian systems. Additionally, the possibility of running as an independent gives SMDP candidates leverage that PR candidates — on open or closed lists — lack.

⁵ Legislators, elected under a variety of systems, likely prefer the status quo because these are the rules under which they won their seats. Deputies elected through SMDP also may prefer its maintenance because it provides maximum autonomy from centralized control. For these reasons, electoral systems may appear path dependent in both autocracies and democracies.

convince them (through side payments and coercive threats).

While many factors affect the ability of regime leaders to control elites, among the most important is party organization. Regimes with strong ruling parties have more control over local elites and local nomination contests. But parties, when nascent, are unlikely to have strong control over nominations. When the ruler is first organizing his elite coalition within the confines of a political party, elites often have relatively high levels of autonomy (Reuter 2017). It is precisely in these situations that leaders may find PR appealing — through control of the candidate selection process, leaders can shift the balance of power in their favor. This leads to our first hypothesis.

Rule choice hypothesis: Autocrats will be more likely to choose PR when their ruling parties are relatively new.

While electoral viability is a natural criterion in the choice of candidates — no matter what electoral system is in place — what we seek to emphasize is that PR enables autocrats to increase the likelihood of electoral victory (through the selection of popular candidates) while minimizing loss of control over them. By emphasizing this feature of PR, we offer a distinct logic for the choice of this electoral system from other scholars who emphasize its utility in dividing the opposition (Higashijima and Chang 2016; Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002). Failure to find evidence for our second hypothesis would suggest that our emphasis on intra-regime dynamics rather than the opposition is misplaced.

Candidate selection hypothesis: Once autocrats have adopted PR, electoral viability will be an important criterion for candidate selection.

In the following section, we use cross-national evidence to investigate the rule choice hypothesis. Our focus then turns to a prominent case — Russia — to illustrate the mechanism behind the rule choice hypothesis and test the candidate selection hypothesis. Our findings concur with studies of the case that emphasize how adoption of PR enabled Putin and United Russia to exert more control over legislators. But we also demonstrate that the institutional control over nominations enabled the Kremlin to run candidates who were both high quality (i.e., capable of attracting votes) and compliant.

3. Choosing the rules: a cross-national analysis

Our cross-national analysis utilizes a dataset of 438 national-level, lower house elections in dictatorships between 1945 and 2012.⁶ We focus on only those regimes for which the tension between seat maximization and coalition management is meaningful — dictatorships with regime parties that compete in elections against other parties.⁷ We exclude regimes with no parties such as Kuwait and Belarus and single-party regimes such as Paraguay in the 1940s and 1950s. In addition, the executive must have clear formal or informal ties to the governing party.⁸ Finally, since our argument assumes that survival in power is a primary goal for leaders, the sample includes only those elections held under the auspices of an incumbent executive with the intention of retaining power — indicated by his candidacy in a concurrent presidential election or his party's participation in the legislative election.⁹

Our dependent variable is *Change Towards PR*, taking a value of one if the electoral system was changed in a proportional direction between

⁶ We identified elections through NELDA (Hyde and Marinov 2012) and Barbará (2013), also consulting secondary sources to ensure complete coverage. The electoral system data comes from V-Dem (Coppedge et al., 2016), the Database of Political Institutions (Keefer 2012), and Barbará (2013). Where these sources were missing or disagreed, we used secondary sources.

⁷ Thus, we assume that if the regime has a party it is trying to strengthen that party.

⁸ This criterion excludes elections held under executives with no ruling party, or executives who support coalitions of parties without any clear favorite (e.g., monarchs in Morocco and Jordan).

⁹ This criterion excludes transitional elections in which a military or caretaker government held the election as a means of transferring power to someone else.

the previous and current elections (when both elections are held under the same regime¹⁰) and zero otherwise.¹¹ Specifically, this variable is coded as one if the electoral system was changed from a majoritarian to a proportional system, a mixed to a proportional system, or a majoritarian to a mixed system. We exclude country-election years for which the previous electoral system was fully proportional (there was no opportunity for further change towards proportionality).¹² Thus, among country-election years for which a change towards PR is possible (i.e., PR was not already in use), we identify those elections in which such a change towards PR was made. This results in 271 observations.

Because regime parties play such a critical role in influencing the shape of leader-elite relations, our independent variable of interest is an indicator for whether the regime party is less than ten years old — *New Party*. In the appendix, we show that the results are robust to using other thresholds to define *New Party*.¹³ We use party age as our proxy for party institutionalization. Following Huntington, we conceive of institutionalization as “the process by which organizations acquire value and stability” (1968, 12). Implicit in this definition is the notion that institutions take time to acquire force. Entrenched institutions are more likely to establish the mutual expectations that make institutional equilibria more robust. Therefore, the most widely-used measure of party institutionalization is party age (e.g., Scartascini et al., 2018), which has the added benefit of being plausibly exogenous to electoral rules.

Party age is coded from the year of the party’s founding, using secondary sources. For parties with superficial name changes, we take the founding date of the predecessor party. For parties with large organizational breaks or party mergers that resulted in substantively new parties, we take the founding date of the substantively new party. Our expectation is that an established — older — regime party will have developed institutional levers by which party leaders can enforce discipline, mitigating the need for PR. Consequently, other things equal, regimes with a new party should be more likely to adopt PR.

We use a dummy variable rather than a continuous measure of regime party age because our theory suggests that regimes with new parties behave differently than regimes with old parties. We should expect decreasing marginal returns from age and our theory is not designed to explain differences between parties that are, for example, twenty years old versus those that are fifty years old. Nevertheless, the results are robust to using a continuous measure for regime party age (see appendix).

Some models include additional controls. We include an indicator for whether a country was a British colony — *Former British Colony*. A history with British administration could affect not only the electoral system used (most former British colonies use majoritarian systems), but also elite strength via the level of political decentralization. We also include indicators for whether the regime is *Presidential* or *Semi-Presidential* (parliamentary is the excluded category) since regime type may

¹⁰ Coding reforms that occur only within a regime is conservative but allows us to ensure we are not miscounting changes made by an outgoing regime as instituted by a new regime. However, the main results are consistent if we instead code changes that occur across regimes (this alternative also significantly increases the sample size).

¹¹ As an empirical matter, our approach does not preclude the possibility that electoral rules exhibit path dependent tendencies and change rarely. Indeed, our data indicate that change is rare. This should not bias results toward the selection of one electoral system or another, but simply reduce the likelihood of any change.

¹² A system dropped from our data due to a change to a fully proportional system could re-enter our data if it was again changed back to a mixed or majoritarian system. Only Cameroon changes to a fully proportional system, to a non-PR system, and then back to a fully proportional system, but the results are robust if Cameroon is excluded.

¹³ The results hold when coding a *New Party* as one less than five, ten, fifteen, or twenty years old.

Table 1
Association between age of regime party and changes towards PR.

		New Party		Total
		0	1	
Change Towards PR	0	201	44	245
		93.93%	77.19%	90.41%
	1	13	13	26
		6.07%	22.81%	9.59%
Total		214	57	271
		100%	100%	100%

Each cell reports the number of observations and column percentages.

affect the leader’s ability to institute reforms. We control for whether the election is the *First Multiparty Election* after a period of single-party rule since a period of single-party rule can affect party institutionalization and the ability of the leader to change the electoral system.¹⁴ To account for the possible regional diffusion of institutions, we include regional dummies. In some models, we also control for the regime’s performance in the previous election with *Previous Seat Share* since poor performance against the opposition may push leaders towards maintaining majoritarianism.¹⁵ Similarly, we also present a model with the effective number of parties in the previous election (*Previous ENP*), since a desire to divide the opposition also pushes autocrats to institute PR.¹⁶

Table 1 shows how changes towards PR are distributed across our binary indicator of party age, conditional on the previous election not using a fully proportional system. When the party is less than ten years old, 23% of these cases switched towards PR. When the party is more than ten years old, only 6% of cases did.

Table 2 shows the effect of the (dichotomized) age of the regime party on the probability of an electoral reform towards PR. For ease of interpretation, linear probability models are presented, but the results are robust to using logistic regression. In all models, standard errors are clustered by country since observations are not independent within each country.

Consistent with our theory, Table 2 shows that regimes with parties less than ten years old are between 17% and 24% more likely than regimes with older parties to increase the proportionality of their electoral systems. With nascent, weak party institutions that cannot fully constrain cadres, autocrats are more likely to use rule changes towards PR as a tool to manage them. In the appendix, we present additional results from Markov Transition models which also confirm the importance of the party’s age in determining the switch to proportionality. When elites are more powerful vis-à-vis the dictator, the dictator is more likely to manipulate rules out of concern for managing his coalition.

We also examine the relationship between the age of the regime party and changes toward majoritarianism (see appendix). There are only nine changes toward majoritarianism, which makes statistical analysis difficult. However, the pattern in those cases is strongly suggestive of the arguments we advance. Of the nine changes towards majoritarianism in our data, eight occurred under parties that were over 10 years old. If we regress *Change Towards Majoritarianism* on *New Party* (excluding cases in which the previous electoral system is already majoritarian), the coefficients are not statistically significant, but if anything, the direction suggests that reforms towards majoritarianism

¹⁴ In the appendix, we also explore models that 1) control for the first two multiparty elections, 2) control for the first three multiparty elections, and 3) drop the first multiparty elections from the analysis. All results are robust.

¹⁵ We use *Previous Seat Share*, rather than previous vote share due to the difficulty of finding vote totals in historical autocratic regimes which significantly decreases sample size.

¹⁶ Regional and former British colony indicators come from Cheibub et al. (2010) and our own coding. Unless otherwise noted, the remaining data is our own coding based on secondary sources.

Table 2
The effect of party age on the probability of a change towards PR.

	Dependent variable: <i>Change Towards PR</i>			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>New Party</i>	0.167** (0.063)	0.200*** (0.064)	0.236*** (0.070)	0.181** (0.078)
<i>Former British Colony</i>		0.050 (0.046)	-0.043 (0.052)	-0.034 (0.048)
<i>Presidential</i>		-0.006 (0.045)	-0.009 (0.050)	0.025 (0.046)
<i>Semi-Presidential</i>		0.095 (0.060)	0.124* (0.063)	0.121** (0.049)
<i>First Multiparty Election</i>		0.149 (0.104)	0.211* (0.123)	0.169 (0.129)
<i>Americas</i>		0.047 (0.056)	0.043 (0.049)	0.062 (0.059)
<i>Asia</i>		-0.083* (0.048)	-0.063 (0.042)	-0.023 (0.038)
<i>Europe</i>		-0.019 (0.082)	0.080 (0.120)	0.024 (0.113)
<i>Oceania</i>		-0.058 (0.038)	-0.062 (0.040)	-0.058* (0.030)
<i>Previous Seat Share</i>			-0.0002 (0.001)	
<i>Previous ENP</i>				-0.004 (0.006)
Constant	0.061*** (0.014)	0.075 (0.060)	0.079 (0.083)	0.044 (0.056)
Observations	271	271	242	218
Clusters	69	69	66	59
R ²	0.0536	0.1111	0.1480	0.0858

Notes: All models are linear probability models. Standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. Models exclude observations with a fully proportional electoral system in the previous election. In models with controls the excluded categories are Africa and parliamentary regimes. *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

are less likely with new parties, consistent with our theory. Given the sparse number of cases, these results should be interpreted with caution, but they imply that our main results on changes toward PR are not due to the fact that any reforms (towards proportionality or majoritarianism) are more likely with new parties.

4. Ensuring performance and loyalty: the case of Russia

Given that our purpose is to probe deeper into an empirical pattern that we uncover in the cross-national analysis, we choose Russia as a case that evinces the predicted relationship between independent and dependent variables (Gerring 2007). The case illustrates how when regime leaders confronted acute problems of elite control, they changed the electoral system to PR. We also use data at the candidate-level to see how PR enabled the Kremlin to select United Russia candidates who would win at the polls, but not create problems later.

4.1. Managing an unruly coalition

At a time of high political uncertainty, President Yeltsin had hedged his bets and decreed the use of a non-compensatory mixed electoral system in October 1993. Half of the 450 Duma members were elected by party list under PR while the other half were elected through SMDP. Duma members later voted to retain the system in the interests of preserving their individual reelection prospects (Remington and Smith 1996). Consequently, this system was used for four Duma elections in

1993, 1995, 1999, and 2003.

During this period, both opposition and pro-government forces within the Duma were highly fragmented. The Communist Party constituted the main opposition and made its strongest showing in 1995 with 35% of the seats, only to see this steadily diminish to 12% by 2003. Between 1993 and 2002, the pro-government side of the chamber also was fractionalized, forcing the Kremlin to rely on shifting coalitions of small parties and amorphous factions of independent deputies to pass its legislative initiatives. Although Yeltsin sympathizers constituted a majority in the chamber, corralling these deputies created enormous headaches for the Kremlin. Ad hoc bargaining and unpredictable log rolls were necessary features of the Kremlin’s legislative strategy.

SMDP deputies were particularly difficult to control. Russian SMDP deputies defected from the position of their parliamentary group at higher rates than their party-list counterparts (Kunicova and Remington 2008; Thames 2005). SMDP deputies developed personal votes such that their nomination and reelection did not depend on being in the good graces of party leaders. Moreover, many, if not most, were controlled by powerful financial-industrial groups (FIGs) and governors’ political machines. As Hale (2006) argues, these regional political machines and FIGs supplied SMDP candidates with all the resources and branding they needed to secure reelection. With the support of these “party substitutes” many SMDP deputies felt little need to join a party’s legislative faction and those that did join were not beholden to party leaders. The fragmentation of the pro-presidential camp also created electoral problems. Since nominations were not centrally controlled, Yeltsin sympathizers often found themselves in competition with each other. Such coordination failures led pro-regime forces to lose races they otherwise would have won.

The emergence of a new, pro-presidential coalition, United Russia, did not immediately solve the problem. This coalition was a merger between the existing pro-presidential party, Unity, and a centrist party, Fatherland-All Russia (OVR). Members of Unity voted with the President almost 90% of the time, but the Kremlin still had to bargain on key votes with independent deputies and factions of undependable SMDP deputies. Russia’s Regions, for instance, a centrist coalition of SMDP deputies, voted with Putin just 70% of the time (Remington 2006).

Buoyed by a surging economy and Putin’s popularity, United Russia (UR) turned into a political party and won 223 seats, just short of a majority, in 2003. It attracted a large number of independents, giving it a constitutional majority. Yet over a quarter of United Russia’s faction had been elected as independents and 61% were SMDP deputies, many of whom were clients of powerful and unruly regional governors. Indeed, although party unity within United Russia was high, instances of defiance came almost exclusively from SMDP deputies. Barely a year old, the institutional capacity of United Russia was limited (Reuter 2017). Thus, the Kremlin had ample reason to worry that the coalition could unravel, especially if oil prices and Putin’s popularity declined.

4.2. The move to PR

In this setting, the Kremlin decided to replace the Duma’s mixed electoral system with a fully proportional one. The new electoral law, passed in 2005, stipulated that all 450 members would be elected on closed-party lists in a single nationwide district. As part of a broader set of centralizing reforms, the obvious goal of the electoral reform was maximizing control over deputies (Moraski 2007; Remington 2006). As one advisor to Vladislav Surkov — deputy head of the presidential administration and the reform’s chief architect — later wrote: “The transition to a proportional system was conceived as a way to weaken

regional leaders and strengthen the party system” (Ivanov 2008: 126).

It is also clear that the goal was not seat maximization. Monte Carlo simulations in Smyth et al. (2007) show that UR stood to gain fewer seats under PR than it would under a mixed system. The simulations also demonstrate that it was much easier to predict the total number of seats that UR would win under a PR system. As Smyth et al. conclude, the Kremlin was trading “seats for certainty” (2007: 130).

Even prior to the rule change, United Russia achieved a high degree of party cohesion among deputies elected by PR and SMDP. Yet their loyalty was due to Putin’s high popularity (Remington 2006). Concerned about a system so dependent on the charisma and reputation of one person, party leaders saw the change to PR as a way to put the party on a firmer footing in both the electoral and legislative arenas.¹⁷ In 2002, Surkov laid out this case at a meeting of UR leaders: “We need to look to 2008; we will survive until then somehow ... The president may leave (we will not stop him) and then what will happen? Some extreme left or extreme right president may come to power ... We could make a mistake and not win. We can’t just be on artificial respiration and an I.V. all the time.”¹⁸

5. Having the cake and eating it too: construction of the 2007 United Russia party lists

The switch to PR provides autocrats with more control, but it is also a way to address the performance-loyalty dilemma. Because control over the nomination process under PR helps to ensure loyalty, autocrats can focus on selecting candidates who have the resources to help the regime win elections. This is our candidate selection hypothesis, which we test using Russia — after the switch to PR in 2005 — by examining the construction of the UR party lists for the 2007 Duma election.

With future legislative loyalty ensured, the Kremlin could focus on constructing electoral lists that would attract the most votes. Under Russia’s PR system, votes are allocated to parties proportionally in one, nationwide district, but, in addition to fielding a national list that appears on every ballot, parties are obliged to divide their party list into regional groups (for the 2007 elections, there were 80).¹⁹ Although voters can cast only one party-level vote (i.e., they are not allowed to make preference votes for candidates as in open-list systems), the ballots contain the list of candidates for each party’s respective regional group.

Under such a system, United Russia had an incentive to fill their regional lists with candidates who could help the party win. And, on average, the most desirable candidates were the former SMDP deputies. SMDP deputies had experience running in — often very competitive — elections. Additionally, they had name recognition and political connections in their districts. The Kremlin had always wanted this type of candidate on its lists but often had difficulty recruiting them. After all,

¹⁷ Although not analyzed here, recent electoral reforms in Russia are also consistent with our framework. In 2014, the Kremlin changed the electoral system back to a mixed system. By this time, UR was well-established and the independent power bases of regional elites had been eliminated, allowing the Kremlin to focus on seat maximization — a goal it was acutely focused on after suffering a jarring dip in popularity following the 2011–12 protest wave. The regime’s popularity surged after the annexation of Crimea, but cratered again in summer 2018, following an unpopular pension reform. In this setting, the regime has tested the idea of reducing the number of PR seats still further (see “Vlast’ testiruyet noviy pravila vyborov d Gosdumu 2021” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. February 6, 2019). In July 2019, rumors emerged that the Kremlin was considering reducing the share of PR seats in the next Stata Duma to 25% (see “Putin Seeks to Lock in Parliament Control” *Bloomberg*. July 12, 2019).

¹⁸ Quoted in “Odnokii Paravoz” *Ekspert*, February 25, 2002.

¹⁹ The exact number and geographic composition of these groups is determined by the parties themselves. After seats are allocated to parties in the national district, parties then divvy their national seat total among these regional lists in proportion to the number of votes received by the party in each regional group.

such deputies had traditionally preferred to retain their autonomy and run their own races. Even if they did join the regime party, the Kremlin and party leaders worried about their loyalty, as discussed previously. After the rule change, however, such autonomy was no longer an option. Thus, we argue that United Russia would seek to use this opportunity to bring more of these electorally strong candidates into its fold. Strong candidates were more likely to win seats, maintaining the ruling party’s electoral and legislative dominance, which, in turn, would help keep these candidates within UR’s fold. Consequently, we hypothesize that the Kremlin would not only seek to place incumbents on its 2007 list, but that it would prioritize placing SMDP incumbents on its list.

To explore this part of our argument, we utilize a dataset of all United Russia members who ran for seats in either the 2003 or 2007 Duma elections. We are able to identify whether the 2003 candidates ran as SMDP or PR candidates and every individual’s placement on the 2007 federal and regional PR lists. We demonstrate that when it made the rule change to closed-list PR, the Kremlin was able to shape its 2007 PR lists to prioritize candidates who had shown their ability to win. Specifically, we show three results consistent with our argument.

Winners’ inclusion result: For the 2007 lists, the Kremlin aimed to include the 2003 winners (SMDP or PR) as opposed to 2003 losers.

Winners’ placement result: The Kremlin placed the 2003 winners on the top part of the lists (in comparison to new entrants).

SMDP placement result: Among the 2003 SMDP candidates, vote share was positively correlated with higher placement.

We discuss, in turn, these results.

5.1. Winners’ inclusion result

The Kremlin should aim to include those who won in 2003 (whether through SMDP or PR) on their 2007 PR list at higher rates than candidates who lost their 2003 races. Moreover, among 2003 winners, SMDP candidates should be more likely to be included on the 2007 list than PR candidates given their name recognition and electoral resources. To test these implications, our dependent variable is a dichotomous indicator, *PR List 2007*, which is one if the individual is included in UR’s 2007 party list and is zero otherwise.

Using constituency-level electoral results and UR’s electoral list, we construct a dichotomous variable, *Ran SMDP 2003*, which is one if the UR member ran under SMDP and zero if the individual ran under PR in 2003.²⁰ Using Reuter’s (2016) Database of Russian Political Elites, we identify which of these individuals obtained seats in the Duma after the election. Our binary variable, *Won 2003*, is one if the UR candidate obtained a seat in the Duma after the election and zero otherwise. By interacting these two variables, we can compare the prospects of inclusion on the 2007 PR list across four groups of 2003 candidates: SMDP winners, SMDP losers, PR winners, and PR losers.

Other factors affect both the likelihood an individual is included on the 2007 list and the likelihood they won in 2003, for which we include several controls. We account for past electoral success (other than in the 2003 Duma elections) by including dichotomous indicators for the individual’s election to office at the federal, regional, or local levels ever before (*Elected in Past*) or just prior to the 2003 election (*Elected Recently*). In addition, the Kremlin may have felt a need to coopt candidates with ties to the business community given their deep pockets and frequency of participation (Gehlbach et al., 2010; Szakonyi 2018). So, we include dichotomous indicators for whether the individual has a background in business (*Business*) or was on the board of directors for a large firm (*Board*) just prior to the election. Finally, we include a proxy for whether an individual was the client of a governor. We code those

²⁰ Constituency-level electoral results are from Carr (n.d.) and United Russia’s 2003 PR lists are from the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation (n.d.). Several candidates ran for both SMDP and PR seats in 2003; we treat them as SMDP candidates.

Table 3
Effect of winning in 2003 and candidacy type on inclusion on the 2007 party list.

	Dependent variable: PR List 2007				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Won 2003</i>	0.410*** (0.051)	0.389*** (0.052)	0.316*** (0.061)		
<i>Ran SMDP 2003</i>		0.099* (0.050)	-0.091 (0.099)	0.198*** (0.062)	0.193*** (0.062)
<i>Won 2003*<i>Ran SMDP</i></i>			0.255** (0.115)		
<i>Elected in Past</i>				-0.154** (0.062)	
<i>Elected Recently</i>					-0.136** (0.061)
<i>Business</i>				-0.096 (0.065)	-0.105 (0.065)
<i>Board</i>				0.116 (0.081)	0.121 (0.081)
<i>Governor Client</i>				-0.161* (0.086)	-0.185** (0.086)
Constant	0.213*** (0.042)	0.191*** (0.043)	0.234*** (0.047)	0.674*** (0.060)	0.658*** (0.058)
Observations	374	374	374	252	252
R ²	0.1478	0.1565	0.1677	0.0763	0.0720

Notes: All models are linear probability models. Standard errors in parentheses. Models 4 and 5 exclude losing 2003 candidates. *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

deputies who worked in the regional administration of a governor as *Governor Clients*.

Table 3 shows the effect of winning in 2003 and of candidacy type on inclusion on the 2007 party list. We report linear probability models for ease of interpretation but results from logistic regressions are substantively similar. The results shown here include only individuals who were members of UR at the time of the 2003 election, but the results are robust to including people who switched to UR during the Fourth Duma (2003–2007).

The results from columns 1–3 show that having proven to be a winner in 2003 — by PR or SMDP — is clearly important for inclusion on the 2007 list. The results from the interaction model in column 3 show

Table 4
Effect of winning in 2003 and candidacy type on placement on the 2007 party list.

	Dependent variable:					
	<i>Top Half Placement</i>			<i>Top Third Placement</i>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Won 2003</i>	0.411*** (0.046)		0.265** (0.134)	0.344*** (0.042)		0.360*** (0.123)
<i>Ran SMDP 2003</i>		0.406*** (0.058)	0.155 (0.140)		0.332*** (0.053)	-0.011 (0.128)
<i>Ran PR 2003</i>		0.384*** (0.059)	0.151 (0.132)		0.292*** (0.055)	-0.025 (0.121)
Constant	0.316*** (0.026)	0.310*** (0.026)	0.310*** (0.026)	0.173*** (0.023)	0.174*** (0.024)	0.174*** (0.024)
Observations	466	466	466	466	466	466
R ²	0.1460	0.1414	0.1485	0.1252	0.1091	0.1253

Notes: All models are linear probability models. Standard errors in parentheses. All models include only those who ran in 2007 and exclude all locomotives. For models 2, 3, 5, and 6 the excluded category is new entrants in 2007. *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

that amongst PR candidates, winning in 2003 is associated with an increased likelihood of being included on the 2007 list of 31.6%. For SMDP candidates, winning a seat in 2003 is associated with a 57.1% (31.6 + 25.5) increase in the likelihood of being included on the 2007 list.

Among the 2003 winners, competing under SMDP is also correlated with an increased likelihood of inclusion on the list for the next election. Column 3 shows that winning SMDP candidates are substantially more likely to be included on the 2007 PR list than winning 2003 PR candidates — amongst winners, running in an SMDP race corresponds to an increase in the likelihood of appearing on the 2007 PR list of 16.4% (-9.1 + 25.5). Moreover, the results from columns 4 and 5 (comparing 2003 SMDP winners to 2003 PR winners) confirm that 2003 SMDP winners are more likely to be included on the 2007 PR list than 2003 PR winners, even controlling for other factors that may influence candidate selection for the Kremlin.²¹ Overall, these results demonstrate that 2003 winners (and particularly, SMDP winners) were clearly being singled out for inclusion on the 2007 party lists.

5.2. Winners' placement result

The Kremlin should aim, not only to include 2003 winners on the list for the subsequent election, but also to place these proven winners higher on the list than new entrants. The 2007 party list was composed of the federal list and regional lists that vary in size from 4 to 27 positions. We construct two dependent variables for this analysis: *Top Half Placement* is coded one if the candidate was ranked in the top half of his or her respective regional list and zero otherwise, while *Top Third Placement* is an analogous indicator for whether the candidate was included in the top third of the regional list. In all models, we include only those who ran in 2007. We also exclude *paravozy*, or “locomotives”: prominent officials, celebrities, and politicians placed at the top of PR lists to attract voter support for the party even though these candidates have no intention of taking seats. Any list ranking of candidates for our analysis should omit these “locomotives” since they are not real candidates to become deputies. We identify 89 of them and omit them when constructing our indicators of rank.²²

Table 4 shows the effect of winning in 2003 on placement on the

²¹ The control variables included in models 4 and 5 are only available for those who won in 2003, so *Won 2003* and the interaction term are excluded.

²² We exclude all locomotives (who could have appeared anywhere in the top three spots of a regional list) in the results shown here, but the results are similar if we exclude only locomotives in the top spot of the regional lists (there were 70 such individuals), which is a proxy for coding only governors as locomotives.

Table 5
Effect of 2003 candidacy type and outcome on placement on the 2007 party list.

	Dependent Variable:	
	<i>Top Half Placement</i>	<i>Top Third Placement</i>
	(1)	(2)
<i>SMDP Winner 2003</i>	0.623*** (0.182)	0.758*** (0.162)
<i>SMDP Loser 2003</i>	0.353* (0.191)	0.194 (0.170)
<i>PR Winner 2003</i>	0.388*** (0.061)	0.326*** (0.055)
<i>PR Loser 2003</i>	-0.018 (0.156)	-0.086 (0.139)
Constant	0.351*** (0.024)	0.197*** (0.022)
Observations	466	466
R ²	0.1404	0.1608

Notes: All models are linear probability models. Standard errors in parentheses. All models include only those who ran in 2007 and exclude all locomotives. The excluded category is 2007 new entrant. *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

2007 party lists. Here, the primary variable of interest is *Won 2003*, which is one if the individual won a seat in 2003 and zero otherwise. For new entrants, this variable is zero since they did not run in 2003. We also include indicators for the type of 2003 candidacy: *Ran SMDP 2003* is one if the individual ran for a constituency seat in 2003 and zero otherwise, while *Ran PR 2003* is one if the individual ran on the 2003 PR list. For the models that include these 2003 candidacy-type variables, the excluded category is new entrants in 2007.

The results in Table 4 demonstrate that winning in 2003 is correlated with a higher likelihood of placement in the top half or top third of the 2007 list, even controlling for candidacy type. We further explore these results in Table 5. Here, we create indicators for every type of candidate on the 2007 lists. *SMDP Winner 2003* is one if the individual ran in a constituency seat in 2003 and won and is zero otherwise, while *SMDP Loser 2003*, is one if the individual ran in a constituency seat in 2003 and lost. *PR Winner 2003* and *PR Loser 2003* are coded analogously for those

Table 6
Effect of 2003 SMDP vote share on placement on the 2007 party list.

	Dependent variable:					
	<i>Top Half Placement</i>			<i>Top Third Placement</i>		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
<i>Vote Share 2003</i>	0.008** (0.003)	0.008** (0.003)	0.008* (0.004)	0.010*** (0.004)	0.010** (0.004)	0.013*** (0.004)
<i>Won 2003</i>		-0.168 (0.226)	-0.169 (0.229)		0.085 (0.264)	0.112 (0.262)
<i># Other Candidates</i>			-0.011 (0.020)			0.042* (0.022)
<i>Standardized # Voters</i>			0.023 (0.062)			0.039 (0.071)
Constant	0.452*** (0.141)	0.576** (0.218)	0.685** (0.321)	0.111 (0.165)	0.048 (0.256)	-0.455 (0.368)
Observations	73	73	73	73	73	73
R ²	0.0739	0.0812	0.0883	0.0957	0.0970	0.1420

Notes: All models are linear probability models. Standard errors in parentheses. All models include only those who ran in 2007 and exclude all locomotives. *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01.

who ran on the PR list in 2003. Thus, in these models, the excluded category is 2007 new entrant.

Again, the results in Table 5 confirm that winning in 2003 is associated with a higher likelihood of favorable placement on the 2007 list relative to new entrants. However, we also see that those who won a constituency seat in 2003 are more likely than those who won a PR seat in 2003 to be included in the top half or top third of the list.

5.3. SMDP placement result

Higher vote shares in the 2003 SMDP races should be associated with higher placement on the 2007 list. For this analysis, we therefore use the same dependent variables (*Top Half Placement* and *Top Third Placement*) from the previous analyses. Our main independent variable of interest is *Vote Share 2003*. However, the effect of vote share may be contingent on several other factors. Most obviously, whether a candidate won in 2003 is related to both vote share and placement on the 2007 list. Therefore, we include an indicator for whether the individual won their constituency race, *Won 2003*. Additionally, the effect of vote share on placement could be contingent on how competitive the constituency race was in 2003. Thus, we include a control for the number of other candidates that an individual faced in 2003 (*# Other Candidates*). Finally, we include a control that captures the importance of the constituency in which a candidate ran — the number of voters in that constituency, standardized (*Standardized # Voters*).

The results are shown in Table 6. Once again, we use linear probability models for ease of interpretation and exclude all “locomotives”, but the results are similar using logistic regression or excluding only the “locomotives” in the top spot on the regional lists. Additionally, we limit the sample to those who ran for a constituency seat in 2003 and on the PR list in 2007.

Table 6 shows that, consistent with our theory, vote share in the 2003 SMDP races is positively correlated with placement in the top half or top third of the 2007 list across all specifications. A 1% increase in vote share is associated with an increase in the likelihood of favorable placement between 0.8% and 1.3%. Given that vote share ranges from

2.8% to 82.5%, favorable placement for some candidates was near certainty.

6. Conclusion

Legislative elections require autocrats to juggle several tasks. They must maximize their seat share, for which a majoritarian electoral system may be useful. But they also must build and manage a dependable coalition of party members who can win elections — with resources, name recognition, and effort — yet still be loyal to the executive's legislative agenda once they win office. Proportional systems are better suited to accomplishing this goal. Under what conditions will autocrats be focused on the problem of control over their coalition and thus choose PR? We argue that when facing unruly elites, leaders will use whatever means are at their disposal to bring discipline to their coalition. This makes PR a more likely choice when the regime party is new and thus when elite strength vis-à-vis the leader is high.

Proportional systems not only help in managing party members, but they also allow leaders to evade loyalty-performance trade-offs among their agents. Centralized control over the nomination process ensures loyalty among legislative party members, enabling leaders to focus on recruiting candidates who can best help them win elections. PR is useful in building a strong regime party with members who are capable of winning elections, but still legislatively compliant.

Cross-national comparisons and a closer look at the case of Russia support these arguments. But the 2005 switch to a proportional system in Russia also shows that the choice of electoral systems is one among several institutional strategies within an autocrat's arsenal to tame the power of elites within his coalition. The very act of building a regime party was designed to constrain elites, as was the decision to change the selection of regional governors from election to appointment. While we have focused on the causes and effects of a specific rule, we recognize that institutions come in bundles, giving leaders an incentive to change many of them at one time. Nevertheless, we highlight this little-recognized motive for adopting PR and the fact that parchment rules still play an important role in regimes where brute force governs politics.

In closing, it is important to note some limitations of our framework and scope conditions for the theory. Our theory applies best in settings where the central leadership of the regime has the ability to steer the selection of electoral rules. In settings where legislative elites have captured the state, the framework that we have supplied will have less relevance. One avenue for future research is an exploration of the bargaining process between autocrats and legislative elites in cases where the central leadership does not have the same ability to drive electoral rule selection as in our framework. Additionally, we have focused on the politics of electoral rule change in electoral autocracies in an attempt to contribute to our understanding of these particular regimes, but the basic logic of the argument has some applicability in democracies. Democratic leaders may prefer to govern with a more disciplined political party, but they often do not have the same level of control over rule selection as their autocratic counterparts. Their capability of implementing a similar strategy is another avenue for future research.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102475>.

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