Do Authoritarian Elections Help the Poor? Evidence from Russian Cities

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Do local elections under autocracy help the poor? We argue that local appointees in electoral authoritarian regimes have political incentives that undermine public service provision; regime leaders' preoccupation with national electoral control encourages them to overlook local governance problems if subnational officials can still deliver requisite votes in national elections. Using geographic and temporal variation across Russian cities (2002–12) in the elimination of mayoral elections, we investigate how mayoral appointments affect the maintenance of aging housing infrastructure. We find that, compared to elected mayors, appointed mayors allow more of their Soviet-era housing stock to become dilapidated and unsafe. Moreover, bad housing increases more in cities where appointees deliver high vote shares to the ruling party in national elections. Thus, while local elections under authoritarianism can improve local governance, the holding of semi-competitive national elections can actually undermine incentives for local appointees to provide public services.

Electoral incentives are central to many theories of government responsiveness to the poor. Much of this research is at the regime level, with scholars debating vigorously about whether democracies do a better job than autocracies at providing public goods to the poor (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Keefer and Khemani 2005; Ross 2006; Sen 1999). However, many of the things most needed to improve the lives of poor people—clean water, transportation, safe neighborhoods, affordable housing, basic education, and health care—are provided by local governments. Consequently, the provision of public services that affect the poor may depend as much on local leaders' political incentives as on national regime type.

In this paper, we examine how the career incentives of local officials in electoral authoritarian regimes affect pro-poor policies. In contrast to previous literature, we theorize the incentives of both appointed and elected officials. Existing research on the topic, which has been studied predominantly in democratic contexts, has focused intensively on whether elected local officials have incentives to respond to poor voters. At the same time, the literature tends to gloss over appointed leaders, as if the absence of elections implies a lack of political incentives that affect policy choices. Yet, we know local appointees have reappointment and promotion goals that incentivize them to pursue policies that will please those who appoint them (i.e., central leaders). Are poor citizens under electoral autocracy better served by elected local officials or by appointed ones?

We argue that local appointees in an electoral authoritarian regime have political incentives that undermine public service provision. In electoral autocracies, regime leaders place great emphasis on winning national elections and winning them handily. This leads them to value subnational officials who can deliver votes for the ruling party in national elections. Since national election campaigns focus on a host of issues aside from local public goods—for example, evaluations of the national leader, foreign affairs, the national economy, and so forth—local

appointees whose primary task is mobilizing votes in national elections will be less responsive to local conditions than locally elected officials who are well incentivized to respond to local concerns. Moreover, as local appointees display more success in mobilizing votes for the regime in national elections, central leaders are even more likely to overlook poor local governance. Thus, our two central claims are that (1) local elections under autocracy improve local governance and (2) in electoral autocracies, the need to deliver votes in national elections undermines local appointees' incentives to promote good governance.

To test these claims, we investigate how replacing mayoral elections with mayoral appointments in Russian cities has affected the condition of low-quality housing that is maintained by local governments. Compared to government spending measures, which may not translate into tangible development outcomes, or mortality and educational indicators, which are codetermined by many factors aside from government policy, housing maintenance in Russian cities represents a specific pro-poor outcome that is directly linked to local government policy efforts. Russian municipal governments are responsible for ensuring that preexisting apartment buildings meet certain minimum standards of quality and safety. When buildings fall below this standard, municipal governments are required to resettle residents into acceptable alternative housing. However, in practice, cities vary in the extent to which they achieve this. Importantly for our purposes, dilapidated apartment blocks in Russia are mostly occupied by low-income households.

Using geographic and temporal variation in the way Russian cities select their local executives (2002–12), we find that the amount of bad housing remains lower in cities that retain elected mayors compared to cities that switch to an appointment system. Consistent with our argument, we also find that appointees' ability to perform political services for the regime conditions their responsiveness to local needs: dilapidated housing increases more in cities where appointees can deliver high vote shares in national elections to the ruling party, United Russia (UR). This suggests that central leaders have been more willing to overlook bad housing outcomes in cities where appointees have successfully fulfilled regime leaders' core political goals.

Our study has several implications for the literature. First, it helps establish the conditions that need to be in place in order for local elections to improve public goods provision. The conventional wisdom treats local elections as an unalloyed good because electoral accountability creates incentives for public goods provision. We are sympathetic to this view, but our study highlights the fact that no comparison between elections and appointments is possible without consideration of appointees' career incentives. If their reappointment hinges on providing good governance, then elections may not outperform appoint-

ments. But if reappointment hinges on political service to the regime, then elections are likely to do a better job of ensuring the provision of local public goods.

Our study has a similar message for those who are skeptical that elections improve local governance. Some scholars argue that state capture, imperfect information, and resource imbalances can undermine local electoral accountability (e.g., Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006; Blanchard and Shleifer 2000). Our findings suggest that, compared to appointments, elections will only be worse for public service provision if appointees have sufficient incentives to pursue good governance.

The paper also has important implications for the study of autocracy. Consistent with Miller (2015), we show that electoral accountability pressures help lead to better development outcomes under autocracy, despite the fact that electoral manipulation tends to blunt these pressures. Local elections under autocracy lead elected Russian mayors to do better at maintaining their cities' aging housing stock. But our study also highlights some unappreciated side effects of electoral competition under autocracy. When appointed subnational officials are primarily incentivized to help the ruling party dominate major elections, they can focus myopically on that goal. If these officials can deliver vote totals in national elections for the ruling party without making costly investments in local public goods, then this is what they will do. Scholars of authoritarian politics have identified different appointment criteria operating in different settings (Beazer 2015; Hassan 2017; Li and Zhou 2005; Reisinger and Moraski 2017; Reuter and Robertson 2012; Wallace 2016; Wang 2015). Our study shows how these appointment criteria can have meaningful consequences for everyday citizens. For example, studies find that the Chinese economy has benefited from the regime's practice of evaluating subnational officials on the basis of economic performance (Maskin, Qian, and Xu 2000; Xu 2011). This is consistent with the perspective we have offered here. As a nonelectoral regime, the Chinese Communist Party does not need to manage national elections to stay in power. This frees China's leaders to use governance as a primary criterion for evaluating local officials. By contrast, electoral autocracies such as Russia apply politicized appointment criteria because they need subnational officials to help them win semi-competitive elections. Our findings indicate that emphasizing this political service comes at a cost to local governance.

LOCAL ELECTIONS AND PRO-POOR POLICIES

In this paper, we examine how the elimination of local elections under autocracy affects public service provision for the poor. In trying to understand how elections affect the poor, social scientists have primarily focused on the national level.

Prominent arguments assert that electoral incentives make the poor in democracies better off because democratic leaders must satisfy a wide range of supporters, not just a powerful economic elite (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003; Meltzer and Richard 1981; Sen 1999). Despite strong theoretical expectations, the empirical evidence is mixed. Some studies find that democracies spend more on education and health care (Brown and Hunter 2004; Stasavage 2005) and perform better on indicators of human development (Brown and Mobarak 2009; Lake and Baum 2001), but others find no such relationships (McGuire 2006; Ross 2006).

As an alternative to studying regime effects, we study changes in how local-level leaders are selected. This allows us to hold country-level factors constant and concentrate on the presence or absence of elections—the key feature of democracy that is supposed to help the poor. It has long been argued that local elections inform leaders about local conditions and that reelection concerns make locally elected governments more responsive to citizens, including the less affluent (de Tocqueville 1835; Treisman 2011). Others, however, are more skeptical about local elections' supposed benefits for social welfare.[1] In particular, the decentralization literature warns against the danger of state capture by local elites. According to these concerns, rent-seeking elites and interest groups can obtain outsized influence over local elected officials, leading them to divert resources away from public goods in return for reelection support. The resulting corruption and inefficiency threaten the quality of local public services (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006; Rose-Ackerman 1999).

Despite the topic's clear importance, relatively few studies provide empirical insights into political decentralization's effects on pro-poor policies.[2] Foster and Rosenzweig (2001) find that the presence of village elections in India increased the quality of roads, irrigation, and schools. Research in Indonesia, meanwhile, finds that introducing direct elections for district heads had no effect on investment in public infrastructure (Sjahrir, Kis-Katos, and Schulze 2014). Using survey data from 60 Chinese villages, Zhang et al (2004) find that introducing direct elections for village governments shifted the tax burden from individuals toward enterprises. Others have used larger surveys to demonstrate positive associations between direct

elections and investment in public goods (Luo et al. 2007). In a similar manner, we exploit institutional variation across both years and cities in Russia to test our argument about local officials' differing incentives to provide public services, but we do so in an electoral authoritarian context and focus more narrowly on policies that disproportionately affect the low-income strata.

ELECTORAL AUTOCRACY AND LOCAL LEADERS' INCENTIVES

Existing arguments about public service provision are lopsided, concentrating almost exclusively on elected leaders' incentives while glossing over appointees' incentives. In fact, most political economy models go no further than to note that appointees lack direct electoral incentives to respond to voters. What are the incentives facing nonelected officials? This is not an idle question, particularly in authoritarian regimes. To take one example, those who argue that locally elected officials are vulnerable to capture must also explain why unelected regime appointees would be more motivated to provide public services than elected-but-captured local officials. For the state capture argument to stand under autocracy, scholars also need to theorize about why nondemocratic central governments would incentivize their agents to promote local pro-poor policies.

To understand appointees' incentives, one must consider the criteria that central leaders use to appoint them. In electoral autocracies, winning elections by large margins is a core regime priority; even narrow electoral victories can embolden regime opponents and encourage elite defections. While elections may offer significant long-run benefits to autocrats, research shows that individual elections can be moments of severe vulnerability (Knutsen, Nygard, and Wig 2017; Robertson and Pop-Eleches 2015). Special care must be taken to address this systemic vulnerability. To maintain their electoral dominance, autocrats sometimes take drastic actions, such as repression and ballot-box fraud. However, regime leaders primarily use subtler means of disadvantaging the opposition: co-optation, bribery, media control, vote buying, voter intimidation, clientelism, and patronage spending (Levitsky and Way 2010; Magaloni 2008). Implementing these tasks effectively requires sustained coordination and support by state officials, even outside of election years.

In this regard, subnational officials are key to the regime's vote-mobilizing efforts. Subnational officials wield authority and influence over local elites and voters. They understand local conditions, and their connections are indispensable to maintaining local patron-client networks. In Russia, for example, subnational officials are the regime's primary vote brokers (Golosov 2011; Reuter 2013). These officials use a myriad

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1. Critics have identified several factors that inhibit the poor in democracies: information asymmetries (Keefer and Khemani 2005), disparities in resources (Bartels 2010; Ross 2006), institutionalized inequality (Bonica et al. 2013), and unequal participation (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016). Such concerns likely apply to local elections as they do to national elections.

2. Here we define political decentralization as giving local actors, particularly citizens, the ability to select their own local leaders. This is separate from the voluminous literature on the effects of administrative and fiscal decentralization, which we do not consider here.

of democratic and undemocratic tactics to win elections. Via their elite networks, they may facilitate clientelist mobilization and, sometimes, repression. They can put pressure on firms to mobilize their employees (Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi 2014). They may also use control over local media outlets to privilege regime candidates. Or, they may lend their authority and influence to the ruling party via endorsements and public appearances.[3] As a result, when regime leaders have the ability to appoint local leaders, they make delivering votes to the ruling party a fundamental duty. Research on electoral autocracies shows that appointed subnational officials who do well at mobilizing votes for the ruling party are more likely to be reappointed or promoted (Blaydes 2010; Reisinger and Moraski 2017; Reuter and Robertson 2012).

Given the regime's desire to enlist subnational officials' help in maintaining electoral dominance, the method of selecting local leaders has consequences for public service provision. Because appointed leaders have incentives to prioritize their principals' goals, political centralization encourages local leaders to concentrate their efforts on helping the regime win votes in national elections. In the process, local public services can become neglected.

To see this, one can contrast the political incentives of locally elected mayors with those of appointees who are evaluated on their ability to mobilize votes in national elections. Recent literature shows that, despite electoral manipulation, there is some electoral accountability in competitive authoritarian elections (Magaloni 2008; Miller 2015). Thus, to a degree, elected regime officials have some career incentives to placate voters. This means that, in competitive authoritarian regimes, locally elected executives must exert some effort to please voters in local elections, and voters in local elections are primarily concerned with the performance of local governments.

By contrast, appointees do not need to please voters in local elections. To the extent that local appointees must please voters to stay in office, it is in national elections, where they are charged with mobilizing votes for the ruling party.[4] This is a key distinction. Individual voters in national elections care not just about local public goods but also about other national issues (e.g., national economy, national security, foreign affairs, federal policy, president's conduct, etc.). Some voters in national elections may care exclusively about national issues,

while others may care about both national and local issues. The share of the electorate voting solely on the basis of local public goods, however, is much smaller in national elections than in local elections. It should come as no surprise, then, that national campaigns in federal countries focus more on national issues, while local campaigns focus on local issues (e.g., Atkeson and Partin 2001).

The predominance of national issues in national election campaigns undermines local appointees' incentives to provide public goods. In local elections, the marginal electoral return on effective public goods spending is high because voters in those elections care primarily about local governance, and elected mayors are well incentivized to invest in them. In national elections, however, the marginal electoral return on local public goods spending is much lower because voters do not vote on the basis of local governance or do so only in part.[5] Thus, for appointed local leaders, whose focus is delivering votes to the regime in national elections, the marginal electoral return on local public goods is lower, making them more likely than elected mayors to divert their time and resources to other uses, such as rent seeking.[6] Compared to appointees, locally elected mayors are deterred from such rent seeking, in part, because they receive a high electoral return on providing public goods. Consequently, we expect that, under electoral authoritarianism, local leaders who are elected will provide more public services than local leaders who are appointed.

Naturally, electoral autocrats may see value in local public service provision. Some regime goals, such as political stability, are easier to achieve when local leaders attend to citizens' needs, and bolstering pro-poor services might help the regime win more votes. But even if regimes want both vote mobilization and good local governance, not all agents have enough resources or expertise to be equally effective at both. Thus, rulers may often face a choice between appointing officials based on their political skills or their capacity for good governance. Given its importance in electoral authoritarian regimes, the capacity to mobilize votes will often win out. Myerson (2020) notes that local appointees may not be fired

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3. Numerous scholars have written about the operation of regional and local political machines in Russia. For a discussion of these machines at the municipal level, see Bychkova and Gel'man (2010), Gel'man and Ryzhenkov (2011), and Gilev et al. (2017).

4. This is their first priority. Regime leaders also want subnational officials to mobilize votes at lower levels (e.g., for city council, etc.), but the first priority is securing votes in national elections.

5. Indeed, as we show below, elected mayors are punished for poor housing outcomes in their own elections. By contrast, additional analyses in the appendix reveal that United Russia's vote share in Duma elections is unaffected by the state of local housing.

6. Appointee incentives may also depend on who is appointing. Where national officials directly appoint local leaders, voters may be more likely to punish the national government for local policy failures. By contrast, in Russia, where nationally appointed regional officials in turn appoint local officials, voters may be less likely to connect local issues to national elections. Instead, as Beazer and Reuter (2019) show, they may focus their ire on the regional authorities.

for poor governance if they offer other services that the ruler values even more. Likewise, we argue that electoral autocrats will be willing to overlook poor local governance when agents do a good job of achieving their first priority—delivering votes in major elections. And, if subnational officials can mobilize votes in national elections without devoting extensive resources to public services, then they will likely choose that easier path.

This reasoning suggests that the effects of political centralization on local pro-poor policies can depend on appointees' political service to the regime. As local appointees deliver more votes to satisfy the regime's electoral needs, they have even fewer career incentives to provide public services to citizens in need. Thus, we posit that appointees will be less likely to pursue pro-poor policies when they are performing well at mobilizing votes. Conversely, if appointees are failing to impress superiors on the most important reappointment criteria, they may need to exert extra effort to succeed in other areas. Thus, when appointees mobilize fewer votes, they must pay more attention to public service provision because they cannot afford to underperform on local governance criteria as well. We test these implications in the empirical analyses that follow.

SELECTION OF LOCAL EXECUTIVES IN RUSSIA

Russia offers a unique opportunity to study the consequences of local elections and appointments. Due to a wave of reforms we discuss below, the use of appointments varies across Russian cities: some mayors are directly elected while other mayors are appointed by regime officials. By analyzing subnational variation, we can study the effects of local elections on pro-poor policies while holding constant political and cultural factors that would be difficult to account for in a cross-national study of electoral authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, the number of cities holding mayoral elections has changed over time and within regions. We exploit this temporal and cross-sectional variation to investigate the impact of local elections on public service provision.[7]

By Russian law, city councils can determine how their municipality's chief executive is selected. Before the 2000s, roughly 90% of Russia's large cities elected their mayors directly. Starting in the mid-2000s, some cities began replacing direct mayoral elections with a system of indirect elections that were de facto appointments. Under the appointment model, candidates were chosen by a commission of officials from the city legislature and the regional administration.[8] The city legislature then selected from that list of candidates. This trend toward mayoral appointments continued steadily until, by 2012, roughly half of Russia's large cities had appointed mayors.

Despite city councils' formal role in their municipal governance model, all observers interpret the shift to appointed mayors as part of Vladimir Putin's efforts to recentralize political authority. The cancellation of local elections closely tracks other Kremlin efforts to increase the federal center's power. Throughout the 2000s, high oil prices and Putin's popularity tipped the balance of resources decidedly in the center's favor, allowing the Kremlin to further weaken regional elites' power through de jure institutional reforms. For example, between 2004 and 2012, Russia's regional governors were appointed by the president (subject to confirmation by the regional legislature). Accordingly, governors became the Kremlin's agents with the primary task of managing regional politics. Studies find that their reappointment hinged on their ability to mobilize votes for United Russia (Reisinger and Moraski 2013; Reuter and Robertson 2012)

During this time period, United Russia came to dominate national and subnational politics. By 2012, 86% of city councils in large cities had UR majorities (Reuter et al. 2016). Within this context, governors began working through UR factions in city councils, pressing deputies into canceling mayoral elections.[9] Indeed, most qualitative and press accounts suggest that governors and/or regional UR branches typically initiated the cancellation process and that when regional authorities tried to remove local elections, they usually succeeded. Governors then pressured municipal deputies—either informally or via the regional UR branch—to ensure that loyal candidates were selected (Avdonin 2015). Thus, even though local legislatures formally select city managers, both scholars and observers treat these city managers as effectively appointed by the regional administration (see Gel'man and Lankina 2008; Kynev 2010).

We note that leaders' discretion over when and where to cancel elections requires researchers to exercise extra caution. In our investigations, we adopt a variety of empirical approaches to deal with this specific issue. We find no evidence that the decision to abandon mayoral elections depended on local governance conditions. We also demonstrate that our results hold when controlling for remaining plausible explanations for local elections' removal. These extra analyses

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7. During the period of study, neither local governments' policy responsibilities nor levels of fiscal centralization changed significantly. Subnational governments did lose significant tax autonomy during this period, but that happened on a national scale, not city by city.

8. Initially, commissions were two-thirds local legislative delegates and one-third regional delegates. Around 2014, this composition shifted to 50% from each.

9. See, e.g., Gel'man and Lankina (2008), Makarkin (2007), and Ross (2008). See also Kynev (2010) and Petrov (2010).

appear later in the paper's penultimate section, which deals exclusively with concerns about potential endogeneity and the selection of cities into the appointment model.

How plausible is the notion that political centralization in Russia may have changed local public service provision? Evidence from a 2009 sociological survey of Russian households provides some suggestive support for this idea. Respondents were asked to identify concerns about their housing conditions and their neighborhood that relate directly to services under the local administration's purview. Figure 1 reveals a telling schism: dissatisfaction with public services is significantly higher among Russian households in cities with appointed mayors than in cities with elected mayors. Respondents with appointed mayors are more likely to complain about a variety of conditions, from building maintenance, utilities delivery, and security to dirty streets, poor pest control, and issues with air and water quality. Based on these descriptive data, it appears that appointed mayors in Putin's Russia are devoting less

Figure 1. Russian household survey: Respondents with appointed mayors are more dissatisfied with public services. Data from the 2009 wave of the Russian Longitudinal Monitoring Survey (RLMS). Respondents grouped based upon the elected/appointed status of their local executive: $n_{\text{elected}} = 1{,}558$; $n_{\text{appointed}} = 735$. Bands represent 95% confidence intervals. Within every category, group means are statistically different at $p \leq .01$.

attention to basic services for their community. In the following empirical section, we test this more rigorously using changes in mayors' elected/appointed status alongside time-series cross-sectional data on municipalities' troubled and dilapidated housing.

DATA DESCRIPTION AND EMPIRICAL METHODOLOGY

To test our hypotheses, we collect a number of economic and political indicators for 200 of Russia's largest cities for the time period 2002–12. Economic data come from various Russian statistical publications as gathered by Multistat. Data on mayoral appointments was originally collected by the International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development (ICSID) at Moscow's Higher School of Economics and extended by the authors. The unit of analysis is the city-year.

Dependent variable: Maintenance of aging Soviet apartment blocks

Our dependent variable, which proxies for public service provision to the poor, is the amount of Bad Housing in Russian cities. In order to alleviate severe postwar housing shortages under Khrushchev and later Brezhnev, Soviet planners adopted a mass-scale approach to housing construction that used prefabricated concrete panels and uniform floor plans to supply modest-sized apartments quickly and inexpensively. Notoriously, many of these so-called *khrushchyovki* buildings were built as low-quality, temporary stopgaps with an expected 25-year lifespan. Almost 60 years later, however, cities continue to have many neighborhoods that are predominately *khrushchyovki*. A smaller, but significant share of at-risk housing stock is located in Stalinist-era concrete buildings and prerevolutionary brick constructions. After the USSR's collapse, municipalities became the de facto caretaker for many of these preexisting buildings, despite often lacking sufficient resources to provide consistent upkeep or meet residents' expectations (Shomina and Heywood 2013). Unless maintained properly over time, this outdated housing stock tends to deteriorate rapidly, creating a host of problems that range from inconvenience to health and safety hazards to neighborhood blight. Because affluent individuals have more means and opportunity to move away from ill-maintained apartment buildings to newly constructed buildings, scholars have identified troubled and dilapidated housing conditions as a persistent welfare issue that afflicts poorer individuals and threatens to create slums, which heretofore have not been a part of Russia's urban landscape (Alexandrova, Hamilton, and Kuznetsova 2004).

Housing is the ideal policy area for testing our hypotheses. Russian voters consistently rank housing and utilities as among the most important issues affecting their daily lives, making the
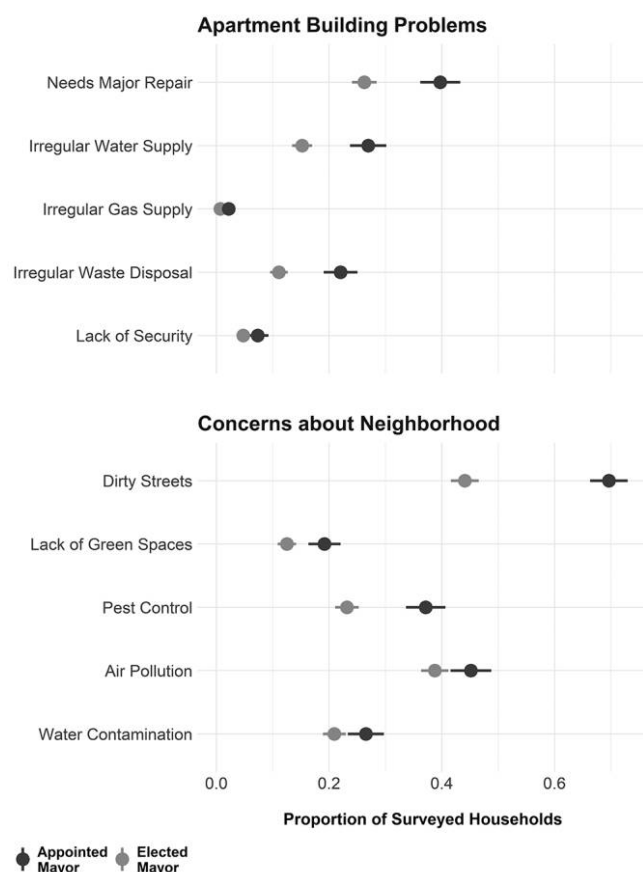
issue politically salient.[10] Moreover, policy governing dilapidated housing is primarily determined by local governments, so voters can and should assign blame to municipal authorities for not dealing with bad housing (Frolov and Agafanov 2011). Indeed, housing is often one of, if not the, primary issue in Russian municipal campaigns. Next, poor-quality housing is an outcome that mostly affects low-income households. Finally, and not unimportantly, we are able to locate city-level data on housing outcomes in Russian cities. Some studies of pro-poor policies use government expenditures as the dependent variable, but public spending may not always reach poor voters. Other studies use broad development outcomes, such as mortality and educational attainment, but because these outcomes are affected by many factors aside from government policy, it is harder to establish causal influence. Moreover, there is little data on the quality of other politically salient, locally provided public goods for the poor in Russian cities. Bad housing is unique in this regard.

Classifying structures as troubled or dilapidated involves many actors (Frolov and Agafanov 2011). The process begins when the federal housing inspection service conducts an inspection, which can be planned, unplanned, or in response to residents' complaints; local government is not involved in this step. Outstanding matters are referred to an intergovernmental commission, whose members include representatives of federal, regional, and local bureaucracies, as well as local utility companies.[11] After a building is declared dilapidated, the municipal government has three options: (1) purchase an existing building that meets standards and resettle residents, (2) purchase housing in a building already under construction, or (3) build new housing. Although financing comes from a mix of federal, regional, and local budgets, local governments allocate and administer the funds.

Thus, the stock of bad housing is determined by both the city's ability to maintain the quality of existing housing stock and their speed in resettling residents into new or existing housing. Municipal authorities can quickly and substantially affect the stock of bad housing by making repairs to troubled housing that is in danger of becoming unlivable and by efficiently resettling residents to better quality buildings or by speeding existing construction projects. They may also initiate new construction, but this entails a longer process.

The dependent variable in our analysis is Bad Housing. The Russian state statistical agency (Rosstat) provides data on housing in the municipality that has been categorized by the government as either troubled (*vetkhiy*) or dilapidated (*avariyniy*).[12] For our main analyses, we measure Bad Housing in 1,000 square meters (m^2) or normalized as m^2 per capita. We also investigate results' robustness to alternative codings such as a logarithmic scale or as a ratio of total housing stock.

Explanatory variables

Our main independent variable of interest is Political Centralization. This is a dummy variable that takes a value of 0 for city-years with a popularly elected mayor as of January 1, and 1 for years where the mayor is appointed per the procedure described above. In 2002, about 12% of the observations in our analyses had appointed executives; 10 years later, that proportion is over 40%. Our argument predicts that, on average, replacing direct mayoral elections with subnational appointments should be detrimental to public service provision for the poor. Accordingly, we anticipate that Political Centralization leads to an increase in bad housing stock.

We also want to guard against potential bias that could arise from omitting political, economic, and social factors relating to both local leaders' maintenance of aging housing stock and municipalities' level of political centralization. Therefore, alongside our main variable of interest, we include measures for Average Income, Working Age Population as a percentage of total city population, and Birth Rate to account for the different housing demands and political conditions that might arise in poorer cities, locales with fewer workers, or cities with lower population growth. Likewise, we control for city population as a proportion of total regional population to control for the influence that Regional Prominence might have on cities' housing stock and the Kremlin's decision to maintain/remove mayoral elections. To account for subnational variation in the degree to which regions provide a political environment that might invite or prevent scrutiny of public service provision and affect the regime's attitude toward local elections, we include an ordinal measure of Press Freedom that ranges from "not free" to "somewhat free" and a measure for Regional Political Climate, an index of regional democracy developed by Nikolai Petrov and Alexei Titkov. In all models, we also include fixed effects for

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10. Survey data indicate that housing concerns rank alongside other major issues, such as inflation, unemployment, and low salaries/pensions. Figures A3–A5 (figs. A1–A5 are available online) show relative rankings from surveys across multiple years.

11. Members often include representatives of the federal Emergency Situations ministry (MChS), the federal consumer protection bureau (Ropotrebnadzor), the city architecture bureau, the city council, the federal real estate registry (BTI), the city planning department, the regional branch of the Safety and Standards department(Otdel Nadzornoi Deyatelnosti), and local utility companies. The mayor does not serve on the commission.

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12. By the classification system, troubled (*vetkhiy*) housing evaluates as having 30%–65% wear and requires major repairs; dilapidated (*avariyniy*) housing evaluates as above 65% wear. Both are considered to have adverse effects on the health and safety of building occupants.

city and year in order to net out time-invariant, unobserved heterogeneity across cities and control for common shocks within a given year. Additionally, we use clustered standard errors to account for within-municipality correlations, including serial autocorrelation (Angrist and Pischke 2009), and estimate the models using ordinary least squares (OLS).

To analyze the relationship between public service provision and political centralization, we use the following base model specification:

$$\text{Bad Housing}_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 C_{it-1} + \gamma \mathbf{X}_{it} + \theta_i + \eta_t + \varepsilon_{it},$$

where i indexes each municipality and t indexes the year; Bad Housing$_{it}$ is the measure of the stock of old and unsafe housing within a given city-year; C is the centralization measure indicating whether or not cities have an appointed mayor; $\mathbf{X}$ is a vector of relevant control variables; α, β, and γ are parameters to be estimated; θ and η are fixed effects parameters for municipality and year, respectively; and ε is the error term. This fixed effects specification represents a generalized difference-in-differences design where, in a given year, cities with an elected mayor serve as control group against which to compare changes in bad housing stock that may occur in cities switching from elected to appointed mayors.[13] Under the identifying assumptions of that framework, these estimates measure the effect of abandoning direct mayoral elections on the maintenance of aging housing stock. Table 1 reports the statistical results for these analyses.

Results

Do appointments under authoritarianism make local leaders less attentive to the living conditions of their poorer citizens? Table 1 supports this claim. Across all models, the coefficient estimates on Political Centralization are positive and statistically significant, indicating that switching from elected mayors to appointed mayors is associated with an increase in bad housing. The dependent variable's coding in the first two columns makes the results straightforward to interpret. In column 1, the estimated coefficient for Political Centralization is 20.136 (SE = 8.754), indicating that replacing mayoral elections with appointments is associated with an average increase of just over 20,100 m² of unsafe housing. Given that a standard two-bedroom *khrushchyovka* apartment was designed to be 45 m² (484 ft²), this estimated increase works out to an ad-

ditional 447 apartments' worth of bad housing in cities that cancel mayoral elections. Similarly, column 2 reports a statistically significant increase in the square meters of bad housing per capita after Russian cities begin appointing their mayors ($\beta = 0.068$, SE = 0.025). For the median city population of 182,000, this approximates to 275 additional unsafe apartments.

Turning briefly to the models' control variables, we see that Press Freedom and Average Income have negative and significant coefficient estimates, suggesting that neglected apartment buildings are less of a problem in wealthier cities and in cities where media can more easily publicize unresolved social problems. In some models, the negative coefficients for Working Age Population and Regional Prominence are also statistically different from zero, but this is inconsistent across models. The models provide no evidence of a statistical relationship between the remaining control variables and bad housing stock.

As a robustness check, columns 3 and 4 demonstrate that using logged quantities or analyzing bad housing as a share of total housing stock also produces coefficients for Political Centralization that have the predicted positive sign and are statistically significant. In their study of these transitions to mayoral appointments, Reuter et al. (2016) argue that the Kremlin was more likely to allow mayors to retain elections if they had strong political machines to use on the regime's behalf; keeping elections was a cost-effective way for the Kremlin to gain access to local political networks without needing to build them. Controlling for this potential confounder here using Reuter et al.'s measure for these local political machines (margin of victory in the last mayoral election) produces no noteworthy changes to our findings. In the penultimate section, we devote more time to addressing concerns about factors like local political machines that might potentially drive the selection of cities for political centralization. Our results in table 1 are also robust to dropping observations from Russia's Caucasus regions, which are often viewed as outlying regions on a number of dimensions. Finally, we also explore alternate dependent variables related to housing policy, such as the number of families resettled from bad housing and household utility costs. As with the stock of bad housing, these other indicators reveal a discernible decline in public service provision under appointed mayors. Results for these robustness analyses appear in the appendix (available online).

Are elected leaders punished for bad housing? Given that voters' ability to sanction errant local leaders is an important mechanism behind our theory, these findings raise the natural follow-up question of whether Russia's elected mayors are actually punished by voters for housing infrastructure

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13. This framework's key assumption is that observed trends in housing maintenance within cities that keep mayoral elections are the same as we would have observed in cities with appointed mayors had they not abandoned mayoral elections. We address this parallel trends assumption in a later section using placebo tests and entropy balancing.

Table 1. Bad Housing Increases under Appointed Mayors

	Dependent Variable: Bad Housing (Old and Unsafe Housing)			
	1,000s m² (1)	Per Capita (2)	Logged per Capita (3)	As % of Total (4)
Political centralization	20.136	.068	.038	.489
	(8.754)	(.025)	(.014)	(.184)
	.022	*.006*	*.006*	*.009*
Press freedom	−13.992	−.078	−.041	−.650
	(6.892)	(.027)	(.016)	(.190)
	.044	*.004*	*.011*	*.001*
Working age population	.351	.005	.002	.013
	(.327)	(.003)	(.001)	(.010)
	.283	*.075*	*.035*	*.218*
Average income	−.449	−.001	−.001	−.003
	(.263)	(.001)	(.001)	(.009)
	.089	*.444*	*.089*	*.750*
Regional political climate	.094	−.004	−.003	−.021
	(1.310)	(.004)	(.002)	(.023)
	.943	*.391*	*.270*	*.347*
Birth rate	4.058	.003	.000	−.083
	(2.825)	(.010)	(.005)	(.134)
	.152	*.780*	*.990*	*.537*
Regional prominence	266.601	−1.463	−.866	11.757
	(386.693)	(.818)	(.452)	(9.130)
	.491	*.075*	*.057*	*.199*
Population	.307	−.001	−.001	−.014
	(.599)	(.001)	(.000)	(.008)
	.609	*.165*	*.155*	*.081*
Total housing	−.020			
	(.011)			
	.074			
No. of observations	2,027	2,027	2,027	2,027
City fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note. Data on Russian mayoral appointments collected by ICSID; all economic data from MultiStat. Parameter estimates for year fixed effects and model constants not presented in table to save space. City-clustered standard errors in parentheses; *p*-values are set in italics.

problems, as the theory implies. To test this causal mechanism, we analyze the results of mayoral elections. We model incumbent mayors' vote share in mayoral elections as the dependent variable and regress it on our bad housing variable. Bad Housing enters the model with a one-year lag to reduce concerns about temporal ordering.

Table 2 confirms that elected officials do indeed have political incentives to deal with the problem of aging apartment buildings. Controlling for our available covariates as well as fixed effects for city and year of election, we observe negative and statistically significant coefficients on Bad Housing. As expected, incumbent mayors receive fewer votes in munici-palities with more bad housing. Depending on the variable's functional form, an increase of bad housing stock by one standard deviation predicts that the incumbent mayor's vote share would decline by somewhere between 14 percentage points (model 1) and 13 percentage points (model 2). These results help to bolster the notion of local elections as a sanctioning device, even in an authoritarian regime.

Additional analyses underscore that housing conditions do not appear to hold the same sway in national elections that they do in local elections. We have argued that appointed mayors need not devote as much attention to local public services because their survival in office is tied more closely to

Table 2. Elected Mayors Lose Votes When Bad Housing Is Higher

	Dependent Variable: Incumbent Vote Share (in % of Total Votes in Mayoral Election)	
	(1)	(2)
Bad housing$_{t-1}$	−.071	
	(.030)	
	.020	
Bad housing per capita$_{t-1}$		−19.714
		(9.405)
		.038
Total housing$_{t-1}$	.001	
	(.004)	
	.830	
No. of observations	284	283
Includes all controls	✓	✓
City fixed effects	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓

Note. Data on Russian mayors collected by ICSID; all economic data from MultiStat. Model specification also includes control variables for press freedom, working age population, average income, regional political climate, birth rate, cities' share of regional population, change in unemployment, city and year fixed effects, and model constant. Parameter estimates for year fixed effects and model constants not presented in table to save space. City-clustered standard errors in parentheses; *p*-values are set in italics.

delivering votes in national elections, where concerns about other issues carry more weight than local issues. Indeed, table A8 (tables A1–A14 are available online) demonstrates that city-level vote returns for UR in national legislative elections are uncorrelated with the stock of bad housing. In contrast to bad housing's influence on local elections, increases in bad housing do not appear to harm United Russia's vote share in national elections. This finding helps explain why the regime would be willing to tolerate appointed local officials' laxness toward housing or similar local matters: it is unlikely to lose the ruling party votes in the contests that matter most.

Together, tables 1 and 2 and the additional analyses in the appendix provide empirical support for claims that political centralization reduces the provision of pro-poor services. First, we find that bad housing increased significantly in Russian cities that replaced mayoral elections with appointed mayor systems. Moreover, additional analyses clarify why elected mayors might care about renovating or replacing Soviet-era apartment buildings—voters hold elected mayors accountable for poorly maintained housing during local elections. When local

executives need voters to be reelected, they must remain mindful of local public service provision or else face the electoral consequences. Conversely, when local leaders are instead appointed from above, we observe that local public services receive less attention. We have argued that this shift occurs as appointed leaders are incentivized to prioritize the goals of their political principals at higher levels of government over the demands of local citizens. In the next section, we extend the investigation to examine subnational appointees' political incentives within an electoral authoritarian regime and how fulfilling these political imperatives affects their responsiveness to local citizens' needs.

Political incentives under centralization

In our theoretical discussion, we have argued that centralization diminishes responsiveness to local needs because it directs local officials' attention away from local governance and toward concerns that predominate at higher levels of government. For electoral authoritarian leaders, the paramount concern is national electoral dominance. Accordingly, we have argued that political centralization reduces local leaders' incentives to provide public services because higher-level officials will tend to overlook shortcomings in local governance as long as those local appointees can still deliver the required votes for the regime in national elections. This line of logic yields additional testable implications: (1) the ability to deliver UR votes to the regime in national elections should prolong appointed mayors' tenure in office and (2) political centralization should most sharply reduce responsiveness to public service needs in places where leaders successfully demonstrate an ability to help the regime maintain national electoral control. We test both claims here. We begin by investigating whether an appointed mayor's ability to deliver votes for UR affects their reappointment chances. We then turn toward our more central concern, which is to show that satisfying the regime's political imperatives attenuates the responsiveness of appointees to local needs.

Do appointed local leaders need to provide votes to the ruling party? If regime leaders do evaluate local appointees on the basis of their political performance—that is, delivering votes to the ruling party in major elections—then we should observe a correlation between local UR vote share in national elections and appointed mayors' tenure in office. We test this in table 3 by analyzing a binary indicator of Appointed Mayor Replacement as a function of various measures of United Russia vote share in the most recent national Duma election, city and region covariates, and fixed effects for mayor and year. The main variable of interest in column 1 is UR Vote

Table 3. Delivering United Russia Votes Helps Keep Appointed Mayors in Office

	Dependent Variable: Appointed Mayor Replacement (Dummy; 1 = Replaced)	
	(1)	(2)
UR vote delivery$_{t-1}$	−.016	
	(.007)	
	.019	
High vote delivery$_{t-1}$		−.445
		(.188)
		.021
Low vote delivery$_{t-1}$		.336
		(.185)
		.074
Bad housing$_{t-1}$	−.001	−.001
	(.001)	(.001)
	.217	*.234*
No. of observations	234	234
Includes all controls	✓	✓
Mayor fixed effects	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓

Note. Linear probability models of turnover in appointed mayors. Data on Russian mayors and United Russia (UR) vote share collected by ICSID; all economic data from MultiStat. Model specification also includes control variables for press freedom, working age population, average income, regional political climate, birth rate, cities' share of regional population, change in unemployment, mayor and year fixed effects, and model constant. City-clustered standard errors in parentheses; *p*-values are set in italics.

Delivery, which is the share of United Russia's vote in the most recent national parliamentary election from a given municipality with an appointed mayor. Columns 2 and 3 break this continuous variable into a pair of dummy variables that can compare high and low vote shares against a medium reference category: High Vote Delivery, which takes a value of 1 for the top quartile (62% or above) and a value of 0 otherwise, and Low Vote Delivery, which codes 1 for the bottom quartile (37% or lower) and 0 otherwise.

The analyses in table 3 indicate that appointed mayors' probability of being replaced is significantly related to delivering high vote shares for UR in national parliamentary elections. Using the continuous measure of UR vote delivery, column 1 reports the expected negative coefficient ($\beta = -0.016$, $p = .019$). Substantively, this model predicts that a one standard deviation increase in UR vote delivery (17.8) over the last parliamentary election is associated with a 28 percentage point decrease in the probability that an appointed mayor will be replaced. When vote delivery is binned into broad categories in

model 2, we observe a similar relationship between vote delivery and appointee retention. In appointment cities that deliver high vote shares to UR, mayors have a predicted probability of being replaced that is on average 45 percentage points lower than appointees who deliver middling vote shares ($p = .021$). The positive coefficient estimate on Low Vote Delivery is estimated less precisely ($p = .074$), but it is consistent with expectations—mayors in the bottom quartile of UR vote delivery have a higher predicted probability (34 percentage points) of being replaced than mayors supplying "average" vote shares. These findings suggest that delivering high vote shares in national elections helps subnational leaders in this electoral authoritarian regime to keep their office. In contrast, these appointed leaders' tenure in office appears unrelated to public service provision.[14] Across all models, we observe no relationship between the level of bad housing stock and the probability of appointed mayors being replaced.[15]

How does fulfilling regime goals affect appointed mayors' provision of public services? Having established appointed local leaders' incentives to perform political service to the regime, we now return to the primary question about outcomes. To examine the effects of appointed mayors' political incentives on public service delivery, we investigate how the relationship between political centralization and bad housing stock changes depending on local leaders' ability to produce votes for United Russia. Specifically, we reestimate the baseline analyses from our previous section while interacting Political Centralization in turns with the measures of regime service used in the previous analysis, UR Vote Delivery and High Vote Delivery. By our argument's logic, appointed mayors' incentives to respond to local concerns are decreasing in their ability to supply UR with strong electoral results in nationwide elections. Thus, we expect a positive coefficient on the interaction term (i.e., bad housing stock increases more under appointed mayors who can deliver more/many votes to the regime in national elections).

Table 4 reports the results from these analyses. In the first two columns, the fixed effects specification effectively compares changes in UR vote share in the most recent election to UR vote share in the prior election within a given city;

14. Additional analyses in table A7 also provide no indication of an interaction between vote delivery and bad housing.

15. We also investigate whether there are perverse fiscal incentives for local leaders to want more bad housing, e.g., to attract extra federal transfers. Table A9 shows no evidence of this: municipal budgets do not attract more federal transfers following increases in bad housing. Relatedly, table A11 shows that our results are robust to controlling for the size of city budgets.

Table 4. Bad Housing Increases More under Appointed Mayors Who Can Deliver Strong Electoral Results for United Russia

	Dependent Variable: Bad Housing (Old and Unsafe Housing in 1,000s m²)			
	Reference for Mayors' Vote Delivery			
	By City		By Mayor	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Political centralization	−21.783	10.174	−22.848	16.913
	(14.129)	(7.616)	(20.449)	(10.076)
	.125	*.183*	*.265*	*.095*
UR vote delivery$_{t-1}$	−.339		−.317	
	(.336)		(.440)	
	.315		*.472*	
Centralization × vote delivery$_{t-1}$	.817		1.045	
	(.360)		(.590)	
	.024		*.078*	
High vote delivery$_{t-1}$		−10.769		−15.130
		(8.482)		(9.938)
		.206		*.129*
Centralization × high vote delivery$_{t-1}$		40.428		50.857
		(16.274)		(26.631)
		.014		*.058*
Total housing	−.025	−.025	−.032	−.033
	(.018)	(.018)	(.022)	(.022)
	.179	*.171*	*.150*	*.138*
No. of observations	1,652	1,652	1,181	1,181
Includes all controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
City fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note. Selected coefficient estimates from linear regression models of cities' stock of old and unsafe housing. Data on Russian mayoral appointments collected by ICSID; all economic data from MultiStat. All models also include control variables for press freedom, working age population, average income, regional political climate, birth rate, cities' share of regional population, city and year fixed effects, and model constant; parameter estimates presented in the online appendix to save space. City-clustered standard errors in parentheses; *p*-values are set in italics. UR = United Russia.

in these models, mayors' performance in delivering UR votes is city oriented, relating current outcomes to past UR vote share in the same city. The remaining two columns use an alternative coding, only comparing changes in UR vote share if the same mayor is in office for both current and previous elections. Thus, these models strictly interpret performance to be mayor oriented because each mayor's vote delivery is analyzed independent of their predecessors' (in)ability to deliver. The findings from both approaches support our claims that local appointees' ability to meet the regime's political goals in national elections reduces the pressure on them to attend to local concerns. In all models, the interaction terms are pos-

itive and statistically significant, indicating that political centralization is associated with larger increases in bad housing stock where local officials can also deliver higher UR vote returns in national elections. Figure 2 plots the marginal effects of centralization, conditional on UR vote delivery.

Figure 2's left panel shows results for the continuous measure of Vote Delivery. At the sample median (50% UR vote share), we estimate that switching from elected to appointed mayors is associated with an average increase of 19,000 m² of old and unsafe housing. This effect grows, however, with larger UR vote shares. At 67% UR vote share (+1 SD), the increase in bad housing is an estimated 33,000 m²—approximately
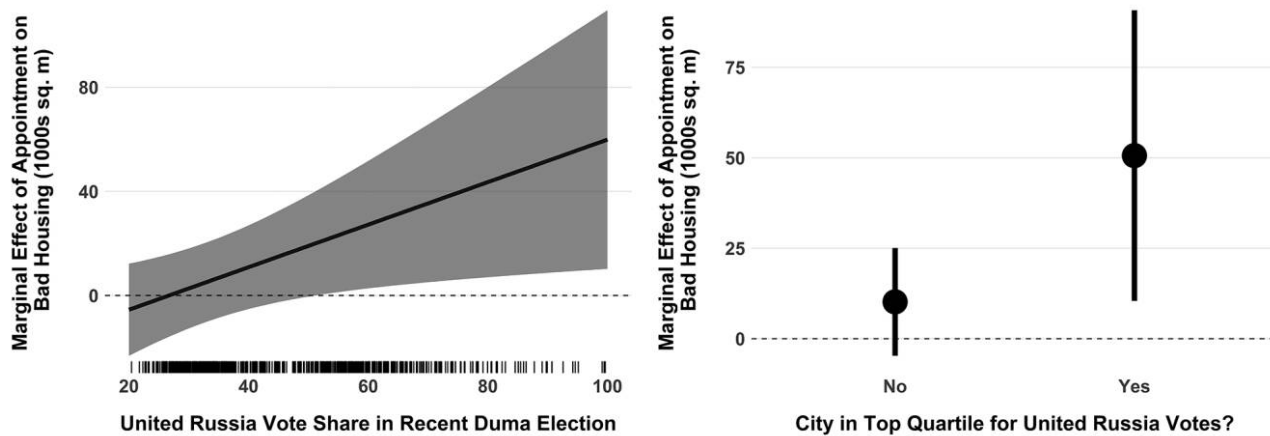
Figure 2. Marginal effects of mayoral appointments on bad housing stock, conditional on delivery of United Russia votes. Left panel based on model 1 in table 4 (continuous measure of UR vote delivery). Right panel based on model 2 (dichotomous measure of UR vote delivery). Bands represent 95% confidence intervals.

730 two-bedroom apartments worth of ill-maintained housing stock. In contrast, at lower levels of UR vote share, there is no statistically significant difference in bad housing stock between cities with elected versus appointed mayors. The right panel in figure 2 tells a similar story if we instead use the dichotomous measure to compare centralization's effects across places where local leaders have High Vote Delivery (i.e., in the top quartile) versus where vote delivery is low or medium. With high vote delivery, political centralization is associated with a large, positive increase in bad housing stock (50,600 m²). Without high vote delivery, the marginal effect is still positive, but more modest (10,200 m²) and with confidence intervals that overlap zero. These estimated effects are statistically different ($p = .014$).

Taken together, these results provide empirical support for our theoretical argument. In doing so, they help clarify why replacing local elections in an electoral authoritarian regime with appointments can undermine public service provision. Whatever local governance's salience to regime longevity, it seems that national electoral performance remains regime leaders' overriding political priority, and local appointees who can convincingly help achieve that goal can prolong their time in office regardless of their performance on other dimensions. Thus, under an appointment system, as local leaders become more secure in their ability to satisfy the regime's national electoral needs, they have fewer career incentives to provide public services to local citizens. The analyses also provide suggestive evidence that this moral hazard problem diminishes in the absence of convincing electoral support. Where parliamentary elections yield less impressive results for UR, appointed officials have less capital to spend with their political superiors and thus cannot as easily afford to ignore key local issues such as housing policy.

Addressing threats to inference

Unfortunately, the processes that lead some cities to abandon local elections are unlikely to have been random. Therefore, we must investigate the possibility that our findings reflect some unmodeled differences that prompted the cancellation of local elections in the first place. To bias our conditional findings, these omitted confounders would need to affect the maintenance of housing stock differentially, depending on UR's vote share in Duma elections. For example, perhaps regional officials wanted reforms in some cities specifically because their elected mayors were beginning to let local infrastructure deteriorate. If this happened primarily in UR electoral strongholds, then we might observe similar patterns to those presented here. In this section, we take a multipronged approach to investigate whether such selection into treatment drives our findings.

We begin by comparing appointment cities' prereform years with those cities that retain elected mayors by the sample's end. Statistical tests show that, before reforms take place, both sets of cities look remarkably similar on key variables.[16] We see no evidence that pre-appointment cities had on average more bad housing, measured either in percentage of total housing ($p = .79$) or in per capita terms ($p = .39$). Neither does it appear that pre-appointment cities differed greatly in their ability to deliver votes to United Russia in the 2003, 2007, or 2011 national parliamentary elections. Finally, both groups have similar records of economic performance, as measured by unemployment in levels ($p = .48$) or changes ($p = .82$). Although far from exhaustive, these tests help to rule out the most likely pathways through which selection might bias our results.

Second, to guard against nonrandom selection operating through less likely pathways, we employ entropy balancing to

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16. The full table of difference of means tests is available in table A12.

further reduce any potentially meaningful differences across the two types of cities. Entropy balancing is a technique that uses iterative algorithms to specify weights so that treatment group (cities that get appointments) and control group (cities that never get appointments) have identical moments on observable characteristics in the pretreatment period (Hainmueller 2012). Thus, to the extent that regime leaders during the pre-reform period select cities for centralization based on political and economic differences that we can observe in the data, entropy balancing allows us to reweight control observations such that these differences become ignorable. In other words, if the underlying concern is that our results may be biased by systematic differences between cities that get appointments and cities that keep elections, then imposing parity via entropy balancing can remove those differences and provide accurate estimates of the relationship between local leaders' incentives and public service provision. Accordingly, we use this method to find the set of weights for each control city such that the control and treatment groups have identical means for pretreatment levels of bad housing and also a broad range of time-varying and time-invariant covariates: press freedom, working age population, average income, regional political climate, birth rate, cities' share of regional population, city population, unemployment rates, change in unemployment, the strength of mayors' political machines, regions' status as republic, whether located in the Caucasus region, ethnic Russians' share of region's population, and historical strength of civil society.[17] The first two columns of table 5 show that our main results are robust to this procedure. Adjusting for observable preform differences via entropy balancing yields estimates that are substantively similar to our previous findings.

Third, in addition to controlling for selection on observables, we conduct an additional placebo test looking for evidence that our findings are driven by unobserved confounders that determine both cities' elected/appointed status as well as housing stock quality. For our placebo, we replace our Centralization measure with Precentralization, a time-invariant dummy indicator equaling 1 for cities that have appointed mayors by the end of the data set, then restrict the sample to city-years with elected mayors (i.e., the indicator equals 1 in the prereform years of cities that eventually switch to appointments).[18] Without the interaction term, this specification investigates whether housing outcomes in cities that never cancel elections are different from housing outcomes in the appointment cities during the years preceding reform. With the interaction term, it tests for prereform differences in the relationship between UR vote share and bad housing stock among cities in the placebo versus control group. Since no observations have actually introduced an appointment system, statistically significant coefficients would indicate that some heretofore unidentified heterogeneity across cities—and not actual appointment incentives—produces our main findings. Table 5's final two columns display the results of these tests. As anticipated by the argument, we find no significant relationship between bad housing stock and prereform status.[19]

Finally, sensitivity analyses provide an alternative tool for assessing our results' robustness to potentially omitted factors that might determine both cities' institutional reform and the condition of aging housing stock. Using the sensitivity analysis suggested by VanderWeele (2011), we find that in order to reduce the estimated effects from table 1 or table 4 to zero, the unmodeled confounders would have to be both (1) very highly correlated with bad housing levels (i.e., with a magnitude comparable to roughly twice the estimated effects of press freedom decreasing from max to min) and (2) overwhelmingly more prevalent in cities that end up with appointed mayors compared to those that retain elected mayors (i.e., 90% vs. 40%). The improbability that such large and distinct differences across cities would go unobserved strengthens our confidence in these results. Results for this analyses appear in table A14.

CONCLUSION

Social scientists have long taken interest in how democratic institutions affect the welfare of the poor. This paper demonstrates that, even under autocracy, local-level elections can improve local governments' responsiveness to the poor. Examining the incremental elimination of mayoral elections across Russia's medium and large cities from 2002 to 2012, we find that switching from elected to appointed mayors led to an increase in dilapidated housing stock. We also find empirical evidence of this electoral mechanism at work: in cities with mayoral elections, incumbent mayors lose votes at reelection time if they allow housing to deteriorate.

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17. Because entropy balancing forces balance across observed pretreatment traits, it also helps to ensure the parallel trends assumption for our difference-in-differences setup (Truex 2014).

18. Since Precentralization is time invariant, we drop city fixed effects and instead include additional time-invariant control variables: regions' status as a republic, ethnic Russians as percentage of regional population, historical strength of civil society, and a dummy of Caucasus region.

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19. These results also bolster confidence in the parallel trends assumption of our difference-in-differences framework. The counterfactual in our analysis assumes that the observed relationship between UR vote share and public service provision in cities with mayoral elections is the same we would have observed in cities with appointed mayors had they retained mayoral elections. Thus, we should not see differences in bad housing stock's relationship with UR vote delivery between cities that keep mayoral elections and appointment cities before they remove mayoral elections.

Table 5. Additional Tests Provide No Support for Plausible Rival Explanations

	Dependent Variable: Bad Housing (Old and Unsafe Housing in 1,000s m²)			
	Entropy Balancing		Placebo Test	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Political centralization	19.508	−31.316		
	(9.757)	(16.800)		
	.047	*.064*		
UR vote delivery$_{t-1}$		−.653		1.253
		(.552)		(1.569)
		.239		*.426*
Centralization × vote delivery$_{t-1}$		.985		
		(.392)		
		.013		
Precentralization			−22.515	−8.629
			(28.201)	(57.064)
			.426	*.880*
Precentralization × vote delivery$_{t-1}$				−.043
				(.930)
				.963
No. of observations	1,985	1,617	1,421	1,100
Includes all controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
City fixed effects	✓	✓		
Time-invariant controls			✓	✓
Year fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓

Note. Selected coefficient estimates from linear regression models of cities' stock of old and unsafe housing. Data on Russian mayoral appointments collected by ICSID; all economic data from MultiStat. Estimates in cols. 1 and 2 use entropy balancing to reweight control observations (cities that retain mayoral elections) to match covariate distributions of appointment cities during the pretreatment period. Columns 3 and 4 test for differences across cities that retain mayoral elections and the prereform period of cities that eventually move to an appointment system. All models also include control variables for press freedom, working age population, average income, regional political climate, birth rate, cities' share of regional population, city and year fixed effects, and model constant. In addition, cols. 3 and 4 include time-invariant controls for regions' status as republic, whether the city is in the Caucasus region, ethnic Russians' share of region's population, and historical strength of civil society. Parameter estimates not presented in table to save space. City-clustered standard errors in parentheses; *p*-values are set in italics. UR = United Russia.

Yet, elected officials' incentives are only half the story of how political centralization affects local public service provision. A key theoretical contribution of this research is the insight that local appointees under electoral autocracy have little incentive to focus on providing local public goods; the regime's desire to maintain national electoral dominance shifts local appointees' incentives away from good governance to providing political services in the form of votes for the ruling party in national elections. The data provide compelling support for these claims. We demonstrate that appointed mayors are more likely to stay in office when they can deliver high vote shares for United Russia. Crucially, we also find evidence that appointees' ability to perform this vital regime service conditions their responsiveness to local needs: appointees who can deliver high UR vote shares in national elections appear to do a much worse job of maintaining their cities' aging housing stock.

By highlighting appointees' political incentives, this paper helps explain why existing research on local elections can yield contradictory findings. Just as the varying quality of elections should affect leaders' attentiveness to the plight of their voters (Beazer 2015), appointed leaders' career incentives can either motivate or undercut good governance. Our study shows that incentivizing subnational appointees to mobilize votes for

the ruling party in national elections can give rise to a perverse myopia. It seems clear that political centralization in Russia was undertaken with an eye toward increasing the Kremlin's influence over local politics. Yet, this study suggests that this centralization has come at the cost of eroding living conditions for the poor.

One remaining question is how our findings travel. On one hand, some particulars of the Russian case—elected local officials serving simultaneously alongside appointed local officials—are rare.[20] And yet, our findings speak directly to governance in all autocracies where local officials make policy. We have argued that appointed subnational officials in electoral autocracies are likely to focus on vote mobilization at the expense of good governance. This argument is relevant to any electoral autocracy where appointed local officials are tapped to mobilize votes for the regime.[21] Regimes without multiparty elections—such as China—do not suffer from this particular myopia. Of course, in nonelectoral regimes, leaders may privilege other types of political services such that good local governance does not become an important performance criterion in those settings either. One prominent threat to all autocrats—electoral and nonelectoral alike—is the threat of coups and schisms. This threat is best confronted by the security services, not local officials, so new research might focus there. Likewise, subnational officials are often tasked to help with controlling protest. Future research could examine how quelling mass protest and ensuring political stability helps regional leaders avoid sanction for poor governance.

There is little cross-national research on these questions, but the perspective we offer is consistent with the findings on economic performance in the appointments literature in China and Russia. In single-party China, where subnational officials do not need to mobilize votes for the regime, most studies find that economic performance indicators are used in the evaluation of local officials (e.g., Landry et al. 2018; Li and Zhou 2005). In Russia, where local officials must mobilize votes, there is very little evidence that economic performance plays an important role in appointments (e.g., Rochlitz et al. 2015). Future research could profit by conducting more cross-national research and identifying how other types of political imperatives might displace performance-based appointments.

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20. Although other examples exist. Prominently, Chinese village elections were phased in gradually over the course of the 1980s. In Malaysia, local council elections were canceled in some municipalities in the late 1960s but retained for a short time in other municipalities (Tennant 1973).

21. Leon and Wantchekon (2019) and Mares and Young (2016) discuss how local officials are natural vote brokers in decentralized systems. Aside from Russia, this phenomenon has been studied by scholars in several electoral autocracies, including Venezuela (Albertus 2015), Egypt (Blaydes 2011), and Ukraine (Matsuzato 2001)

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