

Political Cycles and Elections in Russian Regions

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Extended Abstract

It has been well established that under the Russian system of appointment of regional governors by the president which existed from 2004 till 2012, results of the ruling party or Kremlin-backed presidential candidate in national-level elections in different regions of Russia are crucial to the likelihood of the governor of a region to remain in office for the next term. Reuter and Robinson (2012), studying an extensive dataset on Russian governors, find that while governors' loyalty to the president and, more specifically, their ability to mobilize votes for the ruling party, have a strong impact on appointment decisions, good governance, measured as regional economic development, plays a limited role in appointments. This finding is confirmed by Reisinger and Moraski (2013), Gelman (2008), Gelman (2010), and Rochlitz (2016). In his earlier work, Rochlitz (2014) finds a strong positive relationship between electoral results of the president and the ruling party in a region and the scale of the involvement of government officials in illegal corporate raiding in this region, arguing that regional officials are allowed to participate in illegal financially rewarding activities in exchange for the ability to deliver satisfactory electoral results.

Delivering satisfactory results at particular national elections may have different value to a governor, depending on the stage of his term at which the elections are held. Specifically, if elections are held close to the expiration of a governor's current term, the results are likely to be pivotal to his further career, while if the elections are held in the middle of the term, they might not be as important since the governor will have more time to prove his "effectiveness" to the ruling national party. If the importance of particular elections has different values for a governor at different stages of his term, there should be a systematic pattern in the governor's pre-election activity and, as a result, in voting outcomes which can be explained by regional political cycles. In this paper, exploiting variation in the length and starting date of Russian regional governors' terms, we first test the hypothesis that electoral results, measured as winning margins, of pro-government party or candidate in national elections in Russian regions are higher when elections are held closer to the expiration of a regional governor's term. Our analysis provides strong evidence in favor of this hypothesis: the ruling party or candidate gets up to 10 additional percentage points to its victory margin in elections held just before the expiration of governor's term than, for example, in elections held two years prior the end of the term.

Then we try to understand the source of such increase in victory margins. Our first hypothesis is that the driving force of this result is higher turnout of the ruling party supporters arising from mobilization efforts of governors. If governors, when approaching their term expiry date, use additional resources to stimulate turnout among potential ruling candidate supporters such as government employees, we

should observe an increase in overall turnout similar to the increase in victory margin. However, we do not find convincing evidence of this.

Since it is often argued that from the beginning of the 2000s, electoral fraud had been a widespread phenomenon in Russia (Enikolopov, Korovkin, Petrova, Sonin, & Zakharov, 2013; Lukinova, Myagkov, & Ordeshook, 2011; Moser & White, 2013; Myagkov, Ordeshook, & Shakin, 2009; Treisman, 2009), we further conjecture that the found increase in victory margins for the ruling candidates may come not from mobilization of voters but from electoral manipulations implemented by regional governors. To test this hypothesis, we use two distinct regional level measures of fraud based on research by Moser and White (2013) and Kobak, Shpilkin, and Pshenichnikov (2016). The first measure is based on the observation that a large group of popular electoral fraud techniques, such as ballot stuffing and multiple voting, is associated with abnormal trends in turnout and pro-government party's votes in precincts they take place. As a result, such measures often appear to be strongly correlated with turnout, and thus it is indeed not surprising that we do not find the expected cycle in electoral fraud as we do not find a one in turnout. However, we also do not find any evidence of the cycle in fraud using the second measure by Kobak et al. (2016) which is designed to capture manual corrections of election results by electoral officials.

Given these findings, we are left with two conjectures about the source of the established increase in electoral performance of the ruling candidates in regions where governors are close to the expiration of their terms. First, the increase in victory margins may come from manipulation techniques which are not associated with increased turnout and manual corrections of results, such as invalidating ballots for opposition candidates, harassing their supporters, restricting access of opposition candidates and supporters to media, or simply manipulating the final numbers.

Second, the effect of the approaching governor's term expiration date on the results of the ruling party in national elections does not imply increased fraudulent activity beyond doubt. For example, a governor may put forth efforts to increase region's performance in publicly valued sectors or get involved into a political budget cycle¹, and thus gain additional support from the population, which may positively influence support of the ruling party or candidate in national elections. In the final section of the paper, we use several regional performance measures to test this hypothesis.

¹A well-established phenomenon in which opportunistic politicians systematically adjust public policies prior to elections in order to attract a higher number of votes. Cycles may take a form of increase in public expenditures, change of the composition of expenditures towards more visible projects, and even release of overly optimistic economic forecasts.