

## Elections, Protest, and Regime Dynamics

*Today's protesters are also ridiculed and belittled, especially by leftists both in Russia and the West, for not becoming more. But in the long view (which we historians are trained to take), change in Russia has always come very slowly, and one wonders if in a future Russia people will not look back at the Bolotnaia and even Pussy Riot demonstrators as the beginnings of something big, something that took a while to mature. Even if we scoff at their lost potential, let us also not forget that these recent demonstrations for democracy were unprecedented in their scale. They dwarf the Soviet dissident movement of the 1970s and 1980s, which, as it turned out, planted much smaller seeds.*

Arch Getty (2012)

Studies of Russian politics since 1999 often highlight elite stability and the continuity of leadership as the dominant feature of the system. President Vladimir Putin and his party of power, United Russia (UR), consistently secure electoral victories at every level of government. In this book, I argue that vote totals and incumbent victories mask almost constant change in regime strategies to contain opposition and maintain social support. The result has been the incremental consolidation of authoritarian rule that remains vulnerable to opposition innovation but also an accumulation of societal capacity to organize to make demands on the government. These changes do not inevitably portend revolution, but they do suggest that scholars consider their longer-term effects on the Russian political system.

This state of change is evident in Russia's last three national election cycles. The regime's electoral management strategies shifted substantially to address challenges embedded in societal expectations and opposition capacity. Even with its significant advantages, the Kremlin had not

eliminated serious challenges at the ballot box and in the streets in 2011–2012 and 2019. By 2020, although the regime seemed stable, its efforts to contain opposition challenges included significant institutional change in electoral laws, ballot access rules, and elected offices, as well as constitutional reforms, national referenda, and renewed social welfare initiatives. These changes redefined opposition and regime strategies to contest elections, the sources of political tension between state and society, and the likelihood of societal action.

This continual transformation of Russia's electoral and governance institutions in response to electoral challenges raises questions that are central to the study of non-democratic regime stability. First, in the face of weak civic organization, how can constrained electoral oppositions transform managed elections from demonstrations of state power to contests that generate regime responsiveness? Second, when does electoral contestation spill over into social activism and post-election protest – and what are the consequences of these protests? Finally, how do state and opposition actions (and interactions) between elections shape contestation in subsequent electoral cycles or alter societal capacity to make demands on the regime?

To answer these questions, I develop a theory that links electoral competition to social protest under conditions of disproportionate state power. Building on new work on informational autocrats (Guriev and Treisman 2019), this approach explores how state and opposition strategies influence the accumulation of new actionable information about state goals, shared social demands, and attitudes toward the regime. In non-democratic systems, civil society – the engine of individual mobilization in democratic regimes – remains under-institutionalized. Yet, this lack of organization does not preclude mobilization. Actionable information can transform voters' perceptions and prompt collective action. As the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates, popular attitudes toward the regime incumbents can change in response to economic downturns, natural disasters, policy failures, or government inaction. In election periods, the regime and opposition compete to translate these social preferences and contextual conditions into actionable information that crystallizes collective grievances or collective support, defining winners and losers.

Non-democratic regimes have significant advantages to shape actionable information. In a controlled media environment, the regime's superior knowledge of social preferences and capacity to shape hegemonic narratives limit opposition mobilization. In situations where the regime has solidified support between elections or demonstrated the futility of

opposition initiatives, it can allow the opposition to run without harassment to demonstrate strength and limit protest. In these contests, the regime can avoid engaging strategies that provide new information or generate incentives for collective action.

Yet, regular elections force incumbents to take actions that speak loudly about their support, opposition challengers, and political goals. When the regime is unpopular, banning potentially strong parties and candidates sends an important signal of weakness to supporters, oppositions, and previously inactive voters. If the government engages in falsification, it not only highlights its weakness further but also reveals its unwillingness to relinquish power. These strategies reveal new actionable information that can prompt citizens to act together to express their discontent at the ballot box or on the streets. While these protests often appear to be spontaneous, seemingly weak organized oppositions play a critical role in the process by amplifying the information revealed in electoral contests and providing a collective response to redress social grievances.

As the next section of this chapter demonstrates, the production of actionable information in Russia shifted from election cycle to election cycle, producing very different patterns in turnout, vote support, and protest. Despite its advantages, the regime has not been able to eliminate the opposition's ability to mount electoral challenges, leading it to adopt electoral and intra-election strategies that have consolidated its authoritarian rule.

#### THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN ELECTIONS: FROM FECKLESS PLURALISM TO NON-DEMOCRACY

While the Yeltsin-era marked an opening in electoral politics, voter backlash against its unpopular reform program produced a significant toolkit to limit opposition victories (Belin 2004; Hale 2006; Smyth 2006). In legislative and regional elections, outright incumbent victory was often out of reach of the increasingly unpopular regime, but at the executive level, it developed mechanisms to ensure incumbent victories. These strategies, from workplace mobilization to creating spoiler candidates and parties to split the opposition vote, remain a staple of Russian political competition. In fact, under the Yeltsin administration, the regime accumulated tools to win critical races. The election that brought Vladimir Putin to power in 1999–2000 showcased many of these electoral management tools.

By the mid-2000s, despite Putin's popularity, the regime sought to eliminate electoral uncertainty. It worked between elections to consolidate media control, change formal institutions, and tighten its grip on regional leaders to ensure that they delivered votes (Oates 2006; Smyth et al. 2007). Against a backdrop of economic recovery, these strategies not only built a significant voting majority for the regime but also weakened opposition organizations and their ties to voters. Even greater regime control was achieved through ballot construction or informal processes that allowed the regime to bar candidates and parties from running in order to limit challenges.

In 2008, Putin responded to constitutional term-limits by creating a new institution, the tandem, which codified joint rule between the president and prime minister. Putin sanctioned his protégé Dimitry Medvedev as his heir to the presidency, and Medvedev announced that he would appoint Putin as his PM. The regime tightly controlled Medvedev's election and engaged in significant electoral falsification to bolster his vote totals and silence critics. Yet, the Medvedev Presidency coincided with the 2009 global economic crisis and a significant slow-down in the Russian economy. It also prompted elite competition to challenge Medvedev and a groundswell of opposition to the state party, UR.

In September 2011, the Kremlin sought to remove uncertainty from the election cycle by redeploying its most potent resource, Putin's popularity, and linking it directly to UR. Putin announced that he was returning to the Presidency in the upcoming March 2012 elections. This choice created actionable information against a backdrop of growing societal organization and opposition. In the popular imagination, Putin's candidacy seemed more like a coronation than an electoral bid, and it crystalized popular discontent (Ioffe 2011). Russians called the decision the *rokirovka*, or castling – the chess move in which the king swaps places with a rook.

The *rokirovka* transformed the electoral season, beginning with Moscow's urban "hipsters" who had drawn an analogy between Medvedev's presidency and Khrushchev's thaw, and created a European lifestyle that was threatened by authoritarian rule. Once Putin's strategy became clear, the hipsters jumped to a different historical analogy: the Brezhnev-era stagnation. This sentiment spilled onto the streets as "The Committee of Five Demands," a coalition of opposition activists who protested outside the Kremlin the day after the announcement.

While the Five Demands protest was very small and quickly dispersed, the frustration about the regime's control over elections went well beyond the usual activists. The capital buzzed with conversations about how voters might use their ballot to express their frustration with the Kremlin's control of the electoral process. Following the lead of corruption activist and blogger Alexei Navalny, Russians increasingly referred to UR as "the party of crooks and thieves."<sup>1</sup> Civil society organizations collaborated with the opposition to recruit an army of electoral observers who could monitor electoral processes to reveal expected vote fraud (Kokova 2015). To borrow a well-used metaphor of Russian analysts, it felt as if citizens were waking up. Putinism seemed suddenly vulnerable to popular pressures for reform. The Kremlin's castling misstep created an opening for the organized opposition.

Anticipating electoral challenges, the Kremlin used ballot access rules to bar the opposition from electoral competition. Yet, the electoral opposition seized the opportunity to politicize electoral processes and transform the election into a meaningful protest opportunity. Their strategy revealed new information about the growing gap between the state and society. Navalny urged voters to cast their votes for anyone but UR. The slogan caught on, creating a mechanism to express discontent. Voters abandoned UR. Unwilling to forego its parliamentary majority and veneer of invincibility, the Kremlin falsified election results.<sup>2</sup>

The degree of falsification was captured by the extensive electoral observation effort. The movement relied on social media to distribute often comical evidence of falsification. YouTube videos followed "voting carousels" or buses full of regime loyalists that traveled from precinct to precinct voting at each one. Videos showed belligerent precinct captains stuffing ballot boxes and documented polling stations equipped with disappearing ink. Texts and FB posts displayed images of stacks of discarded ballots. Perhaps more importantly, Muscovites discussed their votes and found that while no one they knew had voted for UR, the party won a parliamentary majority. The juxtaposition of personal information and election outcome raised the critical question: who voted for

<sup>1</sup> The Levada Center tracked the rise of the phrase after April 2011. By May 2013, a majority of Russian citizens (51 percent) agreed that the phrase accurately described the ruling party.

<sup>2</sup> I do not make these claims lightly. For analysis of fraud, see Bader and van Ham (2015), Enikolopov et al. (2013), and Harvey (2016). Forbes (2011) and Gazeta.R (2011) are contemporaneous accounts from journalists. The OSCE report on the 2012 presidential elections (OSCE 2012) provides additional documentation of falsification patterns.

UR? The realization created common knowledge not only about shared grievances among voters but also about the state's efforts to steal the election.

Even with fraud, UR's support in the 2011 election was anemic. Official vote support dropped from 64 percent in 2007 to 49 percent in 2011, although both of these elections included significant vote falsification. The decline extended well beyond Moscow or Saint Petersburg, as UR secured less than 50 percent of the vote in 55 of 83 regions. In contrast, only one region failed to return a UR majority in 2007, and nineteen regions produced UR supermajorities in 2007 compared with eleven in 2011. The results illustrated a decline in the regime's capacity to dominate elections. The broad geographic distribution of declining support posed a clear threat to the system of governance dubbed "Putinism," built between 2000 and 2007.

Shared knowledge of opposition voting, coupled with evidence of electoral manipulation, produced new, actionable information and provoked the For Fair Elections (FFE) protest movement. These events constituted the largest protest in Russia since the pro-independence actions in the early 1990s. First-hand accounts of these two protest waves describe similar crowds consisting of students, the urban middle class, and nationalists (Bonnell et al. 2015; Volkov 2012). After twenty years of relative calm, many of the same social forces that resisted the reassertion of authoritarian control through an illegal coup contested the reassertion of authoritarian control through electoral manipulation. The persistent crowds on the streets in December 2011 called for reform and not revolution, producing new information that rapidly expanded participation.

The combined vote protest and the street actions revealed significant opposition to Putin's regime and his party. The challenge extended well beyond the usual Putin opposition to include students, business people, and civil servants. An analysis of voting behavior revealed that the regime's cross-class coalition had fragmented (Hale and Colton 2017). The street protests also had substantive meaning. As I demonstrate later, protesters rejected Putin as the sole or even best solution to Russia's social, economic, and political problems, signaling a rejection of personalist linkages. Their slogans tied the flawed electoral processes to rising levels of corruption and state control that affected citizens' access to private housing, health care, education, business permits, and other state services (Gabowitsch 2016). These effects redounded through public opinion, as nonparticipants expressed similar doubts about the lack of regime responsiveness. Voters challenged the regime in local and regional elections.

Yet, by the 2016–2018 national election cycles, Russia’s movement from stability to crisis to recovery over three elections demonstrates the stability of these systems, while masking the profound changes that occurred over that time and the growing opposition that persists within the system. It also raises questions about the role of regular elections in producing regime change and regime dynamics, especially in the face of economic crisis, leadership change, and generational shifts. Consistent with the Russian experience in 2011–2012, these studies identify the factors that shape the relationships between repeated elections and authoritarian stability: the opposition, institutions, informal practices, and information control. The literature also points to the need for integration of organized opposition and social forces into explanations of regime dynamics.

DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS, INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS,  
AND THE PUZZLE OF REGIME STABILITY

Hybrid systems that combine formal democratic regime structures with informal practices are not new, but since the third and fourth waves of democratization, their numbers increased. These non-democratic systems span a wide range of regime types and systems from countries just on the edge of the gray zone to those that are squarely in the authoritarian category. Their common trait is that the non-democratic practices, from channeling state resources into the campaign war chests of incumbents to outright fraud to temper electoral accountability. As Larry Diamond wrote, “While an opposition victory is not impossible in a hybrid regime, it requires a level of opposition mobilization, unity, skill, and heroism far beyond what would normally be required for victory in a democracy” (2002, p. 24). Over time, non-democratic rulers have gotten increasingly skilled at electoral management and in shaping the electoral context between elections, raising barriers to a government turnover and diminishing the potential for protest.

The rise of these regimes sparked a debate over their durability and capacity to be self-reinforcing. Samuel Huntington argued, “Liberal authoritarianism is not a stable equilibrium; the halfway house does not stand” (Huntington 1991, pp. 174–175). The puzzle of hybrid stability produced a growing set of studies that explored how democratic institutions designed to enable popular control of government and representation of social interests can also be used to create and sustain non-democratic stability.

The evidence does not support Huntington’s claim. Figure 1.1 shows data from 1948 to 2018 on the distribution of regime types using

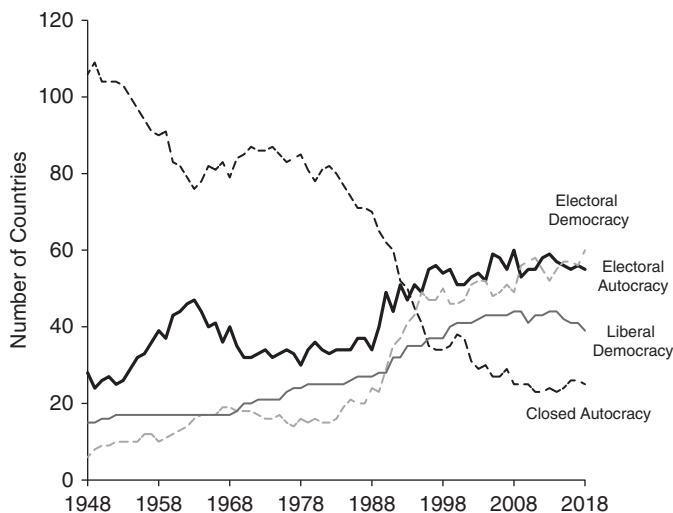


FIGURE 1.1 Counts of regime type, 1948–2018

a classification developed by the Varieties of Democracy (VDem) project (Coppedge et al. 2019). The data classifies countries by year into four categories: closed autocracy, electoral autocracy, electoral democracy, and liberal democracy.<sup>3</sup> Regimes identified in the literature as having hybrid electoral systems (including the focus of this book, Russia) are generally coded by VDem as electoral autocracies.

As the figure indicates, there is some fluctuation in categories year to year, although broad trends are discernible. The number of formal democracies (electoral democracies and liberal democracies) has generally increased over time, and the number of closed autocracies has decreased (particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union and the demise of the Warsaw Pact). Importantly, electoral autocracies appear to be the most stable over time.

Table 1.1 looks at regime stability from 1998 to 2018 to test whether electoral autocracies are a stop on an evolutionary path from one regime type to another – in particular, from non-democratic to democratic status. Of the 54 electoral autocracies in 1998, 38 (70.4 percent) had the same status in 2018. Notably, the stability of electoral autocracies is comparable to both

<sup>3</sup> VDem defines electoral autocracies as “De jure multiparty elections for the chief executive and the legislature, but failing to achieve that elections are free and fair, or de-facto multiparty, or a minimum level of Dahl’s institutional prerequisites of polyarchy as measured by VDem’s Electoral Democracy Index” (Coppedge et al. 2019, p. 254).



TABLE 1.1 *Stability of regime types*

| 1998 Status         | 2018 Status      |                     |                     |                   |
|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
|                     | Closed autocracy | Electoral autocracy | Electoral democracy | Liberal democracy |
| Closed autocracy    | 59.4%<br>(19)    | 31.3%<br>(10)       | 6.3%<br>(2)         | 3.1%<br>(1)       |
| Electoral autocracy | 3.7%<br>(2)      | 70.4%<br>(38)       | 24.0%<br>(13)       | 1.8%<br>(1)       |
| Electoral democracy | 2.0%<br>(1)      | 12.0%<br>(6)        | 70.0%<br>(35)       | 16.0%<br>(8)      |
| Liberal democracy   | –                | –                   | 21.6%<br>(8)        | 78.4%<br>(29)     |

Source: VDem Data

types of democracies, and significantly higher than for closed autocracies. These findings contradict expectations that liberal authoritarianism is a way station to either closed autocracy or liberal democracy.

Additional analysis of the VDem data suggests that simply establishing regular elections is neither necessary nor sufficient to generate moves toward full democracy. All of the countries coded as electoral authoritarian regimes had regular elections.<sup>4</sup> As Table 1.1 shows, these regimes are more likely to move toward democracy than fall backward to full-blown authoritarianism, although a high percentage is stable over this period.

As Table 1.2 indicates, closed authoritarian systems, countries that do not hold regular elections, can become more open over time, although movement toward more closed systems is also possible. Together with the previous observation, this evidence confirms Karl’s (1995) prediction that illiberal democracies can evolve in either an open or closed direction.

The data also confirm that transitions are constrained. In fact, over the twenty years covered in Table 1.2, the only cases of closed authoritarian systems evolving into democratic regimes were those that lacked regular elections. This finding suggests that analyses that examine opposition

<sup>4</sup> Whether or not a country has regular elections was measured using the VDem variable *v2xlg\_elecreg*. This measure matches an alternate variable developed from Hyde and Marinov’s (2012) NELDA dataset that defines regular elections in terms of scheduling, multiple candidates, and opposition organization.

TABLE 1.2 *The impact of elections on closed authoritarian systems*

| Elections in 1998? | 2018 Status      |                     |  |
|--------------------|------------------|---------------------|--|
|                    | Closed autocracy | Electoral autocracy | Electoral democracy or liberal democracy |
| Yes                | 57.1%<br>(12)    | 28.6%<br>(6)        | 14.3%<br>(3)                             |
| No                 | 63.6%<br>(7)     | 36.3%<br>(4)        | (0)                                      |

Source: VDem Data

breakthroughs and combine different types of systems may be obscuring the underlying mechanisms that produce regime change. It also suggests that regularized elections may allow for more effective incremental regime adjustments to electoral management strategies.

These data underscore that Russia is a case of a broader puzzle of non-democratic regime trajectories. The data raise an important question: how political interaction within individual races contributes to factors such as opposition learning, shifts in activists' identities, and the accumulation of regime interventions that generate new frictions and obstacles and shape regime dynamics. By analyzing the legacy of competition over time in one state, Russia, it is possible to explore whether or not regime victories mask significant procedural transformations with implications for the next election cycle.

### Explaining Regime Persistence

My explanation for the persistence of liberal authoritarian or hybrid non-democratic regimes begins with the work of Barbara Geddes (1999), who revolutionized the study of non-democratic rule by recognizing formal institutions and elite bargains as critical mechanisms of regime stability. Geddes' analysis launched a research stream that showed how institutions such as elections, parties, and legislatures – nominally associated with democratic governance – might work to sustain autocratic regimes. The focus of this work, often called authoritarian institutionalism, refers to the incentives that formal institutions provide to solve the elite collection action problem central to non-democratic governance and durability.

These studies present contradictory findings. In some cases, they create the conditions for democratic breakthrough. In other cases, electoral competition narrows the political space and pushes the regime toward authoritarian deepening. Alternatively, movement in each direction might alter the mechanisms that link state and society between elections, but it may not produce a shift large enough to be captured as regime change. Few studies consider these incremental changes or explore how strategies that are optimal in one election might have to be altered in subsequent contests as circumstances change and inter-election policies alter the electoral context.

One side of the debate illustrates how authoritarian regimes that combine regular elections and standing legislatures are longer-lived than authoritarian regimes that govern without these institutions (Boix and Svobik 2013; Gandhi 2008; Geddes 1999; Przeworski and Gandhi 2007; Svobik 2011). Scholars posit two mechanisms that produce these outcomes: elite co-optation and credible commitments. Legislative institutions may serve to co-opt the opposition or dissident elements in the regime through proximity to power and perks of office, creating support for the autocrat's agenda (Reuter and Gandhi 2011). Legislative institutions may also provide a venue to make decisions about the redistribution of economic rents, both to the opposition and regime members (Gandhi 2008; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Lust-Okar 2005; Reuter and Robertson 2012; Wright 2008). These interactions also enable political bargains by increasing transparency and creating what Carles Boix and Milan Svobik (2013) call "a publicly observable signal of the ruler's commitment to the bargain." Similarly, Malesky and Schuler (2013) and Truex (2014) argue that formal institutions train professional politicians whose policy expertise and skills lead to more effective legislation (for dissent see Reuter and Robertson 2012).

Dominant state parties also reinforce autocratic regime success, particularly when they maintain elite consensus over political arrangements or economic distribution (Brownlee 2007; Smith 2005).<sup>5</sup> The creation of a dominant political party can enhance state's control over representative structures and extend the life of the regime (Brownlee 2007; Geddes 2005). The dominant party ensures elite cooperation when the capacity

<sup>5</sup> I leave aside discussions of variation in authoritarian state party structures (Smith 2005). There is no question that variation in party structures influences the capacity of these organizations to fulfill critical functions such as attracting vote support, ensuring leadership innovation, and imposing party discipline.

to win consistent vote support is a rare political resource and party leaders control elite advancement (Magaloni and Kricheli 2010; Smyth, Lowry, and Wilkening 2007). Wright and Escriba-Folch (2012) demonstrate that while authoritarian legislatures do extend the life of autocratic regimes, regular elections do not have the same effect. These studies suggest that the specific nature of institutional forms generate opportunities to deploy mechanisms that ensure elite loyalty and control the nature of electoral choice, but elections may not have the same independent effects without legislative or state party support.

Studies of the menu of manipulation explore the effects of informal mechanisms on electoral outcomes (LeHoucq 2003; Schedler 2006). As I discuss at length in Chapters 2 and 3, non-democratic leaders have a broad range of mechanisms available to shape vote totals, influencing all aspects of competition to generate biases that support incumbent victories. These include control over electoral resources, the adjudication of transgressions, and state's efforts to mobilize voters. The control of these strategies enhances leaders' ability to secure elite loyalty because they can deliver control of the state apparatus.

Henry Hale's (2014, 2018) work on patronal politics echoes this approach, exploring the relationship between presidential institutions, the organization of patronage networks, and elite cohesion. Hale (2014) argues that the variation in elite coherence, or conversely elite defection, drives regime dynamics within wide bounds but does not portend inevitable revolution or regime change. This work provides an important corrective to the elite defection literature by underscoring that non-democratic elections may provoke significant shifts in state strategies and degrees of control without producing regime change, paving the way for the regime to re-establish control in the next period.

More recently, scholars have explored how autocrats maintain stability by building social support. In this literature, elections provide a structure for regimes to reward and punish voter loyalty. Beatriz Magaloni (2006) argues that the tragic brilliance of electoral autocracy is that voters support state candidates and parties to secure continued social benefits. Such mechanisms might also take the form of competitive clientelism, distributing targeted benefits rather than universal programs (Blaydes 2010).

In addition, there is a growing literature on the role of regime decision-making processes and social inputs on regime support. These studies can help to broker elite conflict but also provide an alternative logic for popular support of incumbents. Working in different institutional contexts, Lust (2005) and Truex (2014) recognized that autocratic regimes

secure social support by responding to citizens' demands without compromising their hold on power or political agendas. Recent work demonstrates that authoritarian responsiveness is enhanced when it rests on constrained policy processes that respond to latent social demands for benefits and policies (Truex 2016). By allowing citizens to act collectively to influence policy formation and implementation of top-down initiatives, regimes channel discontent, and secure societal buy-in (Schuler 2018; Smyth 2018).

Not all studies support the claim that elections lead to regime stability, nor do they agree on the mechanisms that determine outcomes. Amanda Edgell et al. (2018) show that both temporal variation and regional identification influence the link between multiparty elections and democratizing effects. Ruchan Kaya and Michael Bernhard (2013) find that regular elections in post-Communist states do not have definitive effects on changes in regime type. In short, the relationship between electoral competition and regime type varies widely depending on context, raising questions about what contextual features shape the effects of iterated elections on regime durability.

Despite these conflicting findings, these studies have identified crucial factors that shape breakthroughs. The research demonstrates that democratic breakthroughs are more likely in open regimes – competitive authoritarian or electoral authoritarian – than in hegemonic regimes (Bernhard, Edgell, and Lindberg 2019; Donno 2013; Schedler 2013). Similarly, empirical studies of the link between opposition strategy and regime stability demonstrate that opposition coalitions are important indicators of successful democratic breakthroughs (Donno 2013; Roessler and Howard 2006). Bunce and Wolchik (2010) establish that these effects are also contingent on opposition innovation and organization that raise doubts about the fairness of electoral processes.

While this rich literature has illustrated important mechanisms that link elections to regime stability or change, several gaps remain. These define the core contributions of the work. The first contribution broadens the focus of study from democratic breakthroughs to the strategies that regimes and opposition rely on to contest elections. I argue that the focus on democratic breakthroughs obscures how mechanisms of electoral control or elite containment might give way to regime innovation or reliance on more repressive strategies to win elections and ensure elite coherence.

In addition, by focusing on breakthroughs, the literature ignores how contextual factors and external shocks can influence the efficacy of regime

management tools from election to election. In explaining mass mobilization in post-election protest, Rød (2019) demonstrates that contextual factors such as economic inequality patterns of government spending have direct effects on the probability of post-election protest, and through that, regime stability. As Knutsen, Nygard, and Wig (2017) demonstrate, elections are risky for the regime in the short term, but that over time incumbents accumulate tools to respond to opposition challenges during and between election cycles. The work foreshadows a broader argument, developed in Chapter 3, that non-democratic regimes rely on a wide range of strategies to contain electoral opposition between election cycles, generating a perpetual campaign.

By examining state and opposition actions between elections, my approach recognizes that many of the factors that shape electoral outcomes – the number of parties or candidates, nature of the opposition coalition, or structure of competition – are endogenous to regime control over party registration and ballot access as well as regime actions in the inter-election period. As a result, they systematically underestimate regime influence over outcomes. Scott Gates and his coauthors (2006) provide an important clue about the importance of ballot access variables, demonstrating that institutional limits on candidate entry extend regime durability. These studies suggest the intuition that drives the hybrid elections model (HEM) briefly described below and presented in the next chapter: that controlling who competes affords non-democratic regimes significant influence over actionable information, electoral outcomes, and the potential for post-election protest.

### **An Integrated Model of Stability and Change in Non-democratic Regimes**

The second contribution of this work derives from the application of theories of information autocracy to electoral competition and mass political behavior such as voting or protest. A growing literature explores how information control helps to secure elite loyalty, and subsequently, regime stability (Gelbach and Sonin 2014). Yet, Treisman (2018) and Guriev and Treisman (2019) write that informational autocrats use information control to shape core social preferences and disarm oppositions. State narratives circumscribe speech and limit the potential for collective action. Most importantly, these information control models help to define the attribution of blame and reward for policy decisions insulating autocratic rulers (Gehlbach and Finkel 2020).

This work builds on those insights to provide an information-based theory of constrained electoral competition that acknowledges the role of information in electoral control strategies. Popular coordination at the ballot box or on the streets depends on common knowledge of the true preferences of citizens – knowledge that is scarce in autocratic systems. Contemporary autocratic regimes limit coordination by privatizing information and obscuring common knowledge. This process occurs through censorship, propaganda, media ownership and centralization, disinformation, and framing. Ideational politics – from symbolic appeals to moral panics – play an important role in framing political debate and limiting political agendas. These tools work similarly to populism, defining artificial divisions in society, and creating a zero-sum winner-take-all competition.

The state can magnify the power of symbolic appeals by controlling the narratives and institutionalizing divisions through laws, redistribution, and social norms. In contrast, the organized opposition often lacks the tools to mobilize latent cleavages or even challenge the regime narrative. Elections challenge these systems through an interaction in which state and opposition strategies reveal new information about state strength and opposition grievances, the nature of the state, and the willingness of citizens to act on their preferences.

At the same time, the decision to hold elections makes the regime vulnerable. As I show in the next chapter, regime decisions about electoral competition inevitably reveal private information about opposition strength and regime weakness. When oppositions can articulate this new information, these signals enable coordination as individuals engage in post-election protest, either in response to opposition success at the ballot box or because some or all opposition parties were excluded from the campaign, revealing the corrupt nature of the process.

The game-theoretic model in Chapter 2 demonstrates that the content of revealed information and, therefore, the likelihood of popular coordination vary depending on state and opposition strategies. As both sets of actors look forward, they try to position themselves to adopt strategies that best support their goals. The state wants to limit any risk of popular coordination and safeguard private information. It prefers to let weak opposition parties run and lose and works between elections to be able to implement this option.

Conversely, the opposition works toward strategies that reveal new information through elections, such as highlighting the coercive nature of the regime or the lack of accountability in the system. This approach not

only reveals new explanations for opposition weakness, it also identifies strategies that can render weak opposition a significant player as the opposition seeks to capitalize on electoral gains or protest experience and shifts resources between protest and electoral actions.<sup>6</sup>

This approach provides new insight into when managed elections lead to unexpected outcomes. It is when the campaign period produces new, actionable information that sparks popular engagement in the form of opposition voting and potentially post-election protest. This information may be realized through a state decision, such as banning an opposition organization from the ballot, or through its campaign strategy. It can also be demonstrated by the formation of opposition coalitions or by an orchestrated vote protest action. When election processes and outcomes reveal that the election has been stolen, this information can produce coordination around post-election protest, as large crowds challenge the regime on the streets.

As the discussion indicates, the information approach yields a final contribution of this study: to reconceptualize the role that oppositions play in controlled electoral competition. Often studies of autocratic stability overlook opposition organizations until there is a breakthrough. Yet, in the presence of regularly scheduled elections, the strength of the opposition is not a constant, nor are the tools of contestation fixed. Focusing on how shifts in opposition strategies, particularly around information and common knowledge, can provide insight into why and how the regime adjusts its strategies over time and the limits of different tools. It can also reveal important insight into the accumulation of opposition capacity both within the organized opposition and within societal forces over time. This work reveals that these forces play an underappreciated role in the conduct of elections.

#### WHY RUSSIA? THEORETIC INNOVATION, INTERNAL VALIDITY, AND GENERALIZATION

This empirical focus of this work is on the nature of electoral competition and popular protest in a single country, the Russian Federation, over three

<sup>6</sup> Wig and Rød (2016) demonstrate that elections provoke challenges when they reveal opposition weakness, revealing the link between an electoral shock and elite coups. In contrast, Lindberg (2006) demonstrates that in Africa, elections have democratizing effects that build over time. Hale (2014) provides evidence of re-equilibration after elections unseat lame-duck incumbents, precluding regime change. And as Schedler (2006) notes, regime shifts can happen suddenly or over time, raising questions about the capacity of the regime and opposition to build momentum over time.



national election cycles. While this approach is well suited to the intellectual problem of testing a model that links electoral competition to post-election protest over time, it generates challenges regarding the scope of the project and its ability to generalize across cases. I provide external validity for this work in two ways. First, I locate the Russian case in the theoretic and empirical literature. As the VDem data indicates, Russia's stability is not unique. Second, in Chapter 3, I test implications of my theory using a cross-national dataset on post-election protest. Yet the book remains a single-country case, raising two questions central to the comparative endeavor: why focus on Russia, and what is the value of the Russian case for understanding the broader political processes in non-democratic regimes?

My goal in designing this study is to use Russia's political evolution to test a comparative theory and improve our understanding of the role of elections in non-democratic regime durability – defined as success in winning elections and containing mass protest. The theory developed in Chapter 2 links national-level outcomes to a mid-level theory of opposition–regime interaction in elections and an explanation of individual-level citizen response to that interaction. This framework highlights the fact that non-democratic regimes must survive the immediate threats inherent in each election and rebuild or maintain their position between elections to preserve electoral majorities, undermine opposition capacity, and eliminate the informational cues that lead to popular coordination.

I argue this research design offers unique advantages for the theoretic side of the project. The first response to the single-county critique is that the study builds on a foundation of comparative theory – the authoritarian institutionalism and coordination models of protest – to identify when elections provide a platform for regime challenges. My work extends existing theories in four important ways. First, it focuses not on regime change but on incremental changes in regime dynamics, measured by the mix of strategies employed between and during elections to engineer regime victories. Second, the study contributes to the literature on authoritarian institutions by recognizing the role that information and informal institutions play in shaping electoral outcomes. Third, the study refocuses attention on inter-election policies that to redress the problems identified in the last election with an eye toward contextual changes that could shape the next contest. This focus on the inter-election period draws attention to the disproportionate power and resources of the incumbent regime, while also explaining why it is difficult for opposition organizations to capitalize

on unexpected victories. The contingent nature of the sequential model provides a strong argument for a single-country comparison over time.

The second response to the critique of single-case studies is that Russia provides an unlikely case for social or opposition influence on regime strategies. In the study of transition and non-democratic contexts, the lack of formal ties between opposition groups and social forces, as well as the de-politicization and control of civic organizations, implies group action must be explained and not assumed. Russia is a challenging case because it has been categorized as not free by Freedom House based on increased harassment of opposition forces, media control, and electoral manipulation. It is a case with hybrid elections, in which we might expect minimal influence by social forces. Surprisingly, though, the Kremlin was and is attuned to the potential for social contestation and has taken steps to meet potential challenges. These findings confirm that even in authoritarian regimes, elections shape regime politics – and that the challenge faced by the regime depends on the nature of the contest.

Finally, the middle part of the book tests a model of individual-level participation and elections, relying on both qualitative and quantitative data. The model that explains protest participation draws on social movement theories to explore why some Russians protested while others supported the regime, and why the vast majority of citizens took no action. Comparing individuals within one country allows me to focus on causal factors that vary at the individual level. This work engages social movement theory to demonstrate that there are multiple pathways to political activism that vary across political preferences, past experiences, personal networks, biographical factors, political interest, and information use.

This approach also recognizes that the threat to the regime is not only embodied in the pro- and anti-regime activists, it also includes nonparticipants whose actions can signal alienation or apathy or contentment with the regime or latent support for oppositions. An important goal of this individual-level analysis is to understand the differences across these three groups, requiring data on institutional arrangements, institutional change, informal controls, and information constraints.<sup>7</sup> These measures capture institutional and informal mechanisms that enable citizens to attribute blame as well as the content and viability of the oppositions' solutions. Controlling for these factors in a single country study prevents

<sup>7</sup> Anderson (2001) highlights these issues in his study of the economic determinants of voting that he labeled the clarity of responsibility and clarity of alternatives.

some of the conceptual and measurement issues that can compromise the internal validity of a cross-national study.

Both the individual-level model of social mobilization and the middle-range theory of regime–opposition interaction in elections require unique data. To explore individual-level responses to electoral falsification, I draw on focus groups, activist interviews, and survey data. I surveyed participants at the FFE protest and the pro-Putin rallies at the end of the first cycle of protest events in March 2012. At the end of the second cycle of protest in June 2012, the same team surveyed Muscovites who had not participated in the protests by drawing a stratified sample from across the city. I label these data as the PRN survey and rely on these data in Chapters 6, 7, and 8 to test protest mobilization theories and to provide a detailed picture of protesters, rally participants, and nonparticipants, including their attitudes and commitment to the regime.

Table 1.3 describes the structure of the PRN data and its subsamples. The statistics confirm the characterization of the protest and rally samples as capturing groups of largely engaged, activist individuals, while also revealing considerable variation in attitudes and behaviors within each group. The sampling frame, instrumentation, collection process, and variable construction for these data are detailed in Appendix 1.

TABLE 1.3 *PRN survey data*

|   | Protestors | Rally participants | Nonparticipants |
|---|------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| <i>N</i>                                      | 484        | 363                | 291             |
| Male  | 57.6%      | 50.0%              | 48.8%           |
| Under 30                                      | 59.1%      | 52.1%              | 44.3%           |
| University graduate                           | 63.8%      | 42.7%              | 54.3%           |
| Voted in 2011 Duma election                   | 78.3%      | 82.4%              | 63.2%           |
| Voted in 2012 presidential election           | 88.8%      | 88.7%              | 68.0%           |
| High political interest                       | 71.3%      | 57.6%              | 22.3%           |
| Country going in right direction              | 2.1%       | 33.9%              | 3.8%            |
| Corruption getting worse                      | 70.3%      | 20.1%              | 63.2%           |
| Experiencing economic hardship                | 16.7%      | 5.2%               | 17.5%           |
| Falsification in 2011 election changed result | 76.2%      | 18.2%              | 42.3%           |

*Note:* Percentages for issue questions are percentage who agree. For details on variables, see Appendix 1.

The second type of individual-level data is drawn from Stephen White's (2014) national study of Russian voting behavior as well as aggregate polling data that the Levada Center collected at the protest actions. I use these data to check the validity of my FFE data, to confirm the results of the analysis, and to extend the analysis. Other data capture citizen attitudes, providing a guide to understand both opposition and regime strategies as they responded to the 2011 election and protests and prepared for subsequent elections. Finally, I supplement these data with focus groups and interview data collected over several years, including a study of activists who participated in the Navalny mayoral campaign in 2013.

Does this single-country study lead to generalizable findings? I argue that it does. For example, as I show in the next chapter, the effects of opposition strategies on protest mobilization vary across regime types because they provide different types of information about the intent of the incumbent regime. While these findings suggest that weak oppositions can influence politics even in the face of authoritarian control, they may not predict the same outcomes in a country that is in the gray zone.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the chapters on protest coordination demonstrate that pro-regime protests cannot be explained by relying on the same model of coordination that describes individual participation. Instead, pro-regime rallies are better explained by side payments and mobilization through state-sponsored organizations.

At the same time, the study suggests caution in interpreting regime support as bought or artificial, as some core supporters expressed sincere attachment to the regime. Yet, this attachment was not uniform. The study reveals that many regime supporters held different political attitudes and even skepticism about the regime. I return to this theme in the concluding chapter. However, the contrast between the mobilization models of the regime and organized opposition provides new insights into the mechanisms that drive regime dynamics.

#### THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

The structure of this book reflects the sequential processes of controlled electoral competition that links electoral outcomes in one period with a long period of strategic adjustment, then a new election. In each period, the argument links a macro-level theory of opposition–regime interaction

<sup>8</sup> The approach echoes Donno's (2013) findings that the capacity for change varies depending on the nature of the regime at the point of elections.

with a micro-level study of how opposition leaders, activists, and ordinary citizens respond to that interaction. The discussion of the inter-election period reflects my theory of how regimes insulate themselves from future challenges by working to limit the actionable information revealed in the next election. I also consider how the opposition position themselves in light of regime strategies to politicize the election and contest for power. The plan of the book follows this sequence that links the two levels of analysis over time, covering three elections and two inter-election periods. Figure 1.2 maps my argument to the empirical chapters.

The framework linking elections over time codifies my argument that regime and opposition successes and failures in one election inform their strategies in the inter-election period. The responses are codified in the period between elections.

The central model of state–opposition interactions is developed in Chapter 2. The chapter presents a game, the hybrid electoral management (HEM) game, that models state–opposition interaction in controlled elections. The HEM game is a unified theory of electoral conduct and post-election protest that focuses on the information revealed by the state and oppositions’ electoral strategies. In this signaling game, state strategies are chosen to ensure elections, while the opposition is working to reveal state weaknesses. When the strategies reveal new information about opposition strength, state weakness, or the nature of the regime, it can rapidly

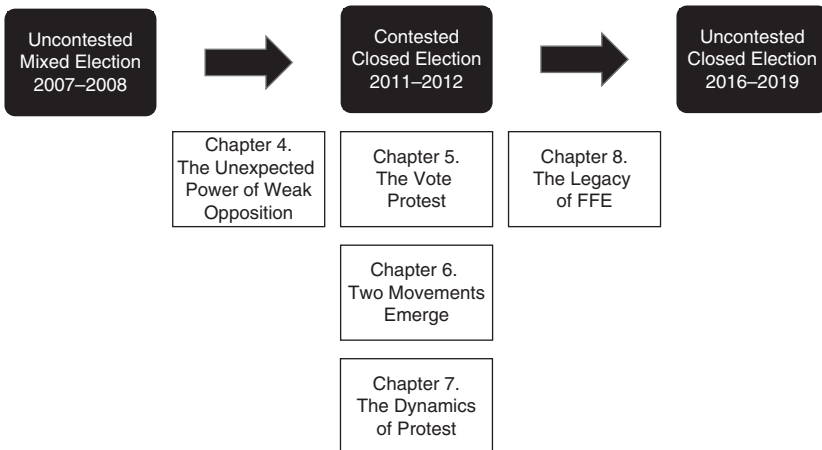


FIGURE 1.2 The plan of the book

transform the context by reengaging citizens and generating coordination at the ballot box and on the streets.

Chapter 3 tests some implications of the HEM game, relying on Hyde and Marinov's (2012) cross-national NELDA and the Coppedge et al. (2019) VDem datasets. The analysis demonstrates that different state and opposition strategies – from media control to boycotts – have different effects on post-election protest. Moreover, the results show that these effects vary by regime type. This analysis demonstrates that the HEM game not only sheds light on developments in Russian politics but also characterizes controlled electoral competition in other regimes. Chapter 3 also uses comparative theory to identify the mechanisms that the regime and opposition employ in the inter-election period to capitalize on gains or mitigate losses and details the evolution of the Russian electoral management system.

Chapter 4 examines the shifting opportunity structure in the lead-up to the 2011–2012 contest. The analysis draws on social movement theory to explain the emergence of a proto-movement that generated new information in the election process, allowing for popular coordination around the post-election protest strategy. The aggregate-level evidence demonstrates some of the factors that shaped coordination, factors that are difficult to capture in the original survey data collected on-site at protests and rallies: the suddenly imposed nature of grievances, the shared emotion among the protest vanguard, and the debate over mobilization frames.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 explore individual-level political behavior in the 2011–2012 election and protest cycle. The evidence in these chapters tests the individual-level implications of the HEM game. Chapter 5 explores opposition efforts in 2011 to counter the regime's disproportionate power to shape elections and provide new actionable information by launching a vote protest and observer movement. It details competing vote protest strategies, including boycott, abstention, spoiling ballots, and voting for anyone but UR. The empirical analysis tests the model using the PRN and White data.

Chapters 6 and 7 compare citizens' decisions to protest, attend pro-regime rallies, or abstain from action. This framework for the analysis synthesizes theories of popular mobilization drawn from the social movement literature, rational choice theories of coordination, and work on the post-Communist colored revolutions to explain individual-level decisions to protest, stay home, or participate in pro-regime rallies. Chapter 6 tests this model using the PRN data to identify the correlates of different types

of activism. It also explores the meaning of inaction, demonstrating that not all who chose not to participate did so out of apathy or fear.

Chapter 7 explores movement dynamics to understand not only which citizens protested or supported the regime, but also how committed they were to the process. The empirical analysis highlights stark differences between mobilization patterns in the rallies and protests, and also reveals important differences among political beliefs and attitudes toward the regime across these different groups. Together, Chapters 6 and 7 outline a complex picture of coordination that occurred at different times and through distinct pathways, generating a significant challenge to the regime.

Chapter 8 examines both state and opposition strategies between 2012 and the next election cycle, 2016–2018. I adapt the framework developed in Chapter 4 to explore the legacy of FFE in the face of regime efforts to diminish it. The central finding is that the opposition continued to develop a strategy that linked elections and protest to produce information that would challenge regime control. The narrative explores how the opposition drew resources from protest actions and invested them in new electoral strategies, producing remarkable success as well as notorious failures. The evidence also demonstrates a shift in regime strategy to rely on ideational politics to rebuild its voting core in the face of persistent economic crisis.

The conclusion, Chapter 9, draws out the broad contributions of the book for the comparative theory of authoritarian regimes. Most importantly, it underscores that the potential for change in state and opposition capacity between elections means that every contest may have a different set of equilibrium conditions. This finding emphasizes that constructing pro-regime winning majorities is a continuous process that shapes policy during campaigns and between elections. It also demonstrates that increasing electoral control can obscure very significant social changes and popular discontent. With time, this growing frustration can spill out onto the streets in post-election protest or inter-election contentious politics prompting unexpected and seemingly spontaneous regime challenges.

The concluding chapter also describes the 2018 presidential contest and addresses Russia's future in light of two shocks. The first shock is political. In 2024, Putin will face term limits as he did in 2008. Containing popular dissent at the ballot box has constrained the regime's choices by precluding the rise of new, independent national candidates who might serve as a successor to Putin. Regime control has also created demands for

political change and electoral accountability, establishing a foundation for street protests if the next election reveals significant social discontent. To address this challenge, the Kremlin outlined a plan to revise the constitution and allow Putin to run for office again, under the new constitutional system. To provide legitimacy for the decision, Putin announced a national plebiscite to endorse the changes. The plan provoked unexpected societal opposition.

Within a month of these announcements, the COVID-19 global pandemic struck Russia. The regime postponed the plebiscite, using the pandemic as cover to build its management strategy. As conditions worsened in mid-May 2020, the national parliament adopted a law to allow online and mail-in voting. The opposition immediately pointed out the opportunities this move generated for a controlled election.

The introduction of the new constitution, Putin's decision to run for a fifth term, and the announcement of a plebiscite coupled with the exogenous shock of the pandemic, illustrate the importance of context, organized oppositions, and new information on controlled elections. The concluding chapter interprets these events through the lens of the theory developed in the study, suggesting the longer-term effects on the next election cycle and the durability of the Putin regime.