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Latin America’s Authoritarian Drift

THE THREAT FROM THE POPULIST LEFT

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Around the turn of the millennium, prominent Latin America specialist Scott Mainwaring highlighted the surprising endurance of democracy in that region after the transition wave of the late 1970s and 1980s.1 During that interval, no democracy had permanently succumbed to a military coup or slid back into authoritarian rule. After decades marked by instability in numerous countries, especially Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, this newfound democratic resilience came as a welcome surprise.

But at about the time Mainwaring was writing, onetime coupmaker Hugo Chávez was winning election to the Venezuelan presidency and beginning to move his country away from democratic rule. Venezuela had survived the rash of military coups that swept the region in the 1960s and 1970s to become a byword for democratic stability in Latin America. Economic deterioration, political ossification, and rampant corruption had brought sustained decay, however, and paved the way for this radical populist, former army officer, and would-be golpista (he had led a violent putsch that failed in February 1992) to decisively win the free and fair December 1998 balloting. Using plebiscitarian strategies to transform the country’s liberal institutional framework, concentrate power, and entrench himself, Chávez set about strangling democracy and putting competitive authoritarianism in its place.2 He remained as president till he died of cancer on 5 March 2013.

The Chávez phenomenon has had strong demonstration and contagion effects beyond Venezuela. Eager to overcome instability and cement their own supremacy, Presidents Evo Morales of Bolivia (2006–)
and Rafael Correa of Ecuador (2007–) have emulated Chávez’s script. As did their political ally and financial benefactor, they have used constituent assemblies to augment executive powers, allow for presidential reelection, and weaken institutional checks and balances. From that position of strength, they have made discretionary use of the law for political purposes. With this discriminatory legalism, they have attacked, undermined, and intimidated the opposition in their respective countries, moving toward competitive authoritarianism as well.

Similarly, strong informal pressures and disrespect for constitutional principles have enabled Daniel Ortega (2007–) to establish his hegemony in Nicaragua. President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras (2006–2009) also sought to follow in the footsteps of Chávez, Morales, and Correa by convoking a constituent assembly and preparing his own perpetuation in power; yet coordinated opposition from Congress, the courts, and the military aborted this effort through a controversial June 2009 coup. Even President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina (2007–), whose fervent supporters take inspiration from Chávez, is eyeing constitutional changes and renewed reelection (she is now in her second term). Given Argentina’s weak and disunited opposition, this push for entrenchment, combined with continuing attacks on the press and the president’s personalistic command over the state, has created alarm in civil society about looming threats to the country’s hard-won democracy.

That Venezuela had already fallen under nondemocratic rule was confirmed in October 2012 by Chávez’s unfair reelection, achieved with the help of intimidation tactics, tight restrictions on the opposition, and the massive misuse of the state apparatus. Since the third wave reached Latin America in 1978, the region had seen only occasional threats and temporary interruptions of democracy in individual nations. The recent suffocation of political pluralism in a whole group of countries is without precedent. For the first time in decades, democracy in Latin America is facing a sustained, coordinated threat. The regional trend toward democracy, which had prevailed since the late 1970s, has suffered a partial reversal. Unexpectedly, democracy is now on the defensive in parts of the region.

With its electoral façade and progressive rhetoric about helping the excluded, the soft authoritarianism that is taking hold in parts of Latin America has an attractive face. It exerts an appeal on regional and global public opinion to which academics are not immune. The military dictators of the 1960s and 1970s were ogres with no legitimacy who depicted themselves as stopgaps—house cleaners putting politics in order so democracy could return. By contrast, Chávez and friends have claimed to institute a new participatory—and hence qualitatively better—form of democracy and to promote social equity and national independence. Rather than a short-lived detour, they seek to carve out a distinct development path purportedly leading to what Chávez called “socialism for
the twenty-first century.” Their competitive authoritarianism appears not as a limited interruption but a permanent alternative to pluralist, representative democracy. This appeal is unusual among contemporary nondemocracies; it contrasts with Russian strongman Vladimir Putin’s more bluntly unsavory brand of autocracy, for instance. These “progressive” claims aggravate the risks emanating from the recent turn to authoritarian rule.

The current authoritarian trend in Latin America is not regionwide: Major countries such as Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and now Colombia seem safely consolidated as democracies; Costa Rica and Uruguay boast especially high democratic performance. But the unexpected ease with which a coordinated nucleus of competitive authoritarianism has emerged must give pause. To see even Argentina, with its tragic history, being lured by the siren song of personalistic plebiscititarianism is worrisome indeed.

Establishing Political Hegemony

As Steven Levitsky and James Loxton and Raúl Madrid have emphasized, Chávez and his friends used populism to entrench their predominance and install competitive authoritarian regimes. Populism, understood as a strategy for winning and exerting state power, inherently stands in tension with democracy and the value that it places upon pluralism, open debate, and fair competition. Populism revolves around personalistic leadership that feeds on quasi-direct links to a loosely organized mass of heterogenous followers. Bypassing or subjugating intermediate institutions such as firmly organized parties, the leader—often a charismatic figure—establishes face-to-face contact with large numbers of citizens. In earlier decades, mass rallies were crucial; nowadays, television allows populists to reach their followers “in person.” Chávez hosted a regular Sunday talk show. The leader in turn ascertains “the people’s will” through frequent popular votes and opinion polls. To show vigorous leadership, seem indispensable, and boost followers’ loyalty, populist politicians are fond of constantly attacking enemies, at least rhetorically. In this way, the leader blames others for the problems that have allowed the leader to take power and act as the savior of the fatherland. The leader is the star of a drama in which “the people” struggle heroically under the leader’s direction against selfish, corrupt enemies at home and abroad.

As a political strategy, populism can have variegated and shifting ideological orientations and pursue diverse economic and social policies. Contemporary Latin America has seen populist presidents from the right, such as Argentina’s Carlos Saúl Menem (1989–99) and Peru’s Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000), and populists of the left such as Chávez, Morales, and Correa. Many populist leaders have embraced economic nationalism and state interventionism, yet others have imposed free-
market reforms. In a particular twist, the Peronist Menem dismantled the protectionism-based developmental model that his own party’s populist founder, Juan Perón (president from 1946 to 1955, and then again from 1973 to 1974), had installed.

Populism will always stand in tension with democracy. The logic of personalism drives populist politicians to widen their powers and discretion. Because these leaders sustain their influence via personal appeals rather than intermediary organizations, they see any institutions outside their control as obstacles to be bypassed or overcome. Determined and politically compelled to boost their personal predominance, populist leaders strive to weaken constitutional checks and balances and to subordinate independent agencies to their will. They undermine institutional protections against the abuse of power and seek political hegemony.

Correspondingly, populist leaders treat opponents not as adversaries in a fair and equal competition, but as profound threats. Branding rivals “enemies of the people,” they seek all means to defeat and marginalize them. Turning politics into a struggle of “us against them,” populists undermine pluralism and bend or trample institutional safeguards. Populist leaders also put strong pressure on independent forces in civil society and strive to control the media, especially television. All these attacks, depicted as a defense of the people against rapacious elites, are also meant to strengthen leader-follower bonds and thus to compensate for the lack of organizational mediation. The absence of institutional discipline in the populist movement prompts the leader to recharge the base’s loyalty through heroic activism. In all these ways, the populist notion of politics as an “all or nothing” struggle damages democracy.

Populism, whether of the left or the right, is a threat to democracy. Yet in Latin America today, the graver and more sustained danger is coming from the leftist variant. Chávez set the model. As soon as he was elected president of Venezuela, he set about revamping the country’s institutional framework. First, he called a constituent assembly. Then, to dislodge the established political class that he charged with selfishness and corruption, he successfully pushed to close the recently elected bicameral Congress, where his followers held only about a third of the seats. Thanks to a reengineered electoral system, Chávez dominated the constituent assembly that boosted his powers, ended the ban on consecutive terms, and created a new unicameral (and hence easier to control) national legislature. These institutional victories—plus the promise of socioeconomic change—lifted Chávez and his camp to victory in the 2000 elections. Moreover, he took control of the courts and other independent institutions, such as Venezuela’s electoral commission, and soon had a stranglehold on all branches of government.6

Chávez and his supporters, along with some academics and intellectuals, claimed that Venezuela had become a participatory democracy. Common citizens, so long neglected by traditional politicians, could
at last have a direct say in their own governance. There is some truth to these claims when it comes to local decision making and social-program implementation, but they are unconvincing as applied to the crucial arena of national policy making.

There should be no mistaking that Hugo Chávez made every important decision and thoroughly determined his country’s political course. No aide could rein him in, and the people lacked the capacity to advance their collective will independently. The absence of firm popular organization and of transparent decision-making procedures precluded effective bottom-up influence. Political initiative emanated from the leader, not the citizens. Chávez never changed any significant plan due to popular resistance. Even when he lost, as in the 2007 constitutional plebiscite, he simply redoubled his efforts and pushed through to his goals. Rather than driving decisions, the populace was the object of Chávez’s populist strategies and tactics, as can be seen from the rapid rise and decline of chavista movements such as the Bolivarian Circles. Talk about direct democracy cannot change contemporary Venezuela’s status as a prototypical case of personalistic populism. Chávez’s handpicked successor Nicolás Maduro, who won an April 2013 special election to the presidency, is perpetuating this top-down style—witness the strikingly opaque machinations that surrounded Maduro’s assumption of presidential powers during the later stages of Chávez’s illness.

Chávez’s success in revamping Venezuelan politics and fortifying his personal dominance turned his strategy of constitutional reform into a script that other populist-leaning left-wing leaders followed. The core of the Chávez method is to use plebiscitarian mass support in order to transform established institutions, dismantle checks and balances, concentrate power in the hands of the president, and promote immediate reelection. Like their Venezuelan role model and generous patron, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Manuel Zelaya in Honduras (till he was stopped) called for constituent assemblies with the aim of boosting the presidency’s powers and paving the way toward indefinite reelection to that office. Bolivia and Ecuador’s respective histories of acute instability—including interrupted presidencies—and consequent hopes for “a fresh start” guaranteed strong popular support for the new chief executives. With this majoritarian backing, personalistic leaders undermined liberal, pluralist institutions.

In Bolivia, the Morales government shut the opposition out of decisive stages of the constitution-drafting process. The charismatic leader then won his foes’ agreement to a referendum on the tailor-made charter by promising not to run in 2014. But he soon went back on this vow; a typical populist, he is determined to cling to power. In Ecuador, Rafael Correa got his constituent-assembly election by engineering the irregular removal of more than half the members of Congress. By in-
voking popular sovereignty, this populist leader managed to defeat his adversaries and rewrite the rules via a new charter that greatly increased presidential powers.

The Weapon of Discriminatory Legalism

Once these populists of the left established predominance, they used their unfettered control over all branches of government to limit debate, strike at opponents, and drastically tilt the electoral playing field. These maneuvers dismantled democratic accountability and eliminated safeguards against arbitrariness. Hegemonic presidents called frequent referenda to garner plebiscitarian acclaim, but always with arrangements in place to ensure that these ballot-box exercises never gave the opposition a fair chance to win. When adversaries did manage to claim a victory, as happened occasionally from 2007 to 2010 in Venezuela, Chávez employed all kinds of shenanigans to render it meaningless. In late 2010, for instance, he crippled a newly elected parliament with significant opposition representation by having the outgoing assembly, where his supporters had exclusive control, delegate extensive legislative powers to him.

In these ways, left-wing populists have slowly but surely smothered democracy and entrenched competitive authoritarian rule in several Latin American states. Their brand of soft authoritarianism violates basic principles of democracy by placing controls on the media and the opposition while the government electioneers use state resources. Even when presidents command high popularity, as left-wing populists often have, contests held under such profoundly unfair conditions cannot qualify as democratic. Where the parameters of political choice are so badly distorted, majority support cannot compensate for serious infringements of pluralism and competitiveness.

While justifying their undemocratic moves with progressive claims, left populists have eagerly availed themselves of timeworn tactics of Latin American politics. Presidents in the region have long been known for efforts to distort electoral competition and unfairly perpetuate themselves in power. In particular, they have applied discriminatory legalism and its maxim “For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law!” As populist chief executives have commandeered all major institutions including the courts, they have used formally legal authority in discretionary ways to promote their cronies and allies while punishing or intimidating critics and opponents in politics and society. With the government controlling all avenues of appeal and avoiding blatant violations of formal rules, those targeted find few chances for domestic recourse or the gathering of international support.

Here again, Chávez proved himself a trendsetter: He showed how skillfully an elected incumbent can employ discriminatory legalism to stifle debate and push critics and opponents to the wall. With comprehensive
control over Venezuela’s political institutions, Chávez closed a number of independent television stations and threatened the remaining ones; used trumped-up charges to jail or drive into exile recalcitrant judges and opposition leaders; and exploited oil rents and the state apparatus for campaigning. In these ways, he sapped the opposition’s chances of success and ensured himself frequent victories at the polls. If his adversaries did win against all odds, he used various ploys to limit the effects. After the opposition managed to win the mayoralty of Caracas in 2008, for instance, Chávez folded much of the city into a new Capital District under a handpicked commissioner who was given most of the power and funding that had previously been under the mayor’s control. With such unfair tactics, this populist leader undermined democracy and skewed political competition.

Seeing how discriminatory legalism has served to entrench competitive authoritarian rule in Venezuela, the leftist presidents of Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua have followed suit and imitated Chávez. In Latin America today, the strangling of pluralism and competitiveness is not confined to a single case. Instead, formally legal means to control the media, attack the opposition, and massively use the state for electioneering are catching on in a whole set of countries as handy expedients for incumbents intent upon securing a lock on power.

In Bolivia, Evo Morales and his Movement Toward Socialism have used trumped-up charges of administrative irregularities, corruption, terrorism, and genocide against numerous opposition politicians, imprisoning some, driving many others out of the country, and intimidating the rest. The competitiveness that is essential to democracy cannot survive in such a hostile setting. Ecuador’s Rafael Correa has applied similar tactics, for example against the politician who challenged him in the 2006 election. Correa also seized on a 2010 police rebellion—painted by him as a coup attempt—as a pretext for cracking down on independent social and political forces. And he has intimidated the media by suing for exorbitant damages and stiff prison sentences over an opinion piece. Daniel Ortega has decreed many paralegal measures in Nicaragua’s weakly institutionalized polity and has put persistent pressure on independent NGOs. After extracting concessions from an opposition leader who had been convicted of corruption charges, Ortega packed the courts and then had his appointees on the bench exempt him from the constitution’s ban on immediate reelection. Furthermore, Ortega’s supporters relied on manipulation and fraud in the 2008 municipal elections. In Nicaragua, discriminatory legalism has shaded into systematic illegalism.

Even in Argentina, where democracy has so far survived populist pressures, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (often known as CFK) has started to follow a Chávez-like script. Businesspeople who publicly criticize her have found themselves targets of special tax audits. Media outlets that draw her ire—the newspaper Clarín is a particu-
lar thorn in her side—have faced everything from antitrust investigations to mob violence. Even as it has been bullying critics, the ruling group around Kirchner has been floating the idea of calling a constituent assembly to pave the way for a third CFK term. Argentine civil society, however, has pushed back harder against this scheme than civil society in a “Bolivarian” country would likely be able to do. Mass protests in late 2012 noisily opposed the extension of CFK’s rule, suggesting that Argentina will not easily be led down the Chávez path.

**Populism Left and Right**

The populist wing of Latin America’s contemporary left poses a significantly stronger challenge to democracy than did the wave of right-wing populist presidents who rose to prominence in the 1990s (or in Colombia’s case, the 2000s). Carlos Menem and Alberto Fujimori, along with Brazil’s Fernando Collor de Mello (1990–92) and Colombia’s Alvaro Uribe (2002–10), also employed populist strategies, but on behalf of neoliberal economic policies and, in Peru and Colombia, the need to defeat violent leftist guerrillas. Despite differing from the current crop of left-wing populists on ideology and policy, these rightist presidents nonetheless favored a similar personalistic leadership style and mobilized amorphous, heterogeneous mass followings in a quasi-direct fashion. Each president cast himself as the people’s champion in a struggle against malign forces such as established politicians and left-wing insurgents. In these ways, neoliberal populists garnered wide popular support that they sought to sustain with plebiscitarian tactics.

In typical populist fashion, these neoliberal politicians sought to boost presidential powers, weaken checks and balances, and extend their control over the government while preparing their own reelectors. Menem, for instance, bent constitutional rules by issuing an unprecedented number of “emergency” decrees and packed Argentina’s Supreme Court in order to protect his arrogations of power. Collor steamrolled Brazil’s Congress, forcing legislators to accept drastic macroeconomic-stabilization measures by using his decree powers to confront the lawmakers with a *fait accompli*. Menem and Uribe pushed constitutional changes designed to help them get reelected. Most blatantly, Fujimori closed Congress and took control of the courts with his 1992 *autogolpe* (self-coup). Faced with strong international protests, he sought to tack away from naked authoritarianism by calling a constituent assembly that augmented presidential prerogatives and allowed for his reelection. The new charter also weakened the legislative branch by replacing Peru’s bicameral Congress with a unicameral assembly. In these ways, right-wing populists damaged Latin American democracy, destroying it altogether for a time in Peru.

But this deterioration was limited in severity in Argentina, Brazil, and
Colombia, and in duration in Peru. Collor did not keep his promise to “kill inflation” and was defeated by Brazil’s political class, which forced him to resign amid a corruption scandal. Menem and Uribe did achieve policy success and parlayed the resulting popularity into convincing reelection victories. But the desire of each to win a third consecutive term ran afoul of intraparty opposition in Argentina and a powerful independent Constitutional Court in Colombia. When Menem and Uribe stepped down, democracy in Argentina and Colombia recovered. Even Fujimori, who in 2000 managed to win a second reelection, fell soon thereafter as his ever more extreme personalism collapsed under its self-destructive logic. Once the president had pulverized the party system and subjugated the Peruvian state, his rule was thoroughly extra-institutional, resting on shady personal connections sustained by widespread corruption. When evidence of this crass bribery surfaced, Fujimori’s hold on power vanished. The political demise of Fujimori—who is now serving jail time for corruption and human-rights abuses—brought back full democracy, with ample public debate and free and fair elections. Thus, right-wing populism did not ruin democracy in Argentina, Brazil, or Colombia, and in Peru democracy’s destruction and temporary replacement were followed by a quick resurrection.

By contrast, left-wing populism has a more negative balance sheet. Chávez dominated Venezuelan politics for fourteen years, stopped only by his death. His underlings have good chances of retaining control, aided by the emotional impact of Chávez’s “martyrdom.” Morales, Correa, and Ortega have also cemented their respective hegemonies and prepared their own continuations in power. Bolivia’s president, as mentioned, has gone back on his promise not to run again in 2014. With Correa’s February 2013 reelection to a third term now behind him, he is poised to tighten his own political stranglehold. Given these leaders’ unfettered control over state resources and their willingness to employ discriminatory legalism, opposition forces face steep uphill battles in a context of heavily rigged electoral competition. Incumbent governments have jailed opposition politicians or driven them out of the country in Bolivia, and have attacked and intimidated civil society in Ecuador and Nicaragua. These tightening constraints on political pluralism give the nondemocratic leaders of left-wing populism ever firmer foundations for their rule.

The Levers of the Left

Why has left-wing populism been doing more damage to democracy in Latin America than right-wing populism did? This asymmetry reflects differences not in intention, but in capacity. Today’s populists of the left command greater political strength and have more policy tools. They can push further down the road toward concentrated power than could their neoliberal cousins of a few years ago.
First, right-wing populism has a temporary (usually crisis-driven) support base, while leftist populism has more lasting roots, particularly in the “informal” sectors that figure so largely in the economies of many Latin American countries. Second, by reducing the power of the state over markets and private economic actors, neoliberalism diminishes the power of right-wing leaders. The growing state interventionism favored by left-wing populists, by contrast, gives them additional means of influence. Third, neoliberalism exposes right-wing populists to international pressures for democracy; economic nationalism, by contrast, insulates leftist presidents from such exhortations. Finally, right-wing populists acted separately, while today’s left-wing leaders form a coordinated group. This cohesion further disarms international pressures to maintain democracy. For all these reasons, Bolivarian leaders have managed to strangle democracy much more effectively than neoliberal populists ever could.

The populists of the right always stood on shakier political ground than that of Chávez and his friends. Neoliberal populists won office by vowing to solve crises. Success made these leaders dispensable. By contrast, left-wing populists invoke structural problems—poverty, inequality, marginalization—that allow only for slow progress and resist definitive resolution. Stubborn problems thus justify one reelection of “the leader” after another. Moreover, these presidents have relied not only on performance-based legitimacy, but also on durable identity-based appeals that cast them as champions of, for example, informal workers, barrio residents, or indigenous people.

The right-wing populist presidents Menem, Fujimori, and Collor rose to power amid bouts of hyperinflation. These economic catastrophes discredited the existing parties in Argentina, Peru, and Brazil, respectively, opening space in each country for an outsider who pledged to stop the pain. But the political weakness that followed Collor’s failure to end inflation contributed to his downfall on corruption charges. Menem and Fujimori eventually brought skyrocketing prices under control and received massive popular support in return. But the backing did not endure: Once these presidents had restored economic stability, voters switched to worrying about poverty and unemployment—problems that executives committed to neoliberal austerity, budget discipline, and privatization found much harder to solve. Within Menem’s own Peronist party, for instance, a rival running to Menem’s left cut him off from his hopes for a third term.

Fujimori and Uribe also won popular support with their success in fighting guerrillas. An improving security situation boosted each president’s popularity for a while. But as the danger receded, especially in Peru, citizens’ priorities shifted, exposing the two chief executives to a paradox of success. Their very accomplishments hamstrung their efforts to perpetuate themselves in office. Fujimori fell in 2000, the victim of his achievements as well as his considerable excesses, and Uribe failed to parlay his 2008 victories over leftist insurgents into another reelection in 2010.
Left-wing populists, by contrast, base their appeal on structural problems. They highlight Latin America’s longstanding social deficits, especially widespread poverty and inequality. While the established political class looks self-serving and beholden to privileged elites, left-wing populists project concern for common citizens and start generous social programs that—despite frequent administrative problems stemming from politicization—significantly increase benefits, alleviate destitution, and bring symbolic recognition as well. This deliberate identification with ordinary people and their plight is reinforced by the leaders’ affiliations with the popular sectors from which they spring (or with which they identify themselves). Left-populist identity politics is especially important in Bolivia, where the supporters of Morales like to boast that he is the first indigenous president that this majority-indigenous country has ever had. Similarly, Chávez dwelt often on his humble upbringing and spoke in a popular (and vulgar) idiom not previously associated with presidents of Venezuela.

Left-wing populists claim to be the first chief executives to embrace a preferential option for the poor. Their social programs embody this commitment, but cannot quickly overcome longstanding structural deficits. This slow progress with no end in sight yields more durable political payoffs than neoliberal populists’ success in solving dramatic crises. Left-wing populists prove their social orientation and performance, and then point to the difficulty of the task in order to explain why they must stay in office. Thus, activist social policies further cement identity-based loyalties. These bonds give left-wing populism more reliable political sustenance than neoliberal leaders can command and allow left-wing populists to do graver damage to democracy.

The neoliberal economics to which recent right-wing populists were devoted ended up diminishing their control over economic matters and hence weakening them politically. Neoliberal orthodoxy limits leaders in other ways. Budget discipline restrains patronage spending. Personnel cuts shrink the leeway for hiring cronies. Reliance on market forces precludes large-scale employment programs. Moreover, business and international financial institutions insist on firm, transparent legal parameters and thus reduce
leaders’ autonomy and discretion. In sum, neoliberalism constrains populist chief executives and hinders their continued reelections.

By contrast, left-leaning populists boost state interventionism. They add to the public payroll, increase regulation, and nationalize enterprises. This yields growing patronage resources, so presidents can buy support and press their opponents. As ever more people come to depend on the state, they become possible targets for discriminatory legalism. Citizens have an incentive to toe the line and back the incumbent, however grudgingly, as in the 2012 election that returned a dying Hugo Chávez to the presidency of Venezuela. Businesspeople need to think twice before funding oppositionists lest the government find a pretext to revoke business licenses, deny access to foreign exchange, or impose other sanctions. Once a populist president has established hegemony and defanged accountability mechanisms, extensive state interventionism offers untold new chances to reward friends, punish foes, and tilt the playing field.

In the years since the Cold War’s end, international pressures in favor of democracy have come to the fore. Neoliberal economic-policy commitments exposed right-wing populists to these in ways that left-wing populists have seldom if ever experienced. After Fujimori’s self-coup, he quickly backed away from open authoritarianism lest economic sanctions foil his market reforms. To preserve his hard-won economic success, Fujimori called elections for a constituent assembly and restored room for political competition. Neoliberalism trumped authoritarianism. Similar external pressures later limited Fujimori’s efforts to manipulate the 2000 presidential election; they also hindered Menem’s and Uribe’s attempts to stay in office.

Left-wing populists, by contrast, can huddle behind economic nationalism. Reduced reliance on global market forces and rising statism build walls against international efforts to promote democracy. Under fire for blatant uses of discriminatory legalism, Chávez pulled out of hemispheric institutions such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. He also kept international election observers out of Venezuela, which helped him to hide how badly he had warped the competitive arena in his own favor. With the continuing boom in oil and natural-gas prices, commodity-rich Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela have been able to ignore global market pressures (as has Nicaragua, which receives Venezuelan subsidies).

Yesterday’s right-wing populists differed from today’s left-wing populists, finally, in being less organized as a group. Neoliberal presidents may have banded together to found the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) but they never did much to support one another diplomatically. For instance, neither Menem nor Collor backed Fujimori after his self-coup, and neither ever came close to trying to shutter Congress. When Chávez put democracy to death by constituent assemblies, he inspired imitators. Fujimori’s more direct attack on democracy had no such effect on his neoliberal peers.
Left-wing populists act in coordinated ways. Morales, Correa, and Zelaya (who was stopped early in the process) sought to retrace Chávez’s path through constitutional change to political hegemony and discriminatory legalism. Daniel Ortega took advantage of Nicaragua’s low level of institutionalization to push his changes through by informal means. They all benefited from Chávez’s petrodollars, political advice, diplomatic support, and security protection. This comprehensive backing from Caracas strengthened left-wing populists both at home and abroad. Thus did Chávez help to smother democracy in several countries.

The tendency of left-wing populists to close ranks also serves to protect their assaults on political competition from international rescue efforts. The hemispheric community can force the president of Peru to retreat from open authoritarianism, but has no such leverage on a cohesive group of countries that aid one another and wield something akin to a veto within regional institutions. Among their tacit allies have been more moderate countries, such as Brazil, which see Bolivarian radicalism as a handy foil that raises their bargaining power vis-à-vis Washington. The diplomatic self-interests of Latin American democracies have thus played a role in hampering international efforts to prevent authoritarian backsliding in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua.

In fact, left-wing populists have skillfully used the region’s democracy-defense arrangements to abet their own internal assaults on democracy. International mechanisms to protect competitive rule were designed with dramatic threats, such as coups against elected presidents, in mind. When Chávez faced an irresolute attempted coup in 2002, these mechanisms helped him, just as they helped Evo Morales when he had to deal with mass protests in 2008. It is no small matter that chief executives, who naturally display solidarity with their counterparts elsewhere, are typically the ones who must apply these measures.9

Discriminatory legalism has so far proved a democracy-strangling tactic that the international community has found hard to rein in. Outsiders to a country must first pierce the veil of formal legality, and then decide when discrimination has become bad enough and broad enough to count as a violation of democracy. Left-wing populists typically move gradually to undermine democracy; where is the threshold that calls for international intervention? The most visible victims are usually legislators, high-court judges, and party politicians—not types that foreign presidents will feel most eager to rescue. As elected populist presidents squeeze and manipulate their opponents, diplomatic backing against the onslaught can prove scarce.

Because they can so easily be made to shield perpetrators more than victims, current democracy-protection protocols in the region are serving to undermine democracy and—however unintentionally—to further tilt the playing field in several countries. Like discriminatory legalism at home, the asymmetrical internationalism that informs regional coun-
cils helps to spread and entrench nondemocracy. The new competitive authoritarian regimes of Latin American leftist populism lack the harshness of old-school dictatorships, but they have achieved a degree of “perfection” (to borrow Mario Vargas Llosa’s ironic term) that even Mexico’s long-ruling PRI in its heyday could not rival.

**A Surprising Threat**

Historically, it has been the right that has done the most damage to competitive civilian rule in Latin America, so when a new threat from the left emerged during a time of what appeared to be democratic consolidation, many observers were surprised. For decades, oligarchs had stifled mass participation while soldiers mouthing anticommunist slogans had all too often intervened to crush popular empowerment and democracy. Leftists bore the brunt of the repression, learning to stop calling democracy a “bourgeois farce” and to embrace human-rights safeguards and checks on state power. Much of Latin America’s left has thus come to have strong democratic credentials.

Populist politicians, however, lack firm commitment to ideologies and principles and concentrate on the quest for personal power. The urge to boost the leader’s clout, the dislike of constitutional limits, and the harsh treatment of rivals make populism an inherent threat to democracy. Populists both right and left have displayed these tendencies, but the latter have done more damage to democracy with their greater staying power and more skillful efforts to hoard power, knock down institutional safeguards, squeeze opponents, and skew competition. Beneath a veneer of formal legality, these populists have blunted and even exploited the hemisphere’s methods for guarding against reversals of democracy.

With its claims to make democracy more direct and to be especially mindful of the poor, left-wing populism has crafted an attractive message. It has spread from Venezuela to several other countries and has stimulated interest elsewhere, especially Argentina. The temptations that it spawns make Chávez-style populism a particular threat to democracy.

This threat also seems to have clear limits, however. Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, Uruguay, and now Colombia boast stable democracies. Steady institutions, pluralist party systems, and respectable government performance leave less room for populists. The downsides of Bolivarian populism, which include raging inflation, corruption, and violent crime, are well known and act as a deterrent. Left-wing populism and soft authoritarianism are unlikely to infect those countries.

Where leftists have achieved political success in those nations, they differ profoundly from Chávez. With coherent organizations and agendas, the Brazilian Workers’ Party, Chile’s Concertación, and Uruguay’s Broad Front have eschewed personalism and populism. Committed to existing institutions and gradual change, they have preserved and en-
riched democracy. Thus the authoritarian turn in Latin America today comes not from the left in general, but from a populism left that in certain countries is even more dangerous than its rightist forebear. The scrim of “progressive” rhetoric around this undemocratic style of politics only makes things worse.

Chávez’s death may abate this threat a bit, but competitive authoritarianism will likely persist and continue to hold appeal. The original Bolivarian leader is now gone, and Venezuelan subsidies may shrink, weakening especially Ortega in resource-poor Nicaragua. But the lessons of Chávez’s remarkable “success” live on and may inspire more imitators, particularly in Argentina. The undemocratic incumbents in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela have entrenched their rule and wield many tools for extending it, aided by the commodities boom. Moreover, neither the domestic opposition nor the international community has found a way to stop discriminatory legalism. For these reasons, the end of the authoritarian trend in Latin America is not in sight.

NOTES


2. For this concept, see Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

3. Democracy’s replacement by competitive authoritarianism has yet to take on sharp contours in every case. This suffocation is more evident in Venezuela under Chávez’s successor Nicolás Maduro, who has reacted to a spirited opposition challenge with ever more repression, than in Ecuador, where a weak, fragmented opposition allowed Correa to win an easy reelection victory in February 2013.


6. For a thorough analysis from an opposition standpoint, see Allan Brewer-Carías, Dismantling Democracy in Venezuela: The Chávez Authoritarian Experiment (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

7. Although Morales has imitated Chávez’s populist script, Morales rose as the leader of bottom-up social movements and therefore commands less personalistic autonomy and control.


RETHINKING RECENT DEMOCRATIZATION
Lessons from the Postcommunist Experience

By VALERIE BUNCE*

RECENT DEMOCRATIZATION

OUR understanding of recent democratization—of such issues as the origins and the consolidation of new democracies—has been heavily influenced by the experiences of Latin America and southern Europe.¹ This is not surprising. The third wave of democratization, as Samuel Huntington termed it, began in southern Europe and then moved quickly to Latin America.² Moreover, given the political oscillations of the region they study, specialists in Latin American politics were unusually well positioned to address questions of regime transition. Finally, combining the experiences of these two regions offered a comparative advantage. They contained a large number of countries, virtually all of which had redemocratized over the course of a decade and a half; they shared some commonalities in terms of history and culture; and yet they varied with respect to the timing and mode of transition. It is precisely such a mix of similarities and differences that makes for instructive comparison.

The breakdown of state socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991 and the subsequent rise of new regimes and new states throughout this region provide us with an opportunity to broaden the discussion of recent democratization.³ By broadening, I

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refer, most obviously, to the geography of the conversation. If recent democratization is, indeed, a global process, then the terrain of these studies should better reflect that fact. Moreover, only by expanding the geographical horizons can we know whether our conceit as social scientists—that is, our presumption of generalizability—is well founded.

There are, in addition, three other aspects of broadening. One is the familiar argument, central to the ideology of pluralism, that more voices are preferable to fewer in producing quality outcomes. This is particularly important in comparative politics, given the correlation between geographical and intellectual boundaries. As we all know, the concepts used, the questions asked, and the theories evaluated all tend to take on a regional cast.

Just as familiar is a second consideration. Stepping outside our familiar terrain often alerts us to new factors and new relationships—more generally, new thinking, to borrow from Gorbachev. As already suggested, this is not just a matter of reaping intellectual benefits from liberalization of trade among scholarly cultures. This is also a function of the new issues that additional cases often introduce. For example, with the rise of new states and new economic and political regimes in the former communist world came heightened sensitivity among scholars to a series of previously overlooked concerns. These include the impact of economic regime transition on the democratic project; the critical distinction between founding genuinely new democracies (as in most postcommunist states) versus redemocratization (as with much of Latin America and southern Europe); the impact of identity politics and the state on democratization; the consequences for democratic politics of deficiencies in civil and political society; and the role of international institutions in founding, sustaining, and/or undermining new democracies.7

A final benefit of broadening is methodological. The most illuminating comparisons are those that restrain the universe of causes while expanding the range of results. In the case of comparative democratization, while Latin America and southern Europe go far in meeting the first condition, they are less helpful on the second—though recent threats to democracy in, say, Peru, Venezuela, Colombia, and perhaps Argentina have provided greater variation in dependent variables. By contrast, the postcommunist region of East–Central Europe and the former Soviet Union is unusually useful on both counts, given, for example, similarities in institutional legacies and in both the timing and the agenda of transformation alongside the sheer diversity of the region’s economic and political pathways—what Charles King has aptly termed the “mercurial dependent variables” of postcommunism.⁸

The appeal of this region as an ideal laboratory for comparative inquiry has not been lost on analysts. There are thus a number of studies that use cases from the postcommunist area to address such questions as why democracies either do or do not arise and why some of the new democracies succeed, whereas others break down;⁹ whether variations in economic performance reflect historical or more recent influences and geographical, economic, or political factors;¹⁰ and why transitions to democracy are sometimes accompanied by nationalist protests, why some states dissolve in reaction to these protests, and why state dissolution is either violent or peaceful.¹¹


This article aims to use the postcommunist experience in East-Central Europe and the former Soviet Union—twenty-seven cases in all—to rethink our understanding of recent democratization. It does so by conducting a conversation between two bodies of research: (1) studies of Latin America and southern Europe, which collectively have constituted the reigning wisdom in the field, and (2) research on postcommunist politics. The discussion will focus on two relationships central to discussions in the field—between transitional politics and subsequent regime trajectories and between the consolidation and the sustainability of democracy. We will see that the postcommunist experience challenges the way both issues have been understood.

In particular, I argue the following. First, the degree of uncertainty in democratic transitions varies considerably. This in turn affects the strategies of transition and their payoffs. Second, mass mobilization can contribute to both the founding and the consolidation of democracy. Third, under certain conditions the democratic project is furthered by transitions that involve both nationalist protest and changes in state boundaries. Fourth, while rapid progress in democratic consolidation improves the prospects for democratic survival in the future, it does not follow that unconsolidated democracies are necessarily less sustainable. Indeed, compromising democracy (and the state) may contribute to democratic survival. Finally, while comparisons among new democracies can identify the optimal conditions for democratization, they may have less to say about optimal strategies for democratization.

Transitions to Democracy: Assumptions and Arguments

The analysis of recent democratization has been premised on some core assumptions about transitions from dictatorship to democracy—with the transitional period understood as beginning with an evident weakening of authoritarian rule and ending with the first competitive elections. These assumptions include the following: (1) that immediate influences are more important than historical considerations in shaping transitional dynamics; (2) that transitions are inherently quite uncertain; (3) that the central dynamic in a transition is bargaining be-

tween authoritarian leaders and leaders of the democratic opposition, 
with outcomes a function of their relative power; and (4) that the key 
issues on the table during the transition are breaking with authoritarian 
rule, building democratic institutions, and eliciting the cooperation of 
authoritarians.12

These assumptions, coupled with comparative studies of Latin 
America and southern Europe, have produced several generalizations 
about what constitutes the ideal approach to transition. First, as 
Dankwart Rustow argued more than thirty years ago, successful de-

cratization seems to require at the very least a prior settlement of the 
national and state questions.13 Second, bargaining about the rules of the 
transition and the new political order should be limited to a small 
group of authoritarian elites and representatives of the democratic op-

position. Finally, given the uncertainty of transitions, it is useful to 
forge compromises that promote political stability during the construc-
tion of a democratic order. In practice, this means pacting; reducing the 
range of issues on the bargaining table (for example, avoiding reforms 
of the state and, if possible, major and inherently destabilizing economic 
reforms); demobilizing publics (which also limits the issues on the 
table, while depriving the authoritarians of a rationale for sabotaging de-

mocratization); forming interim governments with leaders acceptable to 
both sides; giving the military some room for political maneuver in the 
constitution; and holding a competitive election that produces a gov-

erment broadly representative of both authoritarians and democrats.14

MASS MOBILIZATION

The postcommunist experience seems to challenge many of these as-
sumptions about transitional strategies. Let us begin by addressing the

12 O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead (fn. 1); Terry Lynn Karl, "Dilemmas of Democratization in 
Latin America," Comparative Politics 23 (Spring 1990); Guiseppe Di Palma, To Craft Democracy 
13 Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model," Comparative Politics 2 (April 
1970).
14 O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead (fn. 1); Richard Gunther, "Spain: The Very Model of a 
Modern Elite Settlement," in John Higley and Richard Gunther, eds., Elites and Democratic Consi-

dation in Latin America and Southern Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); 
Robert M. Fishman, "Rethinking State and Regime: Southern Europe's Transition to Democracy," 
World Politics 42 (April 1990); Stephen Haggard and Robert Kaufman, The Political Economy of Dem-

ocratic Transitions (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Jose Maria Maravall, "Politics and 
Policy: Economic Reforms in Southern Europe," in Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira, Jose Maria Maravall, 
and Adam Przeworski, eds., Economic Reforms in New Democracies: A Social Democratic Approach (Cam-
bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Moderate policies, however, do not imply the absence of 
role of mass publics in the transition. It is widely agreed among specialists and confirmed by the rankings over time by Freedom House that the most successful transitions to democracy in the postcommunist region have been in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovenia. The transition to democracy in every one of these cases, except Hungary, began with mass protests. Moreover, if we restrict our focus to those countries that show significant improvement in their democratic performance over time, or Bulgaria and Romania, we see the same pattern: mass mobilization at the beginning of the transition.

Why was mass mobilization so often helpful to the democratic transition in the postcommunist context? The answer is that political protests performed a number of valuable functions. They signaled the breakdown of the authoritarian order; created a widespread sense that there were alternatives to that order; pushed authoritarian leaders (and sometimes even leaders of the opposition, as with Walesa in Poland) to the bargaining table; created (and sometimes restored) a large opposition united by its rejection of the incumbent regime; and gave opposition leaders a resource advantage when bargaining with authoritarian elites. Finally, mass mobilization created a mandate for radical change that subsequently translated into a large victory for the democratic forces in the first competitive elections and, following that, led to the introduction of far-reaching economic and political reforms.

UNCERTAINTY

If we accept that mass mobilization during the transition can further the democratic project, then we necessarily confront additional challenges to the received wisdom about recent democratization. First, it can be argued that in many cases such mobilization in the postcommunist region reduced the uncertainty of the transition—by providing a clear reading of mass sentiments, by strengthening the bargaining power of opposition leaders, and by forcing the communists to give up their defense of the old order, either stepping aside quickly (as in Czechoslovakia) or, when thinking prospectively, joining the movement.

15 See fn. 8.
16 In Hungary mass mobilization was understood to be politically risky (and turned out ultimately to be unnecessary), given the brutal suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, on the one hand, and the willingness of the reform communists, even before the roundtable, to jump on the democratic bandwagon, on the other hand. See Patrick H. O’Neil, “Revolution from Within: Institutional Analysis, Transitions from Authoritarianism, and the Case of Hungary,” World Politics 48 (July 1996).
for democracy (as in Poland, Slovenia, and the Baltic states). At the same time, mass mobilization promised—and delivered—a popular mandate for democracy in the first competitive elections.

Most of the transitions to democracy in the postcommunist world were, of course, highly uncertain. This is evidenced by the fact that the first competitive election in most of the countries in the region led to a communist victory. Indeed, the larger the victory, the more likely that authoritarian rule continued. Moreover, even ten years after the transition began, only one-third of the postcommunist regimes were ranked fully free. Although this is the highest number since state socialism fell, it is a percentage much lower than what one finds at a comparable point in the Latin American and southern European transitions. When combined with the earlier observations, these patterns suggest that the uncertainty surrounding postcommunist political trajectories varied significantly. In some cases, a democratic outcome was relatively predictable; in most others, the political options after communism were far more open-ended.

**STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF UNCERTAINTY**

The existence of a more certain political environment in some countries calls into question both the necessity and the logic, outlined earlier, of safeguarding the new democracy by forging compromises between authoritarians and democrats. It is precisely the absence of pressure to do so in the Polish, the Czech, and the other highly successful transitions that explains another contrast between the “East” and the “South.” It is true that many of the most successful transitions in the postcommunist area included pacting (though rarely as elaborate as the Spanish experience) and that some also evidenced for a brief time broadly representative interim governments. It is also true, however, that the transitions in the postcommunist region that combined pacting with demobilized publics—or what has been asserted to be the preferred approach in the South—were precisely the transitions that were most likely to continue authoritarian rule in the postcommunist region. Moreover, the other

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18 Because Poland was the first country in the region to break with communist party rule, its transition was somewhat more uncertain. Given the character of the Soviet bloc, however, developments in Poland during the first half of 1989 lowered the risks of transition for other members of the bloc.


compromises that were deemed so beneficial for the southern European and Latin American transitions were rejected by opposition leaders in Poland, Hungary, Slovenia, and the like. Instead, they were strongly positioned to favor an immediate and sharp break with the authoritarian past. Thus, in every highly successful case of democratization in the region, the military was excluded from political influence from the start; the first elections involved a radical break with the political leadership of the past; and major changes in the economy were introduced quickly. Just as important was the commitment in each of these cases to reforming the state, including in most of them its very boundaries. For the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and the Baltic states, then, the agenda of transition was unusually ambitious.

Postcommunist transition dynamics therefore ask us to amend the familiar formulation drawn from the South. It was precisely because mass mobilization was so threatening to authoritarians that leaders of the opposition in some of these countries were free to carry out radical political and economic reforms. Put differently: because of popular mobilization or, in the Hungarian case, reform communism and collaboration between democrats and authoritarians, opposition leaders in what became the most sustainable and full-scale democracies in the East could proceed quickly in breaking with authoritarian rule and building democratic (and, for that matter, capitalist) institutions without worrying as much as their counterparts elsewhere about appeasing authoritarian interests.

This, in turn, altered the strategies of transition and their payoffs. While bridging between the old and the new order constituted by all accounts the most successful approach to democratization in Latin America and southern Europe, the most successful strategy in the post-communist region was the opposite—severing ties.

**The Role of the Military**

Also contributing to these interregional contrasts in the optimal strategies of transition was the very different role of the military in Latin America and southern Europe, on the one hand, and in the communist area, on the other hand. Specialists in the South have argued with essentially one voice that the biggest threat to democracy today, as in the

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21 On the benefits of breaking with past leadership, see Aslund (fn. 10); Frye (fn. 10); McFaul (fn. 9); and Bunce (fn. 8). Hungary, again, provides an exception. Major economic reforms were introduced only after the second competitive election, when the ex-communists returned to power with a large mandate. However, Hungary was also exceptional in how far reforms went prior to the end of communist party rule.
past, is the military. One has only to recall, for example, the long history of military interventions in Latin American politics, most of which terminated democracy (though some of them oversaw a return to democratic governance, as also occurred in unusually circuitous fashion, in the Portuguese transition). There is, in addition, the attempted military coup d’État in Spain in 1982. Indeed, precisely because of its long importance in politics, the military has been awarded remarkable powers in many Latin American constitutions, their democratic claims notwithstanding. When combined, these examples carry an obvious message: the military in these contexts can make or break regimes. It is precisely this capacity that contributed to the uncertainty of the transitions in the South and that necessitated compromises with authoritarian forces.

In much of the postcommunist world, by contrast, there is a long tradition of civilian control over the military—a tradition that goes far back in Russian history and that, following the Bolshevik Revolution and the demilitarization after the Civil War, was maintained at home and then after World War II was projected outward to the members of the Soviet bloc. Civil–military relations, in short, constituted one area where the authoritarian past proved to be beneficial, rather than a burden, for democratization after state socialism.

With the military less threatening in the postcommunist context and with mass publics in some cases mobilized in support of democracy, authoritarian elites in the postcommunist region were indeed under siege. This was particularly the case in East–Central Europe, where domestic control over the military (and the secret police)—except in Yugoslavia, Romania, and Albania—had been ceded to the Soviet Union after 1968. All this left the opposition in what came to be the most successful democracies in the region with unusual freedom of maneuver—a freedom enhanced by public support in the streets. As a result, both the effects of mass mobilization and the most successful strategies of transition were different in the postcommunist context from what they had been in Latin America and southern Europe.

23 The key phrase is “members of the Soviet bloc.” For those communist regimes outside the bloc or mavericks within the bloc (Albania, Romania, and Yugoslavia), party control over the military was compromised. It was precisely in these cases that the exit from state socialism was violent. Variations in civil–military relations also account in part for the violent disintegration of the Yugoslav state, in contrast to the peaceful dissolution of both the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. See Bunce (fn. 11).
The analysis thus far has sidestepped an issue of considerable importance in the transitions from state socialism: the distinction between protests against the regime and protests against the state. Here, the postcommunist region exhibits another surprising pattern. While popular protest in both the Czech lands and Poland targeted the regime, the Baltic and Slovene demonstrations are better understood as both liberal and nationalist. In the latter cases, then, nationalism supported democratic governance, even when nationalist concerns grew out of and were in part responsible for the disintegration of a state.

There also seems to be another positive linkage between nationalist mobilization and successful, sustained democratization. The republics that made up the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia varied considerably from each other with respect to whether publics protested, whether the opposition was strong and united, and whether publics, the opposition, and, indeed, even the communists were committed to democratization. With the breakup of these three ethnofederal states along republican lines, those republics with the best conditions for democratic governance were liberated from a political and economic context that made such an outcome unlikely, if not impossible. Thus, not just Slovenia and the Baltic republics, but also Macedonia, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine were better positioned to pursue a democratic course following state disintegration.25

How can we reconcile these observations with the familiar argument that nationalist mobilization poses a threat to democracy on the grounds that the logics of state building and democratization are contradictory? This argument, moreover, has empirical support in the post-communist world, given the deleterious effects of nationalism on political developments after state socialism in Bosnia, Croatia, Georgia, Serbia and Montenegro (and Kosovo), and Slovakia. In each of these cases the nationalist movement excluded minorities residing within the republic; transformed some communists into nationalists, who then used nationalism to maintain authoritarian control; and constructed illiberal successor regimes while deconstructing successor states.26 What explains these divergent consequences of nationalism?

25 For a parallel situation, see Michael Bernhard, "Democratization in Germany: A Reappraisal," Comparative Politics 33, no. 4 (2001).
When nationalism enters the discussion, parsimonious arguments often give way to thick explanations. In this instance, however, there seems to be a relatively simple distinction: when nationalist demonstrations began in the republics. Late nationalist mobilization—or nationalist demonstrations that first appeared when the communist regime and state were disintegrating—is associated in virtually every instance with a rapid transition to democracy and progress since that time in building a stable—or at least increasingly stable—democratic order. This describes, in particular, not just the cases of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia, but also the far more flawed, but nonetheless durable democracies of Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine.

By contrast, nationalist demonstrations that first occurred before the regime and state began to unravel are associated with very different political pathways after state socialism—either democratic breakdown or a delayed transition to democracy. There were five republics and one autonomous province that experienced such demonstrations by their titular nation during the 1970s or at the beginning of the 1980s: Armenia, Croatia, Georgia, Kosovo, Slovakia, and, to a more limited extent, Serbia. In every one of these cases the subsequent transition to democracy was undermined, as was the successor state in most cases.

Why is timing so important? The key seems to be differences in regime context. In the “early” cases, nationalist mobilization arose in response to two conditions: a strong sense of identity on the part of members and especially the self-appointed leaders of the republic’s titular nation (reflecting earlier developments, such as the experience of statehood prior to communist party rule) coupled with republican political dynamics that featured domination by the titular nation along with significant autonomy from the center. Once demonstrations began, three developments followed: minorities within these republics (except homogeneous Armenia) defended themselves from titular domination by building countermovements while allying with the center; the center, fearing that nationalist protests would spread and thereby challenge both the regime and the state, suppressed the titular


national protesters, purged the republican party, and empowered minorities as a counterweight to the titular nation; and the republican party fissured in the face of irreconcilable demands from local nationalists versus central communists.

As a result, by the time state socialism began to dissolve, the stage was already set for an unusually problematic transition to both democratic rule and independent statehood. Two insurmountable divides were in place. The first was between nationalists, who dominated the political scene, and liberals, who had been demobilized. The second was between leaders of the majority nation and leaders of minority communities. The national identities of these groups were well defined and exclusivist, and their competing identities were joined with competing interests, political alliances, and preferences for the future. Moreover, the communist leaders of these republics, facing the loss of both their institutional and their ideological bases for ruling, did not have the option their Slovenian counterparts had, of defecting to an opposition that embraced both independent statehood and liberal democracy. Instead, they could either become nationalists or, if adopting a liberal position, face political marginalization.

By contrast, when nationalist mobilization began only later, in response to the weakening of the regime and the state, all these conditions were absent—or at least less well defined. This meant that the majority and the minorities were free to coalesce around the issues of republican sovereignty and liberal democracy. Thus, in these contexts a liberal agenda combined with a nationalist agenda; and not only opposition forces but even many communists embraced that agenda.

We can now conclude our discussion of transitions in the South versus the East. The experiences of the latter region suggest the following, all running counter to the received wisdom about Latin America and southern Europe. First, historical factors are critical in shaping the resources and especially the preferences of elites during the transition, as well as, more generally, transition trajectories. Second, one proximate and positive influence, lying outside the high politics of the transition, is mass mobilization. Third, transitions seem to vary in their degree of uncertainty, and this affects what constitutes the most successful path. In the postcommunist world, where some transitions were less uncertain, the most successful approach was one that moved quickly on both political and economic fronts. Fourth, democratization can be successful when it is combined with nationalist mobilization and the founding of a new state. This is particularly so when such mobilization first begins with the weakening of the state and the regime.
Finally, if we divide the transitions in the postcommunist world into two types—where nationalist mobilization was present and where it was not—we find two simple stories. One has already been noted—the consequences for democratization of timing—when nationalist mobilization begins. The second story describes the remaining countries in the region. Here, the key issue appears to be the strength of the opposition, as indicated by their competitiveness in the first election. Put succinctly, the better their electoral performance, the more successful the transition to democracy.

**Democratic Consolidation and Democratic Sustainability**

With the formation of the first popularly elected government, the transition to democracy is understood to have ended. Scholars then shift their focus to two issues: the consolidation of democracy and its sustainability. The consolidation of democracy refers to the degree to which the key elements of a democratic order are in place, and whether those elements function to promote effective, inclusive, and accountable governance. The sustainability of democracy refers, simply, to the continuation of democratic rule. In the first case, scholars look to mass publics (public opinion, interest associations, and political participation), political institutions (parties, the state, and representative bodies), and the behavior of political leaders. In the second, the concern of scholarly investigations has been equally broad, looking to economic and demographic factors, political institutions, political parties, public opinion and behavior, and the decisions of political leaders.

These two bodies of work rarely confront one another, which is surprising, since on the face of it they are analytically related. Despite the parallel play, however, they do seem to converge along two lines of argument. One is that the choices made by political leaders have powerful effects on whether democracy consolidates and whether it survives. The other is that the quality of democracy—that is, the degree to which it is consolidated as defined above—predicts its sustainability.

**Russia’s Muddied Political Profile**

It is precisely these two arguments that I wish to question. Rather than comparing the postcommunist cases with each other, as I did earlier, I will concentrate instead on one case in particular: Russia, which serves

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28 See, for example, Higley and Gunther (fn. 14).
as a useful empirical foil for two reasons. One is that Russia represents in many respects the modal postcommunist case—for example, with respect to economic development and economic performance, the age of the state, the structure of its government, the weakness of labor, and the slow development of the party system. 29 Perhaps the most surprising aspect of Russian politics—and one that, again, represents the central tendency in postcommunist Eurasia—is the absence of significant political polarization among citizens and the relative stability of their political preferences over time. 30 The other reason to focus on Russia is that the case provides a particularly good test of the arguments about consolidation and sustainability. This is because Russia has a highly improbable and seriously flawed, yet durable democracy. The ledger of Russian democracy can be summarized as follows. Russian democracy is deficient in two key respects. One problem is the Russian presidency; a second is the weakness of the Russian state. As is widely recognized, Boris Yeltin played a central role in the rise of democracy in Russia, yet many of his actions, beginning in 1993, would seem to have compromised the democratic project, as well as economic reform and state capacity. 31 Moreover, given his commitment to the recentralization of the Russian state, Yeltin’s successor, Vladimir Putin, could be viewed as a less capricious and, therefore, potentially a more formidable force against democratic politics. Such an interpretation is particularly tempting, given the parallels between contemporary Russia and Weimar Germany—for example, disastrous economic performance, downward mobility in the international system, and the existence in both cases of a mixed presidential-parliamentary system, with important powers reserved for the presidency. 32

29 See, for example, Bunce (fn. 8); Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, “The Limited Reach of Russia’s Party System,” Politics and Society 29 (September 2001); Stephen Crowley and David Ost, eds., Workers after Workers’ States: Labor and Politics in Post-Communist Europe (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).


31 Three very insightful analyses of the Yeltin era are Lilia Shevtsova, Yeltin’s Russia: Myths and Realities (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1999); Michael McFaul, Russia’s Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Yeltin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001); and George Breslauer, Gorbachev and Yeltsin as Leaders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

32 See Stephen E. Hanson and Jeffrey S. Kopstein, “The Weimar/Russia Comparison,” Post-Soviet Affairs 13 (July–September 1997). However, there is one striking contrast between these two cases: civil society in interwar Germany was highly developed but German publics were polarized, whereas civil society in Russia is far less developed but Russian publics tend to cluster at the center of the po-
If the Russian presidency is a problem, so, too, is the weakness of the Russian state. It is weak because of the absence of rule of law, continuing conflicts between central and local laws, and the privileging of localities over the center with respect to both the identities of local officials and publics and the targets of compliance. As a consequence, the Russian state and regime are both spatially fragmented. This fragmentation, moreover, extends to the economy, thereby compromising the capacity of the state to create the economic integration necessary for capitalism to function effectively.

If the internal boundaries of the Russian Federation are “too strong,” then the external boundaries of this state are “too weak.” This is evident, for example, in the continuing wars in Chechnya. Also important is the absence of public agreement concerning the boundaries of the state—which reflects both the power of localities in practices and in public and official minds and the weakness of Russian national identity. Russian identity is weak for many reasons, including the absence during the Soviet period of republican institutions that could forge such an identity; the divisions within the Soviet and then Russian elite stratum over whether and how to define this identity, and the considerable constraints on the construction of a common identity when the particular protonation in question is numerically dominant, geographically dispersed, and located in the core, not the periphery, within an empire, not within a state. Thus, Russian national identity lacked what many other groups within the former Soviet Union had and what served as the basis for mobilization once the regime and the state began to disintegrate: political, cultural, social, and economic institutions; geographical compactness; an “other” that was defined simultaneously in


ideological, spatial, and national terms; and a sense of being an embattled minority poised against a majority.

If there is a consensus that the Russian state is weak, there is also a consensus that this poses a serious problem for Russian democracy. As Stephen Holmes has observed: "Today's Russia makes excruciatingly plain that liberal values are threatened just as thoroughly by state incapacity as by despotic power."36 While most definitions of democracy do not mention the state and instead emphasize rights, liberties, and competition, a capable state is nonetheless implied. Can there be civil liberties and political rights without rule of law? Can political competition function as it should in a democracy without, for example, power resting in the hands of elected officials and without state guarantees that there will be free and fair elections and that public policies will be implemented?37

THE CASE FOR RUSSIAN DEMOCRACY

There is little doubt, therefore, that Russian democracy is seriously flawed and unconsolidated. In some important respects, however, democracy is well defined in Russia. First, since independence, Russia has held five elections at the national level—and hundreds more at the local and regional levels. These elections have by and large been free and fair: they have invited considerable competition, and power has changed hands repeatedly. In the gubernatorial elections of 1996–97, for example, fully one-half of the incumbent candidates were defeated—an important consideration, since one indicator that a democracy is consolidating is peaceful turnover of political power.38 Second, the rules of the political game have been relatively stable since the referendum on the 1993 Constitution. Third, the number of parties on the ballot for the Duma has declined over time, as has the number of wasted votes.39 Fourth, there is evidence of growing cooperation over time between the president and the Duma.40 Fifth, while there are some extremists in the Duma, Russian public opinion, as already noted, tends to cluster at the center of the political continuum and to evidence im-

38 Steven Solnick, Putin and the Provinces, Research Monograph, no. 115 (Cambridge: Harvard University, Davis Center, Program on New Approaches to Russian Security, 2000).

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pressively high support for democracy despite the uncertainty of the political environment. 41 Sixth, the Russian court system has functioned relatively well; indeed, it may become even more effective in the future if President Putin's recent reforms are fully implemented. 42 Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, gloomy predictions to the contrary, Russian democracy has lasted.

It is precisely this final point that introduces two key questions. Most obviously: given the ledger just presented, why has Russian democracy endured? And less obviously: is this in spite of its democratic deficits, as is usually presumed, or because of them?

**Comparative Standards**

We can begin to answer these questions by addressing the issue of comparative standards. Yeltsin has been criticized for his role in weakening the state (through, say, bilateral treaties with various regional governors), tolerating the accumulation of considerable power by various economic interests, compromising economic reform in ways that serve those interests, and, therefore, giving Russia a capitalism that does not work. It is a state that is both corrupt and limited in its ability to extract resources, elicit compliance, and meet its financial obligations; and it is a democracy that lacks accountability. What is often implied in these critiques is that Yeltsin should have made other choices that supported the state, democracy, and capitalism, rather than undermining them. But this introduces a question. Were those superior choices effectively available to Yeltsin? The answer to that question is rarely provided. Instead, another case—say, Poland or the Czech Republic—is introduced to demonstrate the costs of the Russian approach to political and economic transition.

There are good reasons to pair Russia with either Poland or the Czech Republic, especially when the issue at hand is variations in shock therapy or voucher privatization. 43 However, the problem is with a second step that is sometimes taken, once the comparison is raised: to

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argue that the Russian leadership did it wrong and should instead have adopted the approaches taken by its more successful counterparts. But this approach verges on the automatic, given the emphasis in the relevant literature on (1) leadership choice and (2) the procedure of identifying the optimal approaches by comparing cases with variable records of success. Both arguments ignore differences in context and the ways those different contexts produce not just different menus of choices but also different consequences attached to the same choices.

Ignoring context can be highly misleading, as can leaving the notion of context too vague. Here is where it is necessary to shift from the abstract to the concrete: by comparing Poland and Russia. The Polish leadership that came to power in late summer 1989 had the rare luxury of being able to make choices that could be at once easy, yet radical. I use both adjectives advisedly. Communism in Poland had created over time a popular consensus supporting liberal politics and economics. This consensus had multiple origins—for example, the long history of Polish nationalism, which had been shaped in part by foreign domination, especially Russian and then Soviet; the extraordinary national homogeneity of Poland after the Second World War; Poland’s democratic tradition (which preceded the partitions and which was further reinforced through subsequent domination by authoritarian states); and the vulnerability of the communist regime in Poland, given its political dependence on the Soviet Union and its failure to fully Stalinize the polity and the economy and to constrain popular unrest.

When the communist system made its formal departure in the summer of 1989, the newly elected Polish leadership was in the distinctive position of being both liberal in its outlook and liberated from constraints. It was not just that Soviet power had retreated or that the roundtable accords defined a two-stage transition to democracy. It was also that the newly elected Polish leadership enjoyed a large mandate, thanks in part to the unexpected outcome of the June 1989 semicompetitive elections and the subsequent support of the communists and Gorbachev for the formation of a Solidarity-led government in August of the same year. At the same time, with respect to economic reform, Polish rent seekers, long suspecting that the game would soon be up, had begun to reposition themselves as early as the mid-1980s to reap benefits from the more liberalized economic order to come. They were, in short, better understood as partners than as antagonists.

In this way, an unusually large coalition was in place in Poland to support a transition to democracy in conjunction with sweeping economic reforms (which were also aided by the long-term crisis of the
Polish economy and the failure of earlier rounds of reform in the face of a continuing political stalemate). Critical to both the economic and the political transition, however, was Polish nationalism—which lengthened popular horizons.44 Lest there be any doubt about the enormous political capital supporting Poland's radical break with state socialism, note that the finance minister, Leszek Balcerowicz, faced no opposition to his economic reform package when he consulted with other members of the government and with deputies in the Sejm; that Polish publics did not rebel when the reforms produced an unexpectedly sharp and prolonged economic downturn; and that the transition to democracy proceeded more quickly than the roundtable accords had projected. Thus, Polish leaders had a rare opportunity, whether in the annals of democratic politics in general or of new democracies in particular, to combine considerable power and public support with a radical reform agenda.

In Russia, by contrast and for many reasons, including the weakness of Russian national identity and the dynamics of the collapse of the Soviet state, there was much less consensus among publics and among elites about either the regime or the state-in-formation. As a result, the movement toward the new order was compromised and, because of that, necessarily politically and economically solicitous of rent seeking. Rather than jumping on a train they already knew was leaving the station, as happened in Poland, rent seekers in Russia were waiting to see whether there even was a train and, if so, where it was heading. In doing so, to recall the earlier discussion, they benefited from the uncertainty of the Russian transition and its consequences—partial economic reform and partial democracy.45

Indeed, the Russian version of this process did not originate with Yeltsin or even with Gorbachev. It was also characteristic of the Brezhnev era, where central control over politics and economics was reduced in order to prolong the regime and keep rent seekers within the fold rather than pushing them outside, where they could make even more mischief. Simply put, Brezhnev gave up power in order to keep it—and the weakness of the regime, the state, and the bloc, along with the lackluster performance of the economy during the Brezhnev era, all testified to how costly those compromises were. Indeed, one reason why the Soviet bloc disintegrated so quickly and Russian economic performance

45 The phrasing, as well as some of the logic, is borrowed from Joel S. Hellman, "Winners Take All: The Politics of Partial Reform in Postcommunist Transitions," World Politics 50 (January 1998).
has been so poor for the past decade was Brezhnev’s legacy of maintaining power, the regime, the state, and the bloc by undermining all four.  

In the absence of either a popular or an elite consensus, then, the “choice” in Russia, more recently as during the Brezhnev era, was, in contrast to Poland, neither stark nor simple. Instead, choices were defined by “ordinary politics”—to reverse Balcerowicz’s apt characterization of the “extraordinary politics” that shaped the early stages of the Polish transition to democracy and capitalism. As Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman have argued with respect to economic reform, choice in Russia was severely circumscribed. As they generalized: “The task of a reformer in a weak state is to persuade stakeholders to give up more socially inefficient ways of receiving rents in exchange for less socially costly payoffs.” The same holds true in the political sphere. The task of a democratizer in a precarious regime and state is to persuade stakeholders—say, regional governors, powerful economic lobbies, and the communists—to give up some of their political power in exchange for a more stable order.

The contrasts between Russia and Poland suggest a more general point. Two problems emerge from the scholarly emphasis on elite choice, so central to the study of recent democratization (and economic reform) and so in keeping with the recent preferences of the discipline to search for optimal strategies and to privilege more immediate and obvious influences over those that are more removed and subtle. One problem is a failure to recognize most decisions as choices among competing opportunity costs. The other is a pronounced tendency, especially when “unusual politics” is available as a comparative standard, to overestimate what leaders can do. The first oversimplifies choice while ignoring the thicket of constraints. The second transforms decision makers into heroes or villains—a characterization that speaks to the excessively voluntaristic focus of much of the literature on recent democratization.

Such a focus has been justified on the basis of both the extraordinary impact of leaders during the transition period and the notion of uncer-

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47 See Bakerowicz, Socialism, Capitalism, Transformation (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1995).

tainty—which has been interpreted as a reduction of constraints on leaders. However, as noted earlier in this article, the privileging of political leaders and the presumption of high uncertainty are both questionable. Moreover, while uncertainty logically gives leaders more room for maneuver, it also curtails their ability to shape political and economic developments. Both hold for precisely the same reason—institutional fluidity during transitional periods.49

If elite choice needs to be reconsidered, so does the relationship between the consolidation of democracy and its survival. One reason is that "the stability of a regime and the quality of a regime are analytically separate categories that should not be subsumed under one word—consolidation."50 The other reason can be deduced from the ledger of Russian democracy, presented earlier: it is a democracy that is flawed but not fleeting. Its flaws reflect the compromises, minus a formal pact, that were required as a consequence of the uncertainty surrounding this transition.

If that is the case, then we might want to reverse the usual formulation regarding the relationship between consolidation and sustainability. The sustainability of democracy could be construed as an investment in democratic consolidation. At the same time, it could be argued that the failure to consolidate democracy in Russia may explain why Russian democracy has survived. Thus, it is precisely the democratic deficits in Russia that may have prolonged this democratic experiment. This interpretation can be most readily supported by considering the only alternatives to Yeltsin's policies that might have furthered democracy—a capable, stable, and a well-functioning capitalist economy. What if Yeltsin had proceeded by, say, building a party, strengthening democratic institutions, expanding state control over the regions, and staying the course on economic reforms? Assuming for a moment that these actions could somehow have been carried out, the logical consequence would have been to alienate rent seekers. What might have ensued was a coalition of authoritarians, powerful economic lobbies, and decentralizers—three key groups that are currently divided, not united.51 This, in turn, could have produced a walkout—on the economy, the state, and democracy.

50McFaul (fn. 31), 310.
51On the instability of these coalitions, see Philip Roeder, "The Rejection of Authoritarianism in the Soviet Successor States," and Hanson, "Defining Democratic Consolidation," both in Anderson et al. (fn. 9).
Yeltsin's options, therefore, were threefold: to resist a liberal revolution (like the Polish political stalemate of the 1980s), to embrace this revolution fully (as in the Czech Republic, Slovenia, or the Baltic states), or to proceed, but in compromised fashion. It can be argued on the basis of the Russian context that the third approach was best positioned to yield a flawed but, perhaps because of that, sustainable democracy. Thus, democracy was shortchanged but durable; capitalism was distorted but implanted; and the state, while weak and vulnerable to challenges, nonetheless survived.

Conclusions

Research on democratization, particularly the founding and performance of new democracies, is largely a literature about the choices political leaders have made and the consequences of those choices. It is also largely a literature based on the return to democracy in Latin America and southern Europe. The purpose of this article has been both to question and to complicate the focus on elites and the generalizations that have been made about transitions to democracy, democratic consolidation, and democratic sustainability. I have done so by adding an additional region to the empirical equation—the twenty-seven countries that make up the Eurasian postcommunist region.

Several conclusions emerged. First, transitions to democracy seem to vary considerably with respect to the uncertainty surrounding the process. This variance in turn affects the strategies of transition and their payoffs. In the postcommunist region it was widely assumed that the uncertainty surrounding these transitions was unusually high, given, for example, the absence in most cases of a democratic past together, the extraordinary economic and political penetration of state socialism, and the seeming tensions among democratization, state building, the construction of a capitalist economy, and the radically changed relationship of the state to the international system. It turns out, however, that for a number of countries in the region the transition to democracy was in fact not so uncertain, for two reasons. First, the military was eliminated from the transition. Second, there was present a powerful opposition that gained strength from popular mobilization against the regime (often also against the state) (as with the Baltic, Slovenian, Czech, and Polish cases) and/or reform communists who collaborated with an opposition committed to democracy (as with the Baltic countries, Slovenia, Poland, and Hungary).

Because uncertainty was lower, moreover, the transition in all of
these cases produced a sharp break with the state socialist past—for example, through founding elections that gave the opposition a large mandate, rapid progress in constructing democratic institutions, quick introduction of far-reaching economic reforms, and, in most of the cases, the construction of a new state. By contrast, transition was far more uncertain where the military was engaged in the transition, where mass mobilization focused on leaving the state but not building democracy, and/or where the communists were able to command considerable support in the first election. As a result, the break with the authoritarian past was less definitive—in terms of both political leadership and public policy.

These contrasts have several implications. One is that, while the most successful transitions in the South involved bridging, the most successful transitions in the East involved breakage. Indeed, it is precisely the bridging approach in the East that produced the most fragile democracies. The other is that the contrast between bridging and breakage—and the costs and benefits of each approach—in large measure reflected differences in uncertainty.

Another conclusion is that mass mobilization can play a very positive role in the transition, as it did, for example, in the Baltic, Polish, Czech, and Slovenian cases and, most recently, in Serbia and Montenegro. This is largely because mass mobilization can reduce uncertainty, thereby influencing the preferences of the communists, as well as the division of power between them and the opposition.

Nationalist mobilization and the disintegration of the state can also influence the democratic project. Whether this occurs seems to reflect a key distinction: whether such protests first arose when the regime and state were unraveling or whether the demonstrations at that time were the culmination of a longer history of such protests. In the first case, which describes Slovenia, the Baltic countries, Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova, the transition produced sustainable democratic orders, albeit of varying quality. By contrast, in every transition where nationalist protest had a longer lineage, both the old and the new state, as well as the democratic project, experienced continuing contestation.

This leads to another conclusion. If we divide the twenty-seven cases into two groups—where the transition was accompanied by significant nationalist mobilization and where it was not—we find two sets of stories. As already noted, the first story is about the timing of nationalist mobilization. In the second group, the key issue is the strength of the opposition, which is indicated, for example, by the outcome of the first election.
This brings us to our final set of arguments. It is true, when adding the amendments already discussed, that political leaders—their preferences, their power, and their actions—are critical to the founding and the sustainability of democracy. However, it does not then follow that leaders in different countries have the same menu from which to choose; that similar choices in different contexts necessarily have the same consequences; that there are, as a result, optimal choices that are generally applicable; or that compromising the democratic project and the state during and after the transition necessarily reduces the sustain-
ability of democracy. There are two basic distinctions here: between conditions and strategies and between the consolidation of democracy and sustaining it.

In the first distinction, the key point is that some transitions are more constrained—or more uncertain—than others, and it is precisely the degree of uncertainty that defines both the strategies available to political leaders and the consequences of those strategies. Thus, “easy” transitions feature very different matrices of choices and payoffs than do “hard” transitions. In the postcommunist world there were trans-
itions, as noted above, where the opposition was powerful and the au-
thoritarians either marginalized or collaborative and where, as a result, there could be a radical break with the past. These transitions then pro-
duced a quick consolidation of both democracy and capitalism and, when accompanied by state disintegration, even the state. They also set the standard for what constituted the ideal approach—in economics, as well as in politics.

Most transitions in the postcommunist world did not fall into this category, however. Instead, uncertainty was higher, and the best result was a compromised democracy, capitalism, and state. Nonetheless, this did not necessarily mean that leaders in these contexts adopted the wrong strategies. Rather, they merely faced the “wrong” conditions. Moreover, if they had pretended otherwise and opted for breaking over bridging, thereby emulating their more successful counterparts, they might very well have ended up with no state, democracy, or capitalism. Thus, strategies and their particular payoffs are defined by contexts, not by other cases—unless those cases have similar contexts.

This leads, in turn, to the relationship between the consolidation and sustainability of democracy. It is certainly true that consolidated de-
mocracies are very likely to sustain themselves. But it does not follow that unconsolidated democracies are necessarily less sustainable or that policies and behaviors that compromise the consolidation of democracy necessarily detract from its sustainability. Indeed, as the Russian case
suggests, it may be precisely the limits to democracy, as well as to the state and capitalism, and the policies that contributed to those limits that sustain all three.

We are now in a position to address some issues of broader concern. First, as this article reinforces, the cases chosen do indeed seem to determine the conclusions drawn. This is particularly the case, one can argue, when case selection reduces variation in dependent variables. Moreover, case selection also seems to shape assumptions and therefore analytical approaches. Second, as noted in the introduction, it can be costly to restrict our regional reach. As we have discovered, expanding regional horizons can introduce new variables and new issues, while challenging common assumptions, approaches, and arguments. However, given the repeated contrasts between the South and the East that emerged in this article, an obvious question presents itself: do these contrasts mean that political dynamics are regionally defined?

It is tempting to concur with this statement. After all, for the post-communist cases in particular, the notion of regional effects is logical—given, for instance, the structural similarities forged by the political economy of state socialism and the Soviet bloc; the common origins of all the new states as a result of disintegration of the ethnofederal states in the region along republican lines; and the similarities in the timing as well as the key players involved in the transition to democracy. However, I would nonetheless argue against the notion that political dynamics respond to regional effects.

First and most obviously, a major rationale for analyzing the post-communist cases is their extraordinary variability, not their similarities. Indeed, it is ironic that the variable practices of authoritarianism in Latin America and southern Europe and the variable timing of their transitions to democracy seem to have produced less variation in transition dynamics and in the quality and sustainability of the democratic project than we see in the postcommunist context. Second, like urban-rural distinctions and even some nongeographical cleavages, such as gender and class, that analysts habitually employ, region only begs the question about the factors actually at work. As Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune argued more than thirty years ago: the purpose of comparative analysis is to replace place-names with variables.\textsuperscript{52} Indeed, this is precisely what this article has attempted to do by framing the discussion in terms of variations (1) in the timing of nationalist mobilization, (2) in the historical role of the military in politics, (3) in the strength of

the opposition, (4) in the uncertainty built into the transition, and (5) in the range of policy options available to political leaders and their payoffs.

Thus, region is merely a summary of factors that have taken on geographical form. For this reason and because regions can provide not just new factors and variation in those factors, cross-regional studies can be quite helpful in contesting or complicating those assumptions and arguments that were derived from the analysis of one or several similar regions. This is particularly the case when regions are very different from one another in culture, historical development, and relationship to the international system; when they add new causal considerations to the analysis; when they vary the timing of the political dynamics of interest; and when they evidence considerable variation in dependent variables. It is precisely for these reasons—and not because region itself matters—that it is advisable where possible to expand our geographical horizons. This is particularly the case for democratization, given its global reach.

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53 See, for example, Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin

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In liberal democracies, the approval ratings of political leaders have been shown to track citizens’ perceptions of the state of the economy. By contrast, in illiberal democracies and competitive autocracies, leaders are often thought to boost their popularity by exploiting nationalism, exaggerating external threats, and manipulating the media. Using time-series data, I examine the determinants of presidential approval in Russia since 1991, a period in which leaders’ ratings swung between extremes. I find that Yeltsin’s and Putin’s ratings were, in fact, closely linked to public perceptions of economic performance, which, in turn, reflected objective economic indicators. Although media manipulation, wars, terrorist attacks, and other events also mattered, Putin’s unprecedented popularity and the decline in Yeltsin’s are well explained by the contrasting economic circumstances over which each presided.

In liberal democracies, the approval ratings of political leaders play an important role in the interaction between citizens and their governments.1 Like elections—but far more frequently—they communicate to officials what the public thinks of their performance. Moreover, the messages such polls send have been shown to make sense. In various Western democracies, leaders’ ratings tend to rise and fall with the country’s economic performance. Respondents appear to hold their leaders responsible and reward them for effective economic management with approval, much as, when voting retrospectively, they repay competent and honest incumbents with reelection.

But what role do such ratings play in illiberal democracies and competitive autocracies, where formally democratic institutions coexist with authoritarian elements? In such states, public opinion is often viewed as more a product of political manipulation than an input into politics. Even when the polls themselves are trustworthy, they are thought likely to capture the effects of rulers’ political theater rather than reasoned evaluations rooted in material reality. Citizens, fed distorted information by an unfree press and cynical about the possibilities for participation, are expected to focus on image and personalities rather than to soberly evaluate performance by studying economic statistics (Ekman 2009). To rekindle their appeal periodically, incumbents invoke cruder forms of nationalism, exaggerate external threats or terrorist dangers, or even start military engagements (Mansfield and Snyder 1995).

One country where these issues arise particularly starkly is Russia. Since the first competitive presidential election there in 1991, presidents’ ratings have careened wildly. Russia’s first president, Boris Yeltsin, started out extremely popular; in September 1991, 81% of citizens approved of his performance. When he left office eight years later, the proportion had dropped to 8%. His successor, Vladimir Putin, saw his approval shoot up from 31% in August 1999 to 84% in January 2000. In his eight years as president, his rating rose as high as 87% and never fell below 60%.

To some, these extreme swings reveal the country’s political immaturity. Journalists attributed both wars in Chechnya to the desire to boost a Kremlin-backed candidate’s electoral prospects. Putin’s appeal has been explained as the result of an artificially cultivated image as a “tough” leader, the trauma of terrorist bombings in late 1999, and the Kremlin’s enhanced control and...
manipulation of the media. Such interpretations seem to fit the fluidity of the political scene, where parties come and go and politics has often been seen as primarily the clash of personalities.

But there is another possibility. The volatility of presidents' ratings and vote shares might merely mirror volatility in the economy. Russians might be responding to perceived conditions as logically as do their Western counterparts. Swings in incumbents' approval might reflect not Kremlin manipulation or the capriciousness of voters but their admittedly crude attempts, in an environment of uncertainty and unresponsive government, to hold their leaders to account.

Although there are many conjectures about what causes change over time in the popularity of Russian presidents, few have attempted to confront these systematically with evidence. I use statistical techniques and time-series survey data to do so. I look first at what polls reveal directly about the determinants of presidential popularity. Then, with error correction regression models, I test which factors help predict the trajectories of presidents' ratings.

Understanding what affects the popularity of Russian presidents is important for several reasons. Not least, it matters for Russian politics. If building support for an incumbent requires only projecting a certain image, it makes sense for Kremlin operatives to monopolize the mass media. If fighting Chechen terrorists boosted Putin's appeal, such threats are likely to be dramatized as elections approach. However, if the key element was economic recovery, implications are more benign: leaders will need to master the art of economic management.

Although Russia is unique in certain ways, the results suggest hypotheses and modes of analysis relevant to other hybrid regimes. Debates continue over the influence of economics and charismatic populism over voting and presidential approval in Latin America (Dominguez and McCann 1996; Weyland 2003). Does Hugo Chavez's appeal in Venezuela rest on ideological support for his "Bolivarian Revolution" or on oil-fueled prosperity? Did Fujimori's support in Peru owe more to economic conditions or his counterinsurgency efforts (Arce 2003)? Scholars have also pondered what shapes presidential popularity in the young democracies of Asia, exploring, for instance, whether the dips in Indonesian President Yudhono's rating in 2008 were caused by falling oil prices or the image of the president as weak and indecisive (Mietzner 2009, 147).

To preview the results, I find that Russians resemble voters in developed democracies in how they judge their leaders. Their evaluations closely follow economic conditions. Perceptions of the state of the Russian economy and of families' own finances do a good job of predicting both the decline in Yeltsin's rating, and the surge and plateau in Putin's. Although leaders have tried to manipulate perceptions, the statistical evidence suggests such efforts have had limited effects. At times—notably during certain election campaigns—Russians' views of the economy were rosier than warranted. But in general, perceptions were well predicted by objective economic indicators.

In this article, I study what determines change in the average popularity of Russian presidents over time. Other papers, using cross-sectional survey data, have explored what types of individuals supported Yeltsin or Putin at given moments. Such studies, like this one, tend to find that economic factors were important (Colton and Hale 2008; Duch 1995; Hesli and Bashkirova 2001; Miller, Reisinger, and Hesli 1996; Rose 2007b; Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2004; White and McAllister 2008). While this might seem reassuring, it is important to remember how cross-sectional and time-series analyses differ. They do not, as sometimes thought, generate potentially competing evidence on the same question. Rather, they address different questions. Cross-sectional analyses show what categories of citizens favored the incumbent at a particular time. They reveal little about changes in aggregate support. For that, we need time-series or panel data. Of course, time-series regressions are unable to assess the importance of characteristics that vary across individuals but not over time.

The only time-series study of Russian presidential approval of which I am aware is Mishler and Willerton (2003), which examined data up to 2000, and so was not able to draw strong comparisons between the Yeltsin and Putin periods. I extend their analysis, and, using the more extensive data now available, draw somewhat different conclusions.

### Data on Presidential Approval

The main data I analyze are from a regular, face-to-face survey conducted by the Russian Center for Public Opinion Research (VCIOM) until 2003, and then by its successor, the Levada Center. VCIOM, founded in 1988, was directed from 1992 by Yuri Levada, a sociologist who had been fired from Moscow State University in 1969 for

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2 One exception is Mishler and Willerton (2003).

3 As Kramer demonstrated: "There is no reason whatever to expect time-series and cross-sectional estimates of the same parameters to be similar in magnitude; they need not even be of the same sign" (1983, 93). For an excellent discussion of cross-sectional versus time-series data, see Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson (2002).
“ideological mistakes in his lectures.” VCIOM earned a reputation as the most professional and politically independent of Russia’s half-dozen leading polling organizations. This independence is thought to have prompted a state takeover in 2003, in which Levada was fired. The center’s researchers set up the private Levada Center, which continued the polls.

The surveys are of a nationally representative sample of voting-age citizens, who are interviewed in their homes. I focus on two questions. First, the pollsters ask: “On the whole do you approve or disapprove of the performance of [the president’s name]?” This question, similar to one on the U.S. Gallup poll, was included monthly from late 1996.\(^4\) I use it to examine approval of President Putin, first elected in March 2000. Since this question was asked only occasionally before September 1996, I use another to study Yeltsin’s popularity. This one, included every second month from early 1994, asked: “What evaluation from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) would you give the President of Russia Boris Yeltsin?”\(^5\) I analyze the average evaluation.\(^6\) When both measures are available, the two are highly correlated, in levels (at \(r = .98\)) and in two-month differences (\(r = .91\)).

Figure 1 shows the data. On the left, Yeltsin bumps his way down from a December 1990 peak to a low of 6% in early 2009. On the right, Putin glides along, consistently above 60%. No American president has equaled Putin’s record since regular polling began in the 1930s. Eisenhower came closest, but even his rating fell at times into the 40s. No British prime minister has come close since the first MORI poll in 1979.\(^7\) Nor have postwar U.S. presidents plumbed the depths to which Yeltsin sank—the lowest was Harry Truman’s 22% in February 1952.

A natural first question, then, is whether the results are believable. Might Putin’s ratings have been concocted to please the Kremlin or reflect insincere replies of intimidated respondents? There are reasons to doubt this.

\(^4\) Gallup asks: “Do you approve or disapprove of the way that . . . is handling his job as President?”

\(^5\) This question was also used by Mishler and Willerton (2003). In the approval question, sample sizes were about 1,600; in the 10-point scale questions, the size ranged from 2,100 to about 2,400.

\(^6\) When both measures are available, the two are highly correlated, in levels (at \(r = .98\)) and in two-month differences (\(r = .91\)).

First, it is hard to believe VCIOM was slanting results to please Putin given its leader’s semisdemissed past and the state’s takeover to punish it for insufficient loyalty. Various Western pollsters (such as World Public Opinion and the New Russia Barometer) have worked with the Levada group and found it highly professional. The dynamics in VCIOM/Levada polls match those in surveys by other organizations. For instance, in 2006–2007 the Levada 10-point rating correlates at \( r = .93 \) with the share that said in polls of the Fond Obshchestvennogo Mnenia that they “trusted” Putin.

Second, it seems unlikely many respondents were intimidated given their critical responses on other questions. Asked in 2004 whether there was more or less corruption and abuse of power in the highest state organs than a year before, 30% said “more,” 45% said “the same amount,” and only 13% said “less.” Respondents were not shy to give Yeltsin a 6% approval rating and Putin just 31% in 1999. Even as Russians swooned over Putin, until mid-2007, his governments never won the approval of more than 46%, and large majorities opposed some of his policies, including—after the initial period—the military occupation of Chechnya.

Another concern is that, by limiting respondents to a 10-point scale, the surveys might be censoring the data. In the web appendix, I show the distributions of responses around Yeltsin’s highest and lowest points. While the distribution is reasonably symmetric for Yeltsin’s peak, respondents did cluster at the bottom in 1999. If the scale was censoring some respondents, the effect of economic decline under Yeltsin may actually have been greater than that estimated here.

Possible Explanations

What might explain the path of approval in Figure 1? In other countries, the public often rallies behind leaders at the start of wars (Mueller 1973). Both wars in the southern republic of Chechnya began in the run-up to presidential elections. In November 1994, Yeltsin’s aide Oleg Lobov reportedly said that a “small, victorious war” would “raise the president’s ratings.” Putin’s surge occurred as he sent troops to the republic for a second time and promised to crush the terrorists who had bombed four apartment buildings. “People believed that he, personally, could protect them,” Yeltsin wrote in his memoirs. “That’s what explains his surge in popularity” (Yeltsin 2000, 338).

Surveys suggest the public viewed the two wars quite differently. Yeltsin’s use of force in December 1994 was widely condemned; the next month, two-thirds of respondents opposed it (Jeffries 2002, 372). By summer, 71% disapproved of Yeltsin’s approach to Chechnya. However, opinion soon soured on the compromise of 1996, under which terrorists regularly crossed the border to take hostages for ransom. In October 1999, 74% favored a major military operation against illegal armed groups in Chechnya.

Support, however, proved fickle. By July 2000, about two-thirds of Russians thought Putin’s attempts to rout the insurgents mostly or completely unsuccessful, and the share remained above 60% until 2006. By November 2000, more Russians favored starting peace negotiations than continuing the military operation. By early 2001, fewer than one in ten respondents said they were attracted to Putin by his Chechnya policy. If Putin’s hard line on Chechnya helped him early on, this does not seem to have been the case later. To capture attitudes toward Putin’s Chechnya policy, I use a variable that measures the percentage of respondents who favored “continuing the military operation” in Chechnya rather than “negotiating with the ‘fighters.’”

Second, some saw the main reason for Putin’s popularity and Yeltsin’s dwindling appeal in their divergent personal styles. Yeltsin—ail ing, gaffe-prone, at times visibly inebriated—could hardly have seemed more different from the disciplined, energetic, sober Putin, a former spy and judo black belt. Polls confirm that Russians were attracted by Putin’s image of youthful vigor and put off by Yeltsin’s physical decline. Asked what qualities attracted them to Putin, from 30 to 47% of respondents chose

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8 Results at www.russiavotes.org, Slide 450. Twelve percent picked “don’t know.”

9 Wyman reviews the difficulties and common criticisms of polling in Russia and concludes that most problems are those faced by survey researchers worldwide. He found “no evidence specific to Russia that respondents . . . engage in self-censorship” (1997, 5–19). To investigate this, Rose (2007a) asked respondents in 13 postcommunist countries in 2004–2005 whether they thought “people today are afraid to say what they think to strangers.” Among Russians, 25% thought people were afraid to some extent—the lowest rate for all 13 countries. Those who thought people afraid to talk—and who were presumably nervous themselves—were only slightly more likely to favor the current regime, suggesting distortions due to self-censorship are minor.

10 Lobov later denied saying this, but admitted overestimating the odds of a quick success (Colton 2008, 290).


12 The question was not available for the first war. In a previous version I used the percent that said “war is continuing” in Chechnya rather than “peace is being established.” However, after correcting a data error, preferences on Chechnya policy were more significant, and also required less interpolation of missing values.
“he is an energetic, decisive, strong-willed person.” Only 9% said this of Yeltsin in January 2000. Even in 1996, the third most frequent thing respondents disliked about Yeltsin was that he was “a sick, weak person.”

But did the presidents’ images explain their varying support? Unfortunately, regular data on this were not available; respondents were asked only occasionally about Putin’s attractions. Governing style is also manifested in particular incidents. One episode thought to have harmed Putin’s image was his reaction when the Kursk nuclear submarine sank in 2000. While the Navy brass dithered, ignoring Western offers of help, the news showed Putin jet-skiing on the Black Sea. Yeltsin’s frequent hospital stays cannot have improved his image (Mishler and Willerton 2003). His drinking problem was made vivid in August 1994, when television showed him jerkily conducting a police band in Berlin.

Putin promised from the start to restore “order” after the turbulent 1990s, to fight crime and corruption and reimpose control over wayward local officials. A former KGB officer, he seemed to have the appropriate experience and connections. Could this explain his popularity? In surveys, many Russians say they favor strong leaders and are willing to sacrifice some rights in return for order. However, advocates of a “strong hand” and other antidemocratic norms turn out to be less likely to support Putin than to back Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov or the ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovsky. In fact, Whitefield (2005) found it was democracy supporters who favored Putin.

Moreover, many Russians were skeptical of Putin’s claims. Periodically, VCIOM/Levada polls asked how successful Putin had been at imposing order. On average 47% thought he had been at least partly successful; 49% thought he had been unsuccessful. There was no clear trend. On more specific questions, reports of deterioration predominated. Each year after 2000, at least 25% more thought citizens’ personal security had worsened than thought it had improved; at least 15% more saw decline in law enforcement than saw progress. Early on, 29% liked Putin because he “could impose order in the country.” By October 2006 the share had fallen to 13%.

Following Mishler and Willerton (2003), I created a measure of Russians’ political mood from the question: “Overall, how would you assess the political situation in Russia?” I subtracted the proportion choosing “critical, explosive,” or “tense” from that saying “calm” or “favorable.” To test whether attacking the oligarchs and exploiting nostalgia won Putin support, I created dummies for the months after the arrest of the oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky and after Putin restored the Soviet music to the national anthem. A large plurality—46% in a VCIOM poll—favored the Soviet version.

Respondents credited Putin with “strengthening Russia’s international position.” Between July 2000 and March 2007, on average 65% of respondents said he was quite or very successful at this, compared to 47% who said this of his efforts to “introduce order in the country.” By contrast, many thought Yeltsin had been too accommodating toward the West, which expanded NATO into Eastern Europe on his watch and then bombed the Serbs over Kosovo. To capture effects of foreign affairs, I included dummies for the Kosovo bombing, the 9/11 attack, which prompted a pro-American turn on Putin’s part, and the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. The Kosovo and Iraq wars were both unpopular in Russia and might have sapped support for presidents viewed as too cozy with Washington. Under Putin, I also included the share that

12 Does this reveal a cultural predilection for authoritarian rule or just a response to extreme conditions? After 9/11, large majorities of U.S. and British respondents were ready to trade civil liberties for security. In a YouGov poll of British adults, 70% said they were “willing to see some reduction in our civil liberties in order to improve security in this country” (“Observer Terrorism Poll: Full Results,” Observer, September 23, 2001). In a New York Times/CBS poll, 64% of U.S. respondents agreed that in wartime “it was a good idea for the president to have authority to change rights usually guaranteed by the Constitution” (Robin Toner and Janet Elder, “A Nation Challenged: Attitudes; Public Is Wary but Supportive on Rights Curbs,” New York Times, December 12, 2001). See Hale (2009) for a debunking of the common claim that Russians are undemocratic.
13 Other polls confirm that Putin is not more popular among supporters of authoritarian government (Morin and Samaranayake 2006; Rose, Mishler, and Munro 2004).
16 I used a measure of the share of respondents who said Putin had been very or quite successful in creating order in Russia minus the share who thought he had been mostly or completely unsuccessful. As this question was asked only 14 times, this required shortening the data period and interpolating two-thirds of the data. Similar problems apply to the international affairs variable. Given the need for extensive interpolation, I include these variables with strong reservations; however, some previous readers thought it important to do so.
said he was strengthening Russia’s international position minus the share that thought him mostly or completely unsuccessful in this.

To his opponents, Putin’s ratings simply showed the Kremlin’s increasing dominance of the press. In the words of Garry Kasparov: “You cannot talk about polls and popularity when all of the media are under state control” (Remnick 2007). Under Putin, state companies or loyal businessmen took over the last independent national television networks. Strong criticism of the president—although not of the government—disappeared from broadcasts. Based on a 1999 survey, White, Oates, and McAllister (2005, 192) concluded that media bias helped secure Putin’s victory: “The decisive factor in this dramatic reversal of fortunes appeared to be the media, particularly state television.” Measuring change in press freedom was difficult. Lacking a more sophisticated gauge, I used Freedom House’s index of press freedom, with the annual value used for each month of the relevant year. I also created a variable for the month of the state takeover of NTV, the network previously most critical of the Kremlin.

Finally, economic performance—and, especially, perceptions of it—has been shown to affect approval of incumbents in the United States, France, and Britain (Clarke and Stewart 1995; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Lafay 1991; Sanders 2000). In Russia, scholars have found economic influences on voting (Colton 2000; Tucker 2006), and these might also shape presidential popularity. Such effects might be retrospective or prospective and might focus on respondents’ own circumstances or their views of conditions nationwide. Previous studies of post-Soviet countries found evidence of all four types of economic influences. Hesli and Bashkirova (2001), looking at cross-sectional surveys, found all four effects affected support for Yeltsin. Mishler and Willerton (2003), focusing on time-series data, noted the influence of retrospective evaluations of the national economy and family finances. Rose, Mishler, and Munro (2004, 209) found in a cross-section that views of current economic performance were the strongest predictor of support for the political regime.

Data were available in the VCIOM/Levada surveys to construct three variables. For retrospective evaluations of the national economy, I use the question: “How would you assess Russia’s present economic situation?” For prospective evaluations of personal finances, I use: “How would you assess the current material situation of your family?” For each of these, I subtracted the shares saying “very bad” or “bad” from those saying “very good” or “good,” ignoring those who said “in between” or “don’t know.” For prospective evaluations of the national economy, I use: “What do you think awaits Russia in the economy in the coming several months?” I subtracted the percentage anticipating decline from that expecting improvement. Unfortunately, no question captured prospective evaluations of personal finances for a comparable period. I use a dummy for the shock of the August 1998 financial crisis and another for January 2005, when Putin introduced a reform to replace in-kind benefits such as free bus tickets and drugs for pensioners by cash grants. This provoked major demonstrations of benefit recipients, who complained that the compensation was insufficient.

Explaining Presidential Approval: Analysis

Before analyzing the presidential ratings, some statistical issues must be addressed. As is well known, OLS regressions on nonstationary data may produce spurious results. I therefore examined whether the approval data and the time-series explanatory variables were stationary, i.e., I(0); had a unit root, i.e., I(1); or were something in between, i.e., fractionally integrated, I(d) where $0 < d < 1$. Table 1 shows test statistics for these series. I use the augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) and the Phillips-Perron tests to test the null hypothesis of a unit root, and the Kwiatkowski et al. (KPSS) and Harris-McCabe-Leybourne (HML) tests to test the null of stationarity. I treat the two presidencies separately because, examining Figure 1, it seems likely the underlying process changed between their tenures.

The tests have weak power and do not always agree. In almost all cases, the HML test—but not the KPSS test—suggests the series are not stationary. In almost all, the ADF and Phillips-Perron tests cannot exclude the possibility of a unit root. Given the likelihood that most

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20 These variables were available in a continuous bimonthly series from early 1994, and irregularly before then.

21 On the analysis of fractionally integrated time series, see, for instance, Box-Steffensmeier and Smith (1996).

22 And analysis using the 10-point scale for both periods (not shown here) confirms that the coefficients on key variables changed between the two presidencies. Economic perceptions, although still highly significant, had somewhat smaller coefficients under Putin. It is intuitive to suppose that Russians acclimated psychologically to the stable growth under Putin and were less sensitive to short-run changes than they were to the large, sustained, irregular economic declines under Yeltsin.

23 The exception is expectations in the Putin period, for which the HML test cannot reject stationarity.

24 The exceptions are economic expectations under Putin, for which the Phillips-Perron, but not the ADF test, rejects the null of I(1),
### Table 1: Testing for Stationarity and Cointegration

#### A. Under Yeltsin (May 1994–December 1999, Bimonthly Data)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yeltsin Rating</th>
<th>Current Economy</th>
<th>Family Finances</th>
<th>Russia’s Ec. Future</th>
<th>Political Situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ADF test of I(1)</strong></td>
<td>−1.01, p &lt; .90</td>
<td>−1.60, p &lt; .90</td>
<td>−1.72, p &lt; .90</td>
<td>−2.76, p &lt; .10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phillips-Perron test of I(1)</strong></td>
<td>−1.22, p &lt; .90</td>
<td>−1.97, p &lt; .90</td>
<td>−2.39, p &lt; .90</td>
<td>−2.56, p &lt; .90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KPSS test of I(0)</strong></td>
<td>.03, p &lt; 1</td>
<td>.00, p &lt; 1</td>
<td>.02, p &lt; 1</td>
<td>.01, p &lt; 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HML test of I(0)</strong></td>
<td>2.24, p = .01</td>
<td>2.22, p = .01</td>
<td>2.19, p = .01</td>
<td>2.04, p = .02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Estimate of d</strong></td>
<td>0.884 (.17)</td>
<td>0.344 (.17)</td>
<td>0.509 (.17)</td>
<td>0.629 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Estimate of d for residuals of regression of Yeltsin rating on this variable</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### B. Under Putin (January 2000–November 2007 or March 2008, Bimonthly Data)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Putin Approval</th>
<th>Current Economy</th>
<th>Family Finances</th>
<th>Russia’s Ec. Future</th>
<th>Military Op. in Chechnya</th>
<th>Political Situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ADF test of I(1)</strong></td>
<td>−1.94, p &lt; .90</td>
<td>−.24, p &lt; .95</td>
<td>−1.09, p &lt; .90</td>
<td>−2.41, p &lt; .90</td>
<td>−2.73, p &lt; .10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phillips-Perron test of I(1)</strong></td>
<td>−2.78, p &lt; .10</td>
<td>−.68, p &lt; .90</td>
<td>−1.80, p &lt; .90</td>
<td>−3.10, p &lt; .05</td>
<td>−2.81, p &lt; .10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KPSS test of I(0)</strong></td>
<td>.00, p &lt; 1</td>
<td>.14, p &lt; 1</td>
<td>.07, p &lt; 1</td>
<td>.15, p &lt; 1</td>
<td>.17, p &lt; 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HML test of I(0)</strong></td>
<td>2.49, p = .01</td>
<td>2.35, p = .01</td>
<td>2.42, p = .01</td>
<td>−.17, p = .57</td>
<td>2.28, p = .01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Estimate of d</strong></td>
<td>.646 (.17)</td>
<td>.725 (.17)</td>
<td>.470 (.17)</td>
<td>.635 (.17)</td>
<td>.604 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Estimate of d for residuals of regression of Putin approval on this variable</strong></td>
<td>.703 (.17)</td>
<td>.754 (.17)</td>
<td>.492 (.17)</td>
<td>.552 (.17)</td>
<td>.592 (.17)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Calculated using James Davidson’s Time Series Modeling software, v. 4.31; p: probability of the test statistic exceeding the computed value under H(0); estimates of d calculated with Robinson’s Local Whittle Gaussian ML semi-parametric method; I present averages of the estimates for bandwidths of 15, 10, and 5 (Yeltsin series have N of 34; those for Putin have N of 50), standard errors in parentheses (averaged across the three bandwidths). Yeltsin: 10-point rating; Putin: percent approving of his performance. Standard errors in parentheses.*

or all series are not stationary and the uncertainty about whether they are exactly I(1), it makes sense to see whether they are fractionally integrated. I therefore estimated the order of fractional integration, d, for each series in each period, using Robinson’s Local Whittle Gaussian ML semi-parametric method (Robinson 1995; estimates in Table 1). I fractionally differenced each series by its parameter. Unfortunately, as one text puts it: “In the case of the Gaussian semiparametric estimator...[t]here are as yet no satisfactory methods for choosing the bandwidth parameter” (Doukhan, Oppenheim, and Taqqu 2003, 282). The only recommendation I could find was that of Haldrup and Nielsen (2007), who suggest choosing relatively low bandwidths, which tend to “bias estimators less when noise is not too persistent.” I therefore aimed low, calculating d for bandwidths of 5, 10, and 15, and averaging the results. N was 34 for the Yeltsin series and 50 for the Putin series.

25 Studies of approval ratings in other countries have also found them to be fractionally integrated (e.g., Byers, Davidson, and Peel 2000), which gives theoretical reasons to expect such data to be fractionally integrated.

26 I used James Davidson’s *Time Series Modeling (TSM)* software, v. 4.31. To calculate d, it was necessary to choose a bandwidth and possibly also Putin’s approval (Phillips-Perron test marginally significant).

27 Again, I used Davidson’s TSM software. The fractional differencing formula produces extreme values for the first numbers in the series (in fact, the first value is the level, not a difference). To prevent such outliers from distorting the results, I dropped the first case from the fractionally differenced series for Putin’s approval.
I then examined whether the presidents’ ratings were cointegrated with any of the economic series. If two variables are cointegrated, a long-run equilibrium relationship exists between them (Box-Steinensmeier and Tomlinson 2000, 70). The usual test for cointegration of two I(1) variables is to regress one on the other and test whether the residuals are I(0), in which case the variables are cointegrated. To test whether two fractionally integrated series are fractionally cointegrated, one regresses one on the other (both in levels) and estimates d for the residuals. If the residuals’ d is less than those for the “parent” series, the variables are fractionally cointegrated.28 The estimates in Table 1 suggest that Yeltsin’s rating was fractionally cointegrated with perceptions of the current economy and/or family finances (the two are highly correlated). Putin’s approval may be fractionally cointegrated with economic expectations and support for continuing the military operation in Chechnya; it may also be cointegrated with the political mood. However, this was highly correlated with the economic variables and preferred Chechen policy, and tests in the web appendix suggest it may have been Granger caused by economic expectations.

One revealing way to analyze nonstationary time series is with an error correction model, which simultaneously estimates the long-run relationship and the short-run dynamics of adjustment. Error correction models have been used with fractionally integrated series to study various problems (Baum and Barkoulas 2006; Clarke and Lebo 2003). I use the three-step fractional error correction model of, for instance, Clarke and Lebo (2003) and Lebo and Cassino (2007). That is, I run regressions of the form:

\[ \Delta^d \text{Rating}_t = \beta_0 + \sum \gamma_j \Delta^d X_{j,t} + \sum \delta_k W_{k,t} + \beta_1 \Delta^d ECM_{t-1} + \epsilon_t \]

where \( \Delta^d \) indicates that a variable has been fractionally differenced by its estimated value of d; \( \text{Rating} \) is the average rating on the 10-point scale (for Yeltsin) or the percentage approving of the president’s performance (for Putin); the \( X \)'s, indexed by \( j \), are fractionally integrated explanatory variables; the \( W \)'s, indexed by \( k \), are stationary explanatory variables; \( \Delta^d ECM_{t-1} \) is the fractional error correction mechanism (FECM); and \( \epsilon \) is a normally distributed stochastic error.29 Where necessary to reduce autocorrelation, I included one lag of the fractionally differenced dependent variable on the right-hand side (Table 3, columns 1, 2, and 4). To obtain the FECM, I regressed the president’s rating on a right-hand variable or variables with which it was thought to be cointegrated (both in levels), estimated d for the residuals from this regression, fractionally differenced the residuals by this d, and then lagged the series by one two-month period (see Clarke and Lebo 2003).

The different economic perceptions measures are highly correlated (\( r = .89 \), for the current economy and family finances under Putin), which is not surprising since the same factors are bound to affect all three. Lacking good instruments, it is easier to assess the aggregate impact of economic perceptions than to be sure which type matters most. Because of the high correlations, I first present models with each economic perceptions measure separately and then report a preferred model with more than one, dropping those event dummies that were not significant at \( p = .30 \) (Table 2, column 5; Table 3, column 7). Under Putin, the choice of which economic variables to put in the final model was somewhat arbitrary given the high correlations. Including family finances together with perceptions of the national economy, the former had an odd negative coefficient, which I judged to be a spurious result of the correlation between these two variables rather than evidence that worsening finances boosted Putin’s popularity. In my view, the data are just not fine-grained enough to adjudicate between the three types of perceptions. I also include the political mood variable separately as it is so highly correlated with the economic variables and likely Granger caused by one of them (see the web appendix). I show separate models with the measures of Putin’s policy performance (on international affairs, order) since these require shortening the data series. Finally, in Table 2, column 6, and Table 3, column 8, I show the preferred models with the FECM dropped; these are needed for subsequent simulations.

Choosing how to model the influence of discrete events poses a dilemma when the duration of such effects is unclear. One can arbitrarily assume a path of decay. Or, lacking theoretically informed priors, one can try several specifications. The second course reduces the danger of missing the true effect because one has misspecified the duration, but increases the risk of false positives. In my experience, readers are more uncomfortable with the latter than with the former. In general, I model each event with a dummy valued 1 in the month of the earliest event with a dummy valued 1 in the month of the earliest...

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29 The three-step method also avoids including nonstationary variables on the right-hand side.
TABLE 2 Explaining Yeltsin’s Popularity, Russia 1994–99

| Dependent Variable: Fractionally Differenced Yeltsin Rating on 10-Point Scale | (d = .884) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
| Δ^d Current economy | .031* (.005) | .033* (.004) | .035* (.004) | | | |
| Δ^d Family finances | .010 (.012) | .005 (.004) | .007 (.003) | | | |
| Δ^d Russia’s economic future | | .011* (.003) | | | | |
| Δ^d Political mood | | .004 (.010) | | | | |
| Δ^d ECM(t−1) | −.31* (.14) | −.17 (.13) | −.23* (.09) | | | |
| Months in office | −.006* (.002) | −.004 (.003) | −.004 (.004) | −.006* (.002) | −.005* (.002) | |
| First Chechen war start | −.31* (.08) | −.55* (.09) | −.41* (.09) | −.51* (.18) | −.28* (.06) | −.28* (.06) |
| First Chechen war end | .35* (.14) | .45* (.11) | .26* (.10) | .35* (.17) | .31* (.12) | .25 |
| Budyonnovsk crisis | −.30* (.12) | −.22 (.11) | −.14 (.11) | −.16 (.11) | −.25* (.06) | −.16* (.05) |
| Start of second Chechen war | −.01 (.07) | −.05 (.10) | −.05 (.10) | −.05 (.10) | −.05 (.10) | |
| Drunk in Berlin | −.19* (.09) | −.19 (.10) | −.17 (.09) | −.17 (.11) | −.23* (.07) | −.27* (.07) |
| Yeltsin hospitalized | .03 (.08) | −.08 (.10) | −.07 (.09) | −.11 (.10) | | |
| Kosovo bombing | .06 (.07) | −.01 (.14) | .16* (.07) | .19* (.09) | | |
| 1998 financial crisis | −.14 (.11) | −.53* (.19) | −.52* (.09) | −.59* (.16) | | |
| Constant | .42* (.17) | .27 (.22) | .36 (.19) | .31 (.31) | .43* (.13) | .40* (.12) |
| R² | .8180 | .6171 | .6714 | .5788 | .8250 | .7909 |
| LM autocorrelation test, χ² | .43, p = .51 | .47, p = .49 | .00, p = .96 | .23, p = .63 | .00, p = .97 | .03, p = .85 |
| KPSS test of I(0) | .05, p < 1 | .08, p < 1 | .13, p < 1 | .13, p < 1 | .06, p < 1 | .07, p < 1 |
| Durbin Watson statistic | 2.00 | 1.73 | 1.91 | 1.73 | 1.83 | 1.97 |
| N | 33 | 33 | 33 | 33 | 33 | 33 |

Note: *p < .05. OLS with robust standard errors in parentheses. Data are bimonthly, starting in May 1994, when continuous bimonthly economic series begin, ending in December 1999. Δ^d series fractionally differenced using d estimated in Table 1. Δ^d ECM(t−1) in columns 1 and 5 is the fractionally differenced residuals from a regression of Yeltsin’s rating on perceptions of the current economy (both in levels), lagged one two-month period; in column 2, the residuals are from a regression of Yeltsin’s rating on perceived family finances. Column 5 shows the preferred model (in bold), from which event variables not significant at p = .30 have been dropped. Column 6 shows a regression identical to that in column 5 except without the ECM.
### TABLE 3 Explaining Putin’s Popularity, Russia 2000–2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable Is Fractionally Differenced Percent Approving of Putin’s Performance (d = .646)</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
<th>(6)</th>
<th>(7)</th>
<th>(8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta^d$ Current economy</td>
<td>.38*</td>
<td>.33*</td>
<td>.35*</td>
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<td>(.16)</td>
<td>(.16)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta^d$ Family finances</td>
<td>−.01</td>
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<td>(.23)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta^d$ Russia’s ec. future</td>
<td>.18*</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta^d$ Political mood</td>
<td>.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta^d$ Successful: international affairs</td>
<td>.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta^d$ Successful: order</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<td>(.22)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta^d$ Continue milit. op. in Chechnya</td>
<td>.41*</td>
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Note: *$p < .05$. OLS with robust standard errors in parentheses. Data bimonthly, starting in early 2000 and ending in December 2007. $\Delta^d$ series fractionally differenced using $d$ estimated in Table 1. $\Delta^d ECM(t−1)$ is the fractionally differenced residuals from a regression of Putin’s approval on expected performance of the national economy (both in levels), lagged one two-month period. Preferred model in bold.
subsequent survey, and 0 at other times. The impact is thus assumed to decay at the same gradual rate that the fractional differencing implies.

The one exception is the end of the first Chechen war, which arrived gradually. In March 1996, Yeltsin decreed a halt to military operations, but this changed little on the ground. In May 1996, he and acting Chechen President Yandarbiyev signed a cease-fire agreement. But only in late August was the Khasavyurt Accord signed, actually ending the war. I model this with a dummy valued 1 in May and July, and 0 otherwise (June and August were not in the bimonthly data). I include simple dummies for the months in which the two Chechen wars started (since the dependent variables are differenced, dummies for the start and end make more sense than a dummy for the duration).

As is common in studies of U.S. presidential approval, I control for the time the president had been in office. Approval of American presidents typically falls, even controlling for other factors. Mueller (1973) argued that citizens start with unrealistically high expectations and gradually grow disappointed in their leaders. Under Putin, months in office and the index of press restrictions turn out to be highly correlated ($r = .96$); both rose monotonically over time. Therefore, I do not include them in the same regression; months in office turned out to be more significant in each case.

Table 1 suggested that, under both presidents, more than one variable might be cointegrated with the president’s rating. Since it was not obvious a priori which of these—individually or in combination—belonged in the FE CM, I tried several formulations. In Table 2, columns 1 and 5 contain an FE CM formed using the residuals from regressing Yeltsin’s rating on perceptions of the current economy. In column 2, the FE CM used residuals from Yeltsin’s rating regressed on perceived family finances. The former proved much more significant, and also more significant than an FE CM for which the cointegrating regression contained both family finances and the current economy. In Table 3, the FE CM uses residuals from regressing Putin’s approval on economic expectations. This proved more significant than FE CM s that incorporated preferences on Chechnya policy or the political mood.

What do the results show? Consider first the effects of war and terrorist attacks. Yeltsin’s Chechen misadventure appears to have cost him support, although perhaps less than might have been expected. His rating fell at the start of the first war by more than one quarter of a point on the 10-point scale (Table 2, column 5). It rose as the war ended in 1996, by .31 of a point in both May and July; of course, the estimates should be viewed as only approximate. Yeltsin lost another quarter point after the 1995 Budyonnovsk terrorist siege. By contrast, the start of the second war had no clear effect.30

Putin’s approval rose and fell with support for the use of military force in Chechnya. Since the latter peaked at 70% in March 2000, falling to just 13% in December 2007, this suggests the Chechen situation helped Putin early on, but weighed him down in later years. Indeed, supposing the coefficients on the fractionally differenced series roughly correspond to those for first differences, Putin lost about 20–30 points of approval over the course of his presidencies as faith in his military approach dwindled. Terrorist attacks temporarily revived backing for military force. After the Nordost siege in 2002, support for the military option leapt from 34% in September to 48% in November, before falling back to 31% in January 2003. This led to a rally behind Putin, whose approval temporarily jumped by six points. (Nordost had no effect beyond its militarization of the public mood; the dummy is insignificant in Table 3, where regressions control for support for the military operation.) Beslan led to a smaller jump in support for military force (from 24 to 31%); but Putin’s approval actually fell that month. The Beslan dummy is significantly negative, controlling for preferences on Chechnya policy; in other words, support for Putin rose by less than one would have expected given the militarization of the public mood. One might speculate that in this case, Russians blamed both the terrorists and the authorities for the disastrous outcome.

I lacked good data to assess the influence of presidential style conclusively. But it probably made some difference. After Yeltsin conducted the band in Berlin, his rating fell by about one quarter point. I found no evidence, however, that Yeltsin’s hospitalizations hurt his popularity. Perhaps his ill health was already too well known for this to matter. Putin’s approval may have fallen after the Kursk sank, but the estimates were statistically insignificant. Restoring the Soviet music to the national anthem produced a boost of eight or nine points. It could be that this was the moment Putin “closed the deal” with some former Communist supporters. Perhaps for the same reason, the arrest of the oligarch Khodorkovsky led to a bounce of about seven points.

Neither respondents’ assessments of the political situation nor their evaluations of Putin’s success in

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30 That the dependent variable is fractionally differenced makes it harder to interpret the size of the effects. To get a sense of what difference this makes, I ran versions of the preferred models first-differencing instead of fractionally differencing the dependent variables. The coefficients were mostly quite similar, at least for the significant variables, so it is probably safe to assume the effects are roughly as large as those in Tables 2 and 3.
international affairs or at establishing “order” significantly affected presidential ratings, although in the latter cases the limited data might be to blame. After the United States invaded Iraq, Putin’s approval fell several points: apparently the exercise of American power cast his previous solicitousness of the United States after 9/11 in a bad light. Putin’s rating also fell after the 9/11 attack. NATO’s bombing of Kosovo did not have a clear impact on Yeltsin’s rating (it was not significant in the final model).

As with U.S. presidents, a time trend remains in Yeltsin’s and Putin’s ratings controlling for other variables. One should interpret the months’ term along with the intercept; the first was negative for both presidents, the second positive. This implies that, other things equal, approval tended to rise at first, but then fall. Such a pattern makes intuitive sense: at first citizens rallied behind a new leader, but over time more and more grew disillusioned for a variety of reasons not captured by the model. For Yeltsin, the effect turned negative after about 70 months (mid-1997); for Putin, it remained positive through the end of his second term. The admittedly rough press freedom data do not suggest greater Kremlin control boosted Putin’s rating. The NTV takeover had no clear effect. Nor did Freedom House’s media index; always less significant than time in office, it was dropped from the regressions. Months in office might, under Putin, be picking up the trend toward less press freedom. But if so this would suggest that unfree media lowered Putin’s approval: the coefficient on months was negative.

These results include a mixture of surprises and confirmations of the conventional wisdom. Some of the hypothesized factors help account for the spikes in the ratings at various points. But most effects are small. By contrast, economic perceptions have considerable explanatory power.32

Under Yeltsin, perceptions of the national economy had the strongest impact. The significant FECM in columns 1 and 5 suggests a long-run relationship between rosy views of current conditions and support for the president. The coefficient’s value, –.23 in column 5, implies that when a shock knocks the two variables out of equilibrium, about one quarter of the gap is closed each period. The significant coefficient on fractionally differenced current economic perceptions suggests these also had a short-term effect. As expected, the 1998 financial crisis depressed Yeltsin’s popularity. This is not significant if one controls for perceptions of the current economy, suggesting the crisis affected Yeltsin’s rating via this pathway. Under Putin, the evidence suggests a long-run relationship between economic expectations and presidential approval, with about one-third of any divergence eliminated each period (coefficient of −.32 in column 7). I also found evidence of short-run effects, although the correlations among variables make it hard to say which matters more. Current economic assessments and expectations are both significant if entered alone (columns 1 and 3), but statistical significance falls if more than one is included at one time. Again, the strongest short-run effects are of perceptions of the current economy. As expected, Putin’s monetization of benefits cost him several percentage points even after taking into account the impact of the reform on perceptions of family finances.

How much difference did the economy make? One can explore this by simulating the final model estimated for one president, substituting economic perceptions from the corresponding month in the other’s term, while leaving all other variables at their actual levels. The two presidents’ simulated ratings supposing each had presided over the other’s perceived economic conditions are shown in Figure 2.33 This exercise should be taken with a grain of salt. The simulations change somewhat depending on the specification, and it was not possible to include an FECM.34 Nevertheless, the results are suggestive. It seems Russians’ radically different evaluations of their first two presidents were strongly influenced by the very different economic conditions under which each served. Had Yeltsin presided over Putin’s economy, he would apparently have left office extremely popular. Had Putin presided over Yeltsin’s, his rating would have plunged early on, recovered a bit, but then sunk again. In January 2008, fewer than 50% of Russians would have approved of his performance.35

31 To locate the peak, I divide the constant by the coefficient on months in the preferred models.
32 For instance, a model including all the variables in Table 2 except the economic ones has an adjusted R² of .1270. Adding fractionally differenced current economy and family finances along with the FECM raises the adjusted R² to .7036. The difference is less dramatic but still notable in the Putin period—adding economic variables to a model with all noneconomic variables raises the adjusted R² from .4907 to .6630.
33 To simulate Putin with Yeltsin’s economy, it was necessary to impute values for economic perceptions under Yeltsin in 1992. To do this, I regressed the economic perceptions variables on inflation and real wages during months when both were available and used the resulting models to impute backwards.
34 Since one is simulating the dependent variable, one cannot first regress it on economic perceptions to form the FECM. Instead, I use the models in Table 2, column 6, and Table 3, column 8.
35 In fact, this probably underestimates Putin’s decline. Not including the FECM, the simulations are unable to incorporate the
The regressions also enable us to explore an intriguing counterfactual about Putin’s rise, which is usually seen as inexorably tied to the violent events of late 1999. Suppose there had been no apartment bombings, no second Chechen war. Would Putin’s rating have stayed around its starting point of 31%? Of course, we cannot know for sure, but the statistics offer some clues. To see what economic perceptions alone would predict, I used the estimated effects of just economic perceptions and months in office from Table 1, Model 6, and simply extrapolated forward using the actual economic perceptions data under Putin and restarting months in office. In Figure 3, the dotted line shows the simulated rating of a generic new president based on just the dramatic economic recovery, supposing Russians started evaluating the new leader in September 1999, right after Putin became prime minister. The dashed line supposes Russians started evaluating the new incumbent in January 2000, when Putin became acting president.36

36 To be clear, no actual data on Putin’s approval were used to calculate this. I simply used actual economic perceptions to simulate the incumbent’s rating, restarting months in office in the relevant month. I therefore assume nothing about Yeltsin’s successor except that he took office in September 1999 (dotted line) or January 2000 (dashed line) and that economic perceptions influenced his rating in the same way as under Yeltsin.
The striking implication is that even without a Chechen war or terrorist attacks, economic factors alone would have prompted a leap in the new president’s popularity quite similar to that which occurred. In late 1999, the economy began to revive. Between August 1999 and June 2000, real wages rose by about 20%, while wage arrears and unemployment fell. This fueled an unexpected rebirth of economic optimism that would have boosted support for any new Kremlin incumbent.37

The main difference is that the surge in approval predicted by economic factors comes a little later than the actual surge. In those months, time was of the essence. Putin would have to run for election in June 2000, or, after Yeltsin resigned early, in March. Were it not for the Chechen war, the Kremlin would have been best served by the original election schedule. If the public began evaluating Putin in September 1999, by July 2000 the simulation suggests his rating would have reached 4.5 on the 10-point scale. Supposing instead that Putin remained tethered to Yeltsin’s rating until January 2000, by July his would have been 3.7. In 1996, when Yeltsin won reelection with 54% of the valid vote, his rating had been 3.9. Thus, it is very possible that Putin—or some other new Kremlin candidate—would have won the presidency even without the Chechen conflict and terrorist bombings.

However, economic factors do not explain why Putin’s rating actually surged when it did. This might, indeed, be associated with the Chechen events. Although economic factors would have achieved the same result a few months later, the traumas of late 1999 apparently sped things up.38

The Determinants of Economic Perceptions

If economic perceptions were important, what caused these perceptions? Did they reflect actual economic conditions, were they idiosyncratic, or were they manipulated by government propaganda? Russians’ rosy view of the economy under Putin might itself result from the Kremlin’s media control. Or positive economic perceptions might reflect a general confidence in Putin’s stewardship.

To explore this, I ran fractional error correction models with the fractionally differenced economic perceptions measures as dependent variables (Table 4). Among explanatory factors, I included six objective measures of economic conditions—the average real wage, real wage arrears, the average real pension, logged inflation, unemployment, and the demand for workers (job openings

37 Had Yeltsin been eligible to run for a third term and continued in office, simulations suggest the economic recovery would also have revived his popularity—but more slowly and less dramatically. As noted, the accumulated effect of time in office was by that point weighing quite heavily on his rating.

38 As noted, support for military operations fell drastically in subsequent years, which must have pushed down Putin’s rating; that it remained high reflects the positive effect of economic stabilization.
Table 4  Determinants of Economic Perceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>$\Delta^d$ Current Economy (d = .947)</th>
<th>$\Delta^d$ Family Finances (d = .832)</th>
<th>$\Delta^d$ Russia’s Ec. future (d = .884)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Economic data</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta^d$ Real wage</td>
<td>.007 (.011)</td>
<td>.004 (.011)</td>
<td>.012 (.007)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta^d$ Real wage arrears</td>
<td>−.041 (.035)</td>
<td>−.040 (.024)</td>
<td>.073 (.057)</td>
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<td>$\Delta^d$ Average real pension</td>
<td>.023 (.023)</td>
<td>.051* (.022)</td>
<td>.051* (.019)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta^d$ Log inflation</td>
<td>4.24 (3.73)</td>
<td>2.48 (4.23)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta^d$ Unemployment</td>
<td>−.21 (.98)</td>
<td>−2.49 (1.34)</td>
<td>−2.82* (1.33)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta^d$ Demand for workers</td>
<td>.007 (.006)</td>
<td>.008 (.004)</td>
<td>−.001 (.005)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta^d$ ECM(t−1)</td>
<td>−.50* (.08)</td>
<td>−.51* (.08)</td>
<td>−.48* (.09)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Recovery phase</td>
<td>.97 (1.73)</td>
<td>1.75* (.82)</td>
<td>8.66* (2.27)</td>
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<td>Economic events</td>
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<td>1998 financial crisis</td>
<td>−20.16* (4.91)</td>
<td>−18.84* (2.39)</td>
<td>−.61 (6.97)</td>
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<td>Oct. 1994 financial crisis</td>
<td>−6.43* (2.48)</td>
<td>−5.76* (2.99)</td>
<td>−1.65 (2.58)</td>
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<td>Monetization of benefits, Jan. 2005</td>
<td>−.48 (1.33)</td>
<td>−15.27* (2.01)</td>
<td>−15.05* (1.64)</td>
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<td>Politics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Putin presidency dummy</td>
<td>.41 (.171)</td>
<td>−4.99 (2.50)</td>
<td>−3.62 (4.69)</td>
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<td>$\Delta$ President’s rating (10-point scale)</td>
<td>3.08* (1.08)</td>
<td>2.78* (.83)</td>
<td>2.11* (.72)</td>
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<td>Khodorkovsky arrested</td>
<td>−6.68* (1.45)</td>
<td>−6.14* (1.17)</td>
<td>.45 (1.98)</td>
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<td>Press freedom (high = less free)</td>
<td>.00 (.09)</td>
<td>−.06 (.08)</td>
<td>.1 (.17)</td>
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<td>1996 campaign</td>
<td>3.95* (1.38)</td>
<td>4.13* (1.03)</td>
<td>−1.19 (1.38)</td>
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<td>2000 campaign</td>
<td>−1.30 (2.37)</td>
<td>−1.10 (1.99)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004 campaign</td>
<td>5.37* (1.08)</td>
<td>5.41* (1.02)</td>
<td>−.17 (1.10)</td>
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<td>2008 campaign</td>
<td>−1.75 (1.58)</td>
<td>−3.66* (1.42)</td>
<td>−4.46* (1.65)</td>
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(Continued)
Table 4 Continued

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>( \Delta^d ) Current Economy ((d = .947))</th>
<th>( \Delta^d ) Family Finances ((d = .832))</th>
<th>( \Delta^d ) Russia’s Ec. Future ((d = .884))</th>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>(-.53) ((.484)) (-.63) ((.67))</td>
<td>(.82) ((.50)) (-2.31^\ast) ((.75))</td>
<td>(-4.76) ((.75)) (.31) ((.73))</td>
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<tr>
<td>(R^2)</td>
<td>(.6537) ((.6255))</td>
<td>(.6782) ((.6030))</td>
<td>(.5129) ((.5039))</td>
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<tr>
<td>LM autocorrelation test, (\chi^2) ((p))</td>
<td>(.02) ((.90)) (.19) ((.67))</td>
<td>(.03) ((.86)) (.42) ((.52))</td>
<td>(.19) ((.66)) (.20) ((.66))</td>
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<tr>
<td>KPSS test of I(0)</td>
<td>(.04) (p &lt; 1) (.04) (p &lt; 1)</td>
<td>(.04) (p &lt; 1) (.19) (p &lt; 1)</td>
<td>(.05) (p &lt; 1) (.10) (p &lt; 1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Durbin Watson statistic</td>
<td>(2.00) (2.05)</td>
<td>(1.95) (2.06)</td>
<td>(2.08) (2.09)</td>
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<td>(N)</td>
<td>80 (80)</td>
<td>80 (80)</td>
<td>80 (80)</td>
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Note: *p < .05. OLS with robust standard errors in parentheses. Data bimonthly, starting in early 1994, ending in December 2007. \(\Delta^d\): series fractionally differenced using estimated \(d\) (average for bandwidths of 30, 20, and 10). \(\Delta^dECM(t – 1)\): fractionally differenced one period lag of residuals of regression of dependent variable on (a) real wage and demand for workers (columns 1–2); (b) real wage and unemployment (columns 3–4); (c) real wage (columns 5–6). Even columns show models from which the most insignificant variables have been dropped.

reported to the state employment service). As might be expected, these were correlated (e.g., \(r = .87\) for the real wage and pension), so besides showing models that include all six (odd-numbered columns), I present simpler models from which the most insignificant variables have been dropped (even columns). Given the high correlations, conclusions about which economic variables were most important have to be tentative. All the economic indicators appeared to be fractionally integrated, so I fractionally differenced each by the appropriate \(d\) (average estimate for bandwidths 10, 20, and 30; \(N = 82–4\)) and included a fractional error correction mechanism. Based on exploratory analysis, the most appropriate FECM was based on cointegrating regressions, including the real wage (columns 5–6), the real wage and demand for workers (columns 1–2), and the real wage and unemployment (columns 3–4).

Besides the official statistics, certain events informed the public about economic conditions. One might expect gloomier views after the August 1998 financial crisis. Earlier, Russians had been shocked when on “Black Tuesday” in October 1994 the ruble plunged almost 30%, prompting Yeltsin to fire his main economic ministers. The protests that followed the January 2005 reform of social benefits suggest many Russians thought this had worsened their financial situation. I also include a dummy for whether the economy was in its decline or recovery phase, on the theory that expectations tend to overshoot, being too pessimistic in downturns and too optimistic in recoveries. It is almost a cliché that in business cycles consumers swing between “irrational exuberance” in the boom and excessive pessimism in the recession; there is some evidence for this from the United States.39

What about political influences? First, causation might run in reverse from presidential approval to perceptions of economic performance. In the United States, overall presidential approval does not appear to affect consumer sentiment (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992), but approval of the president’s economic management does (De Boef and Kellstedt 2004). So in estimating the impact of economic indicators on perceptions, one should at least control for presidential ratings; I include the incumbent’s differenced rating on the 10-point scale. (My estimate of \(d\) was almost exactly 1, so first differencing was appropriate.) Certain government actions are likely to affect economic perceptions. I included a dummy to see whether Russians viewed Khodorkovsky’s arrest as good or bad for the economy (recall that Putin’s approval jumped). Finally, I looked for effects of media manipulation. I included a dummy for Putin’s presidency given the view that coverage became more favorable under him, and also included the Freedom House index of press freedom. Media effects are expected to be particularly strong during election campaigns. I included variables valued 1 for the six months before a presidential election and –1 for the six months after it.40

39 Tortorice (2009), for instance, finds that American poll respondents are irrationally pessimistic about future unemployment at the end of a recession and excessively optimistic at the beginning of the downturn. I date the bottom in Russia by the month in which real wages were lowest, February 1999.

40 For a similar approach, see De Boef and Kellstedt (2004).
Table 4 suggests that Russians’ views of economic conditions were not just idiosyncratic. Each perceptions variable is systematically related to objective measures of economic performance. All three appear to be in long-run equilibrium with the average real wage; perceptions of the current economy and family finances were apparently also in long-run equilibrium with, respectively, demand for workers and unemployment. When real wages rise, economic expectations adjust upward to a new equilibrium, closing about a quarter of the gap each period (column 6). In the short run, more job vacancies (significant at p = .06) and perhaps lower wage arrears (p = .09) correlate with a rosier view of the current economy. Short-run increases in pensions (p = .01) and drops in unemployment (p = .04) were associated with cheerier views of family finances; higher wages may also have helped (p = .08). Rising pensions (p = .01), falling wage arrears (p = .04), and possibly falling unemployment (p = .13) led to more positive expectations. Inflation was never significant; its effects might be captured here by real wages and pensions. Attitudes did also overshoot, accentuating the current trend; even controlling for political factors, views of the current economy and family finances were more negative in the downslide and positive during the recovery than would be predicted from just the objective indicators.

As expected, major economic events also triggered reevaluations. The 1998 financial crisis fostered gloom about the current economy, although oddly it did not influence expectations. Both views of the current economy and economic expectations worsened after the October 1994 currency crisis. However, these events did not affect Russians’ assessments of their own finances, unless such effects were captured by the economic indicators. By contrast, the 2005 monetization of benefits prompted a sharp fall in how well-off many Russians felt, as well as more pessimistic expectations.

The extent to which objective economic indicators and events can, by themselves, account for the pattern of economic perceptions can be seen in Figures A2.2 and A2.3 in the web appendix. In these graphs, I plot both actual economic perceptions and those predicted using just the economic variables in the regressions in columns 2 and 4, leaving out political effects. The predictions do not catch all the spikes and dives in perceptions. But they do an excellent job of capturing the trends.

Politics helps explain the remaining variation. As expected, presidential approval correlated with all three economic perceptions measures; controlling for it allows greater confidence in the estimated impact of the economic variables. The coefficients on presidential approval—2.78, 1.44, and 6.91, in columns 2, 4, and 6—suggest the extent of reverse causation. For the current economy and family finances, such effects seem minor. Of the 84-point range of the current economy variable, presidential popularity could predict about 16 points, and it could predict about eight points of the 77-point range in family finances.41 The possible effect of presidential approval on economic expectations is somewhat larger—the former could predict up to 39 points in the 81-point range of the latter.

The dummy for Putin’s presidency was not significant in columns 1 or 5. It was significant at p = .051 but negative in Model 3 for family finances. Of course, it was highly correlated with the economic recovery variable, which distinguished months after February 1999. Interpreting the two together suggests that perceived family finances improved a lot in the early recovery months of 1999, but that the effect diminished after January 2000. Including the economic recovery and Putin dummies separately in the preferred family finances model (column 4), economic recovery is highly significant but the Putin dummy is not. In short, the evidence suggests that perceptions were better during the recovery phase, which largely corresponded to Putin’s presidencies. But it is not clear that Putin’s leadership (and media management) had an independent effect beyond that already captured by the presidential rating. Nor was there evidence that economic perceptions improved as press freedom decreased, at least as measured by the Freedom House index.

Khodorkovsky’s arrest led to a boost of some six or seven points in Putin’s approval (Table 3). Apparently this was in spite of—rather than because of—the economic effect Russians anticipated: after the arrest, assessments of and expectations for the economy worsened. Russians may have favored the arrest on grounds of social justice despite fearing adverse economic effects; or perhaps it was different Russians who applauded Putin’s action and who anticipated economic reverberations.

Finally, presidential campaigns do seem at times to have influenced perceptions. In 1996 and 2004, Russians’ views of the economy and economic expectations improved during the six preelection months and fell during the six postelection months by more than expected based on the economic data. Interestingly, the campaigns brought no improvement in Russians’ perceptions of their own material situations—these may even have worsened in 1996—so this might indeed reflect the media’s influence. There were no significant campaign effects in 2000, and November 2007 (the only month in the dataset from...
the 2008 campaign) actually saw a decline in economic expectations and perceived family finances. Whether the Medvedev campaign later kicked into gear must await future research.  

Thus, politics does help explain some of the peaks and dips in economic perceptions. Russians’ greater approval of Putin than of Yeltsin may have fed back, exacerbating economic pessimism in the late Yeltsin period and fueling optimism in the early Putin years. Biased media might help explain the surges and falls of economic optimism around the presidential campaigns of 1996 and 2004. On the other hand, I found no evidence of systematically greater distortions under Putin than under Yeltsin. Overall, the trends in economic perceptions were well predicted by just the economic indicators. Perceptions of the economy plummeted under Yeltsin and soared under Putin not because of effective propaganda but because the underlying economic variables were doing the same.

**Conclusion**

In illiberal democracies and semi-authoritarian states, politicians’ ratings wax and wane, sometimes very rapidly. Electorates swing between candidates and parties, at times embracing complete unknowns. It is easy to attribute such fluctuations to an unhealthy brew of rootless and cynical voters, demagogic politicians, and media manipulation. But in some cases the cause may be something else: electoral volatility may mirror economic volatility—and the efforts of rational voters, against the odds, to hold their leaders to account.

In Russia, Yeltsin’s plunging popularity and Putin’s soaring ratings are often linked to their personalities and public images. Some see in Putin’s ratings an endorsement of his Chechen military campaign and efforts to rebuild the Russian state (Sil and Chen 2004). Others suppose Russians backed Putin because they had been brainwashed by a state-controlled media from which criticism of the Kremlin had been eliminated (Ryzhkov 2004).

Wartime rallies, media effects, and image did play a part at times. Perhaps better data would show their role to be somewhat greater. However, Russians’ perceptions of economic conditions have been more consistently important. Much like citizens in Western democracies, Russians approved of their president when they saw the economy improving and felt hopeful about its future. Although Kremlin public relations influenced perceptions, especially in certain electoral campaigns, Russians’ views of the economy were closely related to objective economic indicators such as real wages, pensions, and wage arrears.

From this perspective, the fates of Russia’s first two presidents appear in a new light. Yeltsin’s ignominious slide and Putin’s eight years of adulation seem largely predetermined by the economic conditions each inherited. (Of course, each influenced the economy on his watch; still, Yeltsin inherited the Soviet system in mid-collapse, whereas Putin benefited from a recovery fueled by soaring oil prices.) Simulations suggest a generic new president would have become extremely popular—judo or no judo—as a result of the boom.

Starting in late 2008 (after the first draft of this article was written), Russia succumbed to the international financial crisis. Yet the ratings of Putin (now prime minister) and Medvedev, his successor, did not drop dramatically. Has the relationship between economics and presidential popularity in Russia changed? In fact, considered more closely, recent data offer a striking confirmation of the relationships noted here. Two circumstances are important. First, the Putin government, concerned about social stability, succeeded in sheltering the public from the full pain of the crisis. Despite an 8% drop in GDP per capita in 2009, real wages fell only 2.8%; real disposable incomes actually rose by 1.9% because of generous increases in pensions, which rose by 10.7% in real terms that year. Unemployment only increased from 5.7% in July 2008 to 8.2% in December 2009, less than the United States’s 9.7%. Although alarming, the economic downturn was relatively mild in its effects. Second, the effect of deteriorating economic sentiment was largely offset by a surge in support for Putin and Medvedev during the war with Georgia in August 2008. Between July and September 2008, Putin’s approval leapt from 80.4% to 88.0% and Medvedev’s rose from 69.4% to 83.0%. This was a classic wartime rally behind the flag.

If one subtracts out the 7.6-point jump in Putin’s approval in September 2008 attributable to the Georgian war, his rating follows almost exactly the course predicted by the model I previously estimated for the Putin presidency (column 8 in Table 3) when one enters the actual economic perceptions data for the Medvedev presidency (see Figure A3 in the web appendix). The percentage approving of Putin’s performance falls in the simulation from 85 in March 2008 to 69 in November 2009; Putin’s

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42 If one assumes each campaign had the same effect, the variable is significant at $p = .01$ for the current economy, $p = .03$ for economic expectations, and not at all for family finances.

43 Anderson (2007) attributes Putin’s popularity largely to his “image of firm, where necessary ruthless authority,” and claims to see a link to Russian culture: “Historically, the brutal imposition of order has been more often admired than feared in Russia. . . . In what remains in many ways a macho society, toughness—prowess in judo and drops into criminal slang are part of Putin’s kit—continues to be valued.”
actual rating minus the Georgia jump fell from 85% to 71%. Medvedev’s rating correlates with Putin’s at \( r = .85 \) in this period; if we subtract out his even larger jump during the Georgian war, his approval closely parallels the predicted trajectory.\(^{44}\) Thus, the financial crisis of 2008–2009 does appear to have pulled down the leaders’ popularity, but by a fairly moderate amount since the government took active measures to shelter the population, and in a way that was largely offset by the wartime rally of support for the Kremlin over the conflict with Georgia.

The findings of this article fit with a body of recent work that has been discovering familiar, rational behavior beneath the irregular surfaces of political life in developing and middle-income countries (Drazen 2008). Outside the rich democracies, information is usually asymmetric, uncertainty is endemic, and economic conditions often fluctuate wildly. In such environments, quite rational behavior can look like impulsiveness and manipulation. While miscalculations and fraud are certainly common in the hybrid regimes of the developing and postcommunist worlds, so too, it turns out, is retrospective voting and economics-based evaluations of incumbents. From Peru to Zambia, “governments are being held accountable for bad economic policies, at least to some degree” (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2008). The irony is that in such countries economic conditions are particularly vulnerable to global forces, which complicates the task for citizens—even sophisticated ones—of separating noise from signals about leaders’ competence.

\(^{44}\) Since the Levada Center has not published regular data on economic perceptions for this period, I had to interpolate some observations either linearly or, where possible, regressing the Levada data on answers to identical questions asked in surveys by VCIOM, the polling organization Levada used to head. (The results of economic questions on surveys by the two organizations are actually very similar.) Since the Levada Center stopped asking the question about strategy in Chechnya in December 2007, I assumed support for the military option remained at its December 2007 level of 13%.

References


