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0521846900 - Candidate Strategies and Electoral Competition in the Russian

Federation: Democracy without Foundation

Regina Smyth

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# 1

## *Elections and the Development of Democratic Capacity*

Elections and representation are two different institutions.

Yury Sharandin, chair of the Constitutional Legislation Committee of the  
Federation Council<sup>1</sup>

In describing the third wave of democratic transitions, Samuel Huntington (1991) wrote that the introduction of elections signals the death of authoritarian systems. Subsequent developments have demonstrated that the relationship between elections and regime change is much more complicated. Yes, the critical event in the consolidation period is the introduction of competitive elections. However, electoral competition does not always mark the death of an authoritarian regime. Rather, it signals the beginning of building a new regime while grappling with the vestiges of the old, a process that can end in a range of outcomes from stable, responsive, and accountable democracy to authoritarian revival.

This book explores the role that electoral competition plays in the evolution of transitional regimes. Its premise is that understanding how individual politicians respond to incentives in the newly established electoral arena helps to explain the success or failure of democratic consolidation. While the empirical focus of this book is largely on the Russian Federation, the theoretic framework illuminates the broader implications of electoral politics in new democracies.

As Russia emerged from its democratization period and undertook competitive elections in 1993, optimism about the country's chances of achieving democratic goals was boundless. Analysts declared that the Communist Party – and by implication the authoritarian regime – was over. Elections,

<sup>1</sup> Ratiani, Natalia, and Olga Tropkina. "Senators May Be Elected Soon: The Federation Council Is on the Threshold of Crucial Reforms," *Izvestiya*, June 22, 2004, p. 1.

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they argued, had supplanted both the party and authoritarian rule, and would serve as the basis for a stable democracy. As time went on, early optimism waned. Russianists noted with alarm that President Vladimir Putin revived an old Soviet phrase, “managed democracy,” to describe his vision of Russian politics (Colton and McFaul 2003a: 10–11). By 2003, it was impossible to ignore the growing use of coercion to win voter support. Not only were elections a false measure of democracy in Russia, repeated elections had not fulfilled their mandate of pushing (or pulling) Russia toward democratic governance.

These outcomes place Russia in a growing set of democratic regimes that are either incapable or unwilling to generate democratic responsiveness in the face of competitive elections.<sup>2</sup> The cases raise an important set of questions for comparative politics and, in particular, for the study of democratic consolidation. When does electoral competition provoke and structure elite investment in democratic regime structures and behaviors that transform elections into mechanisms of representation and accountability? Conversely, what conditions lead elite politicians to choose strategies that consciously or unconsciously undermine democratic development?

This study argues that it is no surprise that competitive elections did not produce an effective and accountable democracy in Russia.<sup>3</sup> Starting with the founding elections in 1993, it was clear that assumptions about the building blocks of democratic governance that underpin theories of democratic consolidation did not apply to this case. Outside of Moscow, the harbingers of democratic development, political parties, were almost invisible to voters. Sitting around in late-night meetings, regional party leaders struggled to feed themselves, pooled their money to buy vodka, and lamented that while everyone was talking about elections, very few seemed to be paying attention to the campaign. They gossiped about their

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of Democracy* provided a venue for debates over the relationship between elections and democracy. Guillermo O'Donnell's work, aptly titled “Illusions About Consolidation,” 1996, has been a catalyst for this debate. Thomas Carothers prompted a lively discussion in January 2002 that involved responses from policy makers and prominent scholars; see Carothers, 2002: 5–21.

<sup>3</sup> Przeworski et al. define competitive elections as ones in which the opposition has some chance to win given 1) ex ante uncertainty about the incumbents' chances of maintaining office; 2) ex post irreversibility (winners take office); and 3) repeatability (strong expectations that future elections will occur). See Przeworski et al., 2000: 3.

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rivals' ties to business or the governor, grumbled about the role of Kremlin resources in the campaign, and complained about the lack of enforcement of electoral regulations. Only the Communists seemed to know how to reach their voters through door-to-door campaigns built on the vestiges of the Soviet-era party. Conflict among candidates and within parties was ubiquitous. No one, not even the Communists, seemed to be able to work together in pursuit of common goals. Universally, party leaders worked to broker deals among like-minded organizations, but ultimately failed to reach agreements.

These examples illustrate a central finding of this work. Russia lacked the formal and informal structures and patterns of behavior that secure democracy at the point of founding elections. There is no question that Russian elections changed the strategies of prominent politicians. However, factors such as institutions that privileged individual politicians over collective actors, the diffusion of political resources, and the profound level of uncertainty that surrounded the electoral process led politicians away from behaviors that would help to create an accountable, efficient, or responsive government.

Events in Russia demonstrate that repeated electoral competition is not equal to democratic governance, nor is it likely to produce democracy any time soon. In fact, with each election, Russia has moved further from norms of free and fair elections.<sup>4</sup> Rather than generating strong and consistent coalitions of politicians and voters, each contest triggered a seismic reorganization of alliances and organizations. Between elections, the weak systems of checks and balances ensconced in the constitution coupled with the lack of a viable opposition have proved unable to check the growing power of the president.

This book explains Russia's political evolution with a theory of the relationship between electoral competition and democratic development. The logic of the explanation reasons from the actions of individual candidates and party leaders to national-level outcomes. The two levels of analysis are linked by the concept of electoral infrastructure – the political information and patterns of political coordination and cooperation that are necessary for

<sup>4</sup> The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) report listing Russia's violations in the 2003 parliamentary election can be found at [http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2004/01/1947\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2004/01/1947_en.pdf), accessed October 21, 2003. A comprehensive analysis of election and post-election developments can be found at Freedom House Reports, [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org), accessed June 12, 2004.

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a regime to fulfill procedural and normative criteria of democratic governance. The analysis shows that in transitions that are marked by uncertainty, in which candidates and party leaders have a very weak sense of what voters want from government, institutions and resource distributions that enable candidates to compete independently can derail democratic development. The argument is developed and tested using data from Russian elections, but is not a Russia-specific argument. The model and approach are applicable to a range of consolidating regimes to explain variation in both the timing and the outcome of democratic consolidation efforts.

This introduction sets out the analytic framework in broad strokes, establishing a connection between candidates' decisions in response to competitive elections and the capacity for democratic governance. The discussion proceeds by placing Russia within the broader context of postcommunist states and underscoring that elites' actions are an important element in the explanation of the range of outcomes that these states experienced following their founding elections. I then describe the development and test of the theory that is laid out in the remaining chapters of this book.

***Why Study Russia?***

The empirical focus of this book is squarely on the evolution of the new regime in the Russian Federation for a number of reasons. The first reason is a purely practical consideration. The importance of the Soviet Union in the global security environment led to disproportionate focus on Russia's transition. As a result, the scholarly and policy community compiled enormous data on almost all aspects of Russian political, social, and economic structures. This rich pool of information provides an excellent backdrop to this book.

Theoretically, the Russian example highlights a crucial flaw in the concept of democratic consolidation. The expectation that the natural and even inevitable progress of development will be a linear evolution toward a single endpoint, democracy, taints the consolidation framework. The data I present in Chapter 2 show that the period after founding elections can be marked by democratic deepening, as in Estonia, or by decline, as in Russia. These developments can be roughly linear, as in the case of Romania, or progress in fits and starts, as in Ukraine and Georgia. By any measure, the reality of the postcommunist transitions is that the consolidation period produced a range of outcomes, from democracy to authoritarianism and a number of variations in between. More importantly, these cases strongly

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suggest that consolidation need not end in democracy. Hungary, Poland, and Latvia made significant strides toward democracy, while Kazakhstan and Belarus have made little or no progress. Turkmenistan began the process as a brutal dictatorship and that has not changed.

Although prominent in the literature and in the policy world, Russia's experience is not unique. The high levels of political uncertainty, weakly organized civil society, and dispersed set of political resources that marked conditions in Russia at the point of the founding elections characterize a number of consolidating regimes in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and even the Middle East. Works surveying the democratic transitions in the third wave of democratization demonstrate that while competitive elections are essential to democratic regimes, electoral competition is not sufficient to ensure successful consolidation.<sup>5</sup> The demise of fledgling democracies across these regions underscores the fact that simply convening competitive elections is not tantamount to democracy. Recent evidence from across the globe points to the unhappy truth that not all transitional regimes, even those that make a good-faith effort at competitive elections, culminate in representative democracies (Bratton 1997; Karl 1995; Levitsky and Way 2002; O'Donnell 1994; Rose and Munro 2003; Zakaria 1997).

In response to this new understanding of political realities, scholars began to explore the meaning of elections in new democracies.<sup>6</sup> This book enters into the debate about the origins and durability of semi-authoritarian regimes by linking the strategic choices of key actors in the electoral process, candidates and party leaders, to the national-level outcomes – democracy or not. I argue that politicians' choices can produce electoral infrastructure in the form of information, patterns of coordination and cooperation that transform elections into mechanisms of democratic governance. Yet, the accumulation of infrastructure is not the inevitable byproduct of electoral competition. The Russian case clearly shows that under conditions of uncertainty, permissive institutions, and dispersed electoral resources, candidates will choose campaign strategies that perpetuate uncertainty, undermine coordinated action, and shape very weak and underinstitutionalized parties.

<sup>5</sup> This book contributes to a growing set of studies focused on the mechanisms of semi-authoritarianism in postcommunist states. For example, the framework developed by O'Donnell 1994; 1998, has been applied to understand post-Soviet cases; see Kubicek 1994: 423; Tsygankov 1998: 329.

<sup>6</sup> For examples of the discussion of elections and democratic development in postcommunist cases, see Clark 2000; Hale 2000: 123.

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## Candidate Strategies and Electoral Competition

### *A Strategy for Theory Development: Linking Individual Behavior, Elections, and System-Level Outcomes*

Much of the contention in the consolidation literature centers on defining the endpoint of democratization: How do we know when an authoritarian regime is transformed into a consolidated democracy? Minimal definitions (e.g., Dahl 1971) focus on the procedures that enable democratic governance. For example, Adam Przeworski (1986) stresses elite support for the regime or contingent consent as a test of consolidation, relegating any regime that does not meet this test to a residual authoritarian category. Maximal definitions focus on behavior or norms. A number of scholars combine these two concepts, defining consolidation as an endgame of the democratic transition that is marked by a decline in political uncertainty (Alexander 2001; Bunce and Csanadi 1993; Przeworski 1986; Schedler 2001; Schmitter 2001). As Phillippe Schmitter writes:

Consolidation could be defined as the process of transforming the accidental arrangements, prudential norms, and contingent solutions that have emerged during the transition into relations of cooperation and competition that are reliably known, regularly practiced, and voluntarily accepted by those persons or collectivities – that is, politicians and citizens – that participate in democratic governance (Schmitter 2001: 68).

This definition stresses the very concepts that are at the heart of this study – information and coordination in electoral competition – and defines them as important measurements or landmarks of successful consolidation. Yet Schmitter's conception of consolidation straddles the minimalist and maximalist camps in that it does not get at the qualitative aspects of democracy or core democratic norms. It falls short of the very rigorous definition offered by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996: 5–7), who focus on the deepening of democracy in terms of representation, accountability, and effectiveness. Taking this definition one step further, Larry Diamond (1999: 65) combines deepening with the idea of elite commitment, focusing on “broad and deep legitimation” that represents “a shift in political culture.”

The definitional debate is undeniably important to the understanding of regime change but it obscures a number of critical concerns. As discussed previously, debates over whether to define democratic consolidation in minimal (procedural) terms or maximal (quality of democracy) terms do not capture the variation in the outcomes of the consolidation period. Moreover, the debates over endpoints do not address the range of variation in the process of consolidation, the obstacles that new democracies face as

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they attempt to consolidate, or the temporal variation in the trajectories of political development.

To address these concerns, the theoretic framework developed in this book describes consolidation as a process that begins with founding elections and culminates in a range of outcomes from functioning democracy to authoritarianism. This approach concentrates on the effect of a critical political change – the introduction of competitive elections – on the movement toward or away from democracy. The dependent variable is the degree to which candidates' strategies do, or do not, generate and sustain the key electoral and representative institutions of democracy and lay the groundwork for democratic deepening.

Viewed from this perspective, competing definitions of consolidation are not mutually exclusive but provide the outlines of a model of political development in which the imposition of new procedures, elite commitment, and democratic deepening are key landmarks. A democratic regime structure is a necessary condition for any democracy. Elites must commit to competing for power through the new institutions. In turn, this competition can prompt the creation of new political norms and institutions that generate the capacity for citizens to hold their elected representatives responsible for their actions in office. However, there is no guarantee that elections will have this effect. In short, elections are the causal engine of this process, but they can steer the regime in multiple directions.

There is no doubt that elections signal a break with the old regime. They don't simply replicate the past nor do they mirror the forces that put them in place (Alexander 2001; Ames 2001; Jones Luong 2002; Kitschelt et al. 1999; Kitschelt and Smyth 2002). Time and again, authoritarian leaders as disparate as Mikhail Gorbachev and Augusto Pinochet have introduced competitive elections that escaped their control and led to their demise. Electoral competition can transform existing social forces, institutional actors, and individual elites. Poland's mighty Solidarity movement was undone by electoral competition, as were the national fronts that led the way to independence in the Baltic states. Boris Yeltsin used elections to revive his flagging political career and challenge Gorbachev's national leadership. The previously unheralded Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and its volatile leader, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, emerged as a permanent fixture in national politics after its startling showing in the 1993 elections.

At the same time, elections cannot shut the door on the past as the wide-ranging legacy of the old communist regimes continues to influence politics under new rules in many states. Personalities, reputations, skills, and



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resources drawn from the old system can profoundly influence the successes and failures of vestigial parties, new party organizations and non-partisan candidates. In East Europe, some communist successor parties used effective strategies to achieve remarkable and unpredicted success while others foundered (Grzymala-Busse 2002; Ishiyama 2000; Ishiyama and Shafqat 2000). Some of these organizations used electoral competition as a mechanism to adapt to the new environment, while others clung stubbornly to entrenched ideas and patterns of behavior.

A good starting point for understanding elections as a catalyst for democratic development is to distinguish among the roles that elections play in new and established systems. In established systems, elections fulfill a long laundry list of functions: generating and maintaining party systems, engendering equality, legitimizing regimes, installing governing officials, presenting citizens with choices, building communities, involving and educating citizens, preventing tyranny, enabling representation, and provoking accountability and responsiveness (Katz 1997). In contrast, studies of the role of elections in new democracies point to two overarching processes or functions that are integral to democratic deepening: elite incorporation and mass interest aggregation (Aldrich 1995; Kitschelt et al. 1999).

Integration or incorporation of elites into the electoral arena in new democracies is usually but not exclusively accomplished through political parties. Widespread elite incorporation enables party organizations to fulfill a number of important roles in the new democratic systems. First, incorporation cements the contingent consent bargain that elites broker in the democratization phase (Przeworski 1991). Second, it forges increased capacity for governance by solving social choice and collective action problems in government (Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 1993). Elite incorporation also structures the choices presented to voters on the ballot and links voters and government to enable responsiveness and accountability.

The analysis of the postcommunist cases in the next chapter shows that the level of elite incorporation at the point of founding elections is not uniform across the cases. An important implication is that elections are tasked with different burdens in different contexts. In some cases, elections are important mechanisms for incorporating elites; in others, this process is already complete when electoral competition begins.<sup>7</sup> Chapter 2

<sup>7</sup> It is beyond the scope of this work to explain this variation, but authors cite the nature of the authoritarian regime, mode of transition, and level of political organization at the point of founding as key factors. For a more complete discussion see Munck and Leff 1997.



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demonstrates that in cases where elections must provoke incorporation, they may or may not succeed depending on conditions at the point of founding elections, institutional structures, time, and international context. Moreover, as the subsequent investigation of the Russian case shows, elites within new regimes do not respond uniformly to the opportunities offered by electoral competition, as some elites choose strategies that engender coordination and cooperation and others do not.

In the next stage, elite incorporation is critical because it drives the process of democratic deepening identified by scholars focused on normative democratic goals such as accountability and representation. Once committed to the electoral process, elites face significant incentives to forge ties to mass voters and solidify those ties within political institutions to ensure that their mass followings remain loyal. As such, elites are likely to reach out to voters in order to channel their demands through the electoral process and avoid the instability wrought by out-of-system behavior (Huntington 1968). Elites also shape voters' demands and their propensity to work together to pursue common goals. The need to solidify support to win elections generates strong incentives for candidates and party leaders to ensure participation and turnout through voter registration drives and education programs. The motivation for doing so is not an altruistic tendency to cultivate social capital but a need to ensure that the candidates' voters show up at the polls and cast their votes correctly. All of these activities may extend beyond the electoral arena and between contests, shoring up democratic deepening.

While elite integration facilitates this process of democratic deepening, it does not make it inevitable.<sup>8</sup> Interest aggregation is likely to be the result of experimentation and learning as candidates and parties try out different appeals and discern the preferences of potential supporters. This protracted process leaves the new regime vulnerable to exogenous shocks, crises, and scandals that sharply reorder politics and generate instability. Moreover, as the evidence presented later will show, even elites who support democratic goals may not adopt strategies to shore up democratic deepening.

Finally, not all voters will respond to elites' actions in the same manner. Both Diamond (1999) and Linz and Stepan (1996) argue that some polities may resist elites' efforts to mobilize existing interests in support of their cause. Scholars often cite Poland as an example of a new electorate whose

<sup>8</sup> For example, Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik (1998: 574) find that in Hungary and Slovakia, two successful consolidators, party organizations are the lead instigators of protest activity.

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norms and existing organizations generated resistance to elites' efforts to forge stable ties to voters early on in the transition, generating prolonged electoral volatility.<sup>9</sup> My own work on Russian party organizations demonstrates that parties' campaign strategies can hinder the emergence of durable ties between voters and organizations (Smyth forthcoming). The implication is that not all elites will adopt strategies that further democratic deepening and not all voters will embrace their efforts.

To explain this variation in elites' strategies, the empirical chapters of this work show how uncertainty about voters' preferences, electoral institutions that privilege individuals over organizations, and diverse resource distributions lead candidates with disparate goals to choose electoral strategies that short circuit patterns of incorporation and interest aggregation. The evidence reveals how these conditions produce four patterns of behavior that, while individually rational, work to undermine democratic infrastructure: Too many candidates choose to run in every election; too few candidates choose to tie themselves to political parties; most candidates do not establish strong electoral connections to their constituencies; and candidates do not invest in campaigns that generate reliable information to guide voters' choices, future government actions, or future campaigns.

***The Plan of the Book***

The preceding framework establishes the two major tasks of the book. The first task is to show that candidates' responses to competitive elections matter for the outcome of democratic development, and that their impact on outcomes is felt both in the incorporation of political elites into the new regime and the development of stable linkages between and among candidates and voters. In other words, to prove the theory to be right, I must show that the variation in the level of democratic capacity across postcommunist countries is at least partially dependent on elite actions.

Chapter 2 shows that prior degrees of elite commitment to democracy, combined with the prospect of eventual EU membership and constitutional structures, have worked to decrease political uncertainty and to increase reliable information in most of the postcommunist democracies of Eastern and Central Europe. In contrast, none of these factors operates in the Russian Federation, generating the particularly extreme form of electoral

<sup>9</sup> See Ekiert and Kubik 1998: 477. For a theoretic discussion, see also Diamond 1999: 218–60.