



# Changes in the menu of manipulation: Electoral fraud, ballot stuffing, and voter pressure in the 2011 Russian election



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## ABSTRACT

Vote-buying and voter intimidation are costly, complicated, and risky ways to manage elections. Why, then, do hybrid regimes utilize such tactics rather than ballot stuffing or election falsification? Such methods to mobilize voters require the construction of patronage networks that can be used to mobilize or demobilize clients beyond the election, and to display the incumbent's organizational strength. These networks are most valuable in places where opposition groups are active; consequently direct voter pressure should be more common in competitive areas. This paper uses data from Russia's 83 regions during the 2011 election to compare patterns of extra-legal mobilization with patterns of ballot stuffing and falsification. I conclude that local political competitiveness structures the mix of electoral manipulation tactics employed.

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## 1. Introduction: extra-legal mobilization and hybrid regimes

Why do hybrid regimes engage in vote-buying and other methods of directly pressuring voters, when they have a number of other tools with which to manipulate elections? Such extra-legal mobilization efforts require the development of networks that link patrons, brokers, and voters; brokers and voters must be monitored to ensure they do not defect. As a result of the size of these networks and the principal-agent problems inherent in them, extra-legal mobilization efforts are costly, complicated, inefficient, and risky. Why is it that governments in hybrid regimes do not forego extra-legal mobilization, and devote those resources to more efficient forms of social control? I argue that this puzzle, which has not been fully addressed in the literature on authoritarian elections or election manipulation, can be resolved by understanding that the costs and benefits of electoral manipulation vary by the tactic used. Incumbents take advantage of these costs and benefits by adjusting the mix of tactics they employ in response to local political conditions. Like other forms of manipulation, extra-legal mobilization helps improve the incumbent's vote-share in the election. However, it also has additional benefits that are most valuable in competitive conditions.

Extra-legal mobilization requires a network of patronage that can be used to mobilize or demobilize clients. Deploying these networks to influence voters sends a signal of the incumbent's organizational strength and resources to other political actors. Due to these two indirect benefits, extra-legal mobilization is most valuable to incumbents where the risk of opposition mobilization is highest, since these networks and signals can be used to counteract opposition activity. It is difficult to test this theory directly using measures of opposition activity, since the theory predicts that extra-legal mobilization is both a response to, and deterrent of, opposition action. Instead, I test the theory by 1) adapting existing methods of election forensics to estimate three types of electoral manipulation: falsification of results, ballot stuffing, and extra-legal mobilization, and 2) demonstrating that use of these tactics varies in response to indicators of political competitiveness. I apply these methods to electoral results from Russia's 83 regions during the 2011 parliamentary election. I find that local political competitiveness structures the mix of tactics used to manipulate the election: falsification occurs primarily in the least competitive regions, ballot stuffing is equally common at middle and high levels of competitiveness, and extra-legal mobilization becomes increasingly common as competitiveness increases.

This paper contributes to a growing literature on the politics of electoral authoritarian (or hybrid) regimes. Research in this tradition has made great progress in demonstrating the functions that

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ostensibly democratic institutions like elections and legislatures can play in sustaining authoritarian governments. Multi-party elections allow authoritarian rulers to co-opt the opposition (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Gandhi, 2008), to channel their demands into the structured setting of the legislature (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2006), to gather information (Boix and Svoblik, 2013), or to deter elite defections (Magaloni, 2006). Elections and ruling parties can be a means of binding together elites and managing elite disagreements (Brownlee, 2007; Blaydes, 2011). In short, electoral competition serves as a mechanism whereby authoritarian rulers distribute patronage resources and policy influence to those lower-level politicians who demonstrate loyalty and effectiveness at managing elections (Lust-Okar, 2006; Malesky and Schuler, 2010; Reuter and Robertson, 2012).

Elections have been shown to be stabilizing for authoritarian regimes in most cases, but they still pose risks. They provide an opportunity for opposition groups—both domestic and international—to organize and mobilize against the regime (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010; Donno, 2013; Lindberg, 2009), and can also trigger mass protest, as the so-called color revolutions demonstrate (Tucker, 2007). Compared to the literature on hybrid institutions, we know less about the means by which governments in hybrid regimes manage elections in order to avoid these undesirable outcomes. This article contributes to our understanding by demonstrating that pro-regime actors in a hybrid regime vary the tactics they use to manipulate elections across the territory of the regime, in response to the capacity of the opposition to mobilize its own supporters.

## 2. Theory: extra-legal mobilization and (de)mobilizing patronage networks

Authoritarian leaders have a variety of tools at their disposal with which to manage elections. These can range from pre-election limitations on the opposition to post-election nullification of the results (Schedler, 2002). One option authoritarian governments have on election day is extra-legal mobilization, which I define as an attempt to pressure actual voters to support a party or candidate through benefits (such as a cash payment) or sanctions (such as the threat of job loss). This project seeks to understand the conditions under which governments engage in extra-legal mobilization rather than rely on other tools like falsification of the vote count or ballot stuffing. In particular, it addresses a puzzle that has gone thus far gone unanswered in the literature on election fraud in authoritarian countries. Extra-legal mobilization efforts are costly, as they require a network of brokers to identify potential opponents and supporters, disburse payments, and monitor compliance. Authoritarian election managers have been shown to change manipulation strategies with relative ease, manipulating the vote count when methods like ballot-stuffing are too easily observed (Sjoberg, 2013). Why then do authoritarian governments engage in costly, inefficient efforts to mobilize voters through intimidation and vote-buying when they have the capacity to manipulate election results more directly?

In the following paragraphs I will show that extra-legal mobilization is costly and suffers from drawbacks that falsification and ballot stuffing do not. As a result, I argue that extra-legal mobilization should be employed where its indirect, non-electoral benefits are most valuable. Extra-legal mobilization requires the construction and display of patronage networks that could be used to mobilize or demobilize clients when necessary, such as in the event of opposition protest. Extra-legal mobilization can also send signals to other political actors about the incumbent regime's resources, helping induce cooperation. I hypothesize that these two benefits increase in value as the ability of opposition groups to organize increases, and as a result extra-legal mobilization efforts

should be more common and intensive in competitive regions.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1. Cost of extra-legal mobilization vs. election fraud and ballot stuffing

Extra-legal mobilization can encompass a variety of different means of influencing voters.<sup>2</sup> Political machines can make direct payments to voters (Stokes, 2005; Nichter, 2008), pressure employers to ensure their employees vote for the ruling party (Frye et al., 2014), and more. In any case, voters must be rewarded for voting correctly. Consequently, extra-legal mobilization of any kind requires the development of networks that allow patrons to monitor clients, and to transfer rewards and punishments. These networks are usually mediated by one or more levels of brokers, with actors at each level responsible for overseeing a larger number of actors at the next level down (Knoke, 1990; Lazar, 2007; Auyero, 2007; Holzner, 2007). These pyramidal networks are inherently vulnerable to principal-agent problems (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007).

The resulting networks are complex, costly and inefficient. At every level of the pyramidal network linking patrons and clients, brokers must be deterred from diverting resources for their own private gain and clients must be monitored (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007). One study of vote-buying in a district election in Taiwan found that at least 45% of voters who had received a payment from the Kuomintang voted for a different candidate, despite the efforts of an organized and well-funded vote-buying machine. Motivating large numbers of voters to support the ruling party in one district in that election could cost as much as \$4 million, not including payments to brokers (Wang and Kurzban, 2007). A survey of Nigerian voters found a similar result, with a plurality of respondents saying they would accept a payment but vote for the candidate of their choice (Bratton, 2008). This problem does not diminish with scale: a study of Costa Rica's elections in the first half of the twentieth century found that a major vote-buying effort in a presidential election could cost as much as twenty percent of a candidate's budget (Lehoucq and Molina, 2002, pp. 159; 169; Lehoucq, 2007). The 'leakiness' of extra-legal mobilization represents a real loss of resources, and risks not generating enough votes to win the election.

Compared to the networks of brokers and voters associated with extra-legal mobilization, election fraud and ballot stuffing require the cooperation of a relatively small number of easily-monitored officials. In Russia, the case studied here, election commissions at the national, regional, sub-regional, and precinct levels are responsible for counting, tabulating and releasing election results. The number of voting members of these commissions ranges from three in the smallest precincts to sixteen in the largest (Central Election Commission, 2009). An observation report of the 2011 legislative election in Russia noted 'an informal link between election officials and the state apparatus, which was affiliated with the governing party in the majority of regions observed' (OSCE, 2012). Golosov (2011) writes that the regional administrations 'have gained complete control over the system of regional electoral commissions,' and describes this relationship as a 'well-functioning hierarchy' that links the incomes and career prospects of rank-and-file electoral workers, regional bureaucrats, and regional governors to the electoral success of the ruling party (p. 637). Regional

<sup>1</sup> This risk also increases the cost of falsification and ballot stuffing. In Russia, for example, half of regional commission members are appointed by the regional legislature ('On the Guarantees ...' Article 23). A larger delegation in the legislature for opposition parties can thus translate into a less supportive commission.

<sup>2</sup> It can have a variety of goals, as well. Gans-Morse et al. (2014) identify four types of electoral clientelism, based on who is targeted: vote-buying, turnout-buying, abstention-buying, and double-persuasion.

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