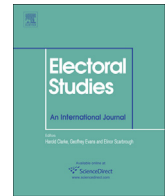




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## Ethnicity and electoral manipulation in Russia

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### ABSTRACT

To what extent does electoral manipulation follow ethnic lines in Russia? Using an original dataset based on raion-level data, we find that the “ethnic component” of electoral manipulation is more nuanced than previous studies have suggested. Electoral manipulation was most prevalent in majority-minority raions across ethnic and non-ethnic as well as richer and poorer regions. We argue that concentrations of ethnic minorities provide: (1) greater incentives for electoral manipulation by the central state and regional elites in order to signal political dominance and (2) greater capacity to carry out electoral manipulation through networks of local co-ethnic elites. However, multilevel analyses suggest that the extent of electoral manipulation was also strongly contingent on regional context. Electoral manipulation was significantly higher in the more politically volatile Muslim regions, while socioeconomic differences among regions, by contrast, had no discernible effect.

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### 1. Ethnicity and electoral manipulation: the case of Russia

Scholars have long noted the dilemmas that an ethnically divided society faces when trying to democratize. Ethnic divisions can promote armed conflict, mass violence, discriminatory state policies, and regime illegitimacy. Moreover, recent scholarship has suggested that democratization may exacerbate these problems by providing elites with incentives and opportunities to use nationalism for electoral gain (Mansfield and Snyder, 2005; Snyder, 2000; Wilkinson, 2004). Those hoping to manage these problems often look to institutions to either co-opt minorities by offering security through greater autonomy and representation (Lijphart, 2004; Saideman et al., 2002) or bridge ethnic differences through institutions designed to foster multi-ethnic electoral coalitions (Horowitz, 2003; Reilly, 2002). Throughout this literature, there is a

presumption that the main threat from ethnic diversity is conflict and competition between ethnic groups.

In this paper, we offer a different perspective on the interaction between ethnicity and failed democratization. We argue that, under certain conditions, geographically concentrated ethnic minorities may contribute to authoritarianism through collusion with (rather than competition against) central authorities, especially in the practice of manipulating elections. Ethnic minorities may become an important “constituency” for a competitive authoritarian regime due to the political economy of elections dominated by patronage. Under these types of elections, central authorities and regional elites enter into a patronage relationship in which the former provides economic and political benefits to targeted regions in exchange for votes delivered by regional authorities during national elections. Regions with large concentrations of ethnic minorities are particularly susceptible to these political arrangements because central authorities may view such regions as a particularly formidable potential threat to their authority. Central authorities may thus have additional incentives to manipulate elections in these regions in order to signal

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political dominance and deter opposition (see [Simpser, 2013](#)). Moreover, regions with high concentrations of ethnic minorities may provide more conducive environments for electoral manipulation because they tend to be isolated regions with low levels of socioeconomic development, weak civil societies, and long histories of patron–client relations. Finally, local elites in minority regions have resources, in the form of ethnic networks, that may make it easier to engage in patronage and other forms of electoral manipulation (see [Hale, 2003](#)). Thus, our argument is two-fold. In Russia, there tends to be more electoral manipulation in regions with concentrations of ethnic minorities because: (1) the state feels particularly vulnerable in minority regions and thus has more political reasons to engage in electoral manipulation and (2) it is easier to conduct electoral manipulation in minority regions due to the existence of minority-based machine politics.

Russia offers an excellent example of this phenomenon. Despite centralizing policies that undermined regional autonomy and a devastating war in Chechnya that has spawned violence across the Caucasus, non-Russian regions have provided some of the strongest support for Vladimir Putin and his “party of power” ([Marsh and Warhola, 2001](#)). Scholars have noted that evidence of electoral malfeasance, such as extremely high levels of voter turnout and support for the party of power, has been more endemic in Russia’s ethnic republics than in its Russian-dominated oblasts (see, in particular, [Myagkov et al., 2009](#)). However, analyses of electoral fraud in Russia have tended to emphasize the detection of fraud and its magnitude on a national scale. In this paper, we examine geographic patterns to try to uncover the determinants of electoral manipulation. While various forms of electoral manipulation have reportedly become widespread in Russia, they are not uniformly experienced across Russia’s vast territory. By carefully examining where electoral manipulation has and has not tended to occur within Russia’s 2700+ raions (which are roughly equivalent to U.S. counties), we hope to gain some leverage on how socioeconomic and demographic factors affect electoral manipulation. In particular, we use raion-level electoral and ethnicity data to explore the potential correlation between the demographic concentration of ethnic minorities in Russia and irregular electoral patterns.

The linkage between ethnicity and electoral manipulation in Russia is important in practical terms for the development of the postcommunist Russian state, but it also sheds light on broader issues of democratic consolidation in ethnically divided societies. Many scholars focus on the interrelationship between ethnic conflict and democratization ([Snyder, 2000](#); [Wilkinson, 2004](#)) and a thriving body of literature has arisen around how to design democratic institutions to mitigate the prospect of inter-ethnic conflict. Two competing perspectives have dominated this debate. Scholars led by [Arend Lijphart](#) have recommended proportional representation, decentralization, and the regional autonomy of ethnic minorities as a method of cooptation within a broader system of consociationalism (see [Lijphart, 1977, 2004](#)). A rival school of thought known as centripetalism has countered that consociational systems lock in ethnic divisions and that

electoral systems in divided societies need to provide incentives for voters to pool their votes behind moderate, multi-ethnic coalitions ([Horowitz, 1985, 2003](#); [Reilly, 2002](#)). Regardless of whether the institutional remedy calls for greater inclusion or incentives for multi-ethnic coalition-building, both consociational and centripetal approaches view the problem of ethnic division in terms of ethnic groups mobilizing against one another or the state in exclusive organizations. By examining the relationship between ethnic minorities and electoral manipulation benefiting the dominant party in a competitive authoritarian system, the Russian experience with ethnic electoral mobilization provides an alternative dilemma – the prospect of patronage systems and ethnic electoral machines that work in tandem with a dominant party to undermine political competition.

Russia is a particularly interesting and valuable case for the study of ethnic politics because it contains many different ethnic groups that vary considerably along demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural lines. Moreover, Russia’s system of ethnic federalism politicized and institutionalized ethnic identity by promoting geographic concentration and reduced assimilation of the groups with ethnic homelands, which served to enhance their political capacity ([Gorenburg, 2003](#)). Finally, the country’s system of ethnic federalism promoted a degree of regional autonomy and minority control over regional politics, particularly during the 1990s, when President Boris Yeltsin ruled over a system of asymmetrical federalism that provided rather widespread autonomy to regional elites in non-Russian regions ([Stoner-Weiss, 2001](#)). Subsequent recentralization of state authority under President Vladimir Putin has greatly curtailed the power of regional elites but also arguably increased incentives for electoral manipulation along ethnic lines to signal political control in previously restive regions. All of these factors provide an interesting context in which to examine the interplay between ethnicity and elections in an atmosphere of competitive authoritarianism.

We will ascertain the differences (or lack thereof) in the incidence of electoral manipulation between Russian and non-Russian regions using electoral and census data disaggregated to the raion level, which is the smallest geographic unit at which data are available. Empirically, we examine a relatively basic set of questions: Are raions with high concentrations of non-Russian minorities more likely to show signs of electoral manipulation than raions where Russians predominate? If so, are these patterns mitigated by contextual factors such as rural/urban divisions or regional characteristics such as levels of economic development, resource-dependent economies, or ethnic differences between Muslim and non-Muslim minority regions?

## 2. Electoral manipulation in Russia

It is important to demarcate what types of phenomena we are trying to capture when studying electoral manipulation in a competitive authoritarian regime such as Russia. Electoral manipulation is a multifaceted enterprise that comes in a wide variety of forms ranging from illicit acts of electoral fraud such as ballot-box stuffing, misreporting

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