Chapter 4

Elections and Voters

MICHAEL McFAUL and KATHRYN STONER-WEISS

Elections as certain procedures with uncertain outcomes

Between June 1991 and December 1993, Russia did not hold elections for national office. In the tumultuous period between August 1991 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union later that year, organising new elections was the last item on Yeltsin’s agenda. First and foremost, he concentrated on breaking up the Soviet Union in a peaceful manner, a mammoth project that involved dismantling the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and splitting into pieces the Soviet army and intelligence services while keeping his own Federation from experiencing a similar fate. His other great priority was jumpstarting Russian economic reform. Yeltsin believed that he already had secured an electoral mandate from the people as recently as June 1991. His allies in the Russian Congress were elected in the spring of 1990, just a year earlier. New elections in post-Soviet Russia, therefore, seemed distracting, dangerous, and unnecessary. Yeltsin even postponed local elections scheduled for December 1991.

Yeltsin’s failure to secure a new electoral mandate, however, had destabilising consequences for the new state. The combination of major economic dislocation, in part fuelled by Yeltsin’s reforms, and poorly defined political institutions created ambiguity, stalemate and conflict both between the federal and sub-national units of the state, and then, more consequentially, between the president and the Congress of People’s Deputies. After price liberalisation and the beginning of radical economic reform in January 1992, the Congress, once loyal to Yeltsin, began a campaign to reassert its superiority over the president. The disagreement about economic reform in turn spawned a constitutional crisis between the parliament and the president. With no formal or even informal institutions to structure relations between the president and the Congress, political polarisation not unlike the standoff between Gorbachev and Yeltsin in 1990–1 re-emerged.

In this newly polarised context, both sides claimed to represent the will of the people. In the heat of the stalemate Yeltsin and the Congress agreed to ask the voters directly which political institution and what reforms they supported. In the April 1993 referendum, voters went to the polls to give answers to the following questions:

- Do you trust Russian President Yeltsin?
- Do you approve of the socio-economic policy conducted by the Russian president and by the Russian government since 1992?
- Should a new presidential election be conducted ahead of schedule?
- Should a new parliamentary election be conducted ahead of schedule?
On the first question, despite the serious economic hardship that most people endured at the time, 58.7 per cent of voters affirmed their trust in Yeltsin, compared with 39.3 per cent who did not. Even more amazingly, 53 per cent expressed their approval of Yeltsin's socio-economic policy, while 44.5 per cent disapproved. Regarding questions three and four a plurality (49.5 per cent) supported early presidential elections, while a solid majority (67.2 per cent) called for new parliamentary elections.

These results reflected the highly divided and polarised nature of Russian politics at the time. In essence, voters were being asked their opinion about the revolution midstream in the revolution: half supported it, half did not. This electoral result, therefore, did little to defuse the constitutional crisis in Russia. On 21 September 1993, Yeltsin issued Presidential Decree Number 1400, which dissolved the Russian Congress of People's Deputies and called for a referendum to adopt a new constitution. The Congress rejected Yeltsin's decree as unconstitutional and instead impeached him and appointed his vice-president, Aleksandr Rutskoi, as the new president. In a replay of August 1991, the crisis only ended when one side – Yeltsin's side – prevailed in a military conflict.

**The development of more certain rules**

After Yeltsin's successful use of force against the Congress, which ended on 4 October 1993, the president sent mixed signals about his commitment to elections and the democratic process. Obviously, the dissolution of the Congress was a blatant violation of both the constitution and the spirit of democracy. The deputies, after all, had been elected by the Russian people. Yeltsin showed the same disregard for the electoral process by dissolving the regional soviets (elected parliaments in Russia's 89 provinces). He also removed three out of eight regional heads of administration who had been elected several months earlier. At the same time, Yeltsin seemed eager to establish new political rules in which elections would play a central role. He published a draft constitution and called for a referendum to approve it in December. After 4 October, Yeltsin also announced that elections for a new bicameral parliament would take place in December.

Without parliament in place, Yeltsin used decrees to establish new electoral laws. As we saw in Chapter 3, he dictated that the new lower house of parliament, the State Duma, would be elected according to a mixed system: half of the 450 seats would be determined by a first-part-the-post system in newly drawn up electoral districts, while the other half would be allocated according to a system of proportional representation. Parties had to win at least 5 per cent of the popular vote to win seats on the proportional representation ballot. (In 2007 this threshold was raised to 7 per cent, as explained later in this chapter.) For the Federation Council, the upper house, Yeltsin decreed that voters in each of Russia's 89 regions would cast two votes for their senatorial candidates on one list. The top two finishers in each region would win. (This too would change to a system of *de facto* appointment under Putin's presidency.)

The December 1993 elections served as the founding elections for Russia's new political system. A majority of Russian voters ratified Yeltsin's draft constitution, giving popular legitimacy to a set of political rules for governing Russia. The new constitution outlined difficult procedures for amendment, meaning that adoption of this constitution was likely to produce a lasting set of political institutions for post-communist Russia. Since 1993, the constitution has not been substantially amended, although there was some discussion about doing so in order to enable Putin to run for a third time as president. The December 1993 vote was also the first election in Russia's brief democratic history in which political parties had the opportunity to participate fully, with proportional representation being an additional incentive for stimulating party participation and development.

The basic rules of the game for elections to the Duma established during this tumultuous period in late 1993 endured for the first four of the (so far) five parliamentary elections. Eventually the newly elected Duma codified Yeltsin's mixed electoral system in to law, meaning that four parliamentary elections (1993, 1995, 1999, and 2003) took place using the same electoral system, while the fifth, in December 2007, was held under a new electoral law that severely circumscribed the number of parties that could gain representation in the Duma. The minimum threshold for parties to gain representation in the Duma was increased to 7 from 5 per cent. This step effectively eliminated small liberal parties, including Yabloko, and the Union of Right Forces (SPS), which had hovered at around the 5 per cent level in the Duma elections of 2003, and who gained more seats through the single mandate races than through proportional representation. In 2007 the single mandate system was eliminated completely such that all Duma deputies are now by law elected only according to party list. As noted later in this chapter, in our discussion of the 2007 parliamentary election results, this served to cement United Russia's dominance of the Duma. Registration requirements for candidates have fluctuated, and become increasingly *ad hoc* such that at the regional and national levels there have been clear efforts to block the participation of candidates deemed undesirable by the Kremlin and local business leaders. Although since 1993, all parliamentary elections occurred as scheduled as prescribed by law and some electoral districts have been redrawn, although not in a radical way, elections have become
much less competitive under the system of ‘managed’ democracy that Putin installed after 2000 in Russia.

The 2000 presidential vote took place three months earlier than planned because Boris Yeltsin suddenly resigned from his office on the last day of the millennium. As prescribed by the law on presidential elections, a new election had to be held three months after Yeltsin’s resignation, meaning that the vote was held in March instead of June 2000. All other major rules and practices governing presidential elections, however, have remained stable up to the time of writing. If examining the formal rules and procedures, elections in Russia have become normal, certain events. The predictability of elections and the stability of those institutions run by elected officials in Russia during the last decade stand in sharp contrast to the earlier electoral history from 1989–93, when not a single elected legislative body served out its full term. Formally, the Russian president has the power to disband the Duma under certain circumstances spelled out in the constitution. Since the end of 1993, however, the Russian parliament has never been dissolved.

The Federation Council is the one government body that has experienced volatility in how it is constituted. Originally, as just discussed, deputies to this upper house of parliament were elected in double-mandate districts; in each region in Russia the top two finishers won seats in the Federation Council. After the 1993 vote, however, the rules governing the formation of the Federation Council twice changed dramatically. Before the parliamentary election in 1993, regional executives (presidents in republics and governors in regions and territories) and heads of regional parliaments pushed hard for and succeeded in winning the right for direct elections to their regional offices, followed by automatic appointment to this Federation Council rather than direct elections. Such a formulation gave governors increased local legitimacy and greater autonomy from Yeltsin and Moscow, because elected governors were harder to dismiss than appointed ones. This new formulation also gave governors a direct voice in national legislative affairs, blurring the divisions between executive and legislative powers and between national and sub-national units of the federal system. This formulation lasted until Vladimir Putin was elected president in the spring of 2000. In one of his first acts as president, Putin pressed for and eventually succeeded in changing the composition of the Federation Council. Instead of elected governors and head of regional parliaments, Putin called on regional executive and legislative heads to appoint representatives to the Federation Council from their regions. In effect, this new procedure for selecting ‘senators’ made the upper house less powerful, since those serving did not have an electoral mandate. Many members of the upper house had rarely, if ever, visited the regions that they purportedly represented and behaved more like paid lobbyists for their respective provinces, rather than elected representatives.

From uncertain electoral outcomes to one party dominance

From 1993–2007, Russia’s electoral rules were relatively certain. Throughout the 1990s, the outcome of these elections, however, remained uncertain. For those interested in the development of Russia’s electoral democracy, this was good news, as the presence of stable electoral rules and unpredictable electoral outcomes is the essence of genuine democracy (Przeworski 1991). However, following the Duma elections of 2003, and the increased dominance of Putin’s preferred ‘party of power’, United Russia/Unity, this situation changed notably and dramatically.

The constitutional referendum in December 1993 produced predictable if somewhat contentious results. Not surprisingly, a majority of Russians approved the new constitution. But the vote for the Duma did produce a shocking, unexpected outcome (these and later results are set out in Table 4.1). The pro-reform party affiliated with Yeltsin, Russia’s Choice, won only 15 per cent of the popular vote, only a third of what pollsters and analysts had predicted just two months earlier. Even more amazing was the strong showing of Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), a xenophobic, nationalist organisation that was neither liberal nor democratic. In essence, Russian voters remained divided in rather equal proportions between those who supported Yeltsin’s ‘reforms’ and those that did not. Zhirinovsky’s supporters were simply a new, non-communist expression of dissatisfaction with Yeltsin’s course. Zhirinovsky’s sudden splash created the impression that Russian voters yearned for a fascist resolution to the tumultuous times in which they lived.

The results of the 1995 parliamentary vote were also surprising (the parliament elected in 1993 was an interim body whose term expired after two years, instead of the normal four as prescribed in the constitution). In the two-year interval between the first and second Duma elections, Zhirinovsky’s star had waned. Taking advantage of Zhirinovsky’s demise was the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), which reemerged as the leading force of the anti-Yeltsin coalition. The CPRF made impressive gains, winning almost a quarter of the popular vote and reclaiming its role as the leader of the opposition. Buoyed by party identification on the ballot, CPRF candidates also dominated the single-mandate races. Zhirinovsky won less than half his 1993 total, but still came second, and Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin’s Our Home is
Table 4.1  Elections to the Russian State Duma, 1993–2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>List</th>
<th>SMC</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>22.9</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPRF</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yabloko</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRUC</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on Central Electoral Commission.

Russia (OHIR) was the only reformist party to break through to double digits. Grigory Yavlinsky’s Yabloko, the self-proclaimed leader of Russia’s democratic opposition, dropped almost a full percentage point, and former acting prime minister Yegor Gaidar and his Democratic Choice of Russia (a modified reincarnation of Russia’s Choice from 1993) suffered the greatest setback, winning less than a third of its 1993 total. The Kremlin did not orchestrate this election result. On the contrary, Yeltsin aides created, generously funded, and provided massive media coverage to Our Home is Russia, yet the pro-Kremlin bloc placed a distant third, while outright opponents of those in power scored major gains.

Coming just six months after the Communist comeback in the December 1995 parliamentary elections, the 1996 presidential election also exhibited great uncertainty, especially in the early months of the campaign. President Yeltsin began the New Year with a single-digit approval rating. Support for his policies, such as the Chechnya war, hovered in the low double digits. Russia seemed poised to follow the electoral trajectories in other post-communist countries in which first generation reformers lost their second election to left-of-centre parties.

Yeltsin, however, still enjoyed several advantages over his opponents that eventually helped him win a second term. Perhaps most importantly, Yeltsin was offered the opportunity to campaign yet again against an old-style Communist, CPRF leader Gennady Zyuganov. The reemergence of the Communist Party as the main opposition force allowed those in power to frame the 1996 election as a referendum between communism and the past versus anti-communism and the future. With the contest framed in this way, Yeltsin could assert that he was the only reform candidate capable of defeating the communist challenge (McFaul 1997).

Yeltsin enjoyed the additional advantage of controlling Russia’s two major television stations, ORT and RTR. Both channels broadcast relentlessly pro-Yeltsin and anti-Zyuganov ads, news, talk shows, and ‘documentaries’. Russia’s third national channel at the time, NTV, was a private company, but its owner, Vladimir Gusinsky, backed Yeltsin, as did all the other business tycoons – the so-called oligarchs – who had made their fortunes during the Yeltsin era. Yeltsin also employed the more traditional tactics of distributing government pork to obtain support from regional heads of administration (Triesman 1998). During the campaign, Yeltsin raised pensions and increased the salaries of government employees. For the first time since 1989, the administrative resources of the state were playing an instrumental role in deciding the outcome of a national election.

In a field of a dozen candidates, Yeltsin barely managed to win more votes than his communist opponent: in the first round he took 35 per cent
of the vote, while Zyuganov captured 32 per cent. However, when the vote became a binary choice between the ‘communist’ and the ‘reformer’, the vast majority of Russians still favoured moving forward, not backward. In the second round, Yeltsin’s entire campaign message painted him as the lesser of two evils. Yeltsin won easily in the second round, winning 54 per cent of the popular vote compared with Zyuganov’s 40 per cent. In contrast with electoral trends in many parts of post-communist Europe, Russian voters opted to retain their first democratically elected leader for a second term.

The 1999 Duma elections continued to exhibit the same mix of certainty about the procedures, but uncertainty about the results. In fact, the December 1999 parliamentary election may have been Russia’s most competitive in the 1990s, since the ruling elite was openly divided. In the prelude to the 1999 campaign, the combination of the August 1998 financial crash, the subsequent instability in the government, and Yeltsin’s declining health created the appearance of weakness and disarray in the Kremlin. Those in power looked vulnerable. Just a year before the presidential election, they had not produced a candidate to replace Yeltsin. The Kremlin’s lack of a game plan for staying in power eventually triggered the defection of many considered to be part of the ruling party of power. Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov planned to participate in the next electoral cycle as an opposition candidate. Former Prime Minister Yevgenii Primakov joined Luzhkov’s coalition, Fatherland-All Russia (OVR), as a step toward winning the 2000 presidential election. At the beginning of the 1999 campaign, Primakov was ahead of all other presidential contenders by a large margin. For the first time in its post-communist history, Russia appeared poised to hand over presidential power from one political group to another through the ballot box.

Those close to Yeltsin in the Kremlin were not going to vacate their fortress without a fight. Because Primakov decided to compete in the 1999 parliamentary vote as a way to build momentum for 2000, his enemies in and close to the Kremlin decided to join the battle against the former prime minister in the parliamentary election as well. As a result, the 1999 election was the first time the federal government became actively involved in a parliamentary contest.

As in the 1996 presidential contest, the state played a tremendous role in shaping the outcome. Working closely with figures in the presidential administration, Russian tycoon Boris Berezovsky helped to invent a new pro-presidential electoral bloc, Unity. State resources contributed to this new electoral bloc, often referred to in the Russian press at the time as a ‘virtual’ party. Berezovsky hired the best electoral consultants money could buy and then deployed the full force of his ORT television station to promote Unity and destroy OVR. To a lesser degree, RTR assumed a similar mission. ORT newscasters and commentators unleashed the most vicious personal attacks of any Russian campaign against OVR leaders (White, Oates and McAllister 2005).

Indirectly, another arm of the state – the armed forces – contributed to the rise of Unity and the eventual presidential winner, Putin. Russian armed forces responded to an attack by Chechen rebel forces against Dagestan and alleged terrorist attacks against Russian civilians in Moscow and elsewhere by sending forces into Chechnya in September 1999. At the time, Prime Minister Putin had a negligible approval rating; however, the war effort – especially as portrayed on ORT and RTR – was popular, and soon catapulted Putin’s popularity into double digits and above all other presidential contenders. Putin in turn endorsed Unity. The blessing of the popular prime minister helped the virtual electoral bloc win nearly a quarter of the popular vote.

The results of the 1999 parliamentary vote radically altered the balance of power within the Duma and determined the winner of the 2000 presidential race. As in 1993, the CPRF won the largest percentage of any party, 24 per cent, an outcome that ensured Zyuganov a second-place finish yet again in the presidential contest the next year. Unity came second with 23 per cent, followed by OVR in a distant third place with a vote that was so disappointing that Primakov decided not to run in the 2000 presidential election. The newly revamped liberal coalition, the Union of Right Forces (SPS), surprised many by winning more than 8 per cent of the popular vote, almost double the total of its chief liberal rival, Yabloko. Zhirinovsky’s Liberal Democratic Party of Russia continued to fade, winning only 6 per cent of the party list vote and just barely crossing the 5 per cent threshold.

When the distribution of seats from single mandate races was added into the equation, the balance of power within the parliament had moved in a decisively pro-Putin direction. The Communist Party still controlled a solid minority of seats, but it could not construct opposition majorities to Kremlin initiatives. The combination of a loyal Unity, a divided and weakened Communist Party, a sometimes supportive/SPS, and strong backing from independents and other smaller factions produced a parliamentary supportive of Putin on major issues – an outcome that few would have predicted just a year earlier.

**The Putin era: the rise of one man and one party dominance**

The results of the 1999 parliamentary election made clear that Putin was going to win the 2000 presidential election. Upon naming Putin prime
minister in August 1999, Yeltsin had hinted that he hoped Putin would replace him as president the following year. Yeltsin gave his heir one last boost by resigning as president on 31 December 1999, an act that moved the date of the presidential election from June to March. As Putin’s popularity peaked in January and slowly declined until election day in March, Yeltsin’s decision to resign was critical in helping Putin win the 2000 presidential election in the first round.

During the abbreviated campaign period in 2000, Putin continued to enjoy the unequivocal support of ORT and RTR. Though Putin did not run an official campaign, which he considered demeaning for a sitting president, these television stations continued to document his every move in glowing terms. His opponents, by contrast, received no attention at all from these Kremlin-friendly media outlets. Most oligarchs and regional heads of administration also stumbled over each other in trying to show their support for Putin, since everyone knew he was going to win. And they were right to jump on board since Putin won in a landslide, winning more than half of the popular vote in the first ballot, compared to 24 per cent for the runner up, Communist candidate Zyuganov.

Unity’s surge in 1999 and then Putin’s victory in 2000 marked the beginning of the Kremlin’s dominance over national electoral politics in Russia. Throughout the 1990s, electoral support for Yeltsin and his allies always seemed precarious. Yeltsin orchestrated a dramatic comeback to win reelection in 1996, but parliamentary votes both before and after 1996 demonstrated that support for Yeltsin’s policies was soft. The volatility in voter preferences in 1999, expressed in opinion polls during the campaign, suggested that the traditional cleavage among voters between ‘democrats’ and ‘communists’ had faded as the central driver of Russian electoral politics. Beginning in the 1999–2000 electoral cycle, Putin offered a different reason to support his party and his candidacy – stability. After a decade of chaotic revolutionary change, Russian citizens yearned for it. With the exception of the ongoing war in Chechnya, Putin delivered it. The Russian economy grew more in each year of Putin’s first term in office than in all of the previous decade. Voters did not care whether this growth was due to Putin’s economic reforms, which were substantial, or to the combination of high oil prices and low international interest rates. Putin got the credit regardless. More generally, Putin’s positive rating as a leader hovered well above 70 per cent for his entire first term. In contrast to Yeltsin, Putin appeared to be a young and able leader who showed up for work every day and made Russians proud again of their president and their country.

It was not surprising, therefore, that Putin and his allies won again in the 2003 parliamentary elections and the 2004 presidential elections. In December 2003, his party – United Russia (the latest incarnation of Unity from 1999) – won a major victory, capturing more than a third of the popular vote on the party list and winning more than a hundred of the single-mandate contests. Two other parties close to the Kremlin also performed well beyond expectations: Zhirinovsky’s LDPR doubled its total from the 1999 parliamentary election, winning 11.5 per cent of the popular vote. The other Kremlin-friendly party to cross the threshold on the party list, with 9.2 per cent of the popular vote, was Rodina (Motherland), a loose coalition of nationalist and left-of-centre politicians that the Kremlin helped to organise and then advertise over the course of the campaign. After the vote and after independents lined up behind different factions in the Duma, United Russia and its allies controlled the two-thirds majority needed to pass amendments to the constitution.

While the pro-Kremlin parties surged in 2003, the main opposition parties on both the left and right faltered. On the left, the CPRF lost half of its party-list vote from 1999, and managed only eleven victories in single-member districts. As a result, the CPRF faction in the Duma shrank by 61 seats, falling from 113 in 1999 to 52 in 2003. Liberal opponents of the Kremlin fared even worse than their comrades on the left. Both Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces (SPS) failed to cross the 5 per cent threshold. In the single-mandate contests, Yabloko won only four seats, while candidates affiliated with SPS won three seats. For the first time since competitive elections began in 1990, the liberals had no faction in the parliament. To varying degrees, all three parliamentary parties that increased their share of the popular vote since the 1999 election supported Putin and enjoyed support from the state. All three parties that criticised Putin (and hence did not enjoy state support) fared worse in 2003 than they had in 1999. By 2007, Yabloko and SPS would be effectively eliminated from the Duma.

The overwhelming victory of United Russia in the Duma elections made it clear that Putin would win the presidential ballot without any difficulty. Indeed, Putin’s reelection was so certain that none of the party leaders who competed in the December parliamentary vote ran as presidential candidates in March. Zhirinovsky, Communist Gennadi Zyuganov, Yabloko leader Grigoriy Yavlinsky, and SPS leader Boris Nemtsov all stepped aside, and let other lesser-known figures in their parties run in vain against Putin. In March, Putin won on the first ballot, capturing more than 71 per cent of the popular vote. The Communist Party candidate Nikolai Kharitonov came a distant second with 13.7 per cent. Former Motherland leader Sergei Glazyev came in third with 4.1 per cent; Irina Khakamada of the SPS garnered only 3.8 per cent; the LDPR candidate, Zhirinovsky bodyguard Oleg Malyskin, managed just 2.0 per cent; and Putin backer and Russian Party of Life candidate Sergei
Mironov trailed the field with 0.7 per cent, well behind 'against all', the choice of 3.4 per cent of those who went to the polls.

By December 2007, and the most recent elections to the Duma, Russian voters had clearly lost the meaningful right to choose their leaders. In 2007, the Russian Duma was elected according to party list votes alone with an increased threshold, now 7 per cent. This effectively eliminated smaller, liberal parties like Yabloko and SPS, which had done better in single mandate than list voting, where they had barely cleared the previously required 5 per cent barrier for representation, from parliament. Further, the changes to campaign laws in late 2006 included restrictions of political parties on using airtime on television to campaign against other candidates and parties. The law also eliminated the minimum voter turnout requirement for elections at both national, local, and regional levels, such that even elections with a turnout of, for example 10 per cent or less, will be counted as valid.

The effect of these changes and some tougher party, candidate and voter registration requirements was another stunning victory for United Russia, which garnered more than 64 per cent of the popular vote, translating into 315 seats of the 450 seat Duma (see Table 4.2). For the first time, Vladimir Putin's name appeared on the United Party list – indeed, it was the only name on the list, and given his high personal popularity rating as president, this undoubtedly help fuel United Russia's big win. The CPRF received a respectable, although relatively meagre 11.6 per cent of the popular vote, which translated into 57 seats. LDPR followed

Table 4.2  The Russian Duma election of 2 December 2007

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Vote</th>
<th>Share of vote (%)</th>
<th>Seats</th>
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<tr>
<td>United Russia</td>
<td>44,714,241</td>
<td>64.30</td>
<td>315</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communist Party of the Russian Federation</td>
<td>8,046,886</td>
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<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia</td>
<td>5,660,823</td>
<td>8.14</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fair Russia: Rodina/Pensioners/Life</td>
<td>5,383,639</td>
<td>7.74</td>
<td>38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agrarian Party of Russia</td>
<td>1,600,234</td>
<td>2.30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yabloko</td>
<td>1,108,985</td>
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<td>Civic Force</td>
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<td>Union of Right Forces</td>
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<td>Democratic Party of Russia</td>
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<td>Invalid votes</td>
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Source: Based on Central Electoral Commission communiqué in Vestnik Tsentral'noi izbiratel'noi komissii, No. 19(222), 2007, pp. 5–22. The registered electorate was 109,145,517, or whom 69,537,065 cast a valid or invalid ballot (63.71 per cent).

with 8.1 per cent of the vote, giving Zhirinovsky's party 40 seats in the Duma, while Just (or Fair) Russia, a new party created shortly before the elections and strongly backed by the Kremlin as the second half of what was then envisioned as two party system (with United Russia), received 7.7 per cent of the vote or 38 seats. These were the only four parties to gain representation in the Duma, since single mandate seats had been eliminated and also the phenomenon of independents gaining representation in the Duma (in the previous election approximately 100 Duma seats had been occupied by independents). Moreover, the unsurpassed dominance of United Russia, along with the election in March 2008 of his protégé Dmitri Medvedev, truly cemented Putin's control of both the legislative and executive branches of government.

A political transition that did not bring about any change

Dmitri Medvedev was elected in March 2008 in the most highly managed political event in Russia's post-communist history. He was nominated to the position in December 2007, days after Unity's overwhelming victory in the Duma elections. Sure enough, upon accepting the nomination, Medvedev immediately announced his intention to run for the presidency only if Putin, his long time political mentor, would serve as his prime minister should he win. Putin consented to do so, and this afforded him the opportunity of staying in control of government without having to amend the Russian constitution to allow him to have a third term as President.

Even with Putin's personal seal of approval, no measure was spared in ensuring Medvedev's resounding victory in the presidential elections on 2 March 2008 (see Table 4.3). He faced no real opposition, his image flooded Russian television, and news of his and Putin's travels around the country dominated the largely now state-controlled Russian print media. Huge billboards picturing Putin and Medvedev walking shoulder to shoulder into Russia's evidently glorious future loomed over city squares – the largest of all on Manezh Square, just outside the Kremlin in Moscow. In case voters didn't get the message: Medvedev would continue the good times and good policies of his mentor, Vladimir Putin. Russian citizens were exhorted to vote at every turn – receiving reminders by text message and even on the back of Moscow metro tickets – since poor voter turnout might delegitimise what was correctly expected to be an overwhelming mandate for Medvedev – remarkable for someone running for elective office for the first time in his life – and Putin, by extension. Medvedev won convincingly with more than 70 per cent of the vote (just one per cent less
Table 4.3  The Russian presidential election of 2 March 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Nominated by</th>
<th>Vote</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dmitri Medvedev</td>
<td>United Russia</td>
<td>52,530,712</td>
<td>70.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gennadi Zyuganov</td>
<td>Communist Party of the Russian Federation</td>
<td>13,243,550</td>
<td>17.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vladimir Zhirinovsky</td>
<td>Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia</td>
<td>6,988,510</td>
<td>9.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrei Bogdanov</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>968,344</td>
<td>1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invalid votes</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,105,533</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on Central Electoral Commission communiqué in Rossiiskaya gazeta, 8 March 2008, p. 1. The registered electorate was 107,222,016, of whom 74,746,649 (69.71 per cent) cast a valid or invalid ballot.

than Putin had won in 2004). The resurrected Communist leader, Gennadii Zyuganov, was second, followed by perennial presidential candidate and leader of the LDPR, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, and Andrei Bogdanov, a lightweight character thought to have been financed and parachuted into the election by the Kremlin to make the race look more competitive.

State limits on the electoral playing field

Given the president’s popularity, it is hard to imagine how Putin and his surrogates could have lost free and fair elections from 2003 onward. We can only speculate about the results of free and fair elections, however, because the actual elections have taken place in a context that did not offer a level playing field. Instead, Putin’s regime limited opportunities for political challengers while at the same it provided Putin, and then Medvedev, and their preferred party, United Russia, with virtually unlimited ‘administrative resources’ to wield during the campaign. To be sure, Putin did not inherit a consolidated democracy from Boris Yeltsin. At the end of Yeltsin’s rule, Russia’s democratic institutions were still weak (McFaul 2001). Nonetheless, Putin did little to strengthen democratic institutions and much to weaken them (McFaul, Petrov and Ryabov 2004; McFaul and Stoner-Weiss 2008).

First, Putin and his government initiated a series of successful campaigns against independent media outlets. When Putin came to power, only three television networks had the national reach to really count in politics – ORT, RTR, and NTV. By running billionaire Boris Berezovsky out of the country with a politically motivated criminal prosecution, Putin effectively acquired control of ORT, the channel with the biggest national audience. RTR was always fully state-owned, and so it was even easier to tame. Controlling the third channel, NTV, proved more difficult since its owner, Vladimir Gusinsky, decided to fight. But in the end, he too lost not only NTV but also the daily newspaper Segodnya and the weekly Itogi when prosecutors pressed charges. When the parliamentary campaign started, the Kremlin de facto controlled all television networks with a national reach. This continued through the 2007 and 2008 electoral cycles.

At the same time, the independence of electronic media eroded on the regional level. Heads of local state-owned television stations continue to follow political signals from regional executives, and most regional heads of administration stood firmly behind Putin in the last electoral cycle. Private and cable stations steer clear of political analysis altogether. Dozens of newspapers and web portals have remained independent and offer a platform for political figures of all persuasions, but none of these platforms enjoys mass audiences. Moreover, Putin changed the atmosphere for doing journalistic work. When journalists criticised his policies, such as the war in Chechnya or his handling of the sinking of the submarine Kursk in 2000, he called them traitors. Similarly, during the August war with Georgia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, critics of the Russian side were hard to find in the Russian press. As we note in Chapter 7, media independence eroded so significantly during Putin’s first term that Freedom House downgraded Russia’s media from Partly Free to Not Free, and it has maintained that rating every year since 2005. Reporters without Borders, which published their first worldwide press-freedom index in 2002, ranked Russia 121st out of 139 countries assessed (just one ranking above Iran), making it one of the worst performers in the post-communist world. The Committee to Protect Journalists accorded Russia the dubious distinction of being one of the ten worst places in the world to be a journalist.

Given these changes, the media has come to play a very different role in elections than they had in the 1990s. During the campaign for the 1999 parliamentary elections, Russian elites supported different electoral blocs: OVR or Unity. Russia’s national media outlets lined up on both sides of this divide. ORT and RTR backed Unity, while Gusinsky’s NTV as well as Luzhkov’s Moscow television station TV-Tsentr and several other regional stations backed OVR. The playing field was not equal, but opposing points of view were represented in the national electronic media. In the 2003 and 2007 parliamentary votes and 2004 and 2008 presidential elections, by contrast, the Kremlin controlled all the major national television stations, and because most regional elites were now united behind Putin and then Putin and Medvedev, the vast majority of
regional stations (including Moscow’s TV-Centre) also sided with pro-Kremlin candidates.

A second important political change carried out on Putin’s watch was ‘regional reforms’ and these have remained in place since he moved from the presidency to the prime minister’s office. Almost immediately after becoming president in 2000, Putin made reining in Russia’s regional barons a top priority. As we discuss more fully in Chapters 9 and 10, he began his campaign to reassert Moscow’s authority by establishing seven supra-regional districts headed primarily by former generals and KGB officers. These new super-governors were assigned the task of taking control of all federal agencies in their jurisdictions, many of which had developed affinities if not loyalties to regional governments during the Yeltsin era. These seven representatives of federal executive authority also investigated governors and presidents of republics as a way of undermining their autonomy and threatening them into subjugation. As already discussed, Putin also emasculated the Federation Council, and regional leaders who resisted his authority found elections rigged against them.

These reforms regarding the distribution of power between Moscow and the regions had important consequences for national elections in 2003 and 2004 and 2007 and 2008 beyond that. Wielding carrots and sticks, the Kremlin eliminated the serious divisions among regional elites that had created the main drama of the 1999 parliamentary elections. By late 2003, almost all regional leaders were supporting Putin and United Russia. These regional executives also deployed their local resources to support United Russia candidates in the single-mandate district races. By 2007, there was no effective opposition to United Russia in the provinces, and governors were encouraged to deliver votes for the party and then for Medvedev in the presidential elections of 2008.

A third context-changing initiative by the Putin regime was a crackdown on the oligarchs. Very early in his first term, Putin made clear that the oligarchs could no longer treat the state as simply another tool to be used for their personal enrichment. Instead, Putin implied that the oligarchs had to get out of politics altogether. Eventually, he arrested or chased into exile three major oligarchs – Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, and Russia’s richest man, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, head of the oil conglomerate Yukos. All three had previously played significant roles in funding and supporting political parties and individuals not deemed loyal to the Kremlin. The marginalisation of these three sent a chilling message to other tycoons. In the 2003 parliamentary campaign, oligarchs continued to contribute significant resources to political campaigns, but only as sanctioned by the Kremlin. Compared to the previous electoral cycle, big business in 2003 was relatively united in backing United Russia and other pro-Kremlin candidates. In 2004, everyone backed Putin and in 2008, the best way to demonstrate continued support for Putin was to back Medvedev.

The absence of independence or internal divisions within media, regional elite, and oligarchic ranks reduced the freedom to manoeuvre for opposition political parties and candidates in elections since 2003. At the same time, the state’s larger role in this electoral cycle gave incumbents enormous advantages, be it positive, continuous, and free national television coverage, massive logistical and administrative support from regional executives, or enormous financial resources from companies like Gazprom and Lukoil. Before the legislative balloting, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) issued its first-ever critical preliminary report on a Russian election, ruling that the State Duma elections had failed to meet many OSCE and Council of Europe commitments for democratic elections. In 2007, the OSCE refused to send a delegation to observe the Russian elections for parliament because representatives of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) maintained that they were issued an invitation to observe so close to the elections that they could not field a meaningful mission of electoral observers. The OSCE also did not field a monitoring team for the 2008 presidential elections, asserting that the Russian government was insisting on too many restrictions on the monitoring team that observers would not be able to do an effective job. Although none of Russia’s previous elections was wholly free and fair, the most recent ones have been the least free and fair of all.

**Conclusion: do elections still matter?**

In the last years of the Soviet Union and the first years of independent Russia, elections helped to weaken or remove communist incumbents and open political opportunities for non-communist challengers. In the context of social, political, and economic upheaval, elections in the USSR and then Russia often were convoked to serve an immediate political purpose. They were not simply ways to choose leaders, but were used and manipulated in the heat of battle over such major issues as the fate of the Soviet Union or the course of economic reform.

Since 1993, national elections were more regular and anticipated events conducted in the context of a widely accepted constitutional system. However, stability in the electoral calendar and electoral procedures have been paralleled by increasing stability in the outcomes of elections. The most powerful office in the country — the presidency — has not seen a true turnover of power: Medvedev has clearly governed in the shadow of his prime minister, mentor, and sometime boss, former
President Putin. The landslide victory of the party of power in the 2003 and 2007 parliamentary elections and the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections marked a new milestone in demonstrating how elections could be easily manipulated to maintain and strengthen the group of elites already in power.

In democracies all over the world, incumbents enjoy tremendous electoral advantages. For instance, in the 2002 elections for the US House of Representatives, incumbents seeking reelection won 98 per cent of the time. Before the election, fewer than 30 of the 435 races were even considered competitive. Parties of power have remained in power for decades in countries widely regarded as liberal democracies.

Nonetheless, the way in which Russian elites have begun to deploy state resources to stay in power represents a greater challenge to the democratic process than some of these other examples of incumbent entrenchment in liberal democracies. The imbalance in resources of the state compared to resources controlled by society give those already in power a tremendous and unfair advantage. The state's growing role in determining who gets on the ballot and who does not is an especially disturbing trend. The trajectory over the last fifteen or so years in Russia has been clear – a growing role for the state in determining electoral outcomes.

At the same time, the elimination of elections is unlikely, since too many actors are interested in preserving the process. The political elite need elections in their present form to legitimise their rule. International norms also place pressure on the Russian elite to continue the formal practice of elections. Moreover, polls indicate that very solid majorities of Russian citizens believe that their leaders should be elected (Colton and McFaul 2003).

Consequently, elections are likely to perform a quasi-democratic function in Russia for the foreseeable future. Elections in which several parties and multiple candidates participate (but don’t exactly compete) will continue to occur, though the party of power — currently called United Russia — is likely to win these contests thanks to monopoly control over national television, and solid backing from most regional elites. In close elections they also are likely to benefit from the control of those state institutions that have demonstrated a capacity to falsify elections.

Elections of limited consequence, however, are perhaps still better than no elections at all. And as dictators in Kenya and Serbia recently learned, elections can unexpectedly change from a charade into a much more meaningful procedure during periods of crises. In Russia today, elections have less meaning than they did several years ago. In a time of crisis, they might acquire meaning again.

Chapter 5
Russia’s Political Parties and their Substitutes

HENRY E. HALE

Many observers expected Russia to develop a competitive party system rapidly after the USSR broke apart in late 1991. Russia was democratising, the argument went, and the experience of Western countries had given experts little reason to question Max Weber’s classic aphorism that democracy was ‘unimaginable’ without parties (Weber 1990). Russian developments quickly challenged this view, however. A plethora of parties did spring up during the 1990s, with as many as 43 appearing on the parliamentary ballot in 1995 alone, but by the end of that decade their growth had stalled. Independent politicians continued to dominate the country’s most important posts. For example, only 3 per cent of Russia’s regional leaders, when running for re-election, chose to do so as party nominees between 1995 and 2000. Likewise, President Boris Yeltsin himself consistently declined to join any party after leaving the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1990.

In the 2000s, Russia’s party system did finally begin to take shape, but with a major twist. Putin instituted a series of reforms that weakened the most important pre-existing parties and corralled a majority of the most influential independent politicians into a new pro-Putin organisation called United Russia. Almost all governors are currently affiliated with United Russia, and by 2008 that party commanded majorities in the national parliament and nearly all regional legislatures. Despite this, United Russia’s growth has never quite reached the point of complete dominance, even in the government. Thus while Dmitri Medvedev became the first party nominee ever to win the Russian presidency, he refused actually to become a member of the party. Former President and current Prime Minister Vladimir Putin similarly agreed to become ‘chairman’ of United Russia in 2008, but declared that even this did not mean he would actually be a party ‘member’. Some have asked, how strong can a party be if its own top patrons will not fully commit themselves to it? Moreover, there is evidence that the Kremlin (that is, Russia’s president
and his close associates) continues to keep a stable of other parties 'in reserve' that can be used either to attack true opposition parties or perhaps one day replace United Russia if something goes wrong.

How did this situation come about, and what does the answer tell us about how politics works in Russia? This is the subject of the pages that follow.

The building blocks of Russian parties

Why would any politician ever bother joining a party in the first place? One short answer is: a politician will join a party when that party gives the candidate a greater chance of getting elected than he or she would have as an independent. Parties in Russia, and arguably everywhere, generally offer candidates at least two kinds of advantages. First, they can provide a candidate with money, organisation, connections, and other resources that can be used to campaign or otherwise win office. Second, they can connect a candidate with a set of ideas that the party has a reputation for pursuing, helping a candidate reach out to people who may support the party's ideas but who may not know anything about the candidate. Politicians who are rich in either resources or reputation, therefore, tend to be particularly successful party builders because they have something that other ambitious politicians want. These things, resources and reputation, are thus the building blocks of parties.

What building blocks were available to would-be party builders in Russia upon the USSR's demise? The only pre-existing party with any claim to have stood the test of time was the CPSU, but in the wake of the August 1991 coup attempt it was banned along with its Russian branch. Even in its heyday, it was mostly an instrument of control rather than a party geared for actually competing in free elections. Moreover, by 1991, its central Marxist ideas were widely discredited and it had been losing members since CPSU leader Mikhail Gorbachev started seriously reforming the Soviet system. Nevertheless, the party did leave behind some significant networks of true believers and people who had forged important personal connections that could eventually be reactivated for organising a party.

Once Gorbachev began reforming the Soviet political system in earnest, and even before parties other than the CPSU were formally legalised in early 1990, a huge number of 'informal' organisations sprang up to promote various political causes. Flush with the opportunity to publicly pursue almost any political agenda openly, these associations were extremely diverse and generally small, often focusing on the pet issues of all and sundry politicians. Some of these grassroots groupings did begin to coalesce into larger associations, with the most prominent being Democratic Russia. During the late perestroika period, Democratic Russia looked like it could successfully rival the Russian branch of the declining CPSU and was able to mobilise hundreds of thousands of people in some of Moscow's largest street rallies ever. But this was an extraordinarily modest movement, united almost solely by a common desire to end communist rule. Once the USSR broke apart, it splintered and left little in the way of reputation and resources for future party builders to utilise.

By far the most important source of building blocks for Russia's first party system was the Soviet state itself. In fact, almost every non-communist politician who has built a truly successful Russian party gained his or her primary fame or other party-building resource through some connection with the state structures of the USSR or the Russian Federation. Upon reflection, this is not surprising: the Soviet state penetrated nearly all aspects of life in some way and explicitly sought to own or at least control all the means by which someone could accumulate political influence, including mass media, social organisations, and, as Marxist ideology dictated, economic resources (including all enterprises and banking institutions). Even after political liberalisation removed most controls over political activity, the state remained overwhelmingly the greatest source of money, organisation, and media attention, which are among the most valuable building blocks for parties. Even after Yeltsin's governments privatised the bulk of Russia's economy in the 1990s, business (including the media it controlled) still remained highly dependent on aspects of the state for its profitability. All this meant that people within or connected to the state had major advantages in building the first non-communist parties. It also meant that people within the state continued to have tremendous resources that could be used against party-building projects that they did not like or to support parties that served their purposes.

The next two sections show how this particular array of building blocks translated into the party system that characterises Russia today.

The veteran parties: those first emerging in the early 1990s

Researchers have found that the outcome of a country's first multiparty elections, often called 'founding elections', can have a disproportionate long-run impact on how its party system develops (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 61–2). This is because the parties that win gain the visibility, opportunities to impact policy, and access to resources that political office brings. These gains, in turn, can be ploughed back into the party-building project, giving the initial winners a great advantage in