

# Elite Defection under Autocracy: Evidence from Russia

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## Abstract

Elite cohesion is a fundamental pillar of authoritarian stability. High-level defections can signal weakness, embolden the opposition and, sometimes, lead to regime collapse. Using a dataset of 4,313 ruling party candidates in Russia, this paper develops and tests hypotheses about the integrity of elite coalitions under autocracy. Our theory predicts that elites defect when there is greater uncertainty about the willingness and/or ability of the regime to provide benefits and career advancement. Regimes that share power with the opposition, limit access to spoils, and lack formal institutions see more defections. Co-opting the opposition assuages outside threats, but leaves regime insiders disgruntled and prone to defect. Those with personal followings and business connections defect first, since they can pursue their political goals independently of the regime. Taken together, our results highlight important tradeoffs among authoritarian survival strategies. Many of the steps autocrats take to repel challenges simultaneously heighten the risk of defections.

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# Introduction

In almost all dictatorships the leader is supported by a group of elites. These elites provide essential political services to the dictator, and the breakdown of these elite coalitions is one of the main threats to authoritarian rule. But the consequences of elite defection are better understood than the causes. In this paper, we examine the determinants of elite defection in one prominent electoral authoritarian regime, Russia.

Focusing on electoral defections in Russia's regions, we develop a simple cost-benefit framework to explain defections from Russia's ruling party, United Russia (UR). Aligning with the regime offers significant advantages for politicians, including career advancement, state backing during elections, and access to rents. At the same time, however, affiliation can come at considerable cost. Regimes can force politicians to forgo their own political beliefs and constituency demands in order to toe the party line. Politicians also run the risk of being tainted by their association with an autocratic regime should the regime falter and rivals seek retribution.

How the regime manages the distribution of spoils and careers is key to understanding why individual elites defect. First, we argue defections should be more likely when the ability of the regime to help candidates win elections decreases. Candidates are hesitant to affiliate with an unpopular regime that cannot ensure their electoral prospects. Second, accessing rents, spoils, and privileges is one of the main goals for politicians under autocracy. We argue that defections should increase when the regime places limits on the ability of regime cadres to access these benefits. Third, we argue that defections should increase in settings where cadres face greater uncertainty about the future provision of spoils and career advancement. Such uncertainty may be driven by weak formal institutions that fail to constrain the arbitrary behavior of the autocrat or by the regime's decision to co-opt the opposition with spoils. Finally, we argue that individual characteristics of elites matter. Those with higher political rank should be less likely to defect since they have less uncertainty about future career advancement opportunities. In addition, those with significant autonomous political resources should be more likely to defect. Such resources increase the chances that elites will be able to achieve their political goals independently of the regime.

Our theoretical framework points out some inherent contradictions in previous work on authoritarian durability. Autocrats face tradeoffs in dealing with different types of threats. Autocrats may try to co-opt opposition leaders in order to stave off challenges, but by diverting spoils from regime insiders to the opposition, they leave insiders disgruntled. Thus, dictators may find it difficult to co-opt their way out of a rising opposition, because opposition co-optation simultaneously threatens the integrity of ruling coalitions. The regime may also seek an electoral advantage by recruiting strong candidates (e.g. those with personal followings or business resources), but candidates with autonomous resources are exactly the type that are more likely to betray the regime. Finally, regimes may seek to exert greater personal control over politics, but this makes it harder to commit to power-sharing with elites and, thus, risks defection.

Using a unique dataset that covers the universe of United Russia candidates in all Russian regional legislative elections between 1999 and 2016, we find evidence consistent with these claims. First, we find some evidence that United Russia cadres are more likely to abandon the party when the regional vote share of the party decreases and when regional economic performance declines. We take both as indicators of the regime's electoral strength: elites defect from regimes whose popularity is on the wane.

We next find that defections increase in legislatures where the regime shares more legislative leadership positions with the opposition. United Russia holds majorities in all of Russia's regional legislatures, but it often shares important posts with the opposition in order to co-opt its leaders. Our analysis reveals that this co-optation comes with a cost: by sharing more spoils with the opposition, the regime limits the spoils that are available to its own cadres. This leads to defections from UR. In addition, we find that defections increase significantly when the regime decreases the size of the regional legislature. By shrinking the size of the legislature, the regime limits institutional points of access to spoils and thereby gives elites less incentive to stay with the regime.

Next, our analysis reveals there are more defections in Russia's ethnic republics, which are run by regimes that are typically more personalist than in other regions. As a number of authors have argued, dictators in personalist regimes (i.e. regimes where leaders are relatively unconstrained

by institutions) have difficulty committing to sharing spoils with elites in a dependable manner (Geddes 1999; Svobik 2012). This increases uncertainty for cadres and increases their incentives to defect.

Finally, we find evidence that elites take their own relationship with the regime into consideration when deciding whether to defect. Candidates who have won elected office or occupy a high spot on United Russia's party list are more likely to remain loyal. These candidates have more to risk by defecting. Moreover, we find that ownership of various autonomous political resources matters greatly. Business owners—especially those in the private sector—are less likely to defect than government bureaucrats and other professional deputies such as lawyers and administrators. Businessperson candidates can draw on their firms to help fund an independent political machine and their employees to help drive their own personal vote. This makes them less dependent on the ruling party. Likewise, deputies who have previously won election as independents (before joining United Russia) are more inclined to defect. Being elected as an independent indicates that the deputy has (or was once able to build) a personal following in their constituency. Ruling party affiliation matters less if a politician can win office on his or her own.

This paper makes several contributions to the literature on authoritarianism. We believe it to be the first study to use micro-level, quantitative data to test hypotheses about the cohesion of elite coalitions under autocracy. In so doing, it offers a direct test of several competing perspectives on authoritarian stability. Some argue that authoritarian coalitions are held together by spoil-sharing among elites (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). Others share this focus on elite spoil sharing but add that institutions must exist to make dictators' commitments credible (Brownlee 2007; Magaloni 2008). Still others focus on the regime's ability to co-opt or repress threats from the opposition (Gandhi 2008; Svobik 2012). We do not resolve this debate, though we do find evidence for a number of the propositions put forth by the neo-institutional literature on authoritarianism. For example, regimes with institutional constraints on the leader have an easier time keeping elites united than those run by personalist leaders. In addition, restricting the overall volume of spoils available to elites, or choosing to distribute spoils to the opposition, can spur defection. We find

that regime elites respond negatively to opposition cooptation by voting with their feet.

Next, our results suggest that theorists of autocracy should think not just about the characteristics and strength of the “regime” and opposition, but also about the composition, orientation, and resources of individual elites. The resources of elites vary both across and within countries and the specific types they hold affect their loyalty to the regime. We add to previous work showing how business resources can empower opposition coalitions ([Arriola 2012](#); [Greene 2010](#)), while also identifying other assets that politicians can capitalize on to remain autonomous.

Finally, our study illustrates the usefulness of studying regional politics under autocracy. The literature no longer views autocracies as monoliths, but many studies still focus on politics in the capital. Regional elites may be especially important in large and/or federal autocracies. Indeed, in a number of prominent decentralized autocracies (e.g the Soviet Union, Nigeria in 2015), regime breakdown was abetted by the defection of regional elites. But even short of regime breakdown, elite schisms at the regional level can provide useful insights into broader regime dynamics. By winning elections at lower levels, opposition forces can make regime change more likely ([Lucardi 2016](#)), but in order to win at the local level they often need to lure elites away from the ruling coalition.

## **Authoritarian Stability and Elite Cohesion**

Dictators do not rule alone. In all autocracies, the ruler is surrounded by a coalition of elites who render various political services. And beyond that inner circle there are usually hundreds, if not thousands, of elite allies—legislators, governors, administrators, mayors, military officers, party cadres, chiefs, oligarchs, employers, landlords, clan leaders and the like—who provide support to the regime. Such elites are important to the survival of the regime because they exercise influence and demand loyalty from citizens and other important political actors. They are opinion leaders and power-brokers. They help the regime mobilize the masses, win elections, administer territory, collect taxes, battle insurgencies and so on.

Elite cohesion is one of the fundamental pillars of authoritarian regime stability. Schisms among elites weaken autocratic regimes. Coups are perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this, but armed revolt is not the only way that elite defection can undermine regimes. Non-violent defections may lead mechanically to the unraveling of the ruling coalition. For example, mass defection by high-level party cadres was one of the most important proximate causes of the Soviet Union's collapse (Solnick 1996). Elites may defect to join the opposition, mobilize mass sectors against the regime or run against the regime in elections. Indeed, high-level electoral defections, the focus of our analysis, have contributed significantly to the breakdown of prominent electoral authoritarian regimes in Ukraine (2004), Taiwan (2000), Mexico (2000), Kenya (2002), and Nigeria (2015). Short of causing regime breakdown, defections can also weaken the regime by demonstrating its vulnerability and dividing the ruling party's vote share.

Political scientists have long recognized the importance of elite cohesion to autocratic regime stability. Transitologists argued that divisions within the regime were the starting point of most democratic transitions (O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986; Przeworski 1991). Decades later, the neo-institutional literature on authoritarianism has almost unanimously emphasized the centrality of elite cohesion. For (Geddes 1999), the most important distinction between various authoritarian regime types is the extent to which they are able to contain elite schisms. Similarly, Svoboda (2012) argues that elite conflict is one of the two main threats to authoritarian rule (the other being mass uprising). Such arguments are also found in many recent studies of authoritarian longevity. (Brownlee 2008; Lee 2014; Hale 2014),

Given the far-reaching consequences of elite defections, it is important to know what causes them. Most of the research on this question has been concentrated in one of two areas. First, there is a large literature on the determinants of coups (Londregan and Poole 1990; Belkin and Schofer 2003). We know much about when the military intervenes in authoritarian politics, a very extreme and specific type of defection. In this paper, we focus on electoral defections by civilian elites, a much more common occurrence, especially in the post-Cold War era.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Militaries hold a monopoly on violence and, in many regimes, have organizational autonomy.

Another approach to studying elite defection comes from the recent literature on authoritarian institutions. A key insight from this literature is that dictators are often stymied in their efforts to maintain elite loyalty by a commitment problem. Leaders may try to keep elites loyal by promising to share power and spoils with them, but dictators have difficulty making those promises credible. Distrust of the dictator and uncertainty about the future give elites incentives to defect from the regime. Dictators who solve this commitment problem—usually by relinquishing some of their arbitrary authority to a political party or a legislature—are said to survive longer. In support of such arguments, scholars have demonstrated that autocracies with power-sharing institutions are more durable (Gandhi 2008; Magaloni 2008; Svobik 2012).

Such studies are persuasive and influential, but it is clear that institutions are not the only explanation for elite defection. If they were, we would never observe defections in dominant party regimes and personalist regimes would never survive past day two. Empirically, these studies approach the question of elite defection only indirectly. Elite cohesion is assumed to be the mechanism that links institutions to regime longevity, but it is not shown directly that institutions reduce elite discord.

Other empirical studies have examined elite defection more directly. Using cross-national data from 227 chief executive elections in hegemonic party regimes, Reuter and Gandhi (2011) find that economic crisis is one of the main drivers of electoral defection. A prominent example is the case of Mexico, where economic crisis provided the structural opening for the defection of Cuauhtemoc Cardenas and his Corriente Democratico (CD) faction from the PRI in 1987 (Langston 2002). But not all studies agree. Analyzing cases of democratic breakdown in Latin America, Haggard and Kaufman (1995) find that only splits within the military were more likely during economic crisis; defections from dominant party regimes did not increase during such downturns.

Others focus on the structure of the economy. Radnitz (2010) and Balmaceda (2013) argue that privatization has led to defections in post-Soviet countries, as access to independent economic

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This makes the study of civil-military relations somewhat separate from the problem of intra-regime conflict that we study here.

resources emboldens elites to challenge the regime. Others, however, have argued that privatization may not spur elite defection unless the state violates property rights in an egregious and repeated fashion (Junisbai 2012).

Other case studies examine the strategies that autocrats use to dissuade defection. In an innovative study of non-defection in Cuba, Schedler and Hoffmann (2016) demonstrate how the regime used carefully calibrated communicative strategies to dramatize the power of the regime and stave off elite discord. Looking at the 2016 elections in Uganda, Khisa (2016) shows how President Museveni used carrots (patronage) and sticks (repression) to dissuade high-level defectors. Other studies focus on how processes unleashed by autocrats can slip out from their control and lead to the unraveling of elite coalitions. Langston (2002), for example, argues that while economic crisis provided the opening for the defection of the CD, the proximate cause of their departure were electoral reforms that allowed smaller parties to win seats and then form coalitions. Increasing electoral competition between the regime and its rivals spurred elite defections from both the PRI in Mexico and KMT in Taiwan (Langston 2006).

In sum, the empirical literature on defections is surprisingly sparse. There are a number of quantitative studies that examine the institutional causes of elite defection indirectly, and we have two quantitative studies that focus on the effects of economic growth. Case study research focuses on a broader range of factors, but those studies have not developed a general theory of elite defections that encompasses structural, institutional, and individual-level explanations. We discuss such a theory below and test its implications with a micro-level, large-N dataset.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In this section, we provide a simple theoretical framework for analyzing electoral defection in authoritarian regimes. We theorize the process from the perspective of a regime-affiliated candidate who is deciding whether to remain affiliated with the regime or to defect and run for office without

a regime affiliation.<sup>2</sup> What are the goals of regime candidates? In the literature on democratic elections, it is often assumed that candidates care about three things: 1) maximizing votes, 2) gaining access to the benefits of office, and 3) achieving policy goals (Fenno 1973; Müller and Strøm 1999). This list is a good starting point, but it requires some amendment when applied to an authoritarian setting. With respect to the first goal, regime candidates clearly want to win votes in order to be (re)elected. But more generally, the literature on autocracy usually assumes that regime cadres pursue *career advancement* as one of their primary goals. They make political decisions with an eye toward retaining their positions and seeking promotion where possible. Winning votes is helpful but given that autocratic elections are not free and fair, votes are not the only thing that determine advancement.

The second goal—obtaining office—has slightly different meanings in the literature on democ-

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<sup>2</sup>This assumption simplifies the decision calculus of regime candidates in two ways. For one, electoral defectors may run independently or join the opposition. For ease of exposition, we collapse these two into a single exit option. However, we return to this issue later and consider how relaxing this assumption affects our analysis. Our approach also focuses only on those who have decided to remain in regional electoral politics. But, of course, candidates may choose not to run again; they may seek appointed office or leave politics altogether. The former path is usually rare, since legislatures are one of the few ways that non-regime politicians can participate meaningfully in politics under autocracy. It is unlikely, for instance, that a defector could part ways with the regime and wind up with an appointment in the executive branch. Regime candidates might also choose to exit formal politics altogether. This is quite common, but it is also less challenging to the regime and, therefore, of less interest than electoral defections. An electoral challenge is brazen and threatening. Moreover the decision to leave politics altogether is analytically distinct from the decision to stay in politics and defect from the ruling party. In order to maintain a precise focus on electoral defections, we focus on those who remain in electoral politics, and effectively censor all other decisions. However, in the appendix, we present empirical tests that model a broader set of choices facing candidates.

racies. Since winning enough votes leads to elected office, office-seeking is often conflated with vote-seeking in some theoretical models (Aldrich and Bianco 1992; Laver and Benoit 2003). For other authors, however, office-seeking refers to the desire of politicians to achieve “power and prestige” within the chamber (Fenno 1973) or to “maximize control over political office benefits, that is, private goods bestowed on recipients of politically discretionary ... appointments” (Müller and Strøm 1999). These goals have clear analogues in autocracies. Candidates in autocracies want to win office in order to gain access to benefits such as prestige, access to patronage, and various corruption rents. Collectively, we call these benefits *spoils*.

The third candidate goal discussed in the literature on democracies is policy. Candidates have policy preferences and want to see their preferred policies enacted. This consideration is also relevant in autocracies, but given the diminished policy-making role of autocratic legislatures, it is probably secondary. Autocratic legislatures have limited influence over policy-making, since the executive branch usually sets policy direction. Spoil-seeking is probably a more salient motivation for most candidates.

To this list of candidate goals we might also add *autonomy*. Like entrepreneurs, many politicians want to be their own boss. Candidates desire the freedom to run campaigns as they see fit, vote how they want, and control their own clientelist networks. Freedom of maneuver and political flexibility are inherently valuable goods for candidates. Such considerations are no doubt also present in democracies, but they may be more relevant in autocracies, where the strictures of regime control can be especially tight. Autocracies demand conformity and allegiance from affiliated elites under fear that factions might undermine overall elite cohesion and lead to regime overthrow. They also exert sufficient control over state resources to reward compliance.

To summarize, we assume that ambitious regime candidates under autocracy seek spoils, career advancement, autonomy, and, to a lesser extent, policy. With these motivations in mind, consider a regime candidate approaching an election campaign. Affiliation with the regime often brings dependable access to government largesse and patronage. And since the regime controls access to state resources and most political offices, continued regime affiliation is helpful for both getting

elected and career advancement. And if the leader and/or ruling party is popular, affiliated candidates can ride those coattails in their own races. Regime affiliation also may offer the best chance for influencing lawmaking. Finally, repression must also be considered. Although most opposition candidates in electoral authoritarian regimes are not repressed, joining a rival party carries a greater risk of intimidation than remaining under the regime's umbrella.

Given these benefits it is clear why an ambitious politician might want to maintain regime affiliation. But there are also costs. For one thing, defecting to the opposition may lead to a status improvement for the candidate. By definition, ruling parties in autocracies are larger and contain prominent elites. A low-level regime official may be a small-fish in the pool of regime candidates, but a big fish in a smaller opposition party. And clearly, becoming an independent—if such an option is possible—provides the candidate with more autonomy. Regime affiliation may restrict a candidate's freedom of maneuver. Regime candidates may be forced to contravene their own beliefs, say things they do not believe, and support policies they do not actually support. At various times, the regime may also place limits on their rent-seeking or compel them to put their own political machines to work for the regime. Thus, membership in the ruling party may sometimes undermine a candidate's long term political goals. After all, what is good for the ruling party is not always good for an individual candidate. For example, if a candidate is forced to vote for a measure that is unpopular in her district, she may suffer at the polls for it. Or, a candidate may have to expend her personal resources—e.g. a business, political machine or personal wealth—on helping the regime win elections.

This simple framework leads to several propositions about how various factors affect these costs and benefits and, hence, the incentives of candidates to defect. First, we should expect more defections as the ability of the regime to provide electoral benefits—i.e. help candidates win elections—decreases. If the regime is on the brink of collapse, then defections will, of course, be widespread. But even when the regime is still firmly in power, candidates should be more likely to defect if they do not view affiliation as an electoral asset. This might happen if the administrative capacity of the state weakens, the popularity of the ruling party fades, or the popularity of the opposition grows.

*H1:* Defections should increase as the regime's electoral vulnerability increases.

Our framework also predicts that defections should increase as access—and uncertainty over access—to spoils declines. This could happen because of an external shock. An economic downturn might reduce the amount of corruption rents available. Alternatively, access to spoils might decline because of some political choice taken by the regime. [Arriola \(2009\)](#) finds that the size of the cabinet in African autocracies is positively correlated with regime longevity. He argues that regime leaders expand the size of their cabinets in order to co-opt key elites. Such an argument can be adapted to the study of elite defection. When the regime limits points of institutional access to spoils—perhaps by decreasing the size of the legislature or reducing the number of leadership posts in the bureaucracy—elites may have less incentive to stay with the regime. Conversely, when it increases points of access, candidates are more likely to see opportunities to win their desired share of the spoils.

*H2:* Defections should increase as institutional points of access to spoils decrease.

Defections also depend on the regime's spoil distribution strategy. In autocracies, most spoils are reserved for pro-regime elites, but recent literature has shown that the regime often shares some benefits with the opposition as well ([Gandhi 2008](#); [Reuter and Robertson 2015](#)). Autocrats do this in order to placate opposition groups, buy off their leadership, and reduce the threat of mass unrest. This leads to a tradeoff. The size of the pie is not infinite, so by distributing spoils to the opposition, the regime is depriving some insiders of those benefits. If ambitious regime cadres are snubbed in favor of outsiders, they may calculate that their future chances of receiving spoils from the regime are diminished. Furthermore, they may also conclude that joining the opposition will not result not in oppression, but rather in opportunities to access the same patronage they did as members of the ruling party.

*H3:* Defections should increase as the regime shares more spoils with regime outsiders.

Broadly speaking, the discussion above suggests that defections should increase when the

regime fails to offer sufficient spoils and career advancement opportunities. But elites also care about the credibility of those offers. Can they trust the regime to follow through on its promises to reward them for loyalty and service? Dictators have difficulty making credible commitments because they are (relatively) unconstrained. One of the main contributions of the neo-institutional literature on authoritarianism is to point out that dictators who solve these commitment problems will find it easier to keep elites loyal. One way of making these commitments credible is by setting up institutions with some modicum of independence that can regulate the spoil distribution process. Legislatures and dominant parties are the institutions most often discussed in the literature. When such institutions are weak, the leader is more unconstrained and more likely to act capriciously in the spoil distribution process. This should make defections more likely.

*H4:* There will be more defections where institutional constraints on the leader are fewer (i.e. in more personalist regimes).

The characteristics of candidates will also affect their propensity to defect. For one thing, candidates vary in the extent to which they are uncertain about future access to spoils and career advancement. One important factor is political rank. Those who have already worked their way up the political ladder to achieve high rank should be less likely to gamble on defection. They have already secured access to high office and spoils and therefore have less reason to start afresh outside the ruling party. Moreover, their high rank ensures that even during periods of regime vulnerability, their stature and access to patronage is not going to be in jeopardy. On the other hand, candidates lower on the ladder might be concerned about the regime's commitment to their own ambitions. They have a smaller investment in the regime and less to lose by casting their lot with the opposition.

*H5:* Candidates of high political rank will be less likely to defect.

Finally, candidates vary in the extent to which they can achieve their political goals without regime affiliation. Those candidates with their own political resources—such as personal followings, political machines, and economic assets—are better positioned to do this than those without

such resources. Such candidates will find it easier to win elections on their own. Moreover, they have more to offer the opposition and therefore can demand higher standing. Some candidates may be so strong in autonomous resources that they can use their resources as bargaining chips and extract spoils from the regime, even as independents. Thus, they may have the means to withdraw from the regime and continue pursuing their political ambitions.

*H6: Candidates with more autonomous resources will be more likely to defect.*

## **Research Design**

### **Data Description: Defections from United Russia**

Our primary goal is to identify the individual and region-level factors that determine when a politician decides to drop his or her electoral affiliation with a ruling autocratic party and run for office under another banner. We test these hypotheses using data on candidacies to regional legislative office in Russia during the period 1999-2016. Russia is a federal state containing 85 subnational units, colloquially called regions, each of which contains a directly elected legislature. Why should an analysis of elite defection behavior look at regional legislators? First, Russian regional legislatures contain a vivid cross section of the most important elites in a region. The most prominent figures in the region—directors of large industrial and agricultural enterprises, representatives of state corporations, and directors of major hospitals and research institutes—are all likely to be members of (or have representatives in) their region’s legislature. Indeed, regional legislatures are key fora of rent-seeking and spoil-sharing among the Russian regional elite

A second reason for examining Russian regional legislatures is practical. Given that our hypotheses make predictions about when elites leave the ruling party, we require an arena where data on partisan affiliations are available. While many members of executive branch carry partisan affiliations, information on those affiliations is not public and is difficult to gather. For legislative candidates, the matter is simplified by the fact that candidates register their partisan affiliation when

they run for office.

In order to understand the analyses below, it is necessary to provide a little background on Russian regional politics in this era. Our period of analysis begins at a time when United Russia was emerging as the dominant party in Russia. From 1999-early 2003, central authorities had little involvement in regional legislative politics. Between 2001 and 2003, only 1.7% of candidates were affiliated with United Russia, which received backing from President Putin but was only starting to expand and strengthen its position outside of Moscow. However, beginning in 2003, the federal center—and United Russia—significantly increased its role in regional politics. By the late 2000s, all of Russia’s regional legislatures had United Russia majorities and the vast majority had super majorities. This continues to be the case today. Between 2010 and 2016, 72% of all regional deputies were elected with a UR affiliation.

This research setting has a number of other advantages. The large number of regions in Russia provides a greater sample size than could be obtained by studying a national legislature. Moreover, since Russian regions vary on important political dimensions—including institutional configurations, levels of political competition, and the strength of United Russia’s regional branches—we are able to examine hypotheses about how regime-level factors affect defection. Indeed, a number of scholars have made the convincing case that Russian regions can be treated as sub-national political regimes (Lankina, Libman, and Obydenkova 2016; Petrov and Titkov 2013), a conceptual convention that is common in the study of other federations as well (Gibson 2005; Gervasoni 2010). At the same time, by looking at variation in defection rates within a single dominant party, we are able to hold constant some important factors, such as the ideology of the party and national political conditions.

Examining candidate defections from the ruling party first requires establishing the proper sample for analysis. We detail this process in Figure 1. We begin by collecting basic data on all candidates to regional legislative office registered with the Russian Central Election Commission at any point from 1999-2016. Over this period, 117,834 individuals participated in elections to 336 regional legislative convocations. We then proceed to narrow down our sample according to the

following criteria. First, to be included in the analysis, a candidate must have been affiliated with the ruling United Russia party during any regional election. Candidates on both the SMD and PR ballots indicate their party affiliation upon registration. From 1999-2016, 19,131 individuals ran on the UR slate, or 16.2% of all candidacies.<sup>3</sup> We exclude all other candidates, such as those running as members of opposition parties or as independents, since they never publicly established an association with the regime and are thus unable to have defected from it.

[Figure 1 Goes Here]

The second criteria to enter the sample is that regime-affiliated candidates face a choice about whether to remain with the ruling party or drop their affiliation. We operationalize this decision by requiring that each candidate that enters our sample run in two consecutive regional elections. In the first election of each sequence, all candidates must have affiliated with United Russia. In the second election, a candidate decides which party affiliation to adopt. Each electoral sequence is a unique observation and individual politicians can be members of multiple electoral sequences. As indicated in Figure 1, 4,313 candidates fall into this regime-affiliated “Repeat Runners” category. In other words, these are candidates who a) have run for office at least twice and b) ran with a UR affiliation in their first balloting. The vast majority retained their UR affiliation in subsequent campaigns, but some choose to drop the UR affiliation. These are our defectors. We code an individual as having defected from the ruling party if he or she ran on a different party ticket or as an independent in the second election in each sequence.<sup>4</sup>

As an illustration, consider the case of Aleksei Vereshagin. Vereshagin is long time deputy

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<sup>3</sup>This number may seem low, but this is because 1) opposition party lists contain a full slate of candidates even if few have a chance of winning and 2) almost all candidates for regional office were independents until 2003 when institutional reforms raised the profile of parties in regional elections and United Russia began campaigning in the regions (see Appendix)

<sup>4</sup>See Section B of the appendix for more information on the construction of this sample and its properties.

in the Arkhangelsk Region Council of Deputies. In our data, he has run for a seat four times—in 2000 as an independent; in 2004 from United Russia; in 2008 again from United Russia; and in 2013 as an independent. This career path contains two electoral sequences that would be included in our analysis: the 2004-2008 sequence and the 2008-2013 sequence. The 2000-2004 sequence is not included because Vereshagin ran as independent in 2000, so he could not, logically, defect from United Russia before the 2004 election. For the 2004-2008 sequence, Vereshagin affiliated with United Russia in the first election and remained with the party in the second. We code such a candidate as *not* having defected in 2008, since his affiliation did not change. For the 2008-2013 sequence, Vereshagin affiliated with UR in 2008, but then ran as an independent five years later. We code this as a defection from the regime in 2013.

Our data indicates that defections are neither common nor rare. Of the 4,313 eligible candidacies in our empirical sample, we find that 361 candidates defected from United Russia. This translates to roughly 1 in 13 United Russia candidates defecting, or a rate of 8.3%. Defections occurred in 77 of the 87 regions in our sample. Smolensk and Volgograd Region saw the highest number of defections at a rate of 29.7%, while regions such as Saratov, Rostov, and Kemerovo did not experience any defections over the period.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 2 plots the nationwide UR defection rate over time. From 2007-2011, the rate decreased by roughly 45%. This corresponds to a period when United Russia was consolidating its control over regional politics and when Putin's popularity was consistently high. Meanwhile, the marked increase in defections in 2012-2013 corresponds to the period when the regime's popularity was falling after the 2011-12 protests.<sup>6</sup> The regime's popularity was buoyed again in 2014 by the surge

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<sup>5</sup>Two autonomous okrugs had even higher rates of defection, Ust-Orda Buryat and Koryak Okrugs, but each had fewer legislative convocations over the period due to merges with larger regions. Appendix Table 3 presents a model that excludes autonomous okrugs from the sample and returns robust results.

<sup>6</sup>A number of pundits observed an uptick in regional defections during this period. See, for example, "Regional Elites See United Russia's Stock Falling," Moscow Times. August 26, 2013.

of patriotism that followed the annexation of Crimea. We observe that defections decreased during this period. Our micro-level data on defections therefore tracks with national trends.

[Figure 2 Goes Here]

Our coding scheme is quantitative and, as such, we cannot easily distinguish between cases when legislators left the ruling party voluntarily and cases when they were expelled. To address this, we collected press reports on the 361 ‘defections’ we identified in the data and coded them to determine if the candidate was expelled or defected voluntarily. We uncovered 22 potential expulsions, with an emphasis on *potential*, because, in some instances, UR cadres that want to leave the party will not make the first move and explicitly exit. Rather they will register with another party or criticize UR publicly. They will then be expelled. Still, the important takeaway is that the vast majority of our defections revealed in the data are likely real.<sup>7</sup> In the appendix, we show that our results are robust to the exclusion of these 22 potential expulsions. Even with these precautions, it is still possible that our sample is contaminated by undetected expulsions. Below we discuss how such contamination could bias specific results.

Electoral defections are problematic for United Russia.<sup>8</sup> In extreme cases, defectors might unseat an incumbent. This is rare, but one high profile instance occurred in 2012 in Yaroslavl, where former UR legislator Evgenii Urlashov won direct mayoral elections, defeating the governor’s favored candidate. In other instances, defections can peel away UR voters and weaken pro-regime

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“Aleksandr Kynev: Rushayetsya Traditziionniye Skhemy Politicheskogo Manipulirovaniya” Golos Analytic Report.

<sup>7</sup>It is also worth noting that the temporal distribution of defections shown in Table 2 is inconsistent with an expulsion story. While there is considerable anecdotal evidence pointing to an increase in defections during 2012-13, there is no evidence that a party purge was underway.

<sup>8</sup>Indeed, the problem of defections is often raised at party congresses, where regional leaders frequently request more tools to help them shore up party discipline. See, for example, “‘Edinaya Rossiya’ podelitsya rukovodyashchei rol’yu” *Kommersant* 4 October 2013.

candidates. In Irkutsk in 2013, Alexandr Bitarov, a former UR regional party secretary and vice chairman of the regional legislature, led a group of prominent UR members away from the party and became chairman of the local branch of the right-leaning party, Civic Platform.<sup>9</sup> Drawing on Bitarov's name recognition and financial resources—he was head of the region's largest construction firm—Civic Platform drew votes from United Russia and won 9% of the party list vote, an impressive showing for a new opposition party. United Russia ended up with only 42% of the party list vote, the second worst showing for the party among the 16 regions holding elections that year. Even though regional defections have not led to the breakdown of authoritarianism in Russia, we believe that they can teach important lessons about the foundations of elite cohesion in Russia.

To our knowledge, there exist no systematic studies of elite defections from United Russia.<sup>10</sup> However, specialists on Russian regional politics have devoted significant attention to intra-elite schisms (Lapina and Chirikova 2002). Little is known about why these conflicts arise, but most observers agree that elite conflict weakens the regime, in particular by damaging United Russia's vote share (Golosov 2011). Our research is also related to studies of party formation in Russia. Smyth (2006) analyzes how the characteristics of individual candidates affect their propensity to join parties in Russia and Reuter (2017) examines the factors that lead individual elites to join United Russia. Neither, however, analyzes defections.

## **Independent Variables**

We operationalize our hypotheses at both the regional and individual candidate levels. To test Hypothesis 1, we use two related indicators of regime electoral vulnerability. First, we measure United Russia's vote share on the PR ballot during the year of the first regional election in each candidate sequence. A decline in UR's regional vote share could be an indicator that the political machine of the regional government is weakening. Or it could indicate that the regime's is becoming less popular in the region, or that the opposition is becoming stronger. Whatever the cause, a falling

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<sup>9</sup>See “Aleksandr Bitarov vybral ‘Grazhdanskuyu Platformu’” *Baikalskie Vesti* 24 June 2013

<sup>10</sup>Hale and Colton (2017) study defections by individual voters, but not elites.

regime vote share may indicate that the regime is losing some of its ability to mete out electoral benefits.

Second, we treat economic performance as a measure of the regime's electoral vulnerability. Poor economic performance is an issue around which challengers might mobilize support, and the electoral viability of the opposition usually increases during economic crisis. We measure the rate of economic growth in the years immediately preceding the second election in each sequence (the year the candidate decides whether to remain with the ruling party). Economic data is taken from the Russian State Statistics Agency and is only available until 2015. We use two different measures: a one-year lag prior to the second election and a five-year moving average that improves data coverage.

We examine Hypothesis 2 with data on changes in the size of the legislature between the two elections in the sequence. An increase in the size of the legislature generates more access points for spoils and makes it more likely that candidates will be able to access spoils via United Russia. This should reduce elite incentives to defect. Conversely, when the number of seats in the legislature contracts, institutional points of access decrease, and this should increase incentives to defect.<sup>11</sup>

Formal responsibility for determining the size of the legislature falls on the legislators themselves, though governors play a major role and have been known to strong arm legislatures into passing reforms. Thirty-eight regional legislatures either expanded or contracted during the period under study. The reasons for these changes, discussed in the appendix, are varied but appear largely idiosyncratic.

To test Hypothesis 3 on spoil distribution, we use data on the allocation of legislative leadership positions during the convocation preceding the second election in the sequence. Legislative leadership offers special opportunities for legislators to push for desired legislation, secure perks

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<sup>11</sup>This logic assumes it is easier to gain access to the legislature on an opposition party list. The opposition in Russia faces a perennial dearth of prominent candidates. A disgruntled UR member would almost certainly find it much cheaper to buy a top spot on an opposition party list than it would be to buy similar spot on a United Russia list.

such as offices and staff, and direct pork to their constituencies. We calculate the percentage of speakerships, vice-speakerships, and committee chairmanships given to United Russia deputies in each regional convocation.

United Russia held a majority in almost all convocations during this period and has the right to keep all leadership positions for itself. Indeed it often does. However, the regime sometimes distributes leadership positions to opposition leaders in order to co-opt them and keep them from mobilizing their supporters in the streets (Reuter and Robertson 2015). The logic of our hypothesis suggests that there should be more defections when United Russia shares more leadership positions with the opposition. This signals to United Russia candidates that their chances of receiving future spoils through the party have decreased while their chances of receiving spoils as a member of the opposition have increased. There should be less defections when United Russia keeps a larger share of leadership positions for itself.

Hypothesis 4 suggest that defections should be more likely in personalist regimes. Russia's ethnic republics often have strong identity-based social networks that were institutionalized during the Soviet Union (Hale 2003). These networks survived into the post-Soviet period and provided ascendant regional leaders the opportunity to build powerful local machines. Leaders of ethnic republics used these machines to concentrate power in the executive branch and weaken other political institutions. Scholars note high degrees of personalism in Russia's ethnic republics (Sharafutdinova 2013). Indeed, many of Russia's well-known regional strongmen (e.g. Mintimer Shaimiev, Mur-taza Rakhimov, Ramzan Kadyrov) are heads of ethnic republics. Given the overweening power of leaders in these regions, the institutional independence of United Russia is usually weaker. Spoil distribution is less likely to be governed by rules and norms embedded within the ruling party and more likely to depend on the arbitrary will of the regional leader. We follow convention in the literature and use the percentage of non-Russians living in each region as an our indicator for ethnic republics.

At the individual level, we operationalize candidates of high political rank as those who have achieved elected office. Incumbents have already achieved one of their major political goals, so

should be less likely to defect. Second, we measure the candidates' rank on the party list component of the ballot. Those who are higher on the list should be less likely to defect because they are more assured of getting a seat on the UR list. Roughly half of regions allow parties to divide the party list into territorial groupings. Voters in regions with territorial groupings still cast a vote for a party, but votes are aggregated and seats allocated with each grouping. We first create a dummy variable ('Ran on Closed PR List') which takes a 1 if a PR candidate was placed on a common 'closed' list, and a 0 if there ran on a territorial grouping list. We also code an ordinal measure for all candidates on the 'closed' list to capture the rank ordering of each candidates within his or her party. Candidates lower on the 'closed' list have a lower likelihood of winning a seat.

Finally, we measure autonomous resources in three ways. All measures are taken from the year the candidate ran in the first election in the sequence. First, we include an indicator for whether the candidate has won election previously (prior to the first election in a sequence [described above]) *as an independent*. This would indicate that the candidate has the personal following and/or resources necessary to achieve elected office on his/her own. Such candidates have more to offer the opposition and are more likely to be able to be elected without regime support.<sup>12</sup>

Second, we create a series of indicators that tap a deputy's occupational autonomy from the regime. Deputies who work for the state owe their careers to regime leaders and, therefore, should be less willing to risk defection. By contrast, those who work in the private sector should be more willing to defect from the regime.

Finally, we also include indicators for whether a candidate has a background in business and for whether that business is in the private sector. Several studies show that businessperson candidates in Russia are less likely to join political parties because their businesses serve as "party substitutes" that provide many of the organizational resources necessary to win office (Hale 2007; Smyth 2006). Moreover, many businesses in Russia operate as political machines, with their managers mobilizing their employees to vote. This provides businessperson candidates with a ready-made base of voters.

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<sup>12</sup>Prior to 2003, the vast majority of regional deputies, including pro-Kremlin deputies, were independents. See Section A of the appendix for more.

In order to create these variables, we first classify candidates by the occupation listed on their election registration form. Our binary and mutually exclusive categories include Firm Director (upper-level management of a company), Government Employee (working for the executive branch at any level or for a budgetary institution), Private Sector Employee (skilled or unskilled workers), Social Organization Employee (working in NGOs, academia, the media, or trade associations), Political Party Employee (employed full time as an activist in United Russia), Professional Regional Legislator (legislative incumbent without other outside employment), and Unemployed (pensioner, student, etc.).

We also draw on recent work on businessperson candidates that matches regional legislators in Russia to official firm registries in order to uncover business ties (Szakonyi 2017).<sup>13</sup> We code two additional indicators based on the ownership of the firms that candidates were affiliated with: private versus state-owned. These final two variables capture both self-described businessperson candidates and the business connections of candidates who did not list their business affiliation. SPARK data is only available for candidates running from 2004 to 2011; the regressions that include these variables use the subset of candidacies occurring within that period.

We also include an indicator of the region's level of democracy, which we treat as a proxy for repression. Defections should be less likely in more repressive regimes. This data comes from (Petrov and Titkov 2013) and is commonly used in studies of Russian subnational politics.

Another important control is governor turnover. Russian regional politics are highly clientelistic, and governors are the patrons in these networks. When governors change, there is usually also high turnover among the broader elite. This turnover is particularly far-reaching when local governors—with ties to the region—are replaced with governors from outside the regime, who are (in)famous for breaking up local patron-client networks. Turnover is also high when governors from Moscow are replaced with regional insiders, who often reinstall local networks. Defections

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<sup>13</sup>The Professional Market and Company Analysis System (SPARK) aggregates official firm registration data from the government for all firms operating in Russia. Using this database, we identify management positions that candidates held at the time of election.

could be higher when governor type changes because such changes create uncertainty about future opportunities for political advancement. We include a variable equal to one for elections in which the governor has changed from being an insider to an outsider (or vice versa) in any of the years intervening since the starting election.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, we also include several other control variables, including candidate age, ballot structure (i.e. whether the candidate ran on the PR or SMD portion), gender, and the share of the vote received in the first election of the sequence (if they ran on the SMD portion).

[Table 1 Goes Here]

## Models and Results

To assess the determinants of defection, we use linear probability models (OLS).<sup>15</sup> The main outcome variable, defection, takes a value of 1 if a United Russia candidate defected in the second election of a given sequence, and 0 if they ran in the second election under the UR banner. Each observation is an electoral sequence, as described above.

[Table 2 Goes Here]

Before adding region-level covariates to the models, we first examine our hypotheses about the individual resources of elites. In Table 2, we present models focusing on the individual(candidate)-level determinants of defection. These models include both fixed effects for region and the year of the second election in the sequence. The latter fixed effects help capture immediate time-specific shocks across Russia that might influence a deputy's decision to run again with United Russia.

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<sup>14</sup>In the appendix, we also show a model that includes a simple control for whether the governor changed during this period.

<sup>15</sup>We uses LPMs instead of Logit models in order to avoid issues of separation that arise in models that include regional fixed effects and regional covariates that change slowly over time. Our results are robust to using logistic models for the same specifications; see Appendix Table 2.

Results are also robust to including fixed effects for the year of the first election (see Appendix Table 4).

The results reveal support for several of our candidate-level hypotheses. First, a candidate's political rank is negatively correlated with defection. Candidates who held regional elected office at the time of the second election in the sequence are less likely to defect. These incumbents found success affiliating with United Russia and are hesitant to break ranks for fear of jeopardizing their position in the party. We also find that candidates who ranked lower on the party list were more likely to defect. These candidates are more uncertain about their future in the party and have less to lose by defecting. And as Figure 3 indicates, this effect is quite large. While holding all other covariates at their means, a candidate ranked #1 on the party list has a predicted probability of defection of 7.1%. However, when a candidate is ranked near the bottom (#25), the probability of defection nearly doubles to 13.5%.

[Figure 3 Goes Here]

Next, we find that candidates with autonomous resources are more likely to defect from United Russia. Candidates that had previously won election as an independent in a single-member district are significantly more likely to leave the ruling party. The electoral resources they employed to win election in the past provide independence from the party that may be transferrable to future contests. This result suggests that even well-developed ruling parties such as United Russia are still vulnerable to defections from popular candidates.

The situation is similar with firm directors, who have financial and staffing resources that can aid their electoral independence. We see that the point estimates on self-described and officially registered (SPARK) management experience are both positive and statistically significant. What is interesting is that directors of state-owned enterprises do not enjoy such autonomy. The point estimate on this measure is no different than the reference category (all non-businesspeople such as government employees and professional legislators), and even possibly negative (with noise observed in the estimation). Private firm directors can claim a degree of independence from the state that gives them leeway to defect; SOE directors are more reliant on maintaining goodwill

with the government. Table A1 in the appendix helps illustrate the mechanism behind this finding. We see that the positive effect on defection of being a firm director is even more pronounced among those who run in SMD races; there is no effect for PR deputies. Firm directors are able to use their business resources to help them win candidate-centered, territorially-based elections on their own, but these resources are less helpful in region-wide races.

We also find that other types of employment help predict the probability of defection. Government employees are far less likely to defect than private businesspeople (the reference category in Column 4, Table 2). Defecting from the party could put a candidate's employment at risk. Likewise, candidates that were formally employed in the ruling party prior to the first election of the sequence are unsurprisingly much more loyal to that party down the road. Unemployed candidates (e.g. pensioners, students, or those just out of work), on the other hand, are more likely to change party affiliation. This could be because they are less worried about the professional consequences of defection, though the number of such individuals in the sample is quite small, and we hesitate to draw a strong conclusion. Finally, results on some of the individual-level control variables are also noteworthy, but we discuss them in Appendix Section D.

In Table 3, we add region-level predictors to test Hypotheses 1-4. We do not employ region fixed effects in these specifications because many of our region-level predictors are slow-moving, if not static, over the period. For example, of the 85 regions in the sample, 47 did not change the number of seats in their regional legislature. Instead in the main models, we cluster standard errors on region. As a robustness check in the appendix, we present models with region and year random effects.

[Table 3 Goes Here]

The results indicate support for our hypotheses about electoral benefits and spoil distribution. First, there is some evidence that defections are more likely when United Russia's party lists vote share in the region is lower, although this effect usually falls short of statistical significance. The higher the ruling party's vote share, the lower the chance of defections. The results on economic growth are stronger. In line with the existing literature, we find statistical evidence that higher

growth in the year prior to the second election in the sequence decreases the likelihood of a defection. Interestingly, the overall rate of growth between the two elections is less important, as shown with the point estimate on the five-year moving average of regional growth, Candidates appear to pay more attention to recent economic trends, rather than assessing the ruling party's longer term record of success.

We also find some support for Hypothesis 2. The negative coefficient on *Perc. Change in Seats* indicates that defections decrease (increase) as institutional points of access to spoils go up (down). This result is significant at either the .05 or .1 level in all models. Defections are more frequent in regions that decide to reduce the number of seats in their legislatures. In these settings, defecting politicians may calculate that in a smaller legislature, they stand a better chance of gaining a seat on an opposition party list or as an independent. Their electoral odds may improve by defecting and trying for a higher spot on party lists elsewhere, rather than risk missing the cut within a ruling party that has fewer seats to allocate.

The choice of spoil distribution strategy also figures prominently in the decision about whether to defect. We find that in regions where key leadership posts are shared with opposition parties, United Russia candidates are more likely to quit their party affiliation (Hypothesis 3). When the regime takes spoils away its own affiliates and gives them to the opposition, UR members understand their chances of receiving spoils through the ruling party have decreased, while the possibility of receiving spoils as members of the opposition have increased. The effect of this variable is quite large. As Figure 4 shows, the probability of a candidate defecting is 6.1% when United Russia keeps all leadership positions for itself. When United Russia shares 35% of leadership positions with the opposition, the predicted probability of defection jumps by two-thirds to over 10%.

[Figure 4 Goes Here]

One might object that this correlation is spurious, however, because the opposition's share of leadership positions is just a proxy for the strength of the opposition, and a strengthening opposition should lead to more defections. There are several reasons to be skeptical of this interpretation. First, there is no mechanical relationship between the opposition's share of leadership positions

and their vote share. UR controls majorities in all regions and decides whether/when to distribute leadership posts to the opposition. Second, regime change is not possible in the subnational context we study. So a strengthening opposition should only make defections more likely because it signals the electoral softening of the regime. And yet, we include a control for United Russia's regional vote share in all models. The results on *UR Leadership Share* come through even with the inclusion of this direct measure of opposition strength. Moreover, the estimate is also robust to the inclusion of economic performance measures which could serve as another proxy for the latent electoral strength of the opposition. Finally, in Appendix Table 3, we show that results on this variable are robust while controlling for the number of protests staged by the opposition in the region—in particular the Communist Party and non-system opposition groups—which is a non-electoral measure of the opposition's level of mobilization. In sum, we feel reasonably confident that the partial effect of *UR Leadership Share* is tapping spoil distribution and not the underlying strength of the opposition.

More personalist regimes see greater rates of defections from the ruling party, although the statistical significance of this result is sensitive to model specification. Regions with larger non-Russian populations (i.e. ethnic republics) experience more defections. The lack of institutional constraints on executives in ethnic republics exacerbate commitment problems and make the promise of future spoil-sharing more uncertain. Where the ruling party is more institutionalized, elites can trust that their career advancement and access to spoils will be dictated by formal procedures. Finally, we find that defections are higher when the governor changes type (from insider to outsider or vice versa). In the appendix, we find that a simple dummy for governor turnover is positively associated with defection, but is not statistically significant.

Above we treat defection as a binary choice: stay with UR or leave and run with another affiliation. But defecting candidates actually face multiple choices: they may choose to run as an independent or they may choose to join the opposition. In Appendix Table 5, we estimate a multinomial logit model, in which the categorical outcome is equal to 0 for non-defections, 1 for defections to the opposition, and 2 for defections to run as an independent. The results are

consistent across the two types of defections, but some differences are worth highlighting. For one, *UR Leadership Share* does a much better job predicting defections to the opposition than it does predicting defections to run as an independent. When the regime shares more spoils with the opposition, cadres calculate that they might do better by defecting to those parties. Independents are less able to demand these spoils because they are not affiliated with social groupings that can credibly threaten unrest. *UR Regional Vote* and *Growth (1-year Lag)* also have more impact on defections to the opposition. This suggests that when candidates defect because the ruling party's fortunes are fading, they seek join another party that might capitalize on regime weakness. Finally, firm directors are more likely to become independents, since they can draw on their economic resources to maintain autonomy.

In closing this section, we return to the problem of expulsions discussed above. We have taken measures to ensure that our dependent variable is not contaminated by a significant number of expulsions. Still, some expulsions have likely gone undetected in our coding. For most variables, however, the inclusion of involuntary expulsions in our set of defections should bias us *against* finding significant results. It is hard to see how most of our independent variables could plausibly be associated with higher rates of expulsion. Indeed, our theory suggests that some of our variables—such as those that measure the autonomous resources of candidates—should be negatively correlated with expulsions. It is not clear why the regime would seek to drive away those with more to offer from an electoral standpoint. For other variables—such as *UR Leadership Share*, *Growth*, and *UR Regional Vote*—it is hard to envision a theoretical story that could link them to expulsions. Thus, the presence of expulsions in our data should decrease the efficiency of our estimates. For two of our variables, however, one could draw a link with expulsions. For instance, higher ranked candidates might be less likely to be expelled. It is also possible that expulsions could be more common in ethnic republics, which tend not only to be more personalist, but also more repressive. So special care must be taken in interpreting these results.

## Conclusion

When do elite coalitions organized under the aegis of a dominant party breakdown? This is the overarching question that has guided our analysis. Of course, we are not analyzing a case of regime breakdown. Rather, like seismologists, who study not just earthquakes but also the vibrations that constantly reverberate through the Earth's crust, we study the strains and disruptions that occur beneath the surface in Russia's ruling party. And just as seismologists cannot predict the exact location of an earthquake, we cannot predict the exact date of regime breakdown in Russia or any other autocracy. Seismologists do, however, predict seismic hazard and can tell us where and when earthquakes are more likely to occur. Ours is a similar task. By studying trends and tendencies at the regional level in Russia, we hope to gain insight into the conditions that make autocratic elite coalitions more likely to collapse.

We developed a simple cost-benefit framework to explain electoral defections in Russia's regions. Defections were more likely when opportunities for accessing spoils, career advancement, and electoral benefits were jeopardized in some way. For instance, we found that defections increased when the regime reduced opportunities to access spoils by reducing the size of the legislature. Defections also increased when United Russia shared more spoils with the opposition in order to co-opt them. But it is not just the raw amount of spoils that matters. Defections were more likely to occur in personalist regimes (ethnic republics) where the lack of institutional constraints on the regional leader increases uncertainty about how those spoils will be distributed in the future. Finally, the individual characteristics of candidates matter. Those who have already achieved high political rank—e.g. those who have already achieved elected office or a top spot on the party list—were less likely to defect. More interestingly, those candidates with political resources of their own, such as personal followings and business assets, were more likely to defect.

Our findings suggest several amendments to the current literature on authoritarianism. For one, more attention should be paid to the tradeoffs between various authoritarian survival strategies. The tradeoff between personal control and elite dissension is well-understood, but other tradeoffs are less appreciated. The literature almost unanimously argues that rational autocrats should co-opt

the opposition and take measures to keep elites loyal. But spoils are not infinite, and by co-opting the opposition, the regime risks depriving insiders of spoils and leaving them disgruntled. Thus, a rising opposition leads not just to external pressure on the regime, but also to the collapse of elite coalitions from within. Conversely, leaders may not be able to satisfy all regime insiders without limiting the spoils available to co-opt the opposition. Thus, maintaining strong regime institutions can actually undermine the ability of the regime to fend off threats from the opposition. We have exposed this tension in this paper, but we have not provided a solution to it. Future research might profit in this area.

A similar tradeoff confronts the regime in the area of elite recruitment. As [Egorov and Sonin \(2011\)](#) have argued, rational dictators face competing appointment incentives. Competent viziers are desired for their ability to help govern, but they are also more likely than loyal cronies to betray the dictator. We have identified a similar tradeoff in electoral politics. The regime would like to draw on the resources of strong elites to help them win elections, but resourceful elites are the most likely to abandon the regime when the chips are down. The exit of prominent elites may signal regime weakness and trigger a wider cascade. Regimes may be better off undermining and/or expropriating powerful elites within society, lest they betray the coalition later.

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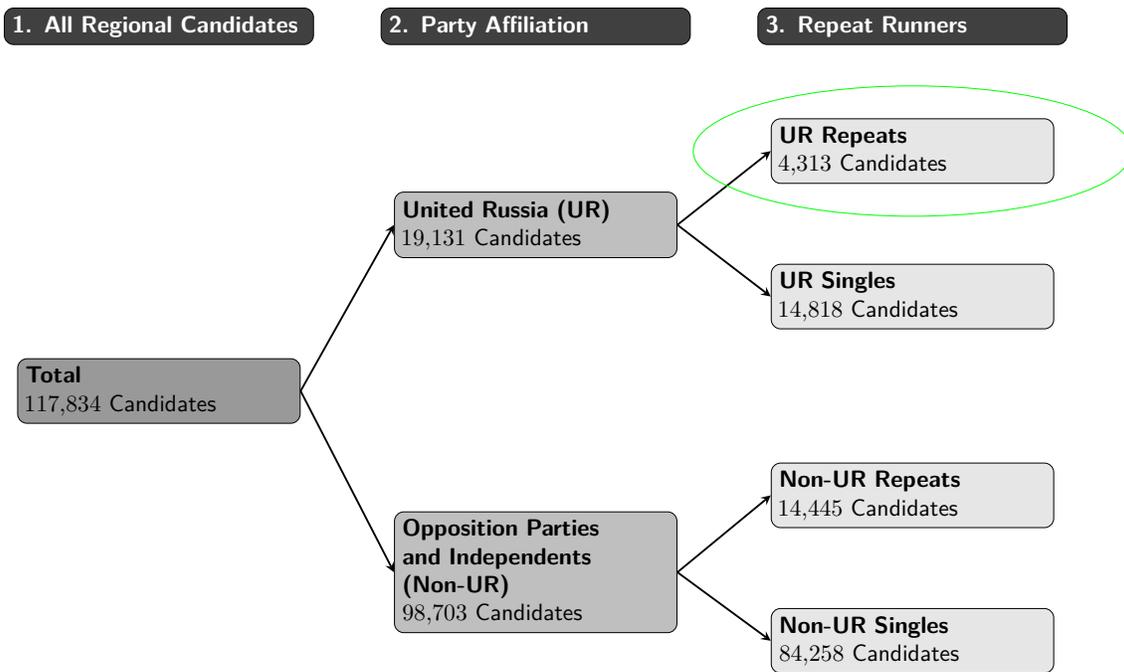
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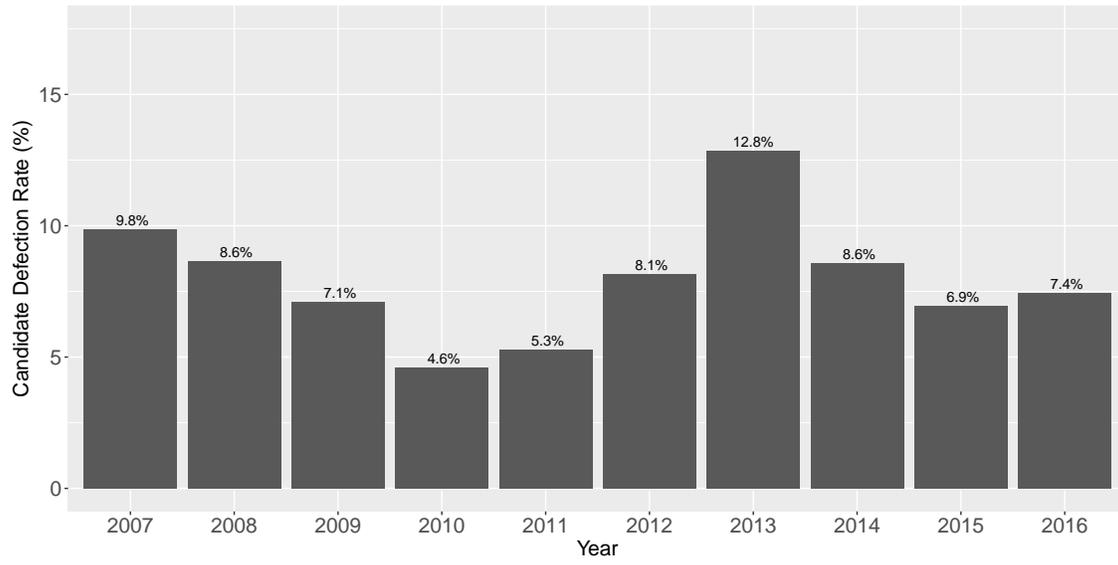
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**FIGURE 1: SAMPLE CREATION**



**FIGURE 2: DEFECTION RATE BY YEAR**



**TABLE 1: SUMMARY STATISTICS**

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Defected	4,313	0.08	0.27	0	1
Male	4,313	0.86	0.35	0	1
Age	4,313	48.98	9.13	21	79
Firm Director (self-described)	4,313	0.41	0.49	0	1
Private Firm Director (with SPARK data)	3,977	0.45	0.50	0	1
SOE Director (with SPARK data)	3,977	0.10	0.30	0	1
Government Employee	4,312	0.25	0.43	0	1
Private Sector Employee	4,312	0.02	0.15	0	1
Social Organization Employee	4,312	0.09	0.29	0	1
Political Party Employee	4,312	0.01	0.12	0	1
Professional Regional Legislator	4,312	0.02	0.12	0	1
Unemployed	4,312	0.16	0.37	0	1
Ran on SMD Ballot	4,313	0.46	0.50	0	1
Ran on PR Ballot	4,313	0.46	0.50	0	1
Ran on Both Ballots	4,313	0.08	0.26	0	1
Won Election	4,313	0.74	0.44	0	1
Vote Share (SMD)	1,961	0.50	0.18	0.01	0.99
Ran on Closed PR List	4,313	0.26	0.44	0	1
Low Ranked on Closed PR List	4,208	3.23	8.23	0	104
Resigned Seat	4,058	0.02	0.15	0	1
Refused Mandate	4,058	0.04	0.20	0	1
Next Election - Ran on SMD	4,313	0.47	0.50	0	1
Next Election - Ran on PR	4,313	0.59	0.49	0	1
Next Election - Won Seat	4,313	0.66	0.47	0	1
Ran in Previous Six Years	4,313	0.47	0.50	0	1
Ran as Independent Previously	4,313	0.22	0.41	0	1
UR Regional Vote Share	4,213	0.50	0.16	0.18	0.91
Percentage Change in Legislative Seats	4,254	0.02	0.16	-0.45	0.79
UR Leadership Share	3,911	0.86	0.16	0.10	1
Growth (t-1)	4,313	102.70	5.18	82.50	126.40
Percent Non-Russian	4,313	0.26	0.25	0.03	0.99
Democracy Score	4,299	30.45	6.34	16	44
Change in Governor Type	4,313	0.25	0.43	0	1

**TABLE 2: INDIVIDUAL DETERMINANTS OF DEFECTION**

	Dependent Variable: Defected (0/1)			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Male	0.010 (0.011)	0.013 (0.013)	0.014 (0.012)	0.011 (0.011)
Age (log)	-0.030 (0.024)	-0.024 (0.023)	-0.025 (0.025)	-0.043* (0.026)
Ran on SMD Ballot	0.045*** (0.011)	0.046*** (0.009)	0.115*** (0.027)	0.101*** (0.028)
Currently in Office	-0.083*** (0.014)	-0.090*** (0.014)	-0.083*** (0.015)	
Firm Director (self-described)	0.019* (0.010)			
Private Firm Director (with SPARK data)		0.019* (0.011)	0.020* (0.012)	
SOE Director (with SPARK data)		-0.014 (0.015)	-0.009 (0.016)	
SMD Vote Share			-0.138*** (0.045)	-0.175*** (0.046)
Ran on Closed PR List			-0.018 (0.013)	-0.036*** (0.013)
Low Ranked on Closed PR List			0.003** (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)
Won Seat as Independent Previously			0.029** (0.013)	0.026** (0.012)
Government Employee				-0.026** (0.011)
Private Sector Employee				-0.039 (0.029)
Social Organization Employee				-0.005 (0.017)
Political Party Employee				-0.063*** (0.022)
Professional Regional Legislator				-0.012 (0.014)
Unemployed				0.107* (0.060)
Repeat Election Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Region Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	4,313	3,977	3,871	4,184

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1 This table examines individual-level covariates, pooling the PR and SMD candidates. Firm Director (self-described) is a dummy for whether the candidates indicated they were part of a private firm's upper management; Private Firm Director and SOE Director add further information from the SPARK database. The reference category for the three firm-related variables is all other non-businessperson candidates. Likewise the reference category for the occupation dummies is all businesspeople. All models use OLS with repeat election year and region fixed effects and cluster standard errors on region.

**TABLE 3: REGIONAL DETERMINANTS OF DEFECTION**

	Dependent Variable: Defected (0/1)					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Male	0.013 (0.011)	0.014 (0.011)	0.012 (0.011)	0.013 (0.012)	0.015 (0.012)	0.012 (0.012)
Age (log)	-0.047* (0.026)	-0.039 (0.025)	-0.048* (0.025)	-0.049* (0.026)	-0.042 (0.026)	-0.050* (0.026)
Firm Director (self-described)	0.022** (0.010)	0.023** (0.010)	0.024** (0.010)			
Private Firm Director (with SPARK data)				0.017 (0.012)	0.019 (0.012)	0.018 (0.012)
SOE Director (with SPARK data)				-0.014 (0.016)	-0.008 (0.016)	-0.013 (0.016)
Ran on SMD Ballot	0.041*** (0.009)	0.113*** (0.027)	0.041*** (0.009)	0.044*** (0.009)	0.107*** (0.026)	0.045*** (0.009)
Won Seat as Independent Previously	0.043*** (0.012)	0.042*** (0.012)	0.043*** (0.012)	0.042*** (0.013)	0.042*** (0.012)	0.042*** (0.013)
Currently in Office	-0.097*** (0.014)	-0.086*** (0.013)	-0.099*** (0.014)	-0.098*** (0.014)	-0.088*** (0.014)	-0.100*** (0.014)
UR Regional Vote	-0.057 (0.042)	-0.022 (0.044)	-0.079* (0.043)	-0.067 (0.042)	-0.034 (0.042)	-0.090** (0.042)
Perc. Change in Seats	-0.059** (0.029)	-0.053* (0.032)	-0.054* (0.029)	-0.061** (0.030)	-0.058* (0.033)	-0.057* (0.030)
UR Leadership Share	-0.110*** (0.033)	-0.106*** (0.033)	-0.102*** (0.037)	-0.093*** (0.035)	-0.090** (0.035)	-0.084** (0.038)
Growth (1-year Lag)	-0.004** (0.002)	-0.003** (0.002)		-0.003** (0.001)	-0.003* (0.002)	
Growth (5-year Moving Average)			0.129 (0.245)			0.265 (0.235)
Percentage Non-Russian	0.050** (0.025)	0.034 (0.025)	0.057** (0.026)	0.050** (0.025)	0.034 (0.024)	0.054** (0.025)
Democracy Score	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Change in Governor Type	0.024** (0.011)	0.024** (0.011)	0.028** (0.011)	0.026** (0.011)	0.027** (0.011)	0.031*** (0.011)
SMD Vote Share		-0.146*** (0.046)			-0.129*** (0.043)	
Ran on Closed PR List		-0.016 (0.013)			-0.018 (0.013)	
Low Ranked on Closed PR List		0.001 (0.001)			0.001 (0.001)	
Repeat Election Year Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,870	3,760	3,870	3,731	3,629	3,731

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$  This table examines both individual- and region-level covariates, pooling the PR and SMD candidates. The reference category for the three firm director variables is all non-businessperson candidates. All models use OLS with repeat election year fixed effects and cluster standard errors on region.

**FIGURE 3: INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL SUBSTANTIVE EFFECTS**

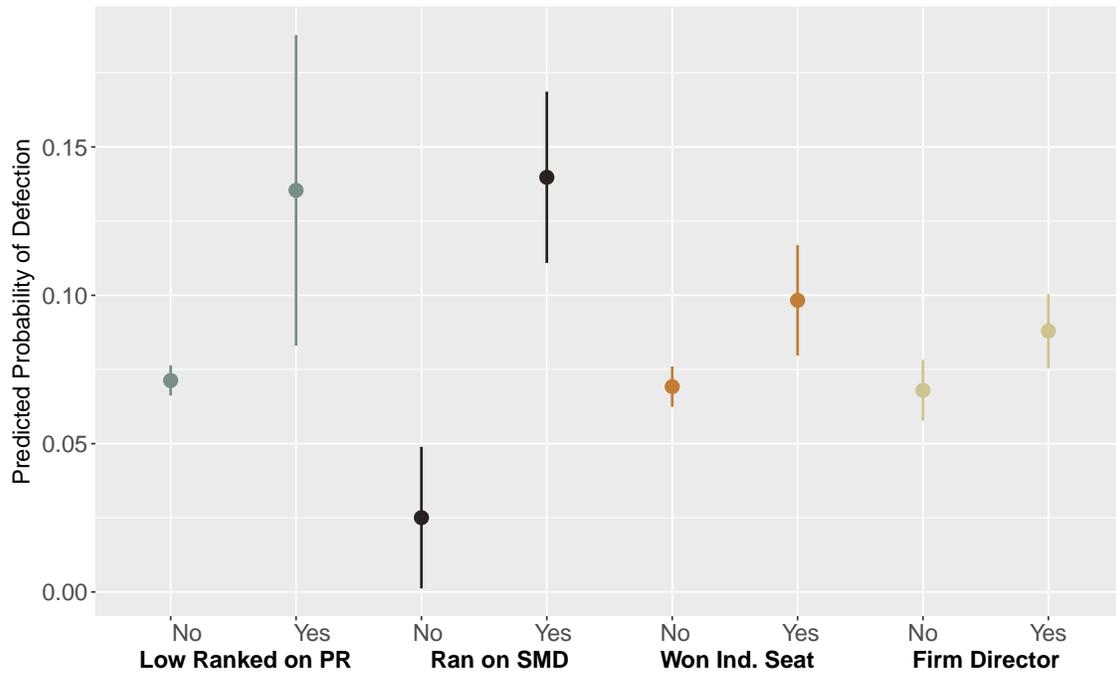


Figure 3 presents the predicted probability of defection based on different values of the predictors shown in bold. The model used to generate the probabilities comes from column 3, Table 2. The Yes category for the variable Low Ranked on PR indicates that the candidate was ranked #25, while the No category indicates a rank of #1 on the same list. All other predictors are held at their means.

**FIGURE 4: REGIONAL-LEVEL SUBSTANTIVE EFFECTS**

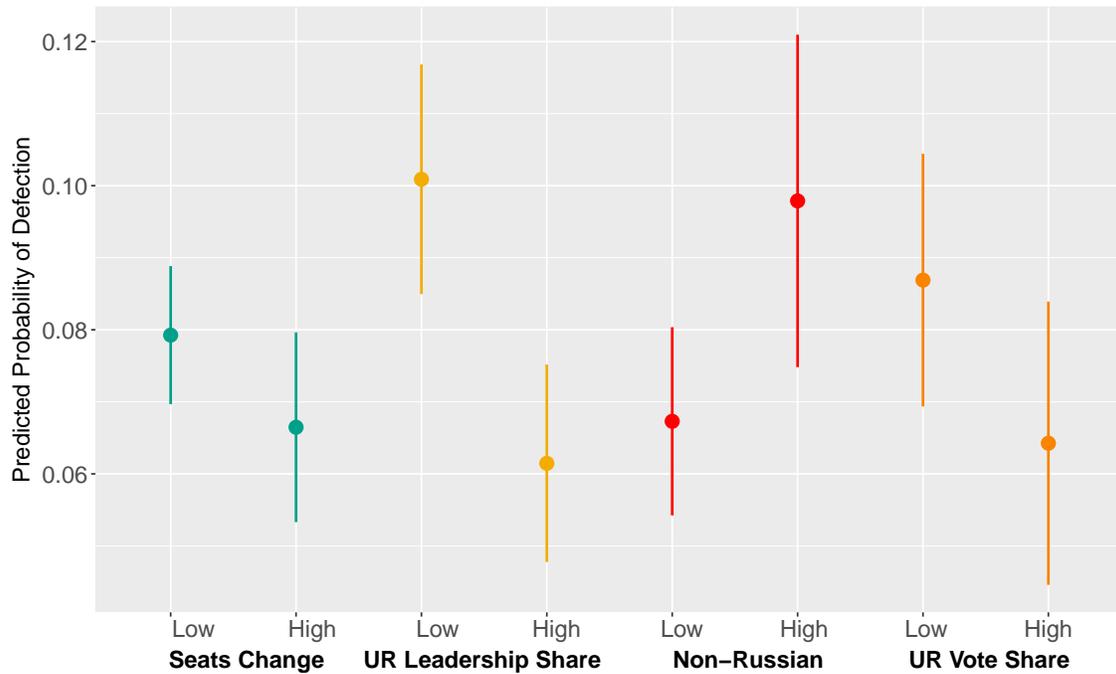


Figure 4 presents the predicted probability of defection based on different values of the predictors shown in bold. The model used to generate the probabilities comes from column 1, Table 3. The High level for the variable Seats Change indicates that the regional legislature increased by 19% (the 90th percentile) while the Low category indicates a decrease of 2.8% (the 10th percentile). A High level for the UR Leadership Share variable indicates that no positions were shared with the opposition (100%, 90th percentile), while the Low level indicates that 64% of positions were given to UR deputies (10th percentile). The Non-Russian categories match to values of 4.9% non-Russian (Low, 10th percentile) and 66.4% (High, 90th percentile). Similarly, the UR vote share categories match to values of 32.5% (Low, 10th percentile) and 71.8% (High, 90th percentile). All other predictors are held at their means.