

What Does Winning Mean in 2003?

A Candidate Centered Analysis of Upcoming Parliamentary Elections

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In 1993, 1995, and 1999, analysts and politicians in both Russia and the United States made bold predictions about the outcomes of each national parliamentary election. Their predictions, based largely on the analyses of party organizations, were consistently off the mark, both in terms of outcomes and the impact of those outcomes on the political process. Volatility in both the parties that actually made it onto the ballot and in voters' responses to those choices made it very hard to impute future outcomes from past competitions. Moreover, the role of charismatic appeals and personal vote connections make it extremely difficult to extrapolate outcomes from one level of elections (for example, regional elections) to another (national parliamentary elections).

Predicting electoral outcomes in Russia and in other transitional states without stable party structures demands a better model of electoral behavior, given political uncertainty—a model based on individual candidate strategies. Applied to Russia, such a model might provide a better understanding of the processes that produce each set of electoral surprises and the factors that underpin the president's recent success in pushing his legislative program through Parliament.

Focus on Candidates, not on Parties

The 1993 election law made the proliferation of political parties inevitable. Parties were appointed gatekeepers of half of the seats in Parliament. Parties quickly formed, recruited candidates, formulated platforms, and mounted campaigns. The parties quickly took center stage in models of electoral behavior partly because of the emphasis on parties in comparative political analysis and also, because of the protracted battle between old and new regimes embodied in Russia's party system. Analysts heralded the mere existence of parties as a precursor to successful consolidation. The party balance was considered a signal of the new regime's health.

These interpretations of elections hold only if parties function as consistent organizers of competition and coordinate candidate and voter actions. Survey data of candidates in nine regions demonstrates that parties do not structure Russian electoral competition—candidates do. These results paint a dismal picture of the role that Russian parties play in shaping voters' choices. In general, party organizations are bystanders as candidates decide where and how to run for office, and what factors to emphasize in their campaign.

Rather than operating to shape the set of candidates who run under the party banner, placing candidates in nominal districts and constructing a party list, party leaders appear to take what they can get as candidates pursue their individual interests.

Candidate behaviors provide an alternative path toward understanding and predicting electoral and policy outcomes. Replacing a party focus with a candidate focus underscores the importance of nominal or district-based races for electoral and policy outcomes. Although most often a footnote in electoral analyses, these deputies, including many independents, increasingly support the president's legislative agenda in a quid pro quo, based on pork-barrel politics. This potential pool of support dramatically alters the legislative math that adds up to a pro-executive coalition in Parliament, dramatically altering the role that parties play in the policy process.

Candidate Strategies, Party Development, Competition

Perhaps the greatest enigma of Russian elections is that there are so many candidates competing for each seat. Candidates' decisions to compete, despite the great odds, signal a lack of party monopoly over competition. In fact, candidate survey data indicate that there is very little partisan activity in the recruitment stage of the elections. This observation about parties is clear in the large number of candidates who run independent of party affiliation. Importantly, many independents do hold strong policy goals, suggesting that they do not see parties as essential to securing these policies.

By and large, candidates with strong political ambition or access to alternative campaign resources do not join parties. Quality candidates who joined parties in 1999 tended toward the ephemeral centrist organizations affiliated with the state—Our Home consists of Russia, Fatherland All Russia, and Unity. It was a good guess that these organizations would provide significant material resources to run campaigns without imparting a strong reputation or imposing party discipline on the future. In contrast, the Communist Party (KPRF) does attract candidates with career ambitions and strong anti-reform policy goals, but these candidates have few resources other than those they draw from past electoral campaigns and positions in the old regime.

Furthermore, candidates who do join parties often choose strategies that maximize their independence within the organization. Although independent candidates can only run in nominal districts, partisan candidates can run on the party list, in a district, or both. If they choose the last strategy, they must run in the district with the partisan label next to their name on the ballot. The survey evidence shows that candidates who possess alternative resources and/or career goals most often opt to run only in a district where they can use party resources while retaining their distance from the party's reputation. Likewise, such candidates are more likely to present campaign messages based on leadership qualities, individual expertise, or past successes than on the party platform.

What Do Candidate Strategies Tell Us about the 2003 Elections?

Viewed through the lens of a candidate, what can we learn about future outcomes? First, we can better assess the resources that different party organizations will bring to the contest and assess their vulnerability. Second, we can pinpoint the factors that are likely

to produce new challenges to existing parties. Third, we can explain recent attempts to change the political structure and assess their impact on key party organizations.

Much has already been written about the threat posed by the KPRF to United Russia and the president's dominance of the legislature. Candidate-centered analysis suggests that this argument is overstated, despite the KPRF's high poll ratings. Although it is true that the KPRF is the only party that serves as a focal point for candidates and voters, the KPRF brand-name label has been consistently too far left to win national elections. As such, candidates and activists affiliated with the party may find it difficult to move to more centrist positions if the party splinters or moves to occupy the center-left position. Chronic partisan infighting appears even more likely and more serious as the Kremlin-led coalition relegates the KPRF to observer status in the Duma, stripping it of important committee positions and organizational capacity. The impact of these moves further weakens the KPRF brand by weakening the capacity of the party to fulfill campaign promises or to sustain its success in reelecting incumbent deputies. As such, the chief assets the party offers its candidates—its label and activist corps—are damaged.

United Russia has not been unscathed since its strong showing in 1999. The merger with its rival, Fatherland-All Russia, blurred any meaning conveyed by its label. To the extent that the party stands for anything, it stands behind the president's legislative agenda. If it is going to accomplish anything through the legislature, it relies almost totally on the president's coalition incorporating independents. This reliance on the state is not only grounded in its reputation-based resources. United Russia's organizational structure and the material resources it can offer potential candidates are deeply embedded in state structures. The party does not exist independent of the Kremlin and is more reliant on Putin the longer he refuses to lead it. This dynamic generates incentives for the president to remain independent until after the election cycle.

United Russia is different from its predecessors, Russia's Choice and Our Home (NDR). It is moderate and has a successful legislative track record based on support of the president's agenda. As such, the organization is well positioned in terms of political space to attract right, centrist, and even center-left voters. Despite low poll ratings, these factors should build voter support for the party as the election draws near and the opposition is clearly defined. There is already a great deal of elite-level support for the president and the party in the Duma, and there is no reason to believe that as ballot choices wane, this support will not extend to voters.

Yet, the linkages between this party and voters remain very tenuous. United Russia incumbents are concentrated in the proportional list side of the race. As such, they are vulnerable to protest votes or referenda on government action. Given party organization volatility, a limited threat of a new Unity, a dark-horse organization, remains.

United Russia does not need to win the election in order for the Kremlin to win. This observation is critical because the Kremlin may not be ready for a national party organization that could turn and oppose it in the future. To maintain control over the Duma, Putin needs the consistent support of approximately half of the deputies elected on party lists, together with the support of independents elected in nominal districts. As the candidate analysis shows, the success of the governing party can be secured if the state stamps out alternative sources of campaign resources. These efforts go well beyond the

changes to the law on political parties, proposed increases in the electoral threshold, and media influence. They extend to efforts to neutralize regional governors, including attempts to appoint and remove these officials. Although economic interests remain a threat, under new regulations the economic interests will find it difficult to find a national vehicle to challenge the governing party or the president. On a regional level, economic interests are likely to produce independent candidates who support Putin's agenda and pose no real threat to the president. The most likely end result will be a legislature that is even less capable of challenging the executive than the sitting Duma.

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