The Institutional Impact on Voter Turnout: The Case of Russia and its Regions (2011–2016)

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Abstract

This study investigates the institutional influence on Russia's regional voter turnout and establishes differences between federal and regional voter participation. Given the regional turnout in the 2011–2016 national and regional elections, the authors test the hypothesis that Russia's turnout largely hinges on institutional rather than socio-economic factors. For a deeper analysis of electoral behavior, the researchers consider a range of institutional aspects applicable to the country's regional peculiarities. Such an empirical approach demonstrates that different types of elections are conditioned by different indicators and metrics. Consequently, the analysis proves the relevance of institutional factors to voter turnout.

Keywords

electoral behavior – voter turnout – Russian regions – institutional impact

Introduction[1]

Voter turnout, an important determinant of electoral statistics, remains a poorly examined subject in Russia. Although many scholars have considered electoral

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behavior, political science lacks a comprehensive approach to those factors, including institutional, socio-economic, and socio-cultural ones, which significantly affect electoral participation. In other words, various methodological schools differently address the complexity of voter turnout. This article aims to identify what exerts a profound effect on Russia's electoral behavior on a regional scale. We assume that voter turnout primarily depends on institutional mechanisms. For verification purposes, we performed a comparative analysis of the voter turnout in the 2011–2016 national and regional elections.

The 2016 parliamentary elections were marked by the lowest turnout in the history of Russia's modern national ballot. The problem of low turnout can be solved by a number of institutional mechanisms such as proportional representation, concurrent and infrequent elections, weekend instead of weekday voting, and compulsory voting.[2] However, such universal tools may not always offer an effective remedy for lower voting rates. The differentiation of electoral activities raises the issue of stay-at-home voters in low-turnout regions and of flawed involuntary voter mobilization in high-turnout regions. With electoral problems long in play, studies on regional characteristics of Russia's voter turnout remain fragmented, thus requiring fundamental reconsideration.

Theoretical Background of Voter Turnout

The theoretical literature on turnout shows that there is no single explanatory factor for variations in citizen participation. A number of research papers have focused on the impact of electoral systems on turnout,[3] decentralization,[4] or motivations for voting or non-voting/abstention.[5] Powell views electoral participation as a principal ingredient for democratic performance.[6] Other scholars have focused on institutional and socio-economic variables. Some studies

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2 Arend Lijphart, "The Problem of Low and Unequal Voter Turnout – and What We Can Do About It", *Reihe Politikwissenschaft / Political Science Series*, no. 54 (1998).

3 André Blais and Roland K. Carty, "Does Proportional Representation Foster Voter Turnout?", *European Journal of Political Research* 18, no. 2 (1990).

4 André Blais, Eva Anduiza and Aina Gallego, "Decentralization and voter turnout", *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 29 (2011).

5 André Blais, Jean-Benoit Pilet, Karine Van der Straeten, Jean-François Laslier, Maxime Heroux-Legault, "To Vote or To Abstain? An Experimental Study of Rational and Normative Considerations Under First Past the Post and PR Elections", *Electoral Studies* 36 (2014).

6 Bingham G. Powell, *Contemporary Democracies: Participation, Stability, and Violence* (Harvard University Press, 1982).

argue that high-affluence and politically mature societies are conducive to increased turnout whilst others argue that institutions have the strongest effect on voting participation. Voting is systematically governed by laws and institutional arrangements that vary markedly from nation to nation.[7] Lijphart argues that the institutional mechanisms are of particular importance because they are more amenable to political engineering than the other factors.[8]

One notable contribution to our understanding of voter turnout was provided by the American political scientists, Powell and Jackman. For instance, Jackman looks at mean turnout in 19 countries in the 1970s, and distinguishes five institutional variables affecting turnout, namely nationally competitive districts, electoral disproportionality, multipartyism, unicameralism, and compulsory voting. In order to analyze Russia's voter turnout, we try to adjust the methodology to fit the country's context.

Jackman believes that high *electoral disproportionality* favors the ruling party, as small parties have to make persistent efforts to gain seats in parliament. High disproportionality, therefore, demotivates sympathizers of small parties from going to polls. Since United Russia has a majority in both the State Duma and virtually all regional assemblies, a high degree of electoral disproportionality is typical of the country's political processes. Hence, this single-party majority rule can discourage those who support smaller and opposition parties from casting their ballots.

Many scholars deem *electoral systems* a salient institutional factor. However, theoretical works fail to clarify which electoral system – proportional, plural or mixed one – boosts turnout. Jackman confirms that higher turnout will be a product of the electoral system capable of convincing voters that their voice really matters, which is deeply significant for the protest electorate. The main reasons why turnout is expected to be higher under a proportional representation system are the large disproportion between votes and seats in a plural system.[9]

Several scholars attach particular importance to *the level of political competition in elections*. Franklin's central argument, which is consistent with the dominant view in the field, is that the degree of electoral competition is the crucial determinant of turnout.[10] Higher levels of participation require greater political competition. It secures an equal relationship between the seats won

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7   Ibid.
8   Lijphart, "The Problem of Low and Unequal Voter Turnout."
9   Ibid.
10   Mark Franklin, *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004).

by a party and the votes gained in the election, which, therefore, offers incentives for small parties to mobilize their electorate.

In addition, we should examine *the spatial patterns of voting* and differences between national and regional voter turnout. On a regional scale, electoral activities are heavily dependent on both the spatial patterns of voting and political institutions. In their turn, federal elections tend to see higher voter turnout. At the same time, people turn out in smaller numbers for State Duma polls than for presidential polls, which is accounted for by the recognition of the latter as "first-order elections."[11] Likewise, gubernatorial turnout is generally higher than turnout in elections to legislative assemblies. However, it is definitely lower than federal voter turnout, which is presumably explained by highly personalized electoral politics, a byproduct of institutional adjustments. For instance, the candidate lists must be divided into one central section and one section listing groups of regional candidates.[12] In this context, Panov and Ross point to weak federalism ascribing a secondary role to Russia's entities.[13]

At the same time, *concurrent elections* seeing regions hold elections simultaneously with the State Duma increase regional voter turnout, as the federal contest tends to yield higher voter turnout. However, all things being equal, voter turnout would be poorer in isolated regional elections. Interestingly, since the mid-1990s, with the exception of 2007, Russia faced a decline in the federal voter turnout, which can be interpreted as a sign of the elections and the legislature losing their relevance for citizens.[14]

From our perspective, the recent study of Panov and Ross on special features of voter turnout under authoritarian regimes is of particular interest.[15] As they believe, high electoral support for the powers that be is conditional upon the administrative resource. As a result, successful electoral mobilization is contingent on the effective political machine. However, we assume that mobilization depends on particular regional institutions rather than authoritarianism.

Some scholars have highlighted *socio-economic indicators* as a crucial factor determining political variables like voter turnout and policy output.[16]

11   Petr Panov and Cameron Ross, "Explanatory factors for electoral turnout in the Russian Federation: the regional dimension". *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 24, no. 3 (2016).

12   Anastasiya Shishorina, *Analiz Vyborov v Regional'nye Parlamenty Rossii 13 marta 2011* (Moscow: Higher School of Economics, 2011).

13   Panov and Ross, "Explanatory factors for electoral turnout."

14   Nikolai Grishin, *Dinamika Elektoral'nykh Predpochtenii Naseleniya Yuga Rossii: Sravnitel'noe Issledovanie* (Moscow: Sotsial'no-Politicheskaya Mysl', 2008).

15   Panov and Ross, "Explanatory factors for electoral turnout."

16   Herbert Jacob and Michael Lipsky, "Outputs, Structure and Power: An Assessment of Changes in the Study of State and Local Politics", *Journal of Politics* 30, no. 2 (1968).

Actually, socio-economic variables have captured close attention, as they are easier to operationalize. Moreover, they are easily accessible. Yet the absence of analyzed institutional variables and electoral legislation will leave us with a flawed methodological approach.

While exploring the impact of socio-economic environment, Powell demonstrates that high voter turnout is a distinguishing feature of well-to-do countries. He also reports that turnout tends to be higher in smaller nations, but the relationship is not statistically significant.[17] Although economic prosperity brings people out to the voting booths, such an approach is rather ambiguous and flawed. For example, Russia's economically developed regions see below-average turnout, while poor or low-income regions – in a potential display of loyalty to federal authorities - have the highest turnout rates. With regional centers serving as turnout outliers, Moscow and St. Petersburg are not the exception to the rule. Hence, the country's diversity enables us to identify a combination of turnout-related factors.

Panov and Ross's article emphasizes the fact that higher levels of political participation at the polls can be observed in most economically advanced territories and poorer and rural constituencies are regarded as the main target of mobilization efforts.[18] Thus, the institutional context and distinctive features of regional political regimes are needed to carry out a scientific investigation into turnout-related issues.

Some turnout studies consider higher levels of wealth and *education*, a major socio-economic characteristic, to be positively correlated with electoral enthusiasm. Indeed, Verba and Nie place a premium on the strength of the relationship between education and voter participation.[19] Specifically, well-educated people, who are more informed about politics, have strong motivation to participate in electoral processes. Russia, however, sees an opposite trend, as the well-educated, who feel more alienated from the country's political life and institutions, prefer to vote with their feet.

In addition, *regional social aspects*, including ethnic ties and traditions, can be crucial to analyzing electoral behavior. For instance, building on the work of Moraski and Reisinger,[20] Panov and Ross believe that ethnicity may forge a

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17   André Blais, "What affects voter turnout?", *Annual Review of Political Science* 9 (2006).

18   Panov and Ross, "Explanatory factors for electoral turnout."

19   Sidney Verba and Norman H. Nie, *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

20   See, Bryon Moraski and William Reisinger, "Interpreting Voter Turnout in Russia: A Temporal and Cross-Regional Analysis." Paper prepared for the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, April 25–28, 2002; William Reisinger and Bryon Moraski, "The Relationship between Turnout and Competition Levels in Russia."

strong group identity, which boosts voter turnout.[21] In his turn, Akhremenko, while examining the influence of ethnic factors on voter turnout, concludes that Russia's ethnic republics witness higher numbers of citizens, who turn out on the election day, due to great mobilization efforts.[22]

The Russian context requires revisiting the existing research designs and methodologies to determine the factors driving the country's voter turnout on a regional scale. Our hypothesis posits that regional voter turnout is subject to institutional rather than socio-economic variables.

Research Design and the Choice of Variables

This article, covering the period of 2011–2016, examines the federal voter turnout rates in the 2011 and 2016 parliamentary elections and the 2012 presidential contest, as well as the regional voter turnout rates in the elections to regional legislatures and governors' offices.[23] Interestingly, the period enables us to track the changes in voter turnout both federally and regionally. As we consider all Russia's regions, the analysis can be deemed reliable and accurate.

To credibly analyze the spatial patterns of voting, regional concurrent elections (the gubernatorial and regional elections which were held jointly with the 2011 and 2016 federal campaigns) were excluded from the study. Therefore, the sample includes 374 electoral campaigns on a regional scale. The general statistics of voter turnout are presented in Table 1.

As is demonstrated in Table 1, there is a yawning gap between minimum and maximum values of electoral participation. The 2011 parliamentary elections faced a 52%-point gap which then increased to 62% points in 2016. In 2011, the Irkutsk region registered the lowest turnout of 47%, with St. Petersburg having the lowest turnout of 32% in the 2016. In terms of voter turnout, the Chechen Republic, however, came first in the 2011 and 2016 elections to the State Duma. As for the 2012 presidential contest, Vladimir Region saw the lowest turnout of 53%, with the Chechen Republic reaching the highest level of electoral participation.

Paper presented to the 66th Annual National Conference of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, April 2008.

21   Panov and Ross, "Explanatory factors for electoral turnout."

22   Andrei Akhremenko, *Elekotral'noe Uchastie i Absenteizm v Rossiiskikh Regionakh: Zakno-mernosti i Tendentsii* (Moscow: Vestnik Moskovskogo Universiteta, 2005).

23   The data was collected from the website of the Central Electoral Commission: http://www.cikrf.ru/.

TABLE 1   *Descriptive statistics of voter turnout.*

Elections	Obs.	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. dev.
State Duma 2011	83	47.08	99.5	61.63	12.94
State Duma 2016	85	32.51	94.92	50.22	16.39
President 2012	83	53.07	99.61	66.68	9.96
Regional Legislatures	60	20.98	92.03	46.56	15.76
Governors	63	20.99	92.04	44.61	13.82

Unlike the federal level, regions see even greater gaps between minimum and maximum voter turnout. Indeed, the elections to local legislative bodies and gubernatorial offices witnessed 71% points gap, which can be accounted for by stronger manifestations of regional differences. Regional voter turnout rates are presented in Table 2.

Our independent variables are a product of the broad turnout literature and anticipated results. The research identifies those institutional and socio-economic factors which reflect Russian realities and influence regional voter turnout: then they are defined in terms of the available indicators.

The first group of independent variables is concerned with political institutions. The list encompasses the level of political competition, party disproportionality, administrative resource capacity and loyalist mobilization, the level / significance of elections, and types of electoral systems.

The effective number of elective parties reflected in the Laakso-Taagepera formula and Molinar's index may serve as an instrument to calculate *political competition*. With Russia's party system heavily dominated by United Russia, we consider the Laakso-Taagepera formula to be less relevant. Instead, we use Molinar's index which gives special weight to the largest party. In this study we measure political competition for each electoral campaign and each region (with the exception of the presidential campaigns which we assume are understood by voters on a national scale, i.e. in the same way in all the regions).

The level of *party disproportionality* is also measured through Molinar's index. We calculate the effective number of parties in regional parliaments. For each federal and regional campaign, we consider disproportionality in the regional legislature at the time of the election, seeing it as a vivid example of political distortion in the eyes of the general public when it decides to vote at regional or federal elections.

In order to quantify the capacity of administrative resources and *loyalist mobilization*, we use two indicators, namely the proportion of votes for United

TABLE 2 *Voter turnout, by region (%).*

Regions/Voter turnout	State Duma 2011	State Duma 2016	President 2012	Regional Legislature	Governors
Altai Territory	52.5	40.74	59.93		34.33
Amur Region	53.99	42.4	60.35		36.77
Arkhangelsk Region	49.95	36.53	58.16	25.11	20.99
Astrakhan Region	55.85	36.85	56.21		40.52
Belgorod Region	75.43	62.14	74.34	53.93	59.47
Bryansk Region	59.82	55.11	66.97	49.97	46.94
Chechen Republic	99.5	94.92	99.61	92.03	
Chelyabinsk Region	59.62	44.36	62.71	41.31	42.4
Chukotka Autonomous Area	79.1	64.45	81.56	76.15	
Chuvash Republic	61.62	59.34	73.64		58.56
Irkutsk Region	47.08	34.6	56.01	25.27	29.18
Ivanovo Region	53.15	38.48	59.93	31.19	36.82
Jewish Autonomous Region	52.01	39.55	58.52		31.84
Kabardino-Balkarian Republic	98.32	90.11	73.05	71.06	
Kaliningrad Region	54.56	43.99	59.29	43.25	39.47
Kaluga Region	57.54	43.09	63.51	35.98	36
Kamchatka Territory	53.47	39.5	61.07		31.86
Karachaevo-Cherkessian Republic	93.18	93.32	91.28	67.56	
Kemerovo Region	69.31	86.71	79.10	75.56	92.04
Khabarovsk Territory	53.12	36.87	61.92	25.45	33.83

TABLE 2　*Voter turnout, by region* (%). (cont.)

Regions/Voter turnout	State Duma 2011	State Duma 2016	President 2012	Regional Legislature	Governors
Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Area – Yugra	54.83	39.24	64.06	44.77	
Kirov Region	53.99	41.85	61.31	47.52	36.25
Komi Republic	72.51	40.75	70.04	49.74	58.95
Kostroma Region	57.25	39.35	61.43	35.71	35.76
Krasnodar Territory	72.52	51.15	70.78	44.68	45.97
Krasnoyarsk Territory	49.65	36.61	59.47		31.22
Kurgan Region	56.44	41.81	64.16	30.37	39.74
Kursk Region	54.7	46.97	64.02	52.34	38.96
Leningrad Region	51.41	44.05	63.24		44.26
Lipetsk Region	56.88	52.58	65.63		47.49
Magadan Region	52.49	40.54	58.96	33.56	32.25
Moscow	61.3	35.24	58.11	20.98	32.03
Moscow Region	50.82	38.08	61.34		38.51
Murmansk Region	51.73	39.66	60.43		30.94
Nenets Autonomous Area	56.09	44.78	62.49	41.47	42.82
Nizhny Novgorod Region	58.83	44.41	66.89	44.72	54.34
Novgorod Region	56.47	39.84	58.64		42.8
Novosibirsk Region	56.78	34.85	63.23	30.62	30.69
Omsk Region	55.62	38.7	61.65		33.79
Orel Region	64.66	53.52	68.04	47.63	62.59

Region					
Orenburg Region	51.18	41.64	61.19		44.12
Penza Region	64.87	60.56	68.12	48.69	62.25
Perm Territory	48.05	35.1	55.09		
Primorye Territory	48.61	37.33	64.14		40.05
Pskov Region	52.86	42.09	61.19		37.8
Republic of Adygeya	65.84	53.87	64.33		
Republic of Altai	63.58	45.1	67.25	49.86	54.13
Republic of Bashkortostan	79.19	69.73	76.32	54.1	74.85
Republic of Buryatia	56.91	40.5	66.15	52.79	
Republic of Crimea		49.12		45.16	
Republic of Daghestan	91.07	88.05	91.10	53.56	
Republic of Ingushetia	86.35	81.42	86.47	84.56	
Republic of Kalmykia	63.18	57.5	62.01	48.2	61.39
Republic of Karelia	50.25	39.59	55.38		
Republic of Khakassia	56.21	39.36	64.69	37.82	37.81
Republic of Mari El	71.28	53.34	70.85	41.67	47.06
Republic of Mordovia	94.08	82.96	89.58		
Republic of North Ossetia – Alania	85.74	85.59	80.71	44.97	
Republic of Sakha (Yakutia)	60.01	48.09	74.50	45.42	52.69
Republic of Tatarstan	79.41	78.74	83.00	80.36	84.07
Republic of Tuva	86.1	89.73	92.62	80.53	
Rostov Region	59.29	48.17	63.73	41.99	48.47
Ryazan Region	52.66	43.29	64.15	37.34	43.51
Sakhalin Region	49.07	37.06	57.25	27.41	37.53
Samara Region	52.91	52.77	60.78		61.4
Saratov Region	66.98	64.43	66.44	46.82	

TABLE 2 _Voter turnout, by region (%). (cont.)_

Regions/Voter turnout	State Duma 2011	State Duma 2016	President 2012	Regional Legislature	Governors
Sevastopol		46.96		48.49	
Smolensk Region	49.61	40.3	59.04	29.03	28.73
St. Petersburg	54.54	32.51	62.05		61.4
Stavropol Territory	50.77	41.96	60.27		47.87
Sverdlovsk Region	51.12	41.44	58.79	50.95	
Tambov Region	68.03	49.23	70.08	51.33	57.77
Tomsk Region	50.42	33.81	58.23		
Zabaykalye Territory	53.58	38.85	59.93		33.19
Tula Region	72.69	45.55	69.45	33.18	
Tver Region	53.41	41.57	58.70	40.52	
Tyumen Region	76.05	81.1	79.15	37.86	58.26
Udmurtian Republic	56.49	44.45	64.39	41.18	43.08
Ulyanovsk Region	60.34	52.3	63.52	35.37	
Vladimir Region	48.49	38.35	53.07	28.51	28.51
Volgograd Region	51.99	42.13	63.81	36.59	36.61
Vologda Region	56.26	40.82	61.63		29.69
Voronezh Region	64.22	53.74	67.99	50.4	57.19
Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Area	82.1	74.3	93.35	69.35	
Yaroslavl Region	55.84	37.76	63.48	31.28	

Russia and the Governor's term in office. Given the 2011 regional election out-comes, Shishorina claims that electoral participation is closely entwined with regional support for the ruling party.[24] Thus, United Russia's better electoral performance will probably translate into increased voter turnout and vice versa. For presidential and gubernatorial campaigns we use shares of votes received by Putin and United Russia's governors, respectively.

As regards the *gubernatorial tenure*, it is calculated as the number of years from early incumbency to the election year. We assume that the longer governors remain in office, the more resources they commit to mobilization campaigns. This is explained by the fact that injecting fresh blood in regional governments may weaken support for United Russia and adversely affect voter turnout.

The level of elections, namely federal and regional contests, represents another variable. The study explores "federal vs. regional" variations in electoral support and the importance of presidential, gubernatorial, and deputy (federal and regional) races in overall turnout rate. The type of electoral system employed to elect representatives to regional legislatures – be it proportional representation, plurality/majoritarian systems or a mixed-member system - is also one of the variables used in our research.

Another group of variables deals with the impact of *socio-economic factors* on regional electoral activities. They are organized into two categories, *involving ethnicity* (the share of ethnic Russians)[25] and *regional socio-economic well-being* (as measured by unemployment and poverty rates, income level, and development of education).[26] It is noteworthy that all the indicators are based on official figures provided by the Federal State Statistic Service for the dates (years) closest to each election studied.

Influence of the Level of Elections and Electoral System

Some scholars opt for constructing dummy variables for the indicators which cannot be accounted for quantitatively. However, our research deems the level of elections and the electoral system vital. These variables were not included in the regression models as dummy variables. Instead, this part of the research includes a comparative analysis of electoral participation at different levels

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24   Shishorina, *Analiz Vyborov v Regional'nye Parlamenty.*
25   The figures are taken from the 2010 Census.
26   Calculated as share of students in the population.

on a case-by-case basis and compares the turnout figures before and after the change of the electoral system in each example.

The power and sway of authorities as seen by voters can be analyzed to determine the level of elections. Rational choice theory states that by casting their ballot, electors seek to maximize their benefits. Citizens, therefore, believe that the more influence and leverage the authorities have, the more important they are. Consequently, voter turnout is commensurate with the power exercised by the elected body.

Thus, at the federal level the presidential race to determine the most important office-holder in the state attracts more voters than State Duma elections. Throughout Russia's modern history, the turnout in presidential elections has always been higher than in the parliamentary elections (see Fig. 1). For instance, the difference in the electoral turnout between the presidential and parliamentary elections constituted 5.04% in the 1995–1996 electoral cycle, 6.8% in the 1999–2000 electoral cycle, 8.63% in the 2003–2004 electoral cycle; 6.1% in the 2007–2008 electoral cycle; and 5.13% in the 2011–2012 electoral cycle.

To evaluate *the significance of elections*, federal and regional elections should also be considered. Electoral participation at the regional level is usually lower than at the federal one. To support the thesis, a comparative analysis was made of voter turnout at federal and regional elections to the same bodies and institutions.
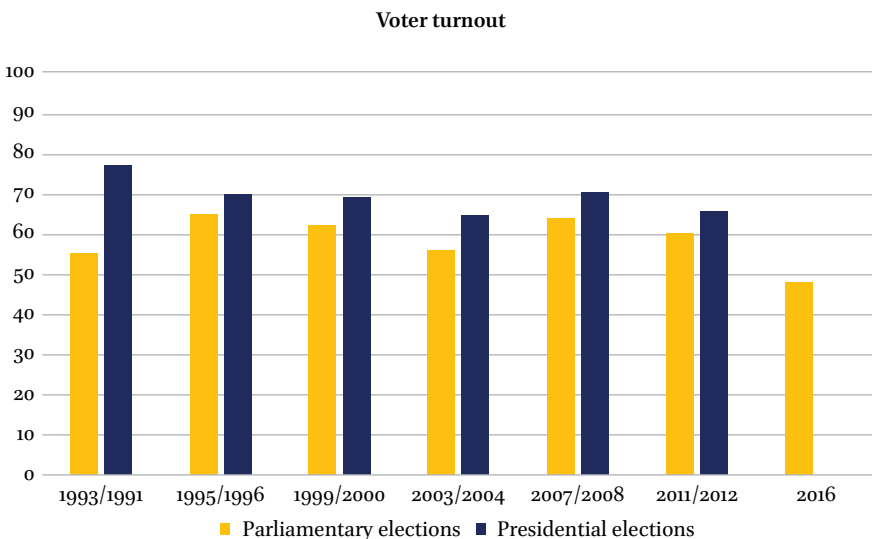
Voter turnout

FIGURE 1   *Voter turnout in the parliamentary and presidential elections* (%).

The 2011 parliamentary elections were compared with the elections to the regional legislatures held in 2012–2015 in the same regions.[27] Ultimately, it was discovered that voter turnout at elections to regional parliaments was higher only in two regions. The first case is the Kemerovo region where long-serving governor Aman Tuleev enjoyed massive popularity and held an influential position. The second exception was the Republic of Tatarstan with its well-developed political machine.

We then compared the 2016 parliamentary elections with the elections to the regional legislatures in 2012–2015, and the spring of 2016 in the same regions. Turnout at the elections to regional legislatures was higher in ten regions (the Kirov region, the Kursk region, the Nizhny Novgorod region, the Orenburg region, the Republic of Altai, the Republic of Buryatia, the Komi Republic, Tatarstan, the Sverdlovsk region, and Chukotka). It is the minority of the regions again, while more significant number of such regions is explained by the fact that turnout dropped in the 2016 federal elections and in some cases was even lower than that in some previous regional campaigns.

Comparing the 2012 presidential elections with the gubernatorial elections in 2012–2015, turnout at the latter was higher only in the Samara region, the Republic of Tatarstan, and the Kemerovo region. With a very few exceptions, many more people cast their ballots at the federal level than at the regional one.

Therefore, it can be stated that the level of elections weighs heavily on electoral activity in a region. Elections to more influential bodies attract a wider electorate.

Many scholars regard *the electoral system* as a key factor which impacts on electoral participation. In Russia the mixed electoral system is widely used both at the federal and the regional level. First, the fluctuations in voter turnout after changing the federal electoral system were highlighted. The purely proportional electoral system functioned at the 2007 and 2011 elections to the State Duma. In early modern Russia, the State Duma deputies received their seats through a mixed electoral system; in 2007 the proportional representation system was applied to allocate seats in the legislature. After the transition, voter turnout rose by 8% points to 63.71%. However, at the next federal elections held under the same electoral system, in 2011 it dropped by 3% points to 60.21%.

The 2016 amendments to the electoral law, which reinstated the mixed electoral system and reintroduced the first-past-the-post system for the Duma

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27   The sample does not include the regional elections in 2011 and 2016, because they were
      held together with the federal elections to the State Duma on the single voting day.

elections, greatly affected the outcome and voter turnout. As one of the authors of this article has demonstrated, the introduction of single-mandate constituencies can intensify electoral competition.[28] The single member districts and mixed electoral system at the regional level could also contribute to the process. However, the first-past-the-post system and the growing competition in general in single-mandate constituencies did not increase voter turnout. Instead, electoral turnout in the 2016 State Duma elections reached an all-time low and amounted to just 47.88%. Therefore, the mixed electoral system did not produce broader electoral participation; on the contrary, it plummeted in 2016.[29] Then we analyzed the impact of the electoral system at the regional level. 90% of Russian regions currently use the mixed electoral system. Full PR systems are only to be found in 8% of the regions, mainly the Caucasian republics. Moscow is the only region with a local level SMD system.

Some regions saw the electoral system change after proportional representation was introduced as obligatory in 2003. Our study focused on all such cases. Our findings point to a higher voter turnout in seven regions following the introduction of proportional representation instead of the mixed system (the Amur Region, the Chechen Republic, the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, the Kaluga Region, the Republic of Kalmykia, the Tula Region, and the Republic of Ingushetia) and lower figures in two regions (the Karachayevo-Circassian Republic and the Nenets Autonomous Area). In turn, the transition from proportional representation to the mixed electoral system increased electoral participation in one region (the Moscow oblast) and led to stronger apathy in five regions (the Amur Region, the Kaluga Region, the Nenets Autonomous Area, St. Petersburg, and the Tula Region). Moscow substituted its mixed electoral system with the SMD one in 2014, and voter turnout declined by 14.28% points to 20.98%.

The regional comparison revealed that the introduction of proportional representation does not necessarily increase voter turnout. The popular thesis that this electoral system prompts voters to go to the polls cannot be supported in Russia because proportional representation is mainly used in national republics, which are generally characterized by high electoral mobilization (the type of electoral system, notwithstanding). There are no reasonable grounds to state that the argument is persuasive enough and the result is representative. Therefore, it can be concluded that the transformation of the electoral system

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28   Rostislav Turovsky, *"Vozvrashchenie" Odnomandatnykh Okrugov: Evolutsiya Mazhoritarnoi Sistemy na Parlamentskikh Vyborov v Rossii* (Moscow: Higher school of economics, 2017).

29   Ibid.

in Russia and its regions does not influence the fluctuation in voter turnout in a clear and unambiguous way.

The Results of Statistical Analysis

To identify the major factors behind electoral behavior, the research included the regression analysis. Using the ordinary linear regression technique, we included all the independent variables in the regression.

Before the regression analysis, we calculated the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) to measure the impact of multicollinearity among the variables in the regression models. The VIF showed that the values ranged from 1 to 10, and, therefore, the relationship between the variables was irrelevant to the research. Consequently, the multicollinearity is absent from the models. Then we worked out 5 models for each of the 5 election types. It allowed us to measure the influence of different factors in combination. The results of regression analysis are presented in Table 3.

The findings enable us to conclude that different types and levels of elections are typified by various factors. Three of the nine independent variables, including the level of competition in the region, the loyalist mobilization, and ethnicity, impact enormously on voter turnout, while the remaining variables hardly affect the figures. However, our models possess a high explanatory power for the cases.

The results proved interesting, with the validity of our assumptions partly confirmed and the theses of other studies partly supported. Some of the factors exert a stronger influence on some types of elections, while the others are more clearly affected by the remaining factors. Curiously, the same factor can even produce a different effect depending on the type of voting. In some cases, it increases voter turnout, whilst in others fewer people turn up at polling stations as a result.

The level of electoral competition in the region is the most influential institutional factor in terms of electoral participation rates. At the State Duma elections in 2011 and 2016, electoral participation largely depended on the degree of competition. In essence, it implies that tougher competition will encourage more voters to go to the polls. Additionally, the coefficient for the 2016 elections is higher than in 2011. Thus, despite the lower national turnout rates in 2016, the intensity of the regional contest proved to be a more significant factor affecting voter turnout.

This assumption is also proved for the elections to the regional legislatures with the same electoral pattern of competition. To the contrary, the competition

TABLE 3   *Results of the regression analysis (dependent variable: voter turnout).*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	State Duma 2011	State Duma 2016	President 2012	Regional Legislature	Governors
Party disproportionality	0.107 (1.809)	0.989 (11.840)	−1.633 (1.774)	−2.563 (10.124)	1.690 (4.872)
Degree of political competition	3.507* (1.588)	5.813** (2.698)	—	3.032** (0.942)	−13.785* (6.204)
Loyalist mobilization	0.801*** (0.09)	1.017*** (0.119)	0.781*** (0.080)	0.468*** (0.097)	0.000 (0.002)
Governor's tenure in office	0.137 (0.117)	0.396* (0.163)	0.130 (0.103)	0.049 (0.245)	0.477 (0.326)
Unemployment rate	−0.250* (0.117)	0.093 (0.302)	−0.200 (0.113)	1.103* (0.437)	0.035 (1.198)
Poverty rate	−0.297* (0.139)	−0.177 (0.199)	−0.080 (0.148)	−0.955** (0.273)	−0.867 (0.494)
Income level	−0.00004 (0.00)	−0.00001 (0.00)	0.00009 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Share of Russians among other ethnic groups	−0.093* (0.037)	−0.163** (0.047)	−0.079* (0.034)	−0.312*** (0.058)	−0.443*** (0.093)
Development of education	−0.002 (0.004)	−0.008 (0.008)	0.001 (0.004)	−0.017 (0.011)	0.007 (0.016)
Constant	28.963* (10.346)	0.673 (17.214)	23.190* (9.047)	53.688* (18.638)	107.75*** (17.918)
N	83	85	83	60	63
R^2	0.888	0.853	0.813	0.0781	0.401

Standard errors in parentheses * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

among the candidates at gubernatorial elections fails to motivate voters from making it to the polling stations, i.e., a closer race is a surprisingly discouraging factor for voters. A more even contest at the gubernatorial elections will not impel more voters to turn up on an election day given the eagerness of the electorate to rally behind a leader such as incumbent governor. In other words, we can explain this paradox considering the role of loyalist mobilization (see

below) which works well in the regions with the strongest incumbents and explains most of the turnout in gubernatorial races while the opposition is unable to mobilize its voters. Contrarily, the weaker governors allow more competition and fail in their mobilization efforts.

The turnout rates are to a very large extent determined by *the loyalist mobilization*. The State Duma elections in 2011 and 2016, presidential elections and elections to regional legislatures saw an apparent interrelation between electoral enthusiasm and the loyalty of the people, be it sincere or imposed. It actually implies that the United Russia electorate contributes to growing electoral rates.

Curiously, the mobilization does not affect voter turnout as shown by the model for gubernatorial elections. In those elections United Russia's electorate does not necessarily increase electoral enthusiasm, while candidates from the ruling party do not always contribute to the efforts to attract more voters to polling stations among their constituencies. In addition, governors tend to have a wider electorate than the United Russia party, because they are also supported by voters who owe their allegiance to other parties in parliamentary elections.

The governor's tenure in office is of importance only in the model of the 2016 State Duma elections. In the 2011 elections to the lower house of the Russian Parliament, this factor was irrelevant, whereas in 2016 it acquired importance. The dependence is positive, and the longer the governor stays in office, the higher the electoral participation rate is likely to be. As a result, voter turnout was the lowest in the regions where governors had been in office only for a short while. In other words, the experience of the regional governors in building their political machines became a strong factor only in times being the hardest for voter turnout in Russia, i.e. in the 2016 federal elections. Probably this points to the growing importance of the "governor's factor" on turnout in Russia. In all the other models, there is no immediate link between the governor's term in office and voter turnout.

Next the impact of socio-economic and cultural factors on electoral participation rates will be considered. Of all such factors, *ethnicity* proves to be relevant to all the models. In every case, it has an adverse effect on the voters' enthusiasm. It implies that the fewer ethnic Russians reside in the region, the higher will be the voter turnout. It is also noteworthy that this factor is particularly noticeable at the regional level, namely in the models for gubernatorial elections and the contests for seats in regional parliaments. At the federal elections to the State Duma in 2011 and 2016 and the presidential elections, the dependence is statistically significant and again negative with the share of ethnic Russians.

Moreover, the share of the Russian population influenced voter turnout at the State Duma elections in 2016 more strongly than in 2011 or presidential elections. The general downward trend in electoral activity can account for the situation. It was most pronounced in 2016 as the role of mobilization in national republics (along with the role of the most experienced governors) became even more important than ever before. These conclusions confirm the results of other researchers.[30]

Of all the indicators of socio-economic welfare, only *the poverty rate* and *the unemployment rate* are relevant when it comes to the State Duma elections in 2011 and contests for seats in regional legislatures. In both cases the higher the poverty rate, the lower the voter turnout. However, since high turnout rates are characteristic of poor and backward regions, including the Caucasian republics, the results are contradictory. At the same time, it should be noted that the Caucasian republics are typified by strong loyalty to the federal center and frequent resort to the administrative resource, which ultimately has a greater impact on voter turnout in these regions.

Meanwhile, *the unemployment rate* is of importance in the model of elections to regional legislatures and in the 2011 State Duma elections. The dependence is positive in the first case as the unemployment rate seems to impel more voters to go to the polls to cast their ballots for candidates to regional parliaments. However, it should be noted that such conclusions stem from a small share of the unemployed electorate and the presence of hidden unemployment, which distorts official data. Curiously, in the 2011 federal elections the unemployment rate had negative relation to the voter turnout. The remaining socio-economic indicators, such as income rates and development of education, are insignificant in the models, and do not affect voter turnout in Russian regions. All in all, obvious contradictions in the role and importance of seemingly related socio-economic factors do not allow us to make clear and unambiguous conclusions.

To uphold the validity of the results, all the models were tested with control variables. In accordance with the requirements imposed on control variables, the indicators should be related in one way or another with dependent variables and with independent variables. Therefore, urban population as a share of total population and the gross regional product (per capita) were chosen as control variables. To test the quality of the models, the models with control variables were constructed (see Table 4).

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30   Akhremenko, *Elektoral'noe Uchastie;* Panov and Ross, "Explanatory factors for electoral turnout."

TABLE 4   *Results of the regression analysis with control variables (dependent variable: voter turnout; control variables: proportion of the urban population, gross regional product).*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	State Duma 2011	State Duma 2016	President 2012	Regional Legislatures	Governors
Party disproportionality	0.310	4.190	-1.399	-4.440	2.758
	(1.8240)	(12.401)	(1.820)	(10.102)	(4.937)
Degree of political competition	3.921*	5.685*	—	3.621**	-16.654*
	(1.645)	(2.718)		(0.964)	(6.535)
Loyalist mobilization	0.807***	1.035***	0.781***	0.482***	0.000
	(0.092)	(0.121)	(0.081)	(0.095)	(0.002)
Governor's tenure in office	0.128	0.411*	0.115	-0.089	0.442
	(0.119)	(0.165)	(0.106)	(0.250)	(0.335)
Unemployment rate	-0.285*	0.126	-0.221	0.894*	0.056
	(0.121)	(0.307)	(0.117)	(0.493)	(1.250)
Poverty rate	-0.319*	-0.163	-0.077	-0.939**	-0.900
	(0.141)	(0.201)	(0.150)	(0.270)	(0.498)
Income level	-0.00001	-0.00002	0.000	0.00003	0.000
	(0.000)	(0.00)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Share of Russians among other ethnic groups	-0.084*	-0.174*	-0.068	-0.259***	-0.440
	(0.038)	(0.048)	(0.037)	(0.062)	(0.100)
Development of education	0.000	-0.008	0.003	-0.008	-0.005
	(0.005)	(0.009)	(0.005)	(0.013)	(0.019)

TABLE 4   *Results of the regression analysis with control variables (dependent variable: voter turnout; control variables: proportion of the urban population, gross regional product). (cont.)*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Proportion of the urban population	-0.074	0.085	-0.050	−0.242*	-0.055
	(0.063)	(0.083)	(0.060)	(0.119)	(0.187)
Gross Regional Product (per capita)	0.0000002	−0.000003	-0.000001	0.0000003	0.00001
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.00)	(0.000)
Constant	31.574*	−8.400	24.712*	62.758**	119.678***
	(10.723)	(19.315)	(9.430)	(18.987)	(21.064)
N	83	85	83	60	63
R^2	0.890	0.855	0.815	0.799	0.423

Standard errors in parentheses * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

TABLE 5 *(In)significant variables in the regression models.*

	(1) State Duma 2011	(2) State Duma 2016	(3) President 2012	(4) Regional Legislatures	(5) Governors
Party disproportionality	–	–	–	–	–
Degree of political competition	+ (more turnout)	+ (more turnout)	N.A.	+ (more turnout)	+ (less turnout)
Loyalist mobilization	+ (more turnout)	+ (more turnout)	+ (more turnout)	+ (more turnout)	–
Governor's tenure in office	–	+ (more turnout)	–	–	–
Unemployment rate	+ (less turnout)	–	–	+ (more turnout)	–
Poverty rate	+ (more turnout)	–	–	+ (more turnout)	–
Income level	–	–	–	–	–
Share of Russians among other ethnic groups	+ (less turnout)	+ (less turnout)	+ (less turnout)	+ (less turnout)	+ (less turnout)
Development of education	–	–	–	–	–

The analysis of the models with control variables allows us to draw the conclusion that almost all of the previously described variables are still relevant. The positive and negative coefficients are also preserved for all the significant variables. Therefore, it can be concluded that the models are resistant to the sample's changes and are a reliable instrument to assess the dependence of voter turnout on predictors. The only exception is the ethnicity factor which loses its relevance in the models with control variables for presidential and gubernatorial elections. So, this factor works for the parliamentary elections at all levels, usually entailing mobilization in United Russia's favor in ethnic regions. However, mobilization for Putin or incumbent regional governors does not have such a distinct ethnic flavor.

The results supplement the conclusions made for the models without control variables. Thus, for elections to regional legislatures, *the share of the urban population* is a significant variable. The coefficient is negative, which means that an increase in the urban population in the region reduces voter turnout. This dependence looks characteristic of electoral turnout in Russia since in cities and regional capitals, electoral participation tends to be lower. Many researchers also highlighted this fact. Gaivoronsky notes that Russia's electoral behavior leads to higher voter turnout in the countryside than in cities.[31] Akhremenko believes this is largely accounted for the outflow of the less active youth and the growing number of senior citizens in the Russian village.[32] However, the urban-rural cleavage typical for the earlier elections in Russia now seems to maintain its importance only for one type of elections.

Next the whole range of institutional and socio-economic variables, which are noteworthy in the regression models (see Table 5) will be presented, with «+» pointing to their relevance and «—» denoting their irrelevance.

Conclusion

The results of the research have confirmed our hypothesis that in Russia electoral turnout is largely determined by institutional mechanisms and the way they are structured in each particular region. In the article, we have demonstrated how the institutional context has affected voter turnout in Russian regions. The research findings allow us to claim that a number of factors may

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31   Yury Gaivoronsky, *Patterny Podderzhki Politicheskikh Partii v Rossiiskikh Regionakh v Usloviyakh "Navyazannoy" Natsionalizatsii* (Moscow: Higher School of Economics, 2017).

32   Akhremenko, *Elekotral'noe Uchastie*.

impact on voter turnout depending on the type of elections. In general, the institutional context, which varies across the regions, leads to different regional electoral turnout across the country. The results of our study have revealed that the institutional context is shaped greatly by the level of political competition in the region and the ability of regional authorities to mobilize the loyal voters. However, these factors work in a very different manner (or do not work at all) in the direct gubernatorial elections as compared with other types of campaigns. Our study has also confirmed the strong impact of the level of elections on electoral participation. Thus, it should be noted that given the three-level system of government in Russia, the level of elections becomes crucial to studying electoral behavior. At the same time, among socio-economic variables only ethnicity impacts on the voter turnout but this linkage is clear for the parliamentary elections, while we cannot prove that it has steady impact on presidential and gubernatorial elections.