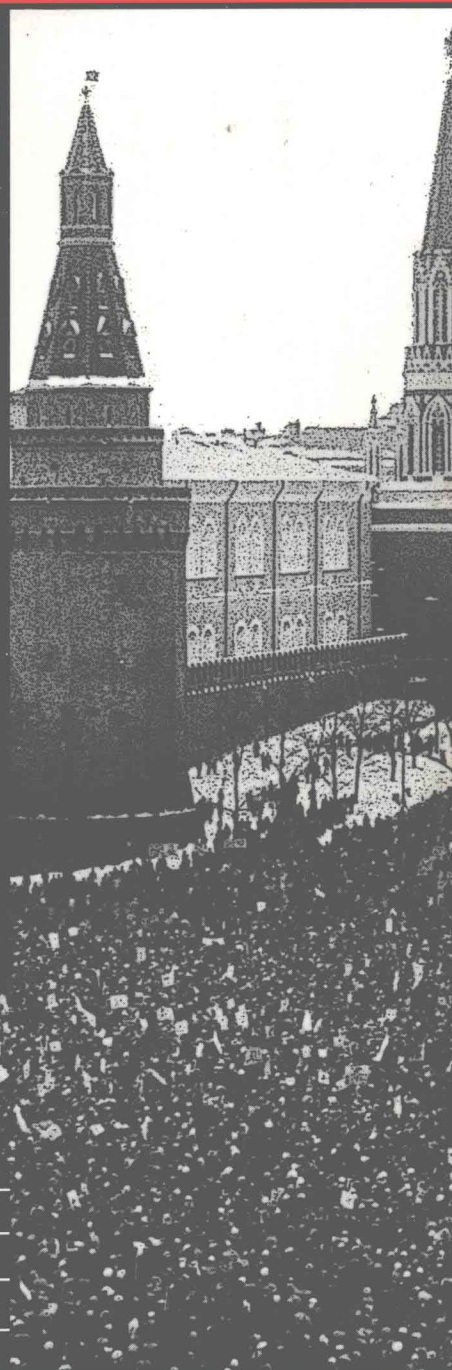


TRANSITIONAL CITIZENS

VOTERS

AND WHAT
INFLUENCES
THEM IN THE
NEW RUSSIA



TIMOTHY J. COLTON

TRANSITIONAL CITIZENS

*Voters and What Influences
Them in the New Russia*

Timothy J. Colton

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To H. Gordon Skilling

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TRANSITIONAL CITIZENS

Preface

Subjects obey. Citizens choose. The signal accomplishment of the epic “transition” in the former Soviet Union—in counterpoint to a sorry economic record—is the political feat of having converted so many subjects into citizens. This book takes a look at the people of the Russian Federation as they make democratic choices they could not have dreamed of being allowed to make a few years back. The venue is the electoral arena, where they periodically pass judgment on their governments and would-be governments. Voting is the consummate act of citizenship.

One hundred and nine million strong and straddling two continents, eleven time zones, and eighty-nine constituent regions, the Russian electorate has from the moment of inception been one of the biggest on earth.¹ Comprehending the way its members stand up and are counted will be critical to debates within political science about mass politics and about regime change and consolidation.

The fascination of this gigantic collectivity lies less in sheer size than in its very enfranchisement, which cuts against the grain of a singularly autocratic past. Russia’s citizens now go to vote in what used to be the citadel of the dictatorship that embodied the main alternative to liberal democracy. This brave new world of competitive elections is thinly mapped. Peaceful jousting among political parties, seating thresholds and runoff formulas, the arcana of *reitingi*, *politicheskiye konsul’tanty*, *polstery*, *fokus-gruppy*, *press-konferentsii*, and *imidzh-meikery*—all were unheard of not so long ago. Most exotic of all is the idea that the man or woman on the street can every so often have a voice in picking state personnel and policy. “We are not accustomed to holding the country’s destiny in our hands,” Mayor Yurii Luzhkov of Moscow remarked grandiloquently of his compatriots in the last-stretch drive of the presidential race of 1996. “The bosses always

did it for us. But now, and this is our achievement, the vote of any of us may prove to be decisive.”² The mayor spoke the truth, if—as a latter-day boss himself—with some disingenuousness in his resort to the first person plural.

A related anomaly of the Russian vote is the enormity of the potential winnings and losses in post-Communist elections. Office seekers in the quiescent West fuss over tuning up social systems in working order and over whether to shave a percentage point or two off the budget deficit or add pennies to the gasoline tax. In Russia the battle is about graver and more incendiary concerns—dysfunctional and insolvent institutions, individual freedom, nationhood, property rights, provision of the basic necessities of life in an economic downswing worse than capitalism’s Great Depression of the 1930s. The idiom of Russian electoral campaigns is that of apocalypse, deliverance, and mutual “Satanization.”³ When Boris Yeltsin was fending off rivals for the presidency in the summer of 1996, his arch-antagonist Gennadii Zyuganov of the KPRF (Communist Party of the Russian Federation) intoned that Russia was “under threat of self-annihilation”; only he and his socialistic nostrums could rescue the country “from falling into the abyss” to the brink of which Yeltsin’s misbegotten reforms had led it. The then pro-Yeltsin Luzhkov rejoined by summoning up the nightmare of retrogression to Stalinism were Zyuganov to be victorious: “One thing would follow another, according to the logic of the totalitarian system . . . until we were cut off by an iron curtain from the rest of mankind and here in our land people were forced to labor out of fear and not out of economic interest.” The choice, he insisted, was “either chaos and tyranny [with Zyuganov] or hope [with Yeltsin].”⁴ The rhetorical grandstanding does not erase the point that in Russian voting the stakes—declared, perceived, and real—are spectacularly out of the ordinary.

The Russian electoral saga was quick to catch the eye of area experts and generalist students of democratization, the latter sometimes in partnership with the former. Stephen White, Richard Rose, and Ian McAllister’s groundbreaking *How Russia Votes*,⁵ Jerry F. Hough’s and my edited volume recapping a major collaborative project,⁶ and a spate of journal articles, papers, and monographs⁷ are the first tender shoots of a scholarly literature.

The output thus far contains fine accounts of the prehistory, administration, and results of elections in transitional Russia, from the half-free elections in the twilight of Soviet power to the inauguration of multiparty voting for parliament in 1993 and Yeltsin’s re-election triumph in 1996.

Anyone wishing to be educated about these things should consult the published narratives, which I shall not duplicate. (As a reference, Appendix A compiles returns from the post-Soviet elections to date—parliamentary in 1993 and 1995 and presidential in 1996.) Nor do I propose to clone the worthwhile material already on the library shelf describing the substance and the roots of public opinion in the post-Soviet states. Much as it can teach us about attitudes toward democracy and economic reform, it scarcely dips into their impact on voting or other forms of political participation.⁸

The pioneer scholarship on Russian elections has tracked events, reconnoitered avenues of inquiry, and spawned an assortment of insights which complement the work on citizen beliefs. It is ripe for extension and revision in several regards:

- Most of it recapitulates a single election or, as with *How Russia Votes*, successive elections seriatim.⁹ Taking elections one at a time was unavoidable at the outset; now it is time to stress overarching questions and topics.
- The literature is skimpy in its coverage of the electoral process per se. It skips lightly over political phenomena such as voter immersion in campaigns, attachments to parties, candidates' personalities, and the role of the news media.¹⁰
- In explaining the vote, analysts underutilize quantitative techniques and are unambitious about sorting out causal relationships through statistical modeling.¹¹
- Odd for so turbulent a country, the commentary is static. Granted the danger of reaching prematurely for the long-range dynamics of electoral choice, this still leaves ample shorter-term dynamics to tend to.
- Authors have not made maximum use of their findings to contribute to theories of how democracies are built.

Transitional Citizens aims to decipher why suddenly enfranchised Russians vote as they do and to further the study of the grassroots politics of democratization by proceeding as follows:

- The text is structured by theme and not by election, tabling evidence from several elections as required. It chiefly exploits individual-level data culled in coordinated pre- and post-election surveys of a large

probability sample of the electorate, done under my, William Zimmerman's, and Russian colleagues' supervision in 1995 and 1996.

- It tackles the electoral process and election-related organization head on. Whole chapters profile engagement in campaigns and with Russia's teeming political parties. Political actors remain central throughout.
- To make voting preferences intelligible, I work with a wide range of determinants and with a statistical tool kit capable of drawing them into a unified synopsis. Methodologically, I am indebted to the magisterial *The New American Voter*, by Warren E. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks, and to the "multistage, bloc recursive model" of origins of the presidential vote adumbrated there.¹² The particulars and mechanics I have tailored to a society which is starkly different from the United States, and which faces choices exceedingly more harrowing than those in the charmed circle of established democracies. (A rundown of survey data, methods, and models employed in the book is given in Appendix B.)
- The survey data were obtained in a format that taps into certain dynamic properties of popular behavior. Three waves of face-to-face interviews over ten months in 1995–96—before and after a parliamentary election and on the heels of a presidential election—were mustered as a panel, that is, through repeated interviews of the same persons. Panels fix changes in attitudes and action more faithfully than standard cross-sectional surveys and are more informative about linkages among the elements of public choice.
- As best I can, I tease out lessons for overall conceptions of political behavior and development.

The learned discourse about transitions away from authoritarianism, and especially away from Communism, has stressed the unsettled tenor of politics and government during such periods. There is much to be said for that characterization. Beyond a doubt, caprice and coincidence do enter into Russians' principal mode of civic action, the vote, and some aspects of it are indeterminate and mercurial.

My research brings out, however, that voting in post-Soviet Russia must also be understood as *highly patterned behavior*. Despite the unfamiliarity of subjects-turned-citizens with democratic procedures and despite the myriad uncertainties that besiege them publicly and privately, their elec-

toral choices manifest a degree of purposiveness and systematic variation which, I suspect, will surprise a fair number of readers. There is plenty about Russians' voting decisions that continues to baffle the observer; I lay emphasis on how much we can manage to say about the forces that shape them.

I say "forces" advisedly because, contrary to claims that in the wake of Communism voters react to one commanding factor—ethnicity, temptation by charismatic leaders, and comparisons of the new regime with the old have all been put up for the honor—I find that it is the interplay of multiple factors which produces the outcome. I frame an argument about them in cross-national perspective and by and large define the components generically, capitalizing on the shared vocabulary and theoretical advances of the field. I infuse the common-use categories with empirical content that has verisimilitude in contemporary Russian conditions.

Variables in reasonably clear-cut categories—electors' social traits, their appraisals of the health of the economy and polity, budding affinities for parties, convictions about systemic reform and other disputed issues, leadership evaluations, and assessments of the performance and promise of incumbents and opposition—all have a significant bearing on how post-Soviet Russians vote. Thanks to the exigencies of the transitional environment, some of these variables are halier predictors of voting choice than others. Moreover, influences on voting have their effects in combinations and sequences that differ plainly from one immediate political context to another.

The electoral politics of post-Communism, in short, has in a historical instant grown into a multicausal and multiphased game of great richness and intricacy. In dissecting it, I will be happy if I can begin to match the participants in subtlety.

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Subjects into Citizens

The ongoing transformation of Russia and its neighbors in Eurasia and Eastern Europe is as far-reaching a revolution as any in modern times. Precisely because of its magnitude, it has yielded a turmoil of results a bare decade into its trajectory. That the countries of the region are in convulsive transition away from Soviet Communism is crystal clear; just where they will transit to, singly and collectively, is murky.¹

Readers undoubtedly hope, as do I, that the trek ends in vibrant democratic regimes. Democracies are governments whose “actions have been in relatively close correspondence with the wishes of relatively many of their citizens for a long period of time.”² By that principle, the Russian Federation is at best a protodemocracy, a work in progress that may some day evolve into a full-grown democracy. Its population is a transitional citizenry.

Emblematic of this limbo polity is the awkwardness its denizens have in characterizing it. Boris Yeltsin has lamented that, although Russia has adopted “a new political system,” those at its helm “have not yet learned how to govern in a new way.” “We are stuck halfway,” he goes on. “We have shoved off from the old shore, but flounder in a stream of problems [that] carries us along and keeps us from making it to the far shore.”³ Ordinary people confess consternation, too. When my survey sample of voting-age Russians was asked in 1996 if they thought their political system “is a democracy,” rather more opposed the statement (34 percent) than approved it (29 percent); the largest group of all (37 percent) was unable to say.⁴

In a well-ordered democracy, political sophistication on the part of the public generally fosters respect for the governmental setup. That this does not occur in Russia is a telltale sign of the makeshift and fragile nature of

its protodemocracy. The Russian electorate can readily be stratified by knowledge of political facts, begetting a scale of citizen awareness similar to scales devised in the venerable Western democracies (cf. Appendix B for the procedure).⁵ When we then plot citizens' civic consciousness against their positions on Russia's regime, we find that greater consciousness leads to greater denial of democratic governance (see Figure 1.1). Persons in the politically most aware fifth of the population, who have the same probability of grading Russia a democracy as the least aware fifth, are nearly three times as likely as the least aware to claim it is not a democracy.⁶

The most cogent reason to grant Russia the benefit of the doubt and rank it a democracy-in-the-making is its record of staffing high offices and adjudicating conflicts through passably free and inclusive elections. The Russian demos may not have many levers over public policy, but it can at least throw the rascals out if all patience is exhausted.

Momentous electoral reforms that eliminated single-candidate charades and instituted competitive campaigns and a secret ballot were the brain-child of the last secretary-general of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union), Mikhail Gorbachev, in the late 1980s. Multicandidate elec-

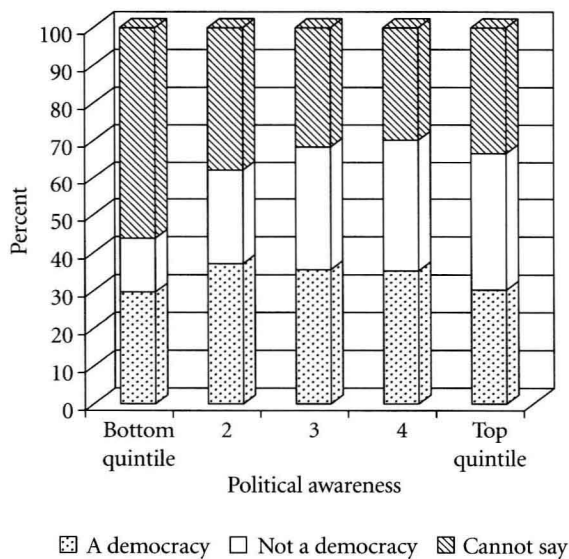


Figure 1.1. Assessments of the Russian Political System by Level of Political Awareness, 1996

tions more than any other innovation let his *perestroika* get out of hand and brought on the subversion and ruination, not the rejuvenation, of the Soviet system. Boris Yeltsin, once Gorbachev's protégé and Politburo comrade, turned into his radical nemesis outside the CPSU as he seized the opening to gain the chairmanship of the Russian republic's legislature in May 1990. In June 1991 Yeltsin won popular election as Russian president in a landslide over five other candidates.⁷

Since becoming a sovereign state in December 1991, Russia has staged parliamentary elections in December 1993 and December 1995 and a presidential election in June-July 1996. (As this book goes to press, preparations are under way for another pair of parliamentary and presidential elections.) The State Duma, the lower chamber of the Federal Assembly chartered by the constitution of 1993, is elected by writ of a split formula.⁸ One-half of its 450 seats are distributed by proportional representation to national lists nominated by the political parties and equivalent organizations, subject to a 5 percent threshold. The other half are filled by simple plurality in single-member territorial districts. Sixty percent of the district candidates and 66 percent of the winners were partisan nominees in 1995, and the rest were independents with no party imprimatur.⁹ I delve into voting for the national party lists only. Regrettably, not much can be learned from the obtainable data about the 225 district races. Besides their national component, they sway to local vagaries liable to elude a survey with sampling units strung from the Gulf of Finland to the Sea of Japan.¹⁰ The upper house of parliament, the Federation Council, elected for only its maiden term from 1993 to 1995, is excluded outright from the study.¹¹

Choice of the kingpin of Russia's federal government, the president, is our other action focus. Russia is one of those atypical countries which directly elect their head of state.¹² The president is elected to a fixed four-year term separate from the legislative branch. A runoff between the top two finishers settles the score if no one secures 50 percent the first time, as happened in 1996. As in the district leg of Duma elections, nomination by a party is optional, not mandatory.

Russia's first multiparty vote, in 1993, was instigated by the Yeltsin administration as an "engineered founding election"¹³ which would give its allies ascendancy in the State Duma and, in an accompanying plebiscite, ratify the president's draft constitution. Except for narrow confirmation of the constitution, the results were a letdown, as Russia's Choice, the one party wholeheartedly for Yeltsin, finished well behind the raucously

nationalist LDPR (Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia) in the popular vote.¹⁴ Progovernment forces were embarrassed again in 1995, with the neo-Communist KPRF overtaking the LDPR in votes for the party lists and forming the largest caucus in the Duma. In 1996, though, Yeltsin, whose chances for re-election many handicappers had belittled the preceding winter, outpolled nine rivals to win a second term and perpetuate divided government in Russia.

Much will be imparted on these pages about political parties. In the Soviet dispensation, there was only "the" party: the CPSU leviathan which monopolized decisions and treated the machinery of state and the population as executors of its will. To an interplanetary pilgrim who docked in Russia today after a decade's absence, no change would be more astonishing than to find the CPSU in its grave and Moscow and the provinces awash in parties of all sizes, viewpoints, and temperaments.

I define a political party functionally—as "any group, however loosely organized, seeking to elect governmental office-holders under a given label," to quote Leon D. Epstein.¹⁵ Russian rules of the political road have not set duly certified and titled parties (*partii*) apart from quasi-parties. These may have more circumspect name tags—ranging from the most common, "movement" (*dvizheniye*), to "association" (*ob"edineniye*, *obshchestvo*, or *assotsiyatsiya*), "union" (*soyuz*), "league" (*liga*), "congress" (*kongress*), "foundation" (*fond*), and "front" (*front*)—but in elections they all pursue the same core political purpose of drumming up votes for candidates. Russia's electoral laws bring both quasi-parties and parties under the tent of "electoral associations" (*izbiratel'nyye ob"edineniya*) and afford them the same prerogatives to nominate and promote candidates. Under prevailing legislation, the Central Electoral Commission will in principle license any group to participate in a national election, so long as it has registered as a bona fide public organization with the Ministry of Justice,¹⁶ its bylaws authorize it to take political action, it does not propound violent overthrow of the government, and it submits petitions with the required quantity of signatures by eligible voters.¹⁷ The law also enables "electoral blocs" (*izbiratel'nyye bloki*), alliances of several parties or public organizations, to campaign for parliamentary seats as quasi-parties. Setting the official terminology aside for convenience, I will regularly speak of all these bodies as "parties."

The number of parties and quasi-parties in transitional Russia is exorbitant. Twenty-one of 35 associations entitled to enter the 1993 election to

the State Duma put up slates of candidates and signature sheets; 13 got onto the ballot, of which 5 were juridically parties.¹⁸ In 1995 the set of organizations permitted to nominate slates for the Duma had billowed to 273. Of the 111 that gave it a try, 38 were parties; 40 of the 111 acted autonomously, and 71 made their bids within 29 electoral blocs. Forty-three lists of candidates were eventually registered and presented to the electorate—10 cobbled together by parties, 15 by stand-alone quasi-parties, and 18 by multipartner electoral blocs.¹⁹

For the most part I will handle Russian parties (and quasi-parties) as discrete entities. Occasionally it will be beneficial to group them into programmatically contiguous “families” of parties, which also help sort the individual politicians associated with the parties or with the parties’ issue stances.²⁰ Six party families may be demarcated (cf. Tables A.1, A.2, and A.3 in Appendix A for the taxonomy and for 1993 and 1995 vote totals).

A privileged subset as of the mid-1990s contained but one movement, Our Home Is Russia (Nash Dom—Rossiya). Convened at President Yeltsin’s instigation in May 1995 and chaired by his prime minister from 1992 to 1998, Viktor Chernomyrdin,²¹ it replaced Russia’s Choice as the *government* party.²² Our Home’s goal on the hustings was unabashedly to shore up the political and policy status quo. The *liberal* opposition or, as its proponents relish saying, the “democratic opposition,” has also preached reform, but promises to prosecute it more cleanly and humanely. Russian liberals are renowned for their internecine feuding and for calving splinter groups. Parties in the *centrist* family act the part of angels of moderation and compromise, maneuvering what they say is a middle way between the government and the militant currents in the opposition. The *nationalist* or self-styled “patriotic” parties chafe at Russia’s humiliations and vow to restore it to grandeur and to stamp out threats to internal order. The *socialist* opposition, its powerhouse the KPRF, trumpets its fidelity to many of the collectivist values of the defunct Soviet regime. Unclassifiable *miscellaneous* groups round out the directory of parties.

Uncertainty and Elections

Uncertainty—the “lack of sure knowledge about the course of past, present, future, or hypothetical events,” in the words of Anthony Downs²³—is inherent in all politics. The hallmark of a transitional environment is the presence of this universal element in aberrant doses.

Abundant uncertainty characterizes the “third wave” of democratization that has swept many parts of the globe since the 1970s.²⁴ One of the most oft-cited overviews of the process, by Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, underlines “the extraordinary uncertainty of the transition, with its numerous surprises and difficult dilemmas.” “Few moments,” they say, “pose such agonizing choices and responsibilities, ethical as well as political.”²⁵

When right-wing despots and juntas bowed out in Latin America and southern Europe, change and its companion uncertainty centered on political arrangements. Economic adjustments were enacted in most countries, but questions about the role of the military, civil rights, censorship, and unfettered elections were at the crux of the transfer of power. In the Soviet Union and its satellites, what melted down was an entire civilization.²⁶ Its backbone an apparatus of political repression and control, the *ancien régime* also paid homage to a messianic ideology and acted out all-embracing blueprints for “scientific socialism” in economics, social organization, and international relations. Its legitimacy withered largely because it failed to deliver the material prosperity it pledged. Chronic economic ills had been exacerbated by Communism’s death pangs; hence programs to leap from Marx to market—to scrap socialist planning and replace it with a free-enterprise economy—crowned the agenda of successor governments. In Yeltsin’s Russia economic “shock therapy” began in the winter of 1991–92.

As if that and the revamping of the central state were not enough, the retreat of the overextended Russians from empire and the dismemberment of the three Communist ethnofederations (the USSR, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia) raised vexing questions about community and national cohesion. Unrehearsed, Russia, a pseudo-federation inside the Soviet Union until 1991,²⁷ had to learn to act like a genuine federal state. The attempt to squelch a separatist rebellion in the North Caucasus republic of Chechnya, when tens of thousands of civilians and troops were killed between December 1994 and August 1996, is proof (if proof were needed) of the potential for deadly violence.

As a catchword for the post-Communist panorama, it would be hard to improve upon “uncertainty.” Yeltsin writes in his memoirs that the demise of the old order ushered in “a time of troubles and uncertainty, forcing us to rack our brains to find a way out of desperate stalemates.”²⁸ Scholars

agree, seeming at times to be trying to outdo the practitioners in dramatizing the mayhem. In a brilliant essay taking Hungary as a springboard, Valerie Bunce and Maria Csanádi talk of the “enormous uncertainty” of the time: “The basic structure of post-communism is the absence of much structure . . . Fluidity and uncertainty are the fundamental characteristics of the transitional period.”²⁹ Kenneth Jowitt colorfully compares the annihilation of the Leninist regimes to the “mass extinction” of a biological species, such as the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous age; its aftermath is a “traumatic Genesis environment” typified by “the dissolution of existing boundaries and related identities and the corresponding potential to generate novel ways of life.”³⁰ Mary McAuley observes that the dismantling of the USSR and of one-party rule, long held to be “part of the natural order of things,” saddled Russia with changes equal “in American terms to the disappearance of the office of the presidency, the flag, the Constitution, together with California, Texas, and New Mexico.”³¹ David D. Laitin calls the downfall of the Soviet Union a “cataclysm . . . devastating to many in the Russian Federation.” For the Russian diaspora outside the federation, it was often “as if . . . New Yorkers were suddenly faced with the prospect of learning Iroquois or being deported to England.”³²

In mass politics, and especially in elections, there is no escaping uncertainty about the morning after—about who will come out ahead and who will not—in the most granite-solid of democracies.³³ But suspense is abridged there because, as Adam Przeworski says, “the possible outcomes are entailed by the institutional framework” and the protagonists have proven knowledge of each other’s desires and abilities. “That uncertainty is inherent in democracy does not mean everything is possible or nothing is predictable . . . Democracy is a system of ruled open-endedness, or organized uncertainty.”³⁴

It is a safe bet that electoral uncertainty will loom larger in transitional countries that are “stuck halfway” between systems, in Yeltsin’s pithy phrase. What with their rickety institutions, the plasticity of their laws, and the brevity of their acquaintance with nonviolent political contestation, vote choice there could hardly ride the well-worn grooves it does in a consolidated democracy. Voting cannot be sequestered from the crisis that inundates society as a whole, exemplified during the Russian election cycle audited in this book by economic deprivation, state weakness, moral anomie, savage political infighting, and the bloodbath in Chechnya.³⁵