A NOTE ON THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE IN THE 1996 RUSSIAN ELECTORATE AND THE EFFECT OF DISTANCE FROM URBAN CENTERS

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Executive summary

Perhaps the most evident correlate of aggregate voting patterns in Russia between 1991 and 1996 is the urban-rural divide within the electorate, with urban areas consistently exhibiting greater support than their rural counterparts for candidates and parties that can be labeled pro-reform or pro-Yeltsin. The usual explanations for this pattern concern the greater proportion of young and educated voters in urban areas and the proximity of voters there to the ostensible benefits, promised or real, of reform.

In this essay, however, we argue that this interpretation requires refinement. Specifically, after computing the simple geographic distance between each rayon and either that rayon's regional capital or the closest urban center, we argue on the basis of a reassessment of the 1996 Presidential election second-round returns that a share of this correlation can be explained not by mere proximity to urban areas or the urban-rural characteristics of a rayon, but also by a rayon's proximity to regional and local political bosses — to those political figures most likely to use their influence to gather votes for Yeltsin's reelection.
It is by now commonplace to characterize Russian voting patterns by the notion of a “red belt” and an urban-rural division of its electorate. With respect to the 1993 parliamentary contests, Clem and Craumer (1995) note that “relatively more urbanized, better educated and younger populations tended to vote in favor of Yeltsin and the reform parties, whereas rural, agricultural areas with older populations typically aligned with the anti-reform parties or positions” (p. 461). Belin and Orttung (1997) extend this conclusion to 1995: “reformist parties and Yeltsin’s government enjoyed greater support in provinces where the population was younger, better educated, and concentrated in urban areas ... [whereas] places where the population was older, less educated, and more likely to be employed in agriculture usually voted for nationalist and left-wing parties and against the Yeltsin administration” (p. 137).

This same pattern repeats itself in 1996: “the urban-rural divide helped determine the second round of the presidential vote” (McFaul 1997, pp. 70-1). Though the correlation appears to be somewhat attenuated in this election as compared to previous ones (Clem and Craumer, 1997), the simple correlation between percentage of the vote for Zyuganov in the second round and the percentage of the population that is urban [“%U”] is -.21, if the unit of analysis is the region (oblast, etc.) and declines to -.42 if the level of aggregation is reduced to individual rayons. Thus, McFaul’s (1997) conclusion that “the urban rural divide has remained firm throughout Russia’s electoral history” (p. 72) and Solnick’s (1998) summary observation that “at the national level, the urban vote has been consistently more pro-administration than the rural vote” (p. 62, fn. 18) seem unassailable.

This pattern of urban-rural voting, moreover, is readily interpretable in terms of what people believe or would like to believe about reform programs in Russia since 1991. If reform, notably economic reform, is assumed to benefit any identifiably large segment of the population (aside from those who had ready access to state property), that segment is the young, better educated members of society who lived in Russia’s urban centers. Regardless of how great or small the political-economic benefits of reform were presumed to be, those benefits were more likely to have been realized in those centers than in the rural areas that even today remain largely untouched by the most recent changes in Russia’s political economy. Thus, the rural-urban divide was not only real and understandable, but it was perhaps also even welcomed by those who saw it as a confirmation of the idea of reform and its
attendant change in political ideologies – with the hope, of course, that such change would expand out from Russia’s urban centers to gradually encompass the entire country.

This explanation, though, appears to run afoul of the fact that in 1993 at least “measures of the impact of economic reform – such as income, unemployment, inflation, and food costs among regions – correlated less strongly with either pro- or anti-reform sentiment…” (Clem and Craumer 1995, p. 461). Similarly, though variables such as the average age, education and income of regions correlate in the expected way with the vote, other variables such as degree of privatization, unemployment, and cost of living “produced weak or inconclusive relationships with voting preferences” (Clem and Craumer 1997, p. 392). Even as late as the 1996 gubernatorial elections, Solnick (1998) concluded that “the correlation between gubernatorial outcomes and votes for presidential candidates or Duma parties in the oblasts is weak at best; the association with economic conditions in the regions is almost nonexistent” (pp. 48-9).

Of course, it is possible to try to save the original interpretation of the geographic patterns in voting by appealing to the argument that the problem here lies with inadequacies in the data – the fundamental difficulty of assessing the economic impact of policy in a society that remains poorly structured for gathering the requisite economic measures, except perhaps at the highly aggregated regional level. Just as the concept of employment is at best undefined or vague in Russia today, the meaning of financial statistics, official or otherwise, is questionable in a society in which pensions and salaries are unpaid and in which money leaves previously few footprints owing to the nonexistence of viable banking and tax systems, and the prevalence of barter as a means of exchange.

The fact that Zyuganov’s (or, equivalently, Yeltsin’s) vote correlates only imperfectly with %urban suggests, of course, that many other variables – economic, cultural, sociological – are required to explain Russian voting patterns and that %U is at best an imperfect indicator of these variables.

“Although there is no doubt that urban-rural residence is a major consideration in the analysis of voting behavior in Russia, interregional differences in electoral choices suggest that a host of other influences shape the manner in which people vote” (Clem and Craumer 1997, p. 393). However, even if we accept this proposition and choose to pursue more careful measurement of the variables that %U indexes, we should also consider another hypothesis: namely, that the impact of these “other variables” is mediated
by regional and local political elites, in combination with whatever alliances they have formed with national political players.

First, much has been written about election fraud and the motives of regional and local officials to participate in electoral manipulations—especially in 1993, when approval of Yeltsin's constitution hung in the balance (see, for example, Myagkov and Sobyanin 1995, and Filippov and Ordeshook 1997), as well as in 1996 when, arguably, huge sums were spent to influence the loyalties of these officials in order to secure Yeltsin's second-round majority. Indeed, without entering into the debate over the extent and nature of fraud, we need only note here that election outcomes can be "influenced" in many ways, legal or otherwise, including disadvantaging an opponent's access to the media and using state agencies to mobilize voters for specific ends. Much has also been written about the particular form of Russian "democracy", in which "the weakness of central authority gives carte blanche to regional leaders" and allows those leaders to exert a powerful influence over the real or merely officially reported voting patterns of their constituencies (Lukin 1999, p. 104; see also Wedel 1996 and McFaul 1997, pp. 63-4).

That officials at sub-national levels of government have begun to learn to use the rules of "democratic" competition for their own purposes is evidenced by Solnick's (1998) observation that although only 16 incumbents were reelected in the 37 gubernatorial elections studied, 20 of 22 mayors of oblast capitals succeeded in securing reelection in the fall of 1996. Indeed, it does not even seem that all governors or gubernatorial candidates with ties to the "old regime" proved incapable of learning how to campaign to good effect. As McFaul and Petrov (1977) note, "strong-khozyain candidates won in 9 [of 14 pro-reform] regions ... [and] of the seven [controlled] regions in which incumbents ran, the Ust'-Orda Buryat Okrug was the only place where the incumbent lost" (pp. 522-33).

We cannot say whether the ability to use the new rules of political competition increased, decreased or remained constant between 1993 and 1996, or whether these officials were more or less likely to work for the reelection of national candidates and parties in 1996 versus, say, 1993. But in terms of trying to understand national voting patterns in national elections, it is foolhardy not to entertain the hypothesis that mayors, governors, or regional heads of industrial or agricultural enterprises were willing and able to influence vote returns in favor of others as well as themselves.
We emphasize that nothing we say here should be taken to mean that differential economic conditions are unimportant in explaining geographic voting patterns or that the urban-rural divide does not capture some of the variation in these conditions. Nor would we want to discount the possibility that this divide can be explained also by that old bugaboo of voting behavior—ideology and the learned predispositions of electorates to vote one way or another. It is certainly true that it is not only contemporary economic circumstances that vary between urban and rural regions, but also those life experiences that manifest themselves in things we call “political culture” and which are often a powerful explanatory parameter of politics.

Nevertheless, if we move to the extremes of possibilities, we can discern two hypotheses that ultimately need to be explored, reconciled or combined into one. The first is that Russia’s urban-rural cleavage is primarily a proxy for a variety of economic and cultural variables, and, in particular, a proxy for the perceived, realized or promised benefits of reform. The second hypothesis is that this cleavage is a proxy for the influence of regional and local political elites whose authority is centered in urban areas and who are most directly beholden, especially in 1995 and 1996 if we are to believe journalistic accounts of the campaigns, to the financial largesse of Yeltsin’s administration.

This, then, is the issue we address here: The extent to which urban-rural patterns of voting can be explained by the influence of regionally-centered political elites versus the extent to which we must continue to relegate the explanation of this pattern to ideas such as “proximity to reform” or “cultural differences”.

Some suggestive patterns

The first thing to note about Russia’s urban-rural divide is that conclusions about its relevance more often than not derive from a national examination of the data either by region or rayon. However, although the existence of this pattern is not an issue here, if we look within regions using rayon-level data, this correlation often disappears and sometimes even reverses sign. Of the 83 regions (2309 rayons) in our analysis (excluding Moscow, St. Petersburg, and four oblasts with unreliable rayon-level data such as Chechnya), the within-region correlation between %U and percentage of vote for Zyuganov...
(%Z) is positive in eleven cases, and its absolute value is a minuscule .2 or less in nine additional regions. Thus, in fully twenty regions—nearly one quarter of those studied here—the correlation is anything but significant (though having excluded Moscow and St. Petersburg, we have also excluded a significant portion of the national electorate upon which this generalization is based).

Of course, insignificant correlations or correlations with the wrong sign can merely indicate problems with the coding of variables. For example, the official coding used here equates a rayon that is mostly a small part of a large urban center but that includes some small nearby villages with a rayon that consists almost exclusively of a single remote town of say 30,000 people, even though the variables for which %U are assumed to be a proxy—the impact of reform or “latent ideology”—presumably assume different values in these two contrived examples. To get a handle, then, on these correlations in a slightly different way, let us take the suggestion of our example and compute the distance, DR, of a rayon (or, more properly, the distance of its geographic center) from the regional political center of which it is a part.

An initial analysis of the data using this distance variable is notably unpromising, which, perhaps, is one reason why it has not heretofore received the attention we subsequently argue it deserves. Specifically, limiting our analysis to those rayons within 200km of their regional center (thereby excluding Russia’s remotest regions), consider the following three regressions that have %Z as their dependent variable and that consider %U and DR separately and together.

\[
\%Z = 57.1 - .16\%U, \quad R^2 = .14 \quad (t=-17.51) \quad (1A)
\]

\[
\%Z = 44.84 + .06DR, \quad R^2 = .04 \quad (t=8.12) \quad (1B)
\]

\[
\%Z = 53.0 - .14\%U + .04DR, \quad R^2 = .16 \quad (t=-15.5) \quad (t=5.7) \quad (1C)
\]

Thus, in the aggregate at least, the variance explained ($R^2$) suggests that distance from a regional center contributes little to our understanding of voting patterns, at least when compared to %U.
However, suppose we now disaggregate the data and look within each region by computing two correlations for each region – between $D_R$ and Zyuganov's share of the vote ($%Z$), as well as between $%U$ and $%Z$. 

Figure 1 (at the end of this paper) portrays the pattern of these correlations, and, naturally, as a reflection of the urban-rural divide, the bulk of these joint correlations falls to the left of 0.0 on the horizontal axis. But notice that the upper and lower triangles formed by the two diagonal lines correspond to regions in which the absolute value of the correlation between $D_R$ and $%Z$ exceeds the absolute value of the correlation between $%U$ and $%Z$. And, as this figure shows, the absolute value of the first correlation exceeds that of the second in 37 (45%) of the regions. In other words, in nearly half of the 83 regions examined, the relationship between distance and vote for Zyuganov is "stronger" than the relationship between $%U$ and that vote. 

Aside from the general availability of $%U$ as a variable and the evident geographic pattern in voting between 1991 and 1996 that any map of Russia reveals, $%U$ is perhaps easier to understand and interpret than our measure of distance because, unlike the correlation between $%U$ and $%Z$, the correlation between distance and $%Z$ exhibits far less consistency in terms of sign. Ignoring the issue of statistical significance, only 11 correlations between $%U$ and $%Z$, as we note earlier, are of the "wrong" sign – in only eleven cases does Zyuganov's vote correlate positively with $%U$ – whereas fully 27 correlations are negative and 56 are positive with respect to the relationship between distance and $%Z$. That is, sometimes Zyuganov's vote increases as we move from a region's capital, and sometimes it decreases.\footnote{One might worry, of course, that $D_R$ and $%U$ correlate so that distance is merely an imperfect substitute for $%U$. However, the average correlation between these two variables is a paltry 0.01, and a graph of the correlation between $D_R$ and $%U$ versus that between $D_R$ and $%Z$ reveals no discernable pattern. Thus, we cannot say that the magnitude of the correlation between distance, $D_R$, and $%U$ implies anything with respect to the correlation between $D_R$ and Zyuganov's vote.} 

\footnote{There are assumptions, however, for which this contamination is inconsequential. For example, suppose a region consists of 3 rayons – the center, one rayon 1 unit of distance from the center, and one rayon 2 units of distance from the center. Suppose Yeltsin's vote declines by $X\%$ per unit of distance, so that for the three rayons in question he receives $Y$, $Y-X$, and $Y-2X$, respectively. The average, then, is $Y-X$, though here an argument can be made that what is "normal" is $Y-2X$ – Yeltsin's vote when the influence of the center is minimal. But notice that if these three rayons constitute our data set, then regardless of whether we normalize the vote in each rayon by $Y-X$ or by $Y-2X$.}
It is tempting, then, to take the correlations portrayed in Figure 1 -- in particular, the correlations between $D_R$ and $\%Z$ -- as evidence of the impact of factors other than the ones $\%U$ is presumed to suggest. In particular, it is tempting to immediately begin exploring these correlations as the fingerprints of the influence of regional political bosses -- where that influence sometimes benefits Zyuganov and at other times Yeltsin. However, the preceding analysis, by itself, cannot be used to dispute the importance of $\%U$ as the key proxy since distance from a rayon's regional capital is only one possible measure of the influence of an urban variable on voting patterns. A second possibility is to look at the distance of a rayon from any large city. So suppose we compute that distance for cities of various sizes -- specifically, for cities with a population that exceeds 1,000,000 ($D_1$); for cities with a population between 1,000,000 and 500,000 ($D_2$); and for cities with a population between 500,000 and 100,000 ($D_3$). If we now compute the regression

$$\%Y = a + bD_i$$

using our complete sample of 2,309 rayons, where $\%Y$ is Yeltsin’s second-round share of the vote in a rayon, we find that the coefficient $b$ is significant only for $i = 1$ -- only for cities of population greater than one million. This result, then, seems to run counter to any hypothesis about the influence of political centers per se. Instead, even though Yeltsin succeeded in carrying 86 of Russia’s 100 largest cities -- thereby cementing the urban-rural divide -- this result is consistent with the hypothesis that reforms have an influence beyond the borders of urban centers only for the largest centers. That is, the suggestion here is that the divide is absolute and gives little evidence of geographic contagion or the influence of local political bosses outside of their immediate geographic grasp.

**Refining our measures**

Before we accept this characterization of the data, however, we should note that the study of voting, both in the United States and elsewhere, reveals the importance of the concept of “the normal vote” -- the approximate allocation of votes across parties or the primary partisan contenders when short-term partisan forces are absent or are roughly balanced (for the seminal essay on this concept see...
Converse 1966). In American politics, for example, we are not surprised often when a candidate for US Congress, governor, or mayor wins with, say, 65% of the vote; instead, the events we deem noteworthy are those in which we can utter a statement such as “the first [Republican, Democrat] elected from that [district, state, city] in ... years.”

Of course, the concept of a “normal vote” is anything but precise or readily measurable, especially in Russia with its fluid (nonexistent?) party system. But consider the fact that despite the tumultuous changes between 1991 and 1996, voting patterns in Russia have been remarkably stable—a fact evidenced by the persistence of the urban-rural correlation across elections—and that the ebb and flow of votes is predictable and coherent (Myagkov et al 1997). The suggestion here, then, is that to explore the influence of such factors as an especially effective campaign, the exertions of a regional or local political boss, or the impact of proximity to reform, we should try to measure the deflection of vote shares from some norm.

If, to detect the influence of, say, a local political boss requires looking at, say, Yeltsin’s performance in the rayons near that boss’s home base relative to some measure of what is normal for that rayon, notice nevertheless that our analysis to this point (as well as all analyses of a similar type that precede ours) assumes, in effect, that what is “normal” for one part of Russia is normal for all other parts. That is, by looking simply at %Y or %Z and correlating these percentages with a variable such as %U, we are, in effect, taking the normal vote in each rayon or region to be the share of vote Yeltsin or Zyuganov receives nationally. But of the different assumptions we might make, this is the one that seems the least tenable. The more reasonable possibility is that this norm differs from region to region, depending on variations in regional characteristics—history, economic base, etc.

Of course, absent a long political history or well-defined partisan attachments among the electorate, it is difficult if not impossible to identify, let alone measure, what precisely we mean by a “normal vote”. However, as a first approximation to this idea, suppose we maintain the hypothesis that Russia’s regions differ in some fundamental way—that each region has its own “normal” vote—and that instead of looking at, say, Yeltsin’s absolute vote in a rayon, we look instead at that vote relative to the average vote in that rayon’s region. As imperfect as this measure might be (since the average is already
contaminated by the hypothesized influence of regional and local elites). Table 1 reports the results of the preceding regression (the coefficient for distance), substituting $%Y_{relative}$ for $%Y$ for all rayons within 50km of a city of size $X$, all rayons within 100 km, and so on, where $X = “cities greater than 1 million”; $X = “cities between 1M and 500,000”;$ and $X = “cities between 500k and 100,000.”$ It is evident from this table, then, that once we normalize our dependent variable, the effect of distance from an urban center on the vote persists, regardless of the size of that center; but that effect attenuates as we move further from the center. That is, a move of, say, 25 kilometers has a greater impact on Yeltsin’s relative vote if a rayon is “close” to an urban center than if it is “far” from one.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dist. (Km)</th>
<th>&gt;1,000 K</th>
<th>&gt;500K</th>
<th>&gt;100K</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;51</td>
<td>-.34</td>
<td>-.59</td>
<td>-.48</td>
</tr>
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<td>-.15</td>
<td>-.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt;201</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;251</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The specific relevance of Table 1, then, is not simply that the “influence” of an urban center diminishes as we move from that center, but that after normalizing Yeltsin’s vote, that influence exists for even “small” (less than one million) urban centers. With this in mind, then, if we return to the issue of the influence of regional political centers (big or small), Table 2 replicates Table 1 except that now we
use distance from each rayon’s regional center as our independent variable (of course, our sample sizes vary considerably among cells, since, if a region does not have a capital of, say, one million, it is not included in the first column of data, and by not considering rayons that are further than 250 km from a major metropolitan center. Table 1 eliminates rayons in the most remote regions of Russia).

Notice now that the effect of distance, though attenuated as we admit more remote rayons, persists for all cities and categories. That is, once we normalize our dependent variable – Yeltsin’s share of the vote relative to each region – the effect of regional centers can be detected for all such centers, large and small. In fact, there is no significant difference among coefficients as we move across a row – the impact of distance on Yeltsin’s vote relative to each rayon is approximately the same, regardless of the size of the city from which distance is measured.

### Table 2: Distance from regional centers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dist. (Km)</th>
<th>&gt;1,000 K</th>
<th>&gt;500K</th>
<th>&gt;100K</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;51</td>
<td>-.26</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>-.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;101</td>
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<td>&lt;251</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before we try to interpret or refine these results, however, because we have changed our dependent variable, we need to check once again to see whether or not distance is simply a proxy for %U. And here our results contrast sharply with the regressions reported in equations 1A-C. Looking
only at those rayons within 200km of a regional center (thereby again eliminating truly remote rayons or even whole regions), consider the following three regressions:

\[
\%Y_{\text{relative}} = 91.9 + .22\%U, \quad R^2 = .14 \quad (2A)
\]
\[
(t=10.67)
\]

\[
\%Y_{\text{relative}} = 113.21 - .13DR, \quad R^2 = .11 \quad (2B)
\]
\[
(t=13.8)
\]

\[
\%Y_{\text{relative}} = 102.6 + .18\%U - .10DR, \quad R^2 = .22 \quad (2C)
\]
\[
(t=15.9) \quad (t=11.6)
\]

Thus, once we normalize Yeltsin's vote, we see that distance from a regional center is neither a proxy for \%U nor an irrelevant variable, as it is in expression set 1A-C. Specifically, that distance has its own influence, independent of the degree of urbanization that characterizes a rayon – the variance explained by \%U alone plus the variance explained by distance from a regional center, DR, alone is nearly equal to that explained by \%U and DR together. So neither \%U nor DR are irrelevant to predicting variations in Yeltsin's relative vote; and neither is a substitute for the other – each appears to index or measure something different or differently.

**Simple economics or political bosses?**

To this point, of course, we have merely established that, in addition to \%U, distance from urban and regional centers is relevant to understanding voting patterns. But we have not yet addressed directly the issue of whether this relevance derives from proximity to reform or from the influence of political bosses – we cannot yet discount the possibility that distance, however measured, merely captures a

\[5\] To interpret the slopes and coefficients, all distances are measured in kilometers, and in the normalization of the vote, if \%Y in a rayon equals the average for that rayon's region, then the normalized value of \%Y_{relative} = 100.
feature of the socio-economic character of the Russian electorate that %U alone does not measure. Here, however, we can incorporate an additional hypothesis into our analysis – namely, if variations in Yeltsin's support as a function of distance from an urban or regional center are the consequence of political bosses headquartered in those centers, then that influence will end at regional borders. In contrast, if it is simple proximity to an urban center – to the presumed centers of reform – that matters, then we should observe no discontinuity in support as we move across regional boundaries.

To examine this hypothesis, let us first restrict our sample to those rayons that are within 125 kilometers of a city of more than 1,000,000 or a city with a population between 1,000,000 and 500,000, where that metropolitan area is in a region other than the one in which the rayon is located. For these rayons, then, we can compute two distance measures: the distance (\(D_R\)) of the rayon from the capital of its region and the distance (\(D_A\)) from this “alien” metropolitan area. The idea here, of course, is to assess which distance measure has the greater impact on voting patterns, and Table 3 reports the results of the following regression:

\[
\%Y_{relative} = a + bD_j
\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Alien Cities ((D_A)) versus Regional Centers ((D_R))</th>
<th>(a)</th>
<th>(b)</th>
<th>std. Error of (b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(&gt; 1M, D_R)</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.04 ((t=4.0))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(&gt; 1M, D_A)</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>+.12</td>
<td>.12 ((t=1.0))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1M - 500K, (D_R)</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>.04 ((t=4.0))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1M - 500K, (D_A)</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.09 ((t=.16))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The results here are striking. Specifically, it is the distance from the regional center and not simply from a large city that appears to account for Yeltsin’s declining support. Indeed, the influence of the closest “alien” metropolitan city has the wrong sign for this subsample of rayons when we look at cities with more than one million residents, and in neither case, in contrast to distance from a regional center, does the coefficient $b$ even begin to approach statistical significance.

The phenomenon that Table 3 summarizes is illustrated in Figure 2 (at the end of this paper). If we take a map of Russia and draw a nearly straight line from Smolensk Oblast, through the regions of Moscow, Vladimir, Nizhnii Novgorod, and finally through the republic of Marij-El (passing, as best we can, through each regional capital), we pass through 38 rayons (counting the city of Moscow and regional centers as unitary rayons). Figure 2 graphs Yeltsin’s second round share of the vote in each of these rayons (vertical lines correspond to boundaries between regions), and several things are apparent. First, except for the sharp rises in his vote at each regional center, Yeltsin’s vote declines nearly uniformly as we move away from Moscow. Second, Yeltsin’s vote for the most part declines within each region as we move away from the regional center. Third, and especially interesting from the perspective of our analysis, notice that with the exception of rayons #8 and 9 – the boundary between Smolensk and Moscow oblasts – boundaries are a discontinuity in terms of the direction of change. For example, as we move from the city of Moscow towards Vladimir oblast, Yeltsin’s vote declines. But immediately upon crossing the oblast boundary, his vote, though suffering a sharp drop, begins to increase as we approach the city of Vladimir, and then declines again as we move East.

Finally, and again with the exception of Smolensk and Moscow, political boundaries are points of discontinuity in terms of Yeltsin’s absolute vote. For example, though his vote declines between rayons 13 and 15 by only 3%, his share of the vote drops a full 12% as we cross into Vladimir. Similarly, across rayons 20, 21, 22, 23 and 24 – all in Vladimir oblast – Yeltsin’s vote declines a total of 14%, but then rises suddenly by 16% as we cross into Nizhnii Novgorod. These patterns are not perfect, but they do illustrate the summary statistical relationships reported in Table 3.
Conclusions

The analysis we offer here is not intended to deny the importance of the rural-urban cleavage in Russia's electoral politics, but rather to refine the interpretation of that cleavage. To this point that interpretation has relied largely on variables such as differentials in age, education and economic opportunities between rural areas and urban ones. There is, though, another variable that needs to be considered—the influence of regional and local political bosses on (officially reported) election returns. Our analysis, of course, is merely preliminary and begs for refinement. It assumes, implicitly, that all regional or local bosses “worked”, if they worked at all, for Yeltsin’s reelection in 1996. A more in-depth study would, naturally, try to differentiate between those regions or urban centers that sided with Yeltsin versus those that sided with Zyuganov. Notice, however, that our assumption, if inaccurate in some instances, would lead us to understate the impact of regional centers and, thus, we can suppose that that impact is even greater than is suggested here. The implication of our analysis, then, is that if we look at Yeltsin’s strength relative to what occurs overall in a region, then that strength depends on proximity not simply to a major urban area, but rather to that region’s political center.

Our analysis suggests, then, that at least a part of the “urban-rural” cleavage we see in voting patterns is not simply a consequence of proximity to reform or variation in the socio-economic variables commonly used to describe urban versus rural regions. Instead, at least a part of that cleavage appears to be the consequence of the influence of political bosses at a region’s center—bosses who, if we are to believe the journalistic evidence, were more often than not the beneficiaries of the financial largesse of Yeltsin’s presidential campaign. We emphasize that this interpretation of our analysis remains an hypothesis, and requires other evidence before we can place much confidence in it. Nevertheless, our analysis does suggest that geography matters, but perhaps not precisely in the way commonly assumed.
References


Figure 1: Correlation with % Zyuganov
Figure 2: Vote discontinuities illustrated