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Political cycles of media repression

BOFIT Discussion Papers
Editor-in-Chief Zuzana Fungáčová

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Abstract

We analyze media repression in Putin's Russia (2004–2019), a smart dictatorship that mimics democratic institutions, notably relatively free elections, and a relatively free press. Drawing on a unique granular dataset on journalist harassment and the pre-determined, staggered timing of local elections, we find evidence of strong political cycles of media repression. This media repression ahead of elections leads to a more favorable tonality of the news coverage of incumbents. Free press and free elections are temporally decoupled, thus disallowing them to work as effective accountability mechanisms. This secures dictator's power while upholding an image of competence and democratic rule.

Keywords: Authoritarian government, smart dictatorships, media repression, political election cycles, media tonality

JEL: D72, H10, P43

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Non-technical summary

FOCUS

Recent decades have witnessed the emergence of a new type of autocrat who manipulates information and creates an illusion of competence and effective leadership, unlike traditional autocrats who rely on brute force and repression. This is the essence of Guriev and Treisman's theory of 'informational autocrats' (Guriev and Treisman, 2019, 2020, 2022), yet, the micro-politics of media manipulation in informational autocracies are poorly understood. It is the concern of this paper. We focus on the case of targeted repression against journalists in pre-war Putin's Russia (2004-2019) and establish the existence of political cycles in media repression peaking around the local elections and their effectiveness in influencing media coverage.

CONTRIBUTION

The research aims to contribute to the literature by providing empirical evidence and insights into the dynamics of media repression in informational autocracies. Using a unique granular dataset on city-level incidents of journalist harassment and a staggered and exogenously pre-determined electoral calendar, we find that media repression intensifies in the months preceding local elections, thus establishing political cycles in media repression. Further, we document the disciplining effect of media repression on the journalists' community using a unique dataset on the coverage of news mentioning the incumbent.

FINDINGS

The research findings shed light on the cyclical nature of media repression in informational autocracies. The analysis reveals that media repression is significantly more prevalent in the period leading up to local elections, including various forms such as violent harassment, censorship, and detention. However, legal actions against journalists do not show a similar pattern, indicating a preference for repression that does not directly implicate the autocrats. The study also finds that repression is effective: an episode of repression before an election improves the tonality of the news mentioning the incumbent. The two key accountability mechanisms in democracies – (relatively) free elections and (relatively) free press are present in informational dictatorships but rendered ineffective as they are temporally decoupled: While in off-election periods, the media are relatively free, they are disciplined in times of election.

1   Introduction

Recent decades have seen the advent of a new type of 'smart' dictators, who rely on fabricating and maintaining an image of competence and problem-solving skills for securing power instead of applying brute force and open repression. Rather than instilling fear or propagating an ideology that justifies their rule, they convince the general public that they are effective leaders and the right choice. Unlike old-school dictators like Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Idi Amin, Kim Jong-un, or Mao Zedong, these new autocrats suppress opposition through carefully manipulated information and mimicking democratic institutions such as general elections and fairly free media, at least in the eyes of the general public. This is the essence of Guriev and Treisman's theory of 'informational autocrats' (Guriev and Treisman, 2019, 2020, 2022). Populist informational autocrats include Hugo Chavez, Alberto Fujimori, and Victor Orban – and Vladimir Putin prior to the Russian-Ukrainian war. With open repression regarded as an admission of incompetence and weakness, the challenges for the smart dictator are manipulating the media effectively while concealing it from the public eye and staging democratic-looking elections that legitimize the regime while securing a favorable outcome.

How exactly is this accomplished? This micro-politics of media manipulation in informational autocracies are not very well understood. It is the concern of this paper.

We study targeted repression against journalists in pre-war Russia, a prime example of informational autocracies (Frye 2021). We propose four hypotheses. We hypothesize that media repression is heavily concentrated on pre-election periods in order to discipline journalists in the period that matters for electoral accountability. In off-election periods media are expected to be relatively free in order to provide credibility to the media, including to their messages in election periods, and to give legitimacy to the incumbent political system. Second, we expect *media harassment to be more prevalent* before important elections (particularly gubernatorial elections), and less prevalent before less important elections, such as regional parliament or city council elections. Media repression can take different forms (violence, detention, criminal prosecution, censorship). We expect, third, those forms to dominate that show the least degree of traceable government involvement in order to maintain the image of a legitimate rule. Lastly, we expect media repression to be effective: an attack on a journalist would lead to more favorable media reports on the incumbents. In short, we expect political cycles of media repression to exist and to translate into political cycles in the tonality of media messaging.

Focusing on subnational elections, we employ a novel, detailed dataset on city-level incidents of media harassment over the past 16 years with monthly frequency. Our estimation

strategy takes advantage of a staggered and idiosyncratically pre-determined electoral calendar for local and regional elections. The findings confirm our hypotheses: media repression is significantly more prevalent in the three months preceding local elections. This pattern is observed for various types of media repression, including violent harassment, censorship, and detention by the police. It is not observed for legal actions against journalists, supporting the hypothesis that electoral autocrats prefer types of repression that do not implicate them directly (Guriev and Treisman, 2019). We also find that high-stakes elections for the executive position at the regional level (governor) or city level (mayor) produce cycles at a higher rate than elections for regional legislative bodies. Local elections of minor importance, such as elections for city council representatives, do not cause a statistically significant increase in media repression.

We also demonstrate the disciplining effect of media repression on critical press coverage using a novel monthly media tonality index of regional governors based on the news coverage of over 67,000 traditional and online news media.We find that an episode of media repression in the months before the governor's election significantly increases the positive news coverage of the incumbent. This finding suggests that the repression of a single media outlet or journalist can send a powerful signal to the journalist community, coercing them to provide more favorable coverage of the incumbent before the election.

This paper speaks to several strands of the literature. Foremost, it is related to the business-cycle literature (PBC, Nordhaus, 1975; Rogoff, 1990; Shi and Svensson, 2006). While the PBC literature largely deals with incumbents seeking to influence voter perceptions about their competence by manipulating the real economy, we focus here on media manipulation to influence perception. While the incumbent may share a similar motivation, the institutional setup is different: such media manipulation is particularly characteristic of autocratic regimes that rule by skillful propaganda and censorship.[1]

Our findings advance the literature on the political economy of non-democracies, specifically the informational autocracy theory of Guriev and Treisman (2019, 2020, 2022), by providing novel empirical evidence of information control – the targeted repression against the press – and by identifying its cyclical nature. Thus, we detail an essential governance technique of informational autocracies.

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[1] The availability of this instrument may explain why so little evidence of traditional PBC is found in autocracies (Grier and Grier, 2000).

We also contribute to the literature on determinants of violence and harassment against journalists. Earlier works focused on prime determinants of violence against journalists, such as corruption (Bjørnskov and Freytag, 2016; Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez, 2018), regime duration (Solis, 2020), and major internal conflicts (VonDoepp and Young, 2013). Carey and Gohdes (2021) show that there are more journalist killings in democracies, especially in those that devolve substantial powers to local governments.[2] We focus on subnational elections as a major determinant of violence against the media and are able to identify the cyclical nature of this violence due to the asynchronous and exogenous timing of local elections. Thanks to our unique data set, we can disaggregate the analysis by type of election and type of harassment.

Finally, our results on the disciplining effect of media repression on news coverage add to the literature that explores the various forms of state manipulation in news reporting. These include state-sponsored advertising (Di Tella and Franceschelli, 2011), defamation legislation (Stanig, 2015), and physical violence against journalists (Salazar, 2019).

The discussion is organized as follows. Section 2 describes theoretical considerations and sets forth our testable hypotheses. Section 3 introduces the data on media repression and local elections in Russia. Section 4 presents the main results for political cycles. Section 5 investigates the disciplining effect of targeted media repression on news coverage. Section 6 concludes.

2   Theoretical considerations and hypotheses

Smart dictators base their rule on popularity created by an image of competence and pseudo-democratic institutions, which mimic real democracies. This approach allows them to increase approval while projecting the appearance of a relatively free press and honest general elections. Open acts of repression undermine this image and thus their rule. A similar problem emerges when institutions are revealed to be phony and manipulated. While maintaining the image of competence and relative freedom, dictators need to effectively suppress opposition and consistently secure electoral victories.

Key to their rule is to maintain two democratic institutions, at least in principle, but to temporally decouple them so that they never function as an effective accountability mechanism. The media enjoy a degree of freedom during off-election periods which provides them with some

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[2] Only Mazzaro (2020) looks at elections as a motivation for violence against media. He finds a positive correlation between the intensity of electoral competition and violence against the media in local elections in Venezuela. Because the elections studied are synchronous, his analysis is correlational rather than causal.

credibility with the general public. They are, however, disciplined during election periods to ensure that the media signals support for the autocrat. This approach confers greater credibility on the media than if they are consistently suppressed. Media discipline is often achieved through selected harassment of journalists, which sends a clear message to the journalist community.[3] This gives us our first hypothesis:

H1: Journalist repression is cyclical and concentrated in the months prior to the election.

Since violence against journalists needs to be used sparingly to uphold the image of freedom and competence of the leader, journalist harassment is concentrated on the important local elections, i.e. elections to select municipal or regional leaders. This provides our second hypothesis:

H2: Cycles in journalist repression are much more pronounced for mayoral and gubernatorial elections than for elections for province parliaments or city councils.

Journalist harassment can take a variety of forms. Smart dictators likely prefer forms that do not implicate them directly. Violence and intimidation can be administered by thugs for hire. Censorship can be effected through firing or removal from editorial responsibilities by media owners. Neither approach directly implicates political leadership. In contrast, police detention and especially criminal prosecution directly involve the authorities, even if the charges are unrelated to the journalist's professional activities. The third hypothesis is:

H3: Cycles in repression are more pronounced for violence and censorship and less so for criminal prosecutions.

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[3] This argument solves the seeming puzzle of independent media being much more common in electoral autocracies than in other types of autocratic regimes (Stier, 2015). Holding autocratic elections shifts the political activity of the opposition and public to election times (Harish and Little, 2017; Knutsen et al., 2017) making the critical reporting between elections by an independent media relatively insignificant with regards to regime permanence.

Repression needs to produce its intended effect to make sense. Acts of harassment should result in a positive change in the tonality of the media reports on the incumbent and boost his/her popularity. As we have data on popularity only for governors, we formulate our last testable hypothesis as:

H4: The tonality of news coverage about the incumbent improves after an incidence of journalist repression.

3   Data

Russia provides an ideal setting for testing our hypotheses. Local elections are staggered and exogenously pre-determined, which allows for identifying electoral cycles. Russian monthly data allow us to look at media repression in high frequency and detect even short-lived cycles.[4] Moreover, we are able to use a unique dataset of journalist harassment that categorizes harassment by type. Finally, a unique measurement of the tonality of news coverage of regional governors enables us to test whether media repression has an effect on how favorable the media report on the incumbent and whether this translates to higher popularity.

3.1 Media repression

We measure media repression by leveraging a unique database that comprehensively covers cases of harassment of journalists in Russia and has been assembled by two major non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to protecting the professional rights of journalists and promoting press freedom.[5] The first is Russia's oldest human-rights NGO, the Glasnost Defense Foundation (GDF). The other is the Russian Union of Journalists (RJU), one of the largest journalist trade unions in Europe, with over 100,000 members. The large regional networks of GDF and RJU and the active involvement of the journalist community permit a continuous and complete collection of information about the incidents of media repression in all parts of Russia.[6] The data are available starting from 2004, which coincides with the time of the transition of Russia to electoral autocracy

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[4] Given that the official campaigning period is limited to two months, high-frequency data are essential for our analysis. Using high-frequency data, Akhmedov and Zhuravskaya (2004) identify sizable, but extremely short-lived, political budget cycles in Russian regions when the country was still a transitional democracy.

[5] The database is published online at http://www.mediaconflicts.org/.

[6] Journalists are likely to be motivated to report their cases as it may help them with crucial legal and other professional assistance from the GDF or RJU.

(e.g., Gill, 2006; Silitski, 2009; McFall, 2021). Our analysis thus covers the 16 years from 2004 to 2019. We exclude the subsequent coronavirus pandemic years as potential outliers.[7]

The primary units of the database are short stories describing incidents of violation of the professional or human rights of journalists or news media outlets. Importantly, the stories contain the exact date of the incident and location (primarily the city name).[8] Our data show that media repression in Russia is widespread. During our observation period, 4,801 stories (about 300 events a year) were reported. We exclude incidents in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as it is impossible to disentangle local and national politics in media repression in those cities. Instead, we focus on larger provincial cities (regional capitals and non-capital cities with populations over 100,000).[9] Our sample includes 167 cities, almost all of which (92 %) are the site of at least one incident of media repression.[10]

We aggregate the observations in each city by month, producing a balanced monthly panel dataset (N=32,064). We construct the main variable for media repression as a dummy that equals one if at least one incident has occurred in a given city and month. There are 1,828 non-zero observations, equivalent to 6 % of all observations. The dummy variable is our preferred choice since the severity of media repression across different episodes cannot be compared reliably. Moreover, most non-zero city-month observations (82 %) contain only one incident, while only 4 % of observations contain three or more incidents.

We improve on the previous research on media repression by differentiating among types of media repression. The database classifies all the incidents into eleven groups: 1) journalists' deaths (*N of incidents=27*); 2) physical attacks on journalists (*N=519*); 3) attacks on the office of media outlets (*N=7*); 4) physical threats (*N=256*); 5) censorship (*N=389*); 6) seizure of newspaper circulation (*N=108*); 7) lay-offs (*N=108*); 8) blocking of the website (*N=21*); 9) distributed-denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks (*N=40*); 10) detention by police (*N=444*); 11) criminal prosecution (*N=353*);. For our analysis, we group these into four broader categories: First, we identify the violent incidents, summing together physical attacks, threats, and deaths (groups 1–4). The category "*Violence*" is the largest group of incidents, with 723 non-zero month-city observations, suggesting

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[7] For example, Kofanov et al. (2022) show that the underreporting of COVID-19 mortality rates was tightly connected to regional politics.

[8] In a small number of cases, the location was identified more generally as a region or was missing. We do not include these cases in our analysis.

[9] There are very few incidents of media repression reported for small cities. This may simply reflect the scarcity of local news media.

[10] As is standard for subnational studies of Russia, we exclude the city of Grozny in the Chechen Republic (e.g. Schulze et al., 2016).

that violence against journalists is the primary tactic of press intimidation.[11] We expect this type of media repression to be particularly effective in signaling to the journalist community the heightened risk of critical news coverage.

The second category, "*Censorship,*" aggregates media repression episodes that aim to silence journalists by non-violent means. It comprises groups 5–9. There are 594 non-zero observations of censorship in our sample.

Finally, we are interested in media repression by public authorities, particularly the police and judicial system. We assemble two categories, "*Detention*" and "*Criminal Prosecution,*" which incorporate groups (8) and (9), respectively. Both types of media repression have a similar frequency in our sample, with 376 and 339 non-zero observations for *Detention* and *Criminal Prosecution*, respectively. The central distinction between the two categories is the involvement of the state power. Criminal prosecution is a public process that engages the entire legal system, including police, prosecutors, and judges, and, therefore, is more visible, while detention by the police is a minor and, thus, a less noticeable operation involving only a few police officers. According to the theoretical prediction of Guriev and Treisman (2019), autocrats prefer disguising their involvement in targeted repression. Thus, we expect to see no political cycle in criminal prosecutions against journalists (Hypothesis 3).

Similar to our primary measure, we construct a dummy variable for each subcategory that equals one only if the city-month observation contains an incident of the respective category.

3.2 Local elections

We collect data on all regular local elections from 2004 until 2019 from the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation. There are four types of regular local elections.[12] At the regional level, there are elections of the governor and the regional parliament, and at the city level, there are elections of the mayor and the city council. The elections for city councils and regional parliaments were held regularly every 4 or 5 years, depending on the local electoral legislation. Regional governor elections were replaced by a presidential appointment system in 2005, resumed in 2012, and have been held every five years since. Mayor elections were held regularly every 4 or 5 years in almost every city at the start of the period under investigation, but they were gradually replaced by an appointment system leaving only ten cities with direct mayor elections in 2019. The

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[11] It is worth mentioning that police in Russia often mischaracterize violence against journalists as "general street crime" and is notoriously incapable of solving these violent incidents (CPJ, 2009).

[12] We do not include local referenda as they are rare and issue-oriented.

gradual elimination of mayoral elections was potentially an endogenous decision. Recent research by Reuter et al. (2016) shows that mayoral elections only continued in the cities with strong political machines of the local elites (i.e. less contested elections). Given that highly contested elections often requiring political manipulation were eliminated, our estimates likely understate the actual persistence of the media repression cycle for this type of election. Additionally, the availability of political appointments of governors and mayors in our timeframe allows us to use them as a placebo treatment as critical reporting is unlikely to sabotage the appointment. We present the frequency of local elections by year in the Appendix, Figure A.1.

Our estimation strategy takes advantage of the exogenous timing of local elections in Russia, which uses an established, staggered electoral calendar. The calendar is the product of an administrative reform introduced in the early post-Soviet period that enabled sub-national units to introduce local elections on an ad hoc basis. In the case of governor elections, the calendar endured the introduction of the appointment system and the subsequent re-introduction of elections: appointments took effect at times when elections were previously held (Sidorkin and Vorobyev 2018), and when elections resumed after 2012, they again followed the traditional, idiosyncratic schedule. The timing of each election within the year is pre-determined by a "single voting day," a day reserved for holding local elections for all the subnational units where elections are due.[13] The use of a single voting day eliminates concerns about local elites' strategic maneuvering of electoral timing.

Finally, Russian local elections have a relatively short pre-electoral period. The announcement of the election and registration of the candidates may not commence earlier than 100 to 90 days before the voting day.[14] Thus, we expect the media repression cycle to manifest within this three-month interval.

3.3 Tonality of news coverage

We employ a tonality index of press reporting about regional governors assembled and published by Medialogia, a leading Russian news monitoring agency, to test whether media repression enhances the favorability of news reporting before the governor's election. The index is a monthly

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[13] The "single voting day" concept was legislatively introduced in 2005. Initially, the second Sunday in March and the second Sunday in October were designated as election days for all due elections. Since 2012, voting has been limited to a single day, the second Sunday in September. In 2016, the date was moved to the third Sunday in September.

[14] Local electoral regulations govern whether it is 100 or 90 days before the election.

measure based on the daily monitoring of over 67,000 sources of registered mass media sources, including national and local TV channels, newspapers, websites, radio, and blogs. The monitoring automatically identifies each news piece mentioning the name of each regional governor, weights it by the size of the potential audience (e.g. newspaper readership, TV viewership, or approximate views for the website or a blog), and categories it as a positive or a negative depending on the tonality. As a result, each news item is assigned a value of -1000 to +1000, where the higher value indicates higher favorability of the news item. The tonality index is a sum of the values of all individual news pieces over one month that we divide by 1000 for convenience.[15] The index is available for all regional governors for the years 2017–2019.

Additional to the tonality data, Medialogia also releases the monthly number of news mentions, allowing us to estimate the effect of repression on the volume of news coverage mentioning the incumbent. If the tonality improves, but the volume of mentions falls, we might interpret the result as a silencing effect on the journalist community; however, if the volume remains constant or increases with the increased tonality, we would interpret this as a disciplining effect of the repression on journalists' coverage.

4 Empirical approach and results

4.1 Main results

Our estimation strategy follows the approach commonly used in the political business cycle (PBC) literature, including Akhmedov and Zhuravskaya (2004), the only other study on PBC in Russia.[16]

We estimate the change in the risk of the incidence of media repression using a modified Poisson regression with high-dimensional fixed effects and standard errors clustered at the regional level (Correia et al., 2020).[17] The estimation equation is:

$$Y_{it} = \sum_{j \in \{-12;12\}} a_j \, Election_{jit} + \beta \, (L) Y_{it-1} + \tau_t + \lambda_{is} + \varepsilon_{it} \,, \qquad (1)$$

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[15] The methodology of the index is available at Medialogia website:
https://www.mlg.ru/about/technologies/#mediaindex

[16] We improve upon the approach of Akhmedov and Zhuravskaya (2004), who also use monthly data, in several aspects. First, we focus on cities rather than on regions, and thus on more numerous, and more fine grained entities, and cover period twice as long. Second, we investigate the effect of all types of local elections and not only governor elections. Third, and most important, we can treat the timing of elections as truly exogenous due to a fixed single-voting day that had not yet been introduced in the period investigated by Akhmedov and Zhuravskaya (2004).

[17] Modified Poisson regression is a preferred estimation technique for correlated binary data with a large number of clusters and high-dimensional fixed effects (e.g. Zou and Donner, 2013). The alternatives – the logistic regression and linear probability models – produce quite similar results.

where *i* and *t* identify cities and time in months, respectively; Y_{it} is the occurrence of media repression in a city-month; $Election_{jit}$ is a dummy that equals one if *t* is *j* months away from elections (*j* equals one in the month of the election, takes negative values before the elections, and positive after); τ_t is a full set of time fixed effects, one for each month *t*; λ_{is} is a dummy for each of the twelve calendar months in each city that accounts for city-specific seasonality and city-specific fixed effects. We include the lag polynomial of the dependent variable, $\beta(L)Y_{it-1}$, to account for autocorrelation (where *L=5*).[18]

We present our main results in Figure 1 by plotting the coefficients for the election month and twelve months before and after the election. We find a large and statistically significant electoral cycle before local elections: media repression is more than one-and-a-half times more likely in the month of elections and one month before. The magnitude is also remarkable. The average risk of a journalist or a media outlet being harassed, which is about 5.7 % in any given month, increases to 9 % before elections. Thus, our results support the first hypothesis.

4.2 Cycles by type of repression

We disaggregate journalist harassment by type and present the results in Figure 2. We observe sizable electoral cycles for "*Violence,*" the largest category of media repression (Panel A). A significant increase in the risk of violence against journalists is observed in each of the three months of the pre-electoral period, in line with our expected cycle length, since the election period officially starts about 80 to 100 days before election day. Violence against journalists in Russia is already quite frequent, with a roughly 2.3 % risk of occurring in a given city in an average month. That risk rises to almost 4 % in the pre-election period.

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[18] The optimal number of five lags is calculated using the Akaike criterion. We use this number of lags for all specifications for the sake of uniformity, but changing the number of lags to the optimal for other estimations separately does not affect the results.

Figure 1. Political cycles of media repression

Dependent variable: Incidence of media repression
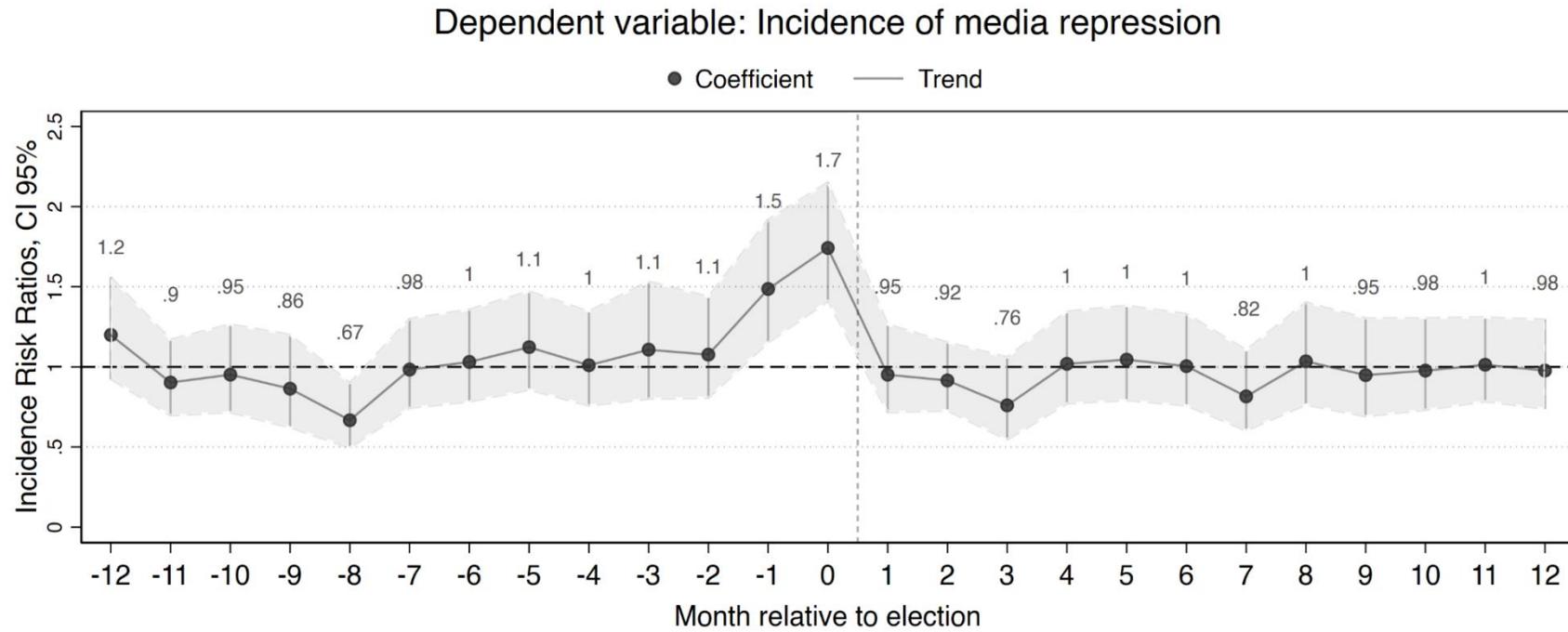
Note: Coefficients represent incidence risk ratios with CI 95%. Modified Poisson regression with mitlidimensional fixed effects includes time FE and city-calendar month FE. Robust SE are clustered at the region level.

"*Censorship*" is our second most common category of media repression, with an incidence risk of 1.9 % in an average month. In Panel B, we see positive and significant coefficients for the election month and one month before the elections, a nearly two-fold increase in the risk of a journalist being actively silenced.

Media repression for both categories, "*Detention*" and "*Criminal Prosecution,*" requires direct involvement of law-enforcement authorities to some degree. Detentions are carried out mainly by police, while legal actions against journalists also involve judges and prosecutors. Following Guriev and Treisman's (2019: 102) hypothesis that autocrats seek to camouflage state involvement in targeted repression, we expect political cycles in both categories to be less prominent. The estimation results are presented in Panels C and D for "*Detention*" and "*Criminal Prosecution,*" respectively. We find a statistically significant but relatively short-lived electoral cycle for police detentions of journalists. The risk of being detained increases from 1.2 % to 2.5 % only in the election month. In contrast, the risk of criminal prosecution for journalists is not statistically different in the pre-electoral period compared to an average month.

In sum, cycles are more pronounced for forms of repression with less discernible government involvement. This finding supports our third hypothesis.

Figure 2. Political cycles by type of the repression
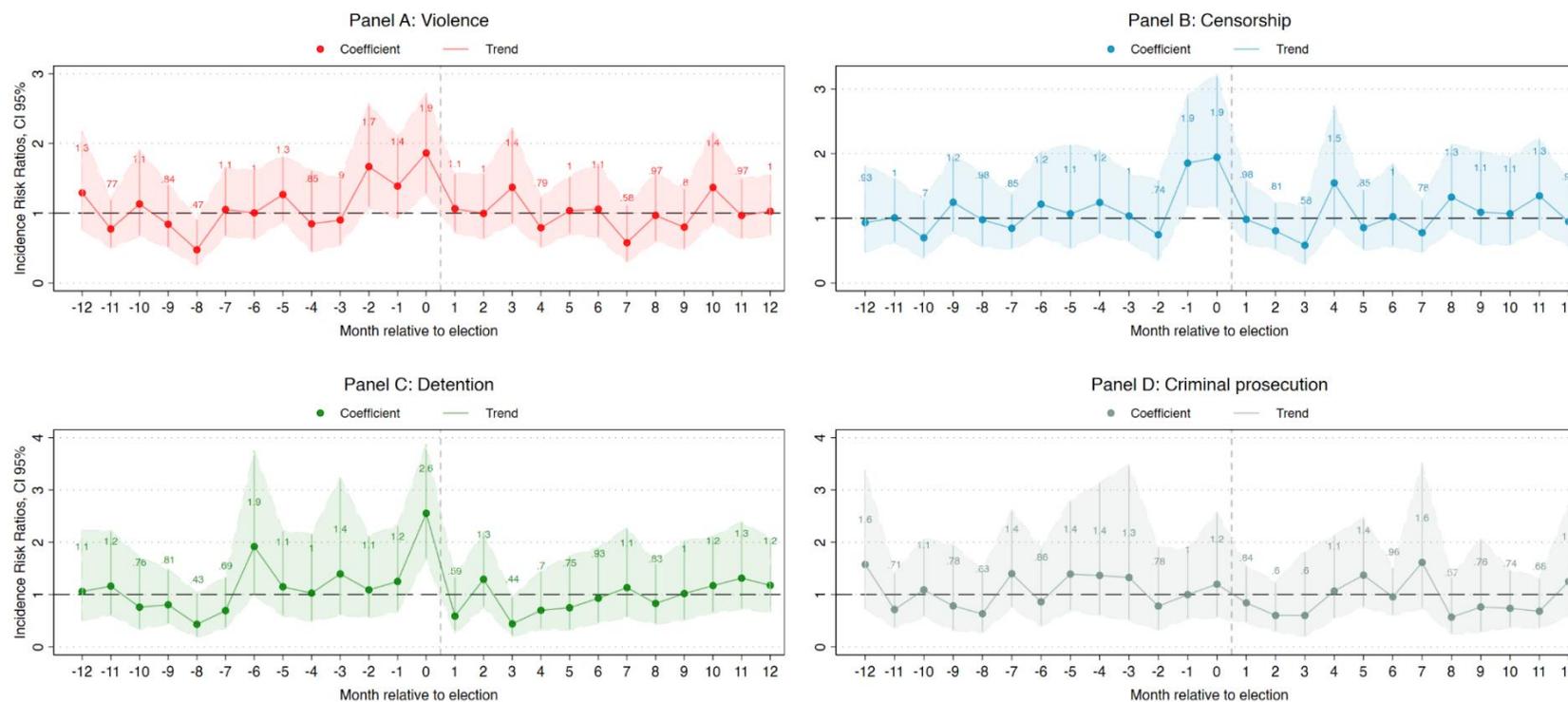
Note: Coefficients represent incidence risk ratios with CI 95%. All regressions include five lag-polinomial, full set of time dummies and fixed effects for each city-calendar month. Robust SE are clustered at the region level.

4.3 Cycles by election type

We next investigate whether the type of election matters. We modify the estimation equation (1) by substituting the monthly dummies for the occurrence of any local election with the dummy variables for the pre-electoral period (3 months, including the election month) for the four types of local elections. We also add similar dummy variables for three months before the appointments of mayors and governors where applicable. This gives the following equation:

$Y_{it} = \beta \, Governor \, election_{it} + \gamma \, Mayor \, election_{it} + \delta \, Regional \, parliament \, election_{it} +$
$\zeta \, City \, council \, election_{it} + \eta \, Governor \, appointment_{it} + \mu \, Mayor \, appointment_{it} +$
$\beta \, (L)Y_{it-1} + \tau_t + \lambda_{is} + \varepsilon_{it} .$ (2)

We continue to employ a modified Poisson regression with multidimensional fixed effects, five lag-polynomial, and standard errors clustered at the regional level.

Figure 3 presents the estimation results. Elections for the governor and mayor executive positions display the most pronounced political cycles.[19] The likelihood of media repression rises by 48 % and 72 % in the three months before the gubernatorial and mayoral elections, respectively. These political cycles occur in violent incidents, censorship, and detentions by the police but not in criminal prosecutions (just as for the aggregate figures). When we look at the effect of mayor and governor appointments as a placebo test, we find no such pattern as the bottom panel of Figure 3 demonstrates.

Elections to regional parliaments produce statistically significant political cycles in media repression as well, but on a smaller scale and almost exclusively limited to violent repression. These elections are still important for the ruling elite, of course, as winning elections provides significant monetary and political benefits. Nevertheless, these benefits have to be shared among a large set of participants, which likely explains the relatively small size of the cycle.

The coefficients for city council elections slightly exceed one but are never statistically significant. These elections are of minor importance since the political power in a city council is not only shared among council members but is also relatively marginal. As expected, we find no political cycles in such cases. Overall, political harassment cycles are more pronounced for top

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[19] As some of the mayors' and governors' elections were early elections for various reasons (e.g., the death of the incumbent), we performed a robustness check by excluding those observations. Our results remained largely unaffected (available on request).

official elections (governors and mayors) than in regional parliament elections, as governor and mayor are more important positions. This finding supports our second hypothesis.

Figure 3. Political cycles by type of local election
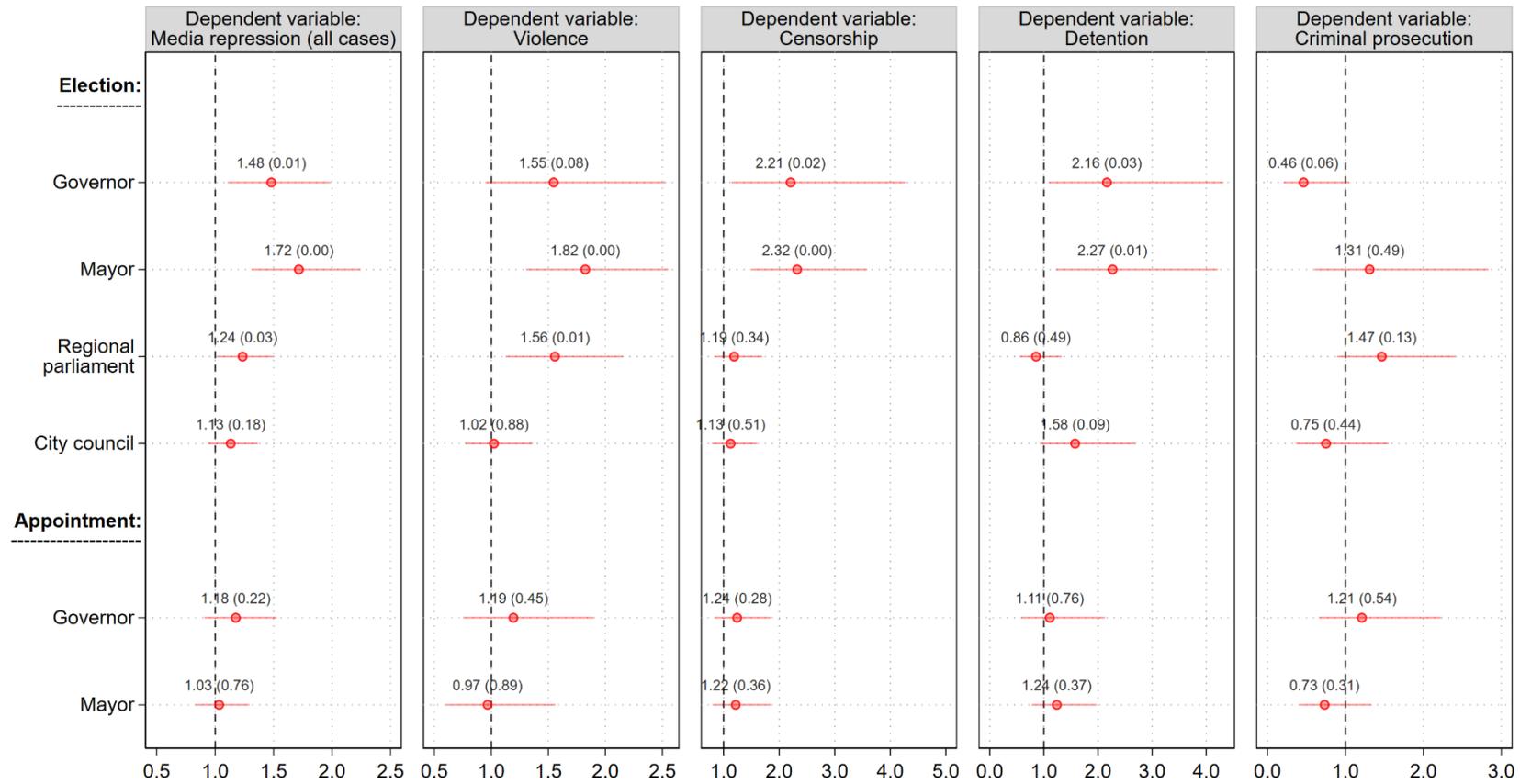
Note: Coefficients represent incidence risk ratios with CI 95%; p-values are in parenthesis. Independent variables are dummies that equal one in the election month and two preceding months. All regressions include five lags, full set of time dummies and fixed effects for each city-calendar month. Robust SE are clustered at region level.

5   The disciplining effect of media repression during election periods

Does media repression positively affect how the local press reports on politicians during an election period? More frequent harassment before elections would make little sense if it was ineffective; therefore, its persistence suggests that media harassment works. We test repression effectiveness directly by employing a novel monthly dataset on the media popularity of the regional governors. The data are available for 2017 to 2019, during which 51 out of a total of 79 regions held gubernatorial elections, with 17 (33 %) of those elections preceded by at least one episode of media repression in the three pre-electoral months. Thus, we can analyze how media repression in the pre-electoral period influences news reporting by the press. The timeframe also includes 24 regional parliamentary elections, 7 (23 %) of which were preceded by media repression during the three months before the election day. We include them in our analysis as a placebo test since media repression associated exclusively with parliamentary elections should not affect the tonality of news reporting about the governor.

We estimate tonality and media reporting using OLS with monthly regional data and robust clustered errors. As before, our estimation includes a full set of time dummies, city-calendar month fixed effects to account for city-specific seasonality, and a five lag-polynomial to account for autocorrelation. The estimation equation is:

$$Y_{it} = \beta\ Governor\ election_{it} + \sigma\ Regional\ parliament\ election_{it} +$$
$$\mu\ Media\ repression_{it} + \eta\ Governor\ election_{it} \times Media\ repression_{it} +$$
$$\zeta\ Regional\ parliament\ election_{it} \times Media\ repression_{it} + \beta\ (L)Y_{it-1} + \tau_t + \lambda_{is} + \varepsilon_{it}\ , \quad (3)$$

where Y_{it} is either the tonality index or the number of mentions of the governor in the news (see Section 3.3) in each region i and month t; $Governor\ election_{it}$ and $Regional\ parliament\ election_{it}$ are dummies that equal one in the respective election month and two months before that. The interaction of media repression with a period before governor elections is our variable of interest as its positive coefficient would confirm the existence of the disciplining effect of media repression on reporting. At the same time, the interaction of media repression with the pre-electoral period for regional parliament elections is a placebo treatment because the spillovers of media repression prior to these elections should not affect press reporting about the governor.

The estimation results are plotted in Figure 4. Unsurprisingly, the tonality of press reporting about the governor increases significantly in the three months before the governor's election day:

by 9.4 points or about 29 % of its mean value (left panel of Figure 4). The elections to regional parliaments slightly decrease the tonality index, with the effect being statistically significant at the 10 % level. In normal times, media repression is negatively associated with the tonality of press reporting about the governor, potentially suggesting unfavorable reporting itself to be a factor driving the repression. In the pre-electoral period, media repression coincides with a large increase in how favorably the media report about the governor. The magnitude is almost the same as the increase due to upcoming elections. In other words, repression doubles the positive effect of the campaign period on the tonality of press reporting. As expected, repression before regional parliamentary elections has no effect on the tonality index in the news concerning the governor.

Notably, the number of news items mentioning the governor does not change following incidents of media repression - not for gubernatorial or for regional parliamentary elections, and not outside election times (right panel of Figure 4). As expected, the governor gets more media coverage during the election period.

Our findings confirm the fourth hypothesis: media repression of journalists in the pre-election period improves the tonality (but not the quantity) of media reports. This improvement in tonality translates into higher levels of electoral support and higher approval rates for the governor, as shown in Figure 5. The abscissa depicts the tonality index, which measures the relative improvement in tonality in the pre-election period and is defined as the average tonality in the election month and the two months preceding it divided by the average tonality over the entire period (in percent). Panel A demonstrates that a larger improvement in tonality is associated with a larger vote share of the winning incumbent – the stronger the media are disciplined, the better the electoral outcome.[20] In Panel B, we construct a regional estimate for governor approval by utilizing nationally representative opinion surveys conducted monthly by the Levada Center, a well-established independent polling organization in Russia. Specifically, we generate a pre-election approval rating by aggregating the share of positive responses to the question "Do you approve of the performance of your regional governor?" from all respondents in the region surveyed during the election month and the two preceding months. This approval rating is then plotted against the pre-electoral improvement in tonality, again demonstrating a pronounced positive relationship.

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[20] Even though electoral fraud seems to be wide-spread (Myagkov et al., 2005; Enikolopov et al., 2013; Harvey, 2016; Skovoroda and Lankina, 2017), so that technically incumbents may not have to rely on disciplining the media they will find favorable news advantageous as it creates an appearance of broad-based support and makes electoral victory more credible which is essential in a smart dictatorship.

We conclude that, in short, journalist harassment is effective as it coerces the press into favorable reporting in a manner that leads to better electoral results and higher public approval for incumbents.

Figure 4. The disciplining effect of media repression on press reporting
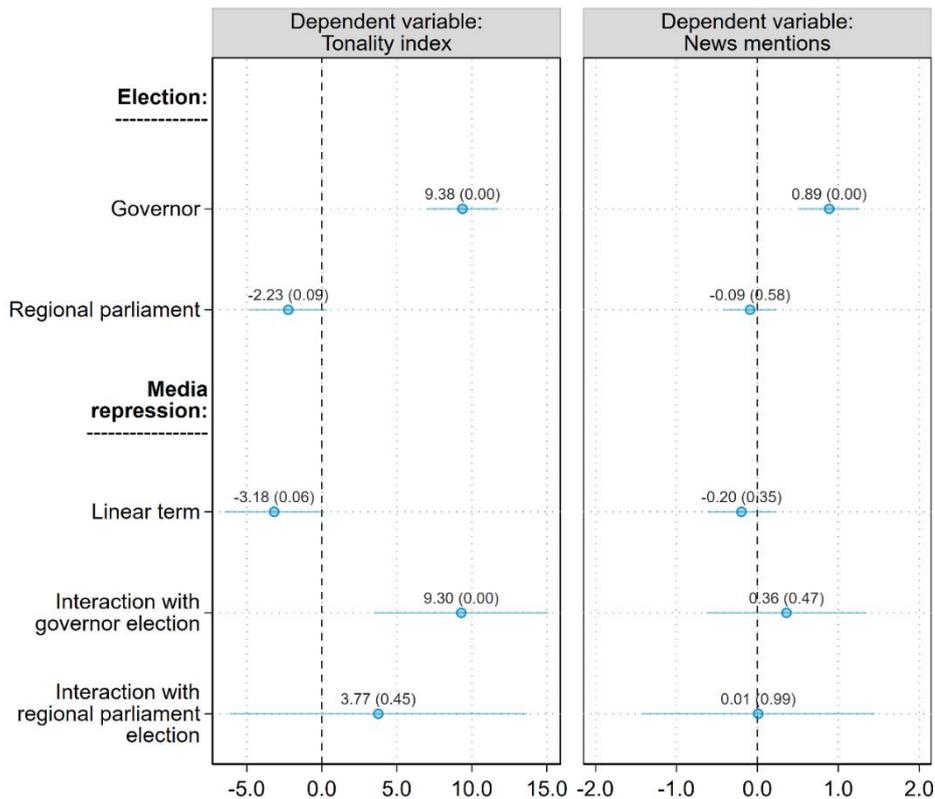
Note: OLS regression, CI 95%; p-values are in parenthesis. All regressions include five lags, full set of time dummies and fixed effects for each city-calendar month. Robust SE are clustered at region level.

Figure 5. Tonality of the press reporting and popularity of the governor in the elections
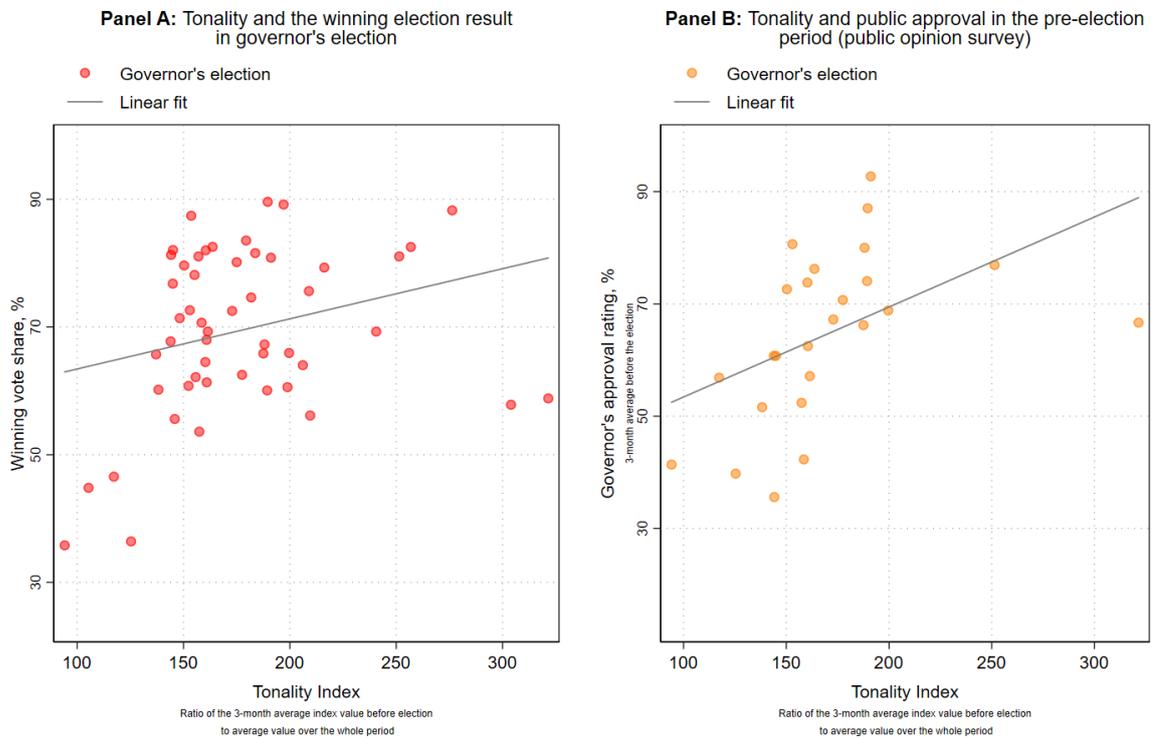
6   Conclusion

This paper focused on a central mechanism that smart dictators (*informational autocrats* in the terminology of Guriev and Treisman) use to secure their rule. In their pursuit of an image of competence and adherence to democratic principles, they allow two key elements of functioning democracies, a free press and general elections, to exist, just not at the same time. Through this temporal decoupling of critical institutions, smart dictators prevent these elements from working as effective accountability mechanisms. The press is allowed to function in relative freedom during off-election times, conferring credibility on reporting, but are closely monitored and effectively disciplined during election times. Critical voices are silenced during critical times.

As a consequence, we observe political cycles of media repression, which we establish empirically using rich data on the repression of journalists in Russian cities and taking advantage of the pre-determined, staggered electoral timing for identifying a causal effect of elections on media repression. Our results show a 1.5 to 3-fold increase in the risk of physical attacks on journalists, censorship, or detention by the police in the three months before the elections. This suggests that harassment of the press is not ad hominem but a strategic instrument used to coerce other journalists into refraining from critical reporting. We confirm this hypothesis by providing empirical evidence

that in the three months before governor elections, media repression is strongly associated with more favorable tonality in press reporting about the incumbent governor.

Our findings explain a recently observed seeming paradox of independent media being substantially more common in electoral autocracies (Stier 2015). During off-election times, relatively free media pose little threat to the smart dictator's rule. Quite the contrary, in fact, they provide a smokescreen that veils autocratic governance. When critical media potentially threaten during election times, they are effectively silenced.

Free press and free elections are essential ingredients of democratic systems, but they work effectively only in tandem.

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Appendix A

Figure A.1. Frequency of local elections in Russia.
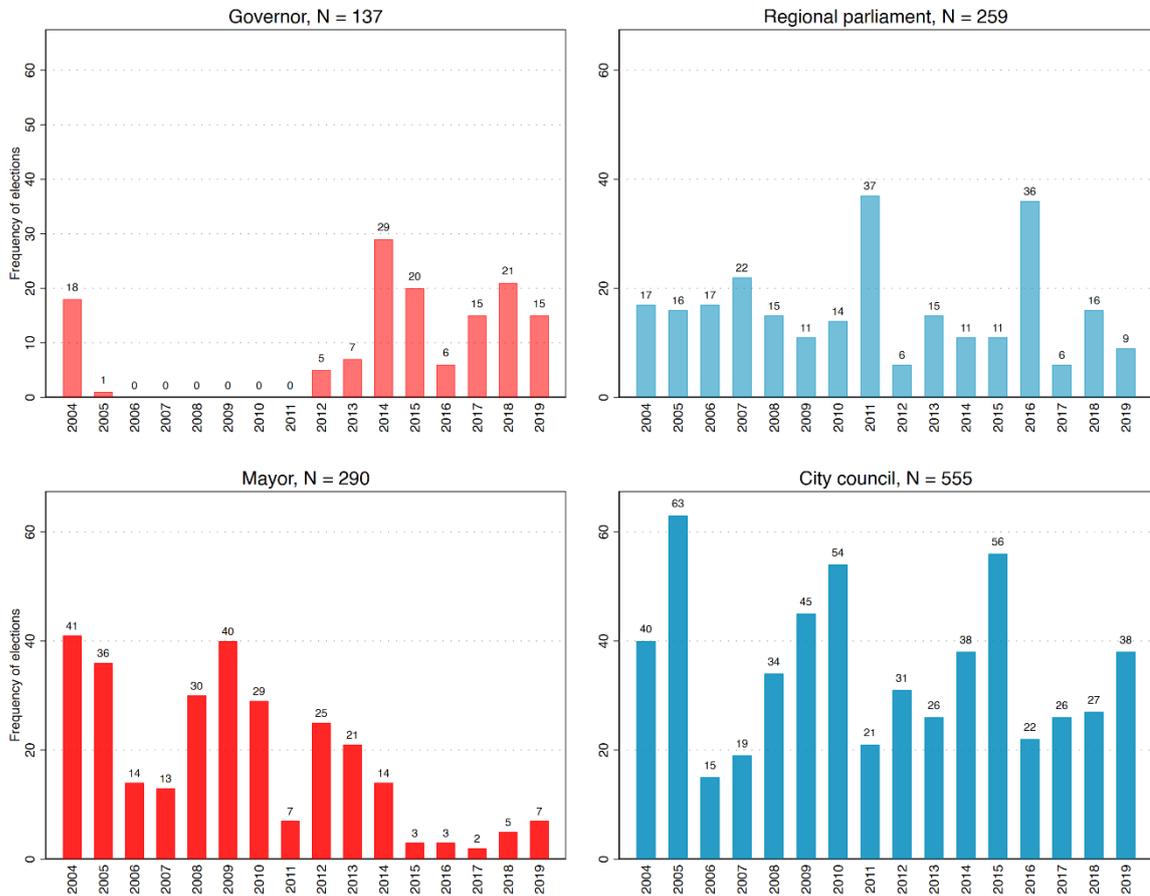
Note: *The figure reports the frequency of distinct Russian elections occurring by year. Hence, while the number of city-level elections coincides with the number of non-zero city-month observations for respective elections in the dataset, there are almost twice as many non-zero city-month observations for regional elections.*

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