

The Dynamics of Presidential Popularity in Post-Communist Russia:  
Cultural Imperative vs Neo-Institutional Choice?

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**Abstract**

Public support for Presidents Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin has fluctuated significantly over Russia's first post-Soviet decade. Cultural explanations for these dynamics emphasize the country's authoritarian culture and Russian preferences for strong and decisive leaders. Neo-institutional theories attribute the dynamics to citizens' everyday evaluations of presidential performance as the government succeeds or fails in meeting citizens' needs and demands. This paper tests competing cultural and neo-institutional theories of presidential popularity in Russia during the Yeltsin and early Putin years (1991-2000). We develop and estimate a series of political support models of Russian presidential approval including indicators hypothesized to reflect variously the impact of Russia's authoritarian culture and of citizens' assessments of political and economic performance. We find substantial support for elements of both cultural and neo-institutional theories of presidential popularity, but institutional theories with their emphasis on citizen's rational evaluations of political performance perform substantially better in accounting for fluctuations in the popularity of Russia's first two post-Soviet presidents.

## Introduction

Vladimir Putin scored a major triumph in the March 2000 presidential election, securing nearly 53% of the vote in a multi candidate field and avoiding a second-round runoff. A political unknown to most Russians just eight months earlier, Putin used his tenure as prime minister (August-December 1999) and strong backing from the political establishment to bolster his standing as President Boris Yeltsin's heir apparent. As acting President following Yeltsin's resignation, Putin enjoyed substantial initial public support which carried through his March election before declining modestly thereafter.

In contrast, Boris Yeltsin enjoyed virtually no popular support when he resigned the presidency in late December 1999. President Yeltsin dominated Russian politics for nearly a decade. He was twice elected President of the Russian Federation (RF) and used his influence to rewrite the Russian constitution, creating a system with extraordinary executive powers. Yeltsin made extensive use of those powers while presiding over the dismantling of the Soviet command economy and the establishment of market-oriented institutions. The economic transition was fraught with difficulties, however, and Yeltsin's tenure was marked by severe and enduring economic distress. Although Yeltsin came to power on a tide of popular enthusiasm comparable to Putin's, his popularity declined dramatically across his tenure. By the time of his resignation, popular support for Yeltsin had all but vanished and few regretted his departure from the political stage.

While the details of Putin's ascendance and of Yeltsin's rise and decline are well known and widely documented (Aron, 2000; Willerton, 2001), there is little systematic research and no agreement on the underlying dynamics of their fluctuating public support. Two principal theories compete as explanations.

**Cultural theories** of political support hypothesize that public attitudes toward political leaders in Russia are substantially conditioned, if not directly determined, by fundamental and enduring social and political values which are deeply ingrained in the Russian culture. From a cultural perspective, the ebb and flow of public support for post-Soviet, Russian leaders must be understood in the context of Russia's authoritarian political culture. Cultural theory interprets Yeltsin's and Putin's initial popularity as reflections of the public's nationalistic pride and its preference for strong leaders, especially in an environment of national decline and of political and economic disorder. Accordingly, Yeltsin's ascendance can be understood as a reflection of the public's embrace of his desire to promote a strong Russian Federation in the wake of

Gorbachev's failure to protect and preserve the Soviet Union. By contrast, Yeltsin's subsequent loss of support is interpretable through a cultural prism as a consequence of the public's increasing perception of Yeltsin as personally and politically weak and erratic. In similar fashion, Putin's initial public support can be interpreted from a cultural perspective theory as a product of his strong and decisive demeanor, especially in contrast to that of Yeltsin in his later years.

**Neo-institutional** theories of political support, by contrast, conceive of the dynamics of Russian presidential approval as a consequence of citizens' 'rational' everyday evaluations of presidential performance -- of public assessments of governments' (and government leaders') successes or failures in meeting the citizens' political and economic needs and demands. From this perspective, it is unnecessary to look beyond the success or failure of Russian presidents in providing peace and prosperity to account for variations in their public support. Thus, deteriorating domestic conditions, an economy in crisis, and a series of seemingly ineffectual foreign and domestic policies undermined Yeltsin's public standing over time. Similarly, Putin's initial popularity can be understood from a neo-institutional or choice theoretic perspective as a consequence of a strong upturn in the Russian economy and the citizens' increasing satisfaction with the national economy and their personal economic situations.

Of course, the cultural and neo-institutional perspectives are not as starkly opposed as they are sometimes portrayed. It is possible, even probable, that cultural values condition the criteria citizens use to evaluate performance (Eckstein, et al., 1998). For example, popular evaluations of economic performance may vary depending on a culture's relative aversion to inflation as compared to unemployment or its embrace of equality of opportunity as opposed to equality of outcomes. Conversely, citizens might rationally assess the performance of a president according to cultural criteria, for example assessing the success of a president's assertions of strength or the effectiveness of nationalist oriented policies. It also is possible for citizens to respond simultaneously to cultural imperatives and political evaluations, weighing one against the other, for example admiring a leader's strength while disapproving of his or her failure to restrain inflation. Nevertheless, the fundamental orientations of the two theoretical perspectives are distinct and provide substantially different understandings of the dynamics of presidential popularity. Cultural theory emphasizes the congruence between a president's image and actions on the one hand, and enduring cultural values and symbols on the other. It assumes that citizens reflexively support political leaders whose behavior is compatible with cultural imperatives. Neo-institutional theory, in contrast, focuses on policy outputs and

assumes that citizens evaluate the effects that a president's actions have, or are perceived to have, on individual and collective self-interest.

This paper tests competing cultural and neo-institutional theories of presidential popularity in Russia during the Yeltsin and early Putin years. Specifically, we develop and estimate a series of political support models of Russian presidential approval including indicators hypothesized to reflect variously the impact of Russia's authoritarian culture and of citizens' assessments of political and economic performance. To test the model we use time-series methods and aggregate data on presidential approval in Russia across the whole of Yeltsin's presidency and the first eighteen months of Putin's tenure. Although we find substantial support for elements of both cultural and neo-institutional theories of presidential popularity, choice theoretic explanations perform substantially better in accounting for fluctuations in the popularity of Russia's first two post-Soviet presidents.

### **Public Opinion in Russia**

Public opinion traditionally has been of little concern to students of Soviet politics.<sup>1</sup> Not only was the public excluded from any meaningful role in the selection of political leaders, but public sentiment was considered largely irrelevant to the power, prestige and political agendas of political leaders as well. The selection and survival of Soviet leaders depended on their support among a relatively small group of political elites and were almost wholly divorced from public acceptance or approval (e.g., White, 1990; Willerton, 1992). Post-Stalinist leaders were responsive to the preferences of the Communist Party establishment. The political authority of such leaders rested on the policy performance evaluations of a small circle of elite decision-makers and was not a matter of public sentiment (e.g., Bunce, 1981; Breslauer, 1982).

With the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev, a series of important changes in Soviet/Russian politics began to transform the role of public opinion (Brown, 1996). Recognizing public opinion as a potential ally in his efforts to reform the Soviet system, Gorbachev introduced a series of measures opening at least some aspects of the political system to public involvement. The logic of perestroika was grounded in glasnost and dependent upon the manipulation of these bottom-up pressures. Although Gorbachev initiated these changes, Yeltsin proved especially adept at exploiting them. As President of Russia, Yeltsin used his public standing to pressure the

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry Hough (1979) was one of the few to give any serious attention to public opinion in Soviet Russia; even the more sophisticated Soviet politics texts generally ignored bottom-up public pressures in the Soviet system (e.g., Barry and Barner-Barry, 1987).

opposition-controlled Duma or to bypass it and appeal directly to the public, as in the 1993 constitutional referendum.

While public opinion may not loom as large in Russia as in many Western democracies, there is no denying its increasing salience for contemporary Russian politics. Competitive elections are now an accepted feature of Russia's political landscape, having removed a number of once well-ensconced incumbents and brought into the public limelight unknown and even fringe elements. Bottom-up pressures are felt increasingly by Russian policy makers as well. Recognizing this, Russian politicians have quickly adapted, learning to use public opinion to their advantage (Treisman, 1996). It is against this backdrop, then, that we seek to understand the dynamics of popular support for the Russian president.

### **Culture, Choice, and Russian Presidential Approval**

Machiavelli observed that "a people that has been accustomed to living under a prince preserves its liberties with difficulty, if by accident it has become free" (cited in Alexander, 2000: 176). Considerable scholarship has focused on Russia's political culture emphasizing, in particular, the authoritarian character of Russian values and institutions. Given its thousand-year history of authoritarian rule with only fleeting, quasi-democratic interludes, it is not surprising that Russia's political culture is characterized by numerous authoritarian strands including (1) a preoccupation with order, stability, and predictability (White, 1979), (2) a commitment to a strong state and autocratic decision-making (Tucker 1971; Brzezinski, 1989), (3) a belief in strong leaders (Inkeles and Bauer, 1959; Pipes, 1974), (4) low levels of popular political efficacy (Smith, 1991; Wyman, 1997), and (5) limited participatory expectations (Lempert, 1993). Additionally, Russia's culture is said to be naturally collectivist, passionately nationalistic, and rabidly anti-Western (Joyce, 1984).

The persistence of Russia's authoritarian culture across a variety of past political systems is well documented (Keenan, 1986; Fitzpatrick, 1994; Hoffmann, 1994; Aron, 1995; Viola, 1996). While the past decade has witnessed the elimination or transformation of many Soviet period structures, replacement structures are not fully in place (Fish, 1995) and the democratic character of new institutions is subject to dispute. In the midst of a chaotic and still incomplete transformation, it is not surprising that Russian citizens overwhelmingly embrace order and stability (Bova, 1998: 185).<sup>2</sup> Public opinion aside, some argue that the "logic" of the

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<sup>2</sup> According to VCIOM surveys conducted repeatedly between 1991 and 1995, when Russians are asked, "what is more needed for our society now, order or democracy," more than 75% consistently

post-Soviet system is strongly grounded in the continuing state-led organization of societal interests that was so prominent in the authoritarian past (Fish, 1994). Other research documents the persistence of deeply-rooted symbols of authority patterns in post-Soviet political arrangements (Anderson, Chervyakov, and Parshin, 1995).

Although the authoritarian character of Russian culture is widely accepted, there is evidence of the existence of more liberal, democratic strands in the culture as well (Gibson, 1997). Some argue that there have always been important elements of a democratic culture in Russia (Petro, 1995), and studies of the late Soviet and immediate post-Soviet periods have revealed both nascent democratic attitudes (Bahry, 1987; Hahn, 1991) and mounting participatory pressures associated with the country's political changes (Roeder, 1989; Gibson, Duch, and Tedin, 1992). Over the past decade, the continuation of these pressures, reinforced by the impact of nearly a dozen federal-level elections and referendums, has restructured elite-mass linkages and altered politicians' and voters' perceptions of leader accountability in Russia. Nevertheless, the dominance of authoritarian values in Russia's political culture is taken for granted, and many continue to perceive Russia's authoritarian proclivities as threatening those democratic constructs that have been introduced to the country over the past decade (Levada, 1995a; Kutkovets and Klyamkin, 1997).

From a Russian cultural perspective, Boris Yeltsin's rise to power and impressive initial public support reflected his mastery of traditional Russian power politics and his effective use of nationalist appeals. Yeltsin exuded strength at the start. He stood up to the old regime, stared down an attempted coup, and used military force to assert his will on a recalcitrant Duma. He also dominated the writing of a new constitution which invested his office with extraordinary powers to issue executive decrees: a prerogative he used extensively throughout his tenure (Remington, Smith, and Haspel, 1998). Yeltsin launched a military campaign against the renegade Chechen republic and carved an independent Russia from the rubble of the old regime. Over time, however, Yeltsin was perceived as increasingly weak. This was reflected in his progressive inability to assert his will on the opposition dominated Duma, to halt the contraction of Russian power and international prestige, to prevail in the Chechen conflict, or even to manage his personal life, which was marred by heavy drinking, ill health and erratic

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picked order over democracy whereas fewer than 15 percent expressed a preference for democracy (Levada, 1995). Other surveys relying on different questions reach similar conclusions about the persistence of substantial elements of Russia's authoritarian culture among both the public and political elites (Reisinger, Miller, Hesli, and Maher, 1994; White et al., 1997; Mishler and Rose, 2001).

behavior. Those holding to a cultural perspective further associate the decline in Yeltsin's popularity to Russia's inevitable rejection of "alien" Western institutions and economic reforms with which this President came to be associated (Alexander, 2000; Levada, 1995b). These culturally based reservations arguably were encouraged and reinforced by the increasingly strident nationalist appeals of both left and right opposition leaders such as Aleksandr Lebed, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Gennady Zyuganov.

Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin, who appeared quietly assertive, possessing what one Russian observer (Vsevolod Marinov, personal communication) termed a "samurai warrior value system," gained initial notice and approval by reasserting Russian military force in Chechnya. He reinforced his image of forcefulness by moving to reestablish Moscow's control over the vast periphery of regional governments and attacking the unpopular oligarchs and the country's widespread corruption and crime (Hyde, 2001). Putin presented himself as a principled, firm, and decisive nationalist by pressing to strengthen and streamline federal government bodies, manipulating symbols such as Russia's new national anthem, subtly challenging the United States, and taking numerous, high profile, foreign trips to reestablish Russia's relevance to the international community. From a political culture perspective, therefore, it was not surprising that the public rallied behind Putin's strong, nationalist leadership, first as prime minister and later (since January 2000) as President.

While not denying traditional Russian concerns for stability, order, and strong leadership, a neo-institutional perspective does not need to invoke Russian cultural uniqueness to account for Yeltsin's declining popularity or Putin's initial approval. To the contrary, the ebb and flow of public support for Russian leaders are explained in institutional terms, as predictable consequences of citizens' retrospective evaluations of the leaders' performance as conditioned by the circumstances and events surrounding their presidencies (O'Donnell, 1994; Shin, 1994). From a neo-institutional perspective, judgments about how the country is doing – politically and economically – are central concerns. In this regard the age-old question, "what have you done for me lately?", is as relevant in post-Soviet Russia as in the United States or Britain. No Western democratic leader conceivably could have survived ten years in office with popularity intact if confronted with Russia's severe economic contraction, triple digit inflation, double digit unemployment, currency devaluation, and humiliating stalemate in a localized civil war. Indeed, the remarkable aspect of Yeltsin's tenure is not that it ended with his popularity exhausted, but that he survived for nearly a decade, despite formidable obstacles, managing in



the process to win two national elections while guiding Russia through the dismantling of a seventy-four-year-old political and economic system. Similarly, Putin's initial public approval may have less to do with his assertions of authority as President than with Russia's increasingly positive economic balance sheet in the months leading up to his initial appointment. Just as Clinton benefitted from an economic recovery begun under his predecessor, so Putin arguably benefitted from the rebound in the Russian economy that began a year or more before he was selected by Yeltsin as Prime Minister.

There are good reasons in theory to expect that economic evaluations should play an even greater role in public assessments of Russian presidents than of Western leaders. For one, fluctuations in Russian economic performance across the decade have been much larger and more devastating than the worst recessions experienced in the West. For another, given their long experience with a command economy, Russians have been more accustomed than Western citizens to holding the government accountable for the performance of the economy. Given their authoritarian heritage, they also are more accustomed to associating control of the government with a single leader. As the strongest and most visible public official in Russia, the president is closely connected in the minds of citizens to government actions and outcomes (Alexander, 2000) and receives disproportionate credit or blame for what government does or fails to do.

Despite Russia's authoritarian past, there is considerable evidence that democratic ideas about leader accountability already have taken hold in Russia. Russians believe they have the right to expect their government to produce and they believe they have the right to hold their leaders accountable if these expectations are not fulfilled (Colton, 2000; Steen, 2001). In this context, we would expect Russia's widespread economic woes, the decline of order, and the deterioration of many of Russia's basic institutions to take a severe toll on public support for the president early in the decade. Conversely, we would expect presidential popularity to rebound later in the decade as a number of these trends are stanching or reversed. Whereas cultural theory emphasizes the congruence of the leader's actions and basic values and symbols, neo-institutional theory stresses the centrality of substantive policy outcomes to an electorate's collective judgment about its leadership (Linz and Stepan, 1996). The Russian case offers an interesting and important setting in which to compare these contrasting perspectives.

### **Trends in Russian Presidential Support**

To examine more closely the ebb and flow of public support for Russian presidents, we

use aggregate, public opinion data collected by VCIOM, the Russian Center for Public Opinion Research. VCIOM conducts periodic, face-to-face, public opinion surveys with national probability samples of voting-age citizens across the Russian Federation (for details of the Russian surveys see Appendix A). VCIOM surveys regularly include the question, *What mark on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) would you give the performance of President of Russia, (Yeltsin/Putin)?* The question was asked every month in surveys during the first two years of Yeltsin's tenure and every other month for most of the period after 1993.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1 traces public support for Soviet/Russian political leaders from January 1991 through June 2001. As expected, the long-term trend in Yeltsin's popular support is substantially negative. Yeltsin assumed the Russian presidency in June 1991 on a wave of public enthusiasm; his initial support as President of the Russian Republic was nearly half again as high as that of USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev at the same time. Yeltsin's popularity, however, began dropping almost as soon as he entered office. During his first eight months as President, Yeltsin lost nearly a third of his support, falling to a level comparable to that of Gorbachev at the time of the Soviet Union's demise. Yeltsin's popularity stabilized in 1992 and remained relatively level into 1994 before dropping again shortly after the start of the Chechen conflict. His popularity surged briefly in 1996 in the run-up to the Summer presidential elections, but quickly returned to its pre-election level before falling again in 1998 and remaining at very low levels through the end of his presidency.

Vladimir Putin, widely touted for his populist touch, began his tenure as Yeltsin's appointed Prime Minister (August 1999) with a level of popular support comparable to Yeltsin's long-term average. Putin's approval, however, rose precipitously in the aftermath of his Fall 1999 decision to recommit troops to Chechnya. At its peak, Putin's approval was on a par with or even slightly higher than Yeltsin's at the beginning of his presidency. Putin sustained his high

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<sup>3</sup> The question used in the VCIOM surveys differs in its wording and response format from questions typically used in surveys of popular support for Western democratic leaders. The latter typically report the percentage of citizens who indicate their "approval" or "satisfaction" with "the job being done" by a specified leader. Indeed, VCIOM has included a Western style presidential approval question at various times since 1991. It also has included a variety of other questions on public attitudes toward the president. Unfortunately, neither the approval question nor any of the other measures of presidential support are asked in the same form, on a regular basis, over extended periods of time. The sole exception is the ten-point scale used, here. Moreover, for those periods when the presidential approval question is asked, the percentage of Russians approving of the president is highly correlated ( $r > .90$ ) with the score for the president on the older ten-point series. Given their close correlation, we feel justified in taking some literary license and referring to the results of this measure variously as presidential support, approval and popularity in this manuscript.

approval level through the March 2000 presidential elections, after which his popularity began a slow and intermittent decline. By June 2001, Putin's public standing was nearly a full point below its highest level (a decline of about 15 percent), and the trend, while gradual, was continuing downward.

Despite the conventional wisdom about the distinctiveness of the Yeltsin and Putin presidencies, the pattern of public support for the two leaders is remarkably similar over the first 18 months of their tenures. During their early months in office, both leaders experienced a sporadic decline in support. Yeltsin's support clearly fell further, faster, but the correlation between the two series ( $r = .74$ ) across the first 18 months is remarkable, indicating that the trends in public support over the early months were much more similar than conventionally believed.

If Russian attitudes toward their leaders are driven substantially by cultural values and symbols, then it is reasonable to expect that the pattern of public support for Russian leaders should differ in important ways from the patterns of support characteristic of political leaders in other cultures and contexts. This is true whether political support for other leaders is driven by choice theoretic considerations or by those leaders' respective (and presumably different) cultural characteristics. To see how exceptional public support for Russian leaders has been, Figure 2 compares the pattern of public support for Yeltsin across his tenure with the public support enjoyed by American President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher during their respective terms in office.<sup>4</sup> There are differences in these three series, of course, reflecting not only the unique circumstances and events within each of these countries during the three periods but also the different historical periods within which these leaders worked. Nevertheless, the overall patterns of the three series are remarkably alike. Were labels not provided, and in the absence of a detailed knowledge of the histories of these three administrations, it would be difficult to differentiate the Russian vase from the others.

While comparisons of the absolute levels of support for the three leaders must be interpreted cautiously given the different questions asked and the different cultures and contexts involved, it is quite appropriate to compare the trends in support for these leaders over

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<sup>4</sup> Data for Reagan and Thatcher are derived from monthly Gallup polls in their respective countries. The Gallup Surveys measure the percent "approving" the job being done by the President or the percent "satisfied" with Mrs. Thatcher as Prime Minister. Since these are measured on a 100 point scale while support for Yeltsin is measured on a ten point scale, we have simply divided British and American support by 10 to create a common 10-point metric.

time. In this regard, it is instructive that trends in public support for the three leaders over the first two and one half years of their administrations are highly similar. Across the first 30 months of their respective administrations, public support for Yeltsin and Thatcher is as highly correlated ( $r=.73$ ) as the first 18 months of Yeltsin and Putin, and the correlation between Yeltsin's and Reagan's support is only slightly smaller ( $r=.70$ ).<sup>5</sup>

In the middle of the third year in office, however, the similarities end. Coincidentally, at that point in their administrations, Margaret Thatcher went to war with Argentina, Reagan invaded Grenada, and Yeltsin sent troops into Chechnya. The popularity of the three leaders sharply diverges thereafter. Buoyed by decisive victories, Thatcher and Reagan experienced a substantial resurgence of popular support, whereas Yeltsin's popularity continued to fall as the Chechen conflict dragged on without successful resolution. As a consequence, a large gap opened between Thatcher and Reagan's popularity on the one hand and Yeltsin's on the other. Leaving aside the differential effect of this single episode, however, the trends in public support for American, British, and Russian leaders are remarkably similar. In the 60 months following the onset of these international episodes the correlations among the three series again were strong and positive. Indeed, the correlations between Reagan and Yeltsin and between Thatcher and Yeltsin ( $r=.45$  for both) are only slightly smaller than the correlation between Reagan and Thatcher ( $r=.54$ ) across this same period.

Overall, the Russian and Western cases support Brace and Hinckley's (1992) contention that popularly elected chief executives in the United States will generally commence their terms with "average good support," but with "normal decay" setting in over time. Although there are clear differences in Yeltsin's popularity as compared to that of Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher, the differences between Yeltsin and the two prototypical democratic leaders are not appreciably greater than the differences between Reagan and Thatcher. Indeed, these differences appear to be differences of modest degree and not of fundamental kind.

### **Measuring the Effects of Culture and Choice**

While agreeing broadly on the patterns of public support for Russian presidents across the first decade of the post Soviet period, cultural and neo-institutional theories explain and interpret these patterns very differently. Cultural theory emphasizes the public appeal of nationalist symbols and strong leaders whereas neo-institutional theory emphasizes public

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<sup>5</sup> The correlations in public support between Putin and Reagan ( $r=.60$ ) and Putin and Thatcher ( $r=.62$ ) across the first 18 months of their administrations also are substantial.

assessments of political performance.

Testing the impact of performance evaluations on public support for political leaders is relatively straightforward. It entails the specification and estimation of a political support model or what is widely known as a Vote-Popularity (VP) function in which fluctuations in a leader's support are regressed against a series of variables measuring actual and perceived economic and political performance.<sup>6</sup> Testing the impact of Russia's authoritarian culture on leadership popularity is more difficult. While it is possible to include measures of authoritarian attitudes in a V-P function to assess their impact on leadership support, cultural theory holds that cultural values are deeply ingrained and fundamentally stable. While cultural attributes can and do change, they typically do so over generations or decades not months or even years (Putnam, 1993). If culture does affect short term variations in political support, therefore, it is unlikely to be the result of changes in underlying values and more likely to be the result of changing public perceptions of the leader's behavior as interpreted through the prism of stable cultural criteria. For example, whereas Yeltsin arguably was perceived as a prototypical Russian strongman early in his administration given his vigorous response to the attempted coup and his forcefulness in dealing with anti democratic opponents, it is possible that the stalemate in Chechnya combined with his frequently erratic personal and political behavior (e.g., the constant rotation of government ministers and top advisors) led Russians increasingly to perceive him as weak and vacillating. The authoritarian faith in strong leaders may not have changed, but the public perception of Yeltsin from a cultural perspective could have changed fundamentally and in ways deleterious to his public support.

To assess the impact of culture and choice on support for Russian presidents we construct a political support model (V-P function) for Russian presidential support that includes a variety of indicators of Russia's authoritarian culture along with more conventional measures of political and economic performance. Regarding the latter, at the heart of political support models is an assumption of individual rationality and a belief that citizens are utility maximizing materialists (Downs, 1957). This is reflected in V-P functions by an emphasis on economic

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<sup>6</sup> Vote and popularity functions are a growth stock; for example, Lewis-Beck and Paldam (2000) count more than 200 published books and articles on the topic most published within the past twenty years. Although the specific form of VP-functions varies modestly from study to study, there is a remarkable consensus on the basic structure of these models across both time and space. Among the numerous reviews of this extensive literature are: Nannestad and Paldam, 1997; Paldam, 1981; Lewis-Beck, 1988; Norpoth et al., 1991; and Clarke et al., 1992.

outcomes, typically inflation, economic growth and unemployment (see, for example, Hibbs, 1987). Nevertheless, while objective economic conditions are important, subjective evaluations of the economy have been found in Western democracies to have even greater impact on leadership evaluations (Sanders 1991, 2000), although controversy continues to surround the nature of the subjective economy's effects: specifically, whether voters are more concerned with their personal economic situations (egocentrism) or with the performance of the economy (sociotropism) more broadly (Kieweit, 1983). A related controversy centers on whether citizens are more likely to evaluate the economy retrospectively, rewarding or punishing leaders for past performance, or to discount past performance while emphasizing prospective economic conditions (Fiorina, 1981; Chappell and Keech, 1985; Mackuen, Erickson and Stimson, 1992). While much of the available evidence with regard to Russia supports the primacy of retrospective sociotropic evaluations, existing research is based primarily on cross-sectional analyses of individual survey data (Duch, 1995; Miller et al., 1996; Hesli and Bashkirova, 2000) rather than on aggregate time series analyses whose results can be significantly different (Kraemer, 1983). Thus, to measure the effects of economic performance in our model, four variables are included: an objective economic indicator, the consumer price index,<sup>7</sup> two separate survey-based measures of citizens' aggregate evaluations of the current macro-economy and of their personal economic situations, and a measure of citizens' assessments of the economy as they expect it to perform in the near future.

Economic variables occupy pride of place in VP-functions, but political performance considerations can have important effects on political support calculations as well (Clarke, Dutt and Kornberg, 1993; Evans and Whitefield, 1995; Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer, 1998). To measure political performance, we use two variables. The first is a subjective measure based on a VCIOM question asking respondents, "*What do you think Russia should expect in political life in the forthcoming months? Much/some improvement vs. much/some deterioration.*" The second is a measure integrating the separate Freedom House indices of civil and political liberties. From a neo-institutional perspective, citizens should reward leaders who provide

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<sup>7</sup> There are, of course, any number of other objective economic indicators we could and did consider including in the model such as gross domestic product and unemployment level. There is, however, a very high degree of multi-collinearity among aggregate objective indicators of Russia's economy over this period which suggested the inclusion of a single representative measure. Consumer prices are a standard index and are less subject to measurement problems than unemployment (Rose et al. 1998). The measure used in the model is the natural log of inflation which is in keeping with econometric conventions to mitigate the impact of cases with extreme values.

increased freedoms and punish those who restrict their liberties. From an authoritarian cultural perspective, by contrast, increases in freedom can be deeply disconcerting, not only because freedom and personal responsibility can be threatening to those accustomed to societal controls (Adorno, et al., 1950; Fromm, 1941), but also because of freedom's association in the minds of many citizens with societal disorder.

To measure culture in the V-P model we begin by including a measure of authoritarian values. Unfortunately, VCIOM's monthly surveys do not include consistent measures of Russian ideology across the period of study. To compensate we use data from the New Russia Barometer<sup>8</sup> (NRB) to construct a yearly, aggregate measure of Russian authoritarian values. While the NRB contains a number of different questions that measure the authoritarian proclivities of Russian, the best measure – both because it is asked most regularly and because it is most highly correlated with other measures – is produced in response to the question, *If Parliament was suspended and competitive parties abolished would you approve or disapprove?*<sup>9</sup> Because the NDB surveys were conducted annually, the suspension of parliament measure varies year to year but not month to month. In fact, while there is a very slight increase in authoritarianism from 1991 through about 1996 as reflected in this and other variables and a small decline thereafter, there is only modest variation in the measure over time as is to be expected with a variable that purports to measure relatively stable cultural values. In this regard, the lack of monthly data is not a major concern.

The typical measure of long term values or political predispositions used in V-P models is party identification, but this is problematic in Russia. With the exception of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), stable, mass-based parties did not function in Russia throughout the decade under study. Monthly times series data on party loyalties could not be constructed because parties were constantly evolving and being reconfigured across the

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<sup>8</sup> The New Russia Barometer consists of a series of surveys conducted approximately once per year since 1991 in by VCIOM using a national probability sample of 2000 citizens and face to face interviews.

<sup>9</sup> Among other questions which are highly correlated with responses regarding the suspension of parliament (on both the individual and aggregate levels) are a question asking respondents whether they agreed or disagreed that *"dictatorship is the only way out of the present situation,"* a question asking whether they agreed or disagreed that *"we should return to communist rule,"* and a battery of questions asking whether citizens would prefer any of a series of authoritarian regimes over the current regime including rule by the army, rule by a strong man, or rule by economic experts. Factor analyses of responses to these questions consistently produce a single strong factor on which suspension of parliament typically has the strongest loading.

decade.<sup>10</sup> We would argue, however, that political loyalties in Russia across the decade were more personalistic than partisan; citizens were more likely to identify with one among a series of highly visible political personalities (Yeltsin, Lebed, Zhirinovskiy) than with political parties per se. Indeed, political parties frequently were little more than political holding companies for leading political personalities. In this regard, VCIOM routinely includes a question on public trust in leading Russian political leaders. From the results, it is clear that five politically diverse leaders dominated the political landscape in Russia across the decade – Viktor Chernomyrdin, Grigory Yavlinsky, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Gennady Zyuganov, and, of course, Yeltsin. Importantly, these individuals represent the principal political and ideological perspectives in Russia over this period, with Chernomyrdin associated with Yeltsin's more mainstream policies, Yavlinsky representing the forces of democratic (i.e., Westernizing) change, and Zyuganov and Zhirinovskiy representing left and right opposition to Yeltsin and reform.

Predictably, public trust in these leaders is highly correlated. A factor analysis of trust in four leaders<sup>11</sup> yields a single ideological dimension with trust in Chernomyrdin and Zyuganov defining the opposite poles of the continuum. Yavlinsky and Zhirinovskiy are located in between, with Yavlinsky on the same side of the midpoint as Chernomyrdin, and Zhirinovskiy on the same side as Zyuganov. Based on these results we created a weighted factor-score index of Russian political ideology reflecting public trust in pro and anti-reform political leaders.

Whereas neo-institutional models emphasize material self-interest as the basis for evaluating leader performance, cultural theories emphasize the congruence between leaders' actions and cultural norms and values. To the extent that Russia's authoritarian culture embraces strong leaders, this suggests that Russian support for the president should vary directly with the extent to which the president takes decisive action in response to political challenges exercising his formidable constitutional powers. We noted previously, for example, that the Russian Constitution provides the president extraordinary executive decree authority which both Yeltsin and Putin used extensively. Indeed, Yeltsin issued an average of more than

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<sup>10</sup> While cross-sectional data have been used to demonstrate the emergence of mass-based partisanship in post-Soviet Russia (Miller and Klobucar, 2000 and Brader and Tucker, 2001), and to document its relevance to voter attitudes and behavior in the 1996 presidential election (Colton, 2000), repeated cross-sections over time demonstrate that the party system in Russia remained in flux across the decade. As a result, while it is possible to measure party loyalties at the moment, it is difficult if not impossible to track the ebb and flow of party loyalties over time.

<sup>11</sup> To avoid the possibility of autocorrelation we did not include public trust in Yeltsin or Putin in these measures.



20 normative decrees per month across his tenure, while Putin issued an average of about 16 decrees per month during his first year in office. Nevertheless, there is considerable variation in the use of decrees both month to month and from one year to the next (Mishler, Willerton and Smith, 2000). Because many of these decrees tend to be highly visible it is reasonable to use the number of executive decrees issued each month as a measure of the president's use of his formal powers.

Strong leadership also can be exhibited in the president's control of his governing team, as reflected in his hiring and firing of leading government members. Russian presidents enjoy substantial discretion over the composition of the executive branch. Both Yeltsin and Putin have used this discretion extensively. Across the whole of his tenure, Yeltsin replaced an average of 2.1 members of his leadership team every month, while Putin, in only his first year in office, replaced an average of 1.5 members of his team each month.<sup>12</sup> While the rationale for any individual promotion or demotion will vary, and the public may or may not be favorably inclined toward the official affected, such actions do underscore the power prerogatives of the chief executive to the public.<sup>13</sup> From an authoritarian perspective, assertions of presidential power in the form of changes in the leadership team should have a positive impact on public support for the president. From a performance perspective, in contrast, the firing of subordinates may be interpreted as an effort to escape responsibility for policies gone wrong and lead to a loss of public support. Whereas cultural theory predicts a strong positive relationship between public support and both decrees and executive turnover, neo-institutional theory predicts no relationship or a negative relationship in these regards.

While V-P functions assume that support for political leaders and parties is driven substantially by public assessments of the leaders' policies and actions, they also recognize that popular support for leaders can be affected by a variety of short- to medium-term political shocks such as war, a stock market crash or a political assassination. To the extent that such

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<sup>12</sup> The population of officials used includes the prime minister, deputy prime ministers, and government members with ministerial portfolios.

<sup>13</sup> Promotions, demotions, and rotation of senior-level officials clearly cumulate and could redound to the chief executive's reputational advantage or disadvantage. An excessively high number of top-level personnel changes, while underscoring the president's institutional prerogatives, could suggest to the public executive confusion and weakness. The threshold at which high-level personnel changes are perceived to be excessive cannot be pinpointed, but we remain sensitive to this potential dilemma in assessing our analytical results.

shocks influence public support for political leaders, their effects can be either positive or negative and are variously interpretable from either a performance or a cultural perspective. With regard to the impact of war, for example, there is considerable evidence that a country's entrance into conflict almost always stimulates nationalist sentiments and precipitates an immediate "rally-round-the-flag" effect that redounds to the benefit of the national leader (Muller, 1973). The evidence suggests, however, that the rally effect typically is short-lived and that the longer term impact of war depends critically upon its progress.<sup>14</sup> Whereas we observed in Figures 2 that Britain's success in the Falklands War and the quick victory of the US in Grenada were followed by sharp increases in leader popularity in both countries, the first of Russia's two incursions into Chechnya was quickly followed by a significant loss of public support for President Yeltsin as the invasion staled and gave way to stalemate. The conventional wisdom in Russia, however, is that the second incursion into Chechnya was critical in establishing Putin's reputation for strong leadership and helped galvanize public support for him. To measure the effects of the Chechen conflict on presidential support in Russia, we include separate dummy variables for the two incursions. The first is coded '1' from the outset of the Chechen conflict in December 1994 through the signing of a cease fire and the beginning of the Russian troop withdrawal in August 1996. The second is coded '1' from the August 1999 resumption of bombing through the end of the period examined.

Among the other crises confronting Yeltsin during his tenure, two were especially notable: the attempted coup in August 1991 and the showdown with the Duma which resulted in Yeltsin's order to fire on the White House in October 1993. In the same way that Putin's assertion of strength in Chechnya is interpreted as having galvanized public opinion behind him, Yeltsin's response to the coup is widely credited with having solidified his public support. Less obvious, however, is the impact of Yeltsin's October 1993 decision to use military force against the White House on his popularity. From a cultural perspective this could be interpreted as an exercise in strength. From a choice theoretic perspective it could be assessed as a failure of leadership on the president's part. At a minimum, the effects of such potentially important shocks to popularity need to be controlled. Accordingly, both are included in the V-P model as dummy variables, coded '1' for the three months following each event, and '0' otherwise.

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<sup>14</sup> There is considerable debate about the size, shape and duration of a war's effects on leadership popularity. For a discussion of the effects of war on presidential popularity in the U.S., see Muller (1973). For a discussion of the impact of the Falklands war in Britain, see the debate among Norpoth (1987), Sanders, Ward and Marsh (1987) and Clarke, Mishler and Whitely (1990).

Yeltsin's frequent health problems and his extended absence from public life provided a continuing challenge to his public support. Although evidence suggests that a sudden threat to a leader's life or health frequently rallies public opinion in support of that leader, much as the American public rallied to Ronald Reagan when he was shot, from a Russian authoritarian perspective Yeltsin's continuing, long-term health problems threatened to undermine public confidence in the strength of his leadership. This was reinforced in Yeltsin's case since his health problems and frequent absences from the political scene were widely perceived as self-inflicted, at least partly the result of heavy drinking. To assess the impact of Yeltsin's health on his political support, we used newspaper reports to create a dummy variable, coded '1' in months when the President was incapacitated and out of public sight for a significant time, and '0' otherwise.

Finally, as we noted in the data on popular support for Yeltsin, Putin, Reagan and Thatcher, a near universal dynamic of leader popularity in democratic systems is the tendency of a leader's support to dissipate gradually across their tenure, even after controlling for other factors. Newly elected political leaders typically come to office with relatively high public support as a consequence both of their election victory and of the public rallying behind its new leader. Almost immediately, however, initial support begins to wane as a leader begins to make decisions on controversial issues. Even if leaders act in support of the majority position on an issue, they risk alienating the minority of voters on the losing side. As the number of decisions grows, so does the number of disaffected minorities, thus creating a "coalition of minorities" consisting of those disaffected with the leader's role (Muller, 1977). In V-P models, the coalition of minorities effect typically is captured by introducing a simple "time" variable. Consistent with this approach we include a variable in the model that is coded '1' in the month that a president first assumes office and that increases by 1 each month thereafter through the end of the president's tenure, whereupon the time variable is reset to '1.'

### **Modeling Presidential Support**

To assess the impact of cultural values and performance evaluations on popular support for Russian presidents, we estimate a series of political support models containing indicators of both Russia culture and government performance. The models include a variety of indicators hypothesized to reflect cultural effects including two measures of authoritarian attitudes and political ideology, two presidential powers measures (executive decrees and executive personnel turnover), a measure of presidential illness, and the four dummy variables measuring

the impact of the two Chechen incursions, the failed coup, and the attack on the Russian White House. The model also includes several economic indicators (objective and subjective), the combined Freedom House index, and the measure of perceived political performance.<sup>15</sup>

Cognizant of the near universal tendency of political support for leaders to erode over time, a simple “time” variable is included in the models as a control. We also include a dummy variable to control for the difference in the overall level of political support for Putin as compared to Yeltsin. Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) procedures are used to estimate the models which required, among other considerations, inclusion of a first order autoregressive term (AR1).

The results of the analysis are reported in Table 1. Four separate but overlapping models are included. The first, in column A, includes estimates based on all variables and all years for which complete data are available. Because several of the economic indicators are unavailable before July 1993, this model covers the 90 months from the middle of 1993 through December 2000, the end of Putin’s first year in office. The model in column B is the same as that of column A except that the time period ends in December 1999 with Yeltsin’s departure from office; this model is included to insure that the Putin data have not distorted the Yeltsin years. Models A and B do not include the potentially critical first two years of Yeltsin’s tenure and thus may not provide a full picture of the dynamics of presidential support. Thus, Models C and D exclude those survey variables for which data are missing early in the period. Model C covers all of the Yeltsin years plus the first year of Putin’s term (July 1991 through December 2000). Model D is the same as C but excludes Putin’s tenure, thus focusing exclusively on Yeltsin’s presidency.

Despite the inclusion of different variables and time periods, there is remarkable consistency among these four models, which testifies to the robustness of the basic model which performs consistently well. The variance explained in the model is very high,<sup>16</sup> and the diagnostics at the bottom of each column demonstrate that model residuals are “white noise” as

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<sup>15</sup> Definitions and sources for all variables are included in Appendix B along with variables’ means and standard deviations.

<sup>16</sup> Two separate  $R^2$  statistics are reported.  $R^2_{tot}$  measures the total variance accounted for by the entire model including the autoregressive term.  $R^2_{reg}$  measures the variance accounted for by the substantive variables excluding the autoregressive term.

required.<sup>17</sup> While the variance explained in the models is significantly inflated by the inclusion of the autoregressive term and by the ‘time’ and Putin control variables, even excluding these controls, the models account for more than 50 percent of the variance in public approval of the president.

The FIML estimates in Table 1 provide a measure of support for both cultural and institutional explanations of leader support but clearly favor the importance of economic performance over authoritarian values. Regarding cultural effects, for example, because of the stability hypothesized to be inherent in basic cultural values, we did not expect to observe that support for the president in Russia would be strongly linked to variations in Russian authoritarian attitudes across a period as short as a decade. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that the small variations in the percentage of citizens who favored the suspension of parliament and the elimination of competitive parties had at least marginal effects (i.e., statistically significant at the .10 level) on variations in presidential support. Moreover, the relationship is virtually identical whether we include Putin in the model or focus strictly on support for Yeltsin (compare Models A and B).<sup>18</sup> In fact, we estimated a version of Model A (not shown) including a multiplicative term (Putin x Authoritarianism) to determine whether the slope of this relationship was different during the Putin months as compared to the Yeltsin years. The coefficient for the multiplicative term was small and not statistically significant (  $b = -.001$ ,  $se = .02$ ).

In contrast, it is clear from a comparison of Models A and B that the impact of what we call nationalist ideology is substantially different when the Putin years are included as compared with when they are not. During the Yeltsin years (Model B), a statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) and negative relationship exists between nationalist ideology on the one hand and support for Yeltsin on the other. Predictably, those who trusted leaders such as Zhirinovskiy and Zyuganov were less supportive of Yeltsin than those who expressed greater trust in Chernomyrdin or

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<sup>17</sup> Specifically, the Durbin Watson (DW) statistic is non-significant in all cases indicating the absence of first-order autocorrelation in the residuals. The Ljung-Box Q (LBQ) statistics are not significant, indicating that the residuals are not autocorrelated at lags up to six months; and Lagrange multiplier (LM) tests also are not significant at lags up to six months confirming that the residuals are “white noise.”

<sup>18</sup> While data are available only for the first twelve months of Putin’s tenure, this is still a significant period of time in an overall model that covers between seven and ten years. Putin’s tenure constitutes 12 of the 90 months or 13 percent of the cases in Model A and just under 10 percent of the cases in Model C. If the patterns under Yeltsin are appreciably different, we would expect to see small but consistent differences between Models A and C on the one hand, and B and D on the other.

Yavlinsky. The inclusion of Putin in Model A, however, substantially reduces this relationship, indicating that the effects of nationalist ideology on support for Putin were the opposite of their effects on Yeltsin's support. Inclusion of a multiplicative term (Putin x Ideology – not shown) confirms the suspicion and demonstrates that nationalist ideology has a nearly equal and opposite impact on support for Putin as compared to Yeltsin. While these differences conform to the conventional wisdom that Putin benefitted from nationalist sentiments whereas Yeltsin did not, they are in contradiction to the evidence with regard to authoritarian values. At best the impact of cultural values on support for the two Russian presidents is weak and inconsistent.

The evidence regarding Russian's embrace of strong leaders is decidedly mixed as well. Consistent with cultural theory, the evidence in Table 1 demonstrates that public support for the Russian president has varied directly with presidential exertions of executive decree authority. While the relationship is not especially strong, it is consistently positive and marginally significant ( $p < .10$ ) across all versions of the model. It also is not appreciably different for Putin than for Yeltsin. Again, however, the opposite dynamic appears to operate with respect to presidential assertions of authority over leading government leaders. Rather than rewarding presidents for their strength in replacing members of their governments, public reactions to executive turnover are modestly but consistently negative.

If Russian culture predisposes citizens to judge their leaders by the image of strength they project, then Yeltsin's increasing problems with his health and his increasingly erratic behavior across his term should have contributed significantly to his loss of popular support. In contradiction to this hypothesis, however, the evidence in Table 1 suggests that support for Yeltsin was largely unaffected by his health related absences from the political scene. In fact, the coefficient, while inconsistently significant, is consistently positive across all four versions of the model. The public does not appear to have sympathized greatly with Yeltsin's illnesses, but they certainly did not punish him for any weakness of character his health problems may have suggested.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> It is possible, of course, that the impact of Yeltsin's health was both cumulative and curvilinear. While the public may initially have sympathized with Yeltsin's illnesses, they reasonably might have grown increasingly cynical about his repeated illnesses over time. To test these possibilities we created a cumulative illness variable calculated simply as the total number of months that Yeltsin had been ill and out of public view at any point in his presidency. In fact, this measure has a strong, negative effect on Yeltsin's public standing. Unfortunately, this variable is very highly correlated with time ( $r > .90$ ), making it impossible to distinguish the possible cumulative effects of Yeltsin's illness from other long term trends, including the coalition of minorities effect.

Perhaps the clearest test of the authoritarian culture hypothesis, however, is provided by public reactions to the defeat of the attempted coup, the assault on the White House and the two separate invasions of Chechnya. If nationalist values, an authoritarian bent and a commitment to strong leaders shape public evaluations of their leaders, then Russians should have rallied strongly in support of their president in response to each of these actions. In fact, Yeltsin's actions in opposing the attempted August 1991 coup did produce a strong and immediate increase in public approval. Indeed, the effect is among the strongest in the model. In contrast, however, the public appears to have been ambivalent about the 1993 attack on the White House, which culminated more than a year of public posturing and struggle between Yeltsin and the opposition-dominated parliament. While the coefficient for this variable is positive as cultural theory predicts, it is small and not statistically significant.

Further in opposition to the nationalist culture hypothesis, the public's reaction to the both of the two military incursions into Chechnya was very strongly negative. Consistent with the conventional wisdom, the evidence confirms that the first of the Chechen invasions substantially depressed public approval of the President throughout the period of the incursion even controlling for other influences.<sup>20</sup> Contrary to the conventional wisdom, however, the evidence also shows that Putin's 're-invasion' of Chechnya did not substantially enhance his public standing. To the contrary, the Chechnya conflict has been a significant drag on Putin's public support from the very beginning. Indeed, Chechnya's impact on Putin has been even more negative than its earlier impact on Yeltsin's popularity. Far from rallying behind the president for taking strong action against a breakaway republic, the Russian public has consistently punished its presidents for the use of force in Chechnya.

The evidence from the upper half of the model suggests that Russians like strong leaders and tough action, but only when those leaders and actions produce successful outcomes. Otherwise, they do not. This, however, is not a distinctive feature of Russia's authoritarian culture, but appears to be a common characteristic of a rational public which looks beyond a leader's actions and focuses on the results achieved.

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<sup>20</sup> It is possible, of course, that the incursion, while initially popular, grew increasingly unpopular over time as stalemate set in. To test this possibility we used a dummy variable assessing the impact on presidential popularity of the first six months of the Chechen conflict (not shown). Predictably this coefficient is smaller: it is but half as large and only marginally significant ( $p < .10$ ). Nevertheless, the sign of the relationship remains negative. The first invasion of Chechnya depressed public approval of the President virtually from the start, although the size of the negative effect grew as the stalemate continued.

Further evidence of the tendency of Russians to behave as rational actors is contained in the bottom half of the models in Table 1. Consistent with the experience of Western leaders whose political support rises and falls with the performance of the economy, political support for Russian presidents is heavily influenced by consumer prices. Indeed, the CPI is among the strongest influences in the model, and its effects are consistent across the Yeltsin and Putin periods. Russian support for the president also is closely linked with public perceptions of the economy, which conforms to Western experience. Unlike American or British citizens, however, Russians appear to discount future economic conditions while emphasizing retrospective evaluations of both the macro economy and personal finances. While economic considerations appear primary, Russians also reward and punish the president based on their perceptions of the political direction of the country. All four models reveal a positive impact of political expectations on public support for the Russian president.

There is, however, one performance variable which is not significant in any version of these models, and that is the aggregate Freedom House index. Although the gradual erosion of civil and political liberties in Russia has been associated with a decline in public support for the country's chief executive, the relation is not statistically significant controlling for other variables. While this result is consistent with recent research suggesting that Russians do not value newly gained freedoms as much as do citizens of other post-Communist regimes (Mishler and Rose, 2001), it also is possible that the lack of a freedom effect is related to the rather crude nature of this variable and its limited variation over time.

Sensitive to the possibility that cultural influences may precede and condition the impact of performance evaluations and thus have important indirect effects on presidential support, we re-estimated the political support models in three stages. First, we regress political support on a president's time in office to establish a baseline of predicted support overtime. Although the conventional Western interpretation of the long term decline in incumbent popularity is that it reflects a coalition of minorities that are dissatisfied with a leader's policies, there is no easy way in the Russian case to know whether this long term dynamic is truly performance based or reflects instead the public's increasing dissatisfaction with leaders who fail to live up to culture-based expectations. Thus we use this variable strictly as a baseline control. In a second stage, we regress political support on time plus the series of indicators hypothesized as measures of cultural influences on political support. This estimates the maximum possible impact of culture on support. Finally, in a third stage, we regress political support on time and culture plus the



series of economic and political performance measures.<sup>21</sup> The logic of this design is to allow the presumably longer term cultural influences to account for all of the variance in support that they can before shorter-term performance considerations are taken into account. What is of interest, here, is the variance accounted for by the model at each stage,<sup>22</sup> which is reported in Table 2.

Reinforcing the evidence in Table 1, the results in Table 2 confirm that both culture and performance have substantial effects on Russian support for the president, but performance considerations have the stronger effects overall. In the models including both Yeltsin and Putin (Models A and C), the simple time variable accounts for slightly more than half of the total variance in presidential support over time. While the addition of cultural influences further reduces unexplained variance in the model, the performance variables do even better than the cultural variables in this regard, although the net additional effect on presidential support that is achieved by adding performance variables to culture is small. The impact of both time and culture is reduced, however, when Putin is dropped from the model and political support for Yeltsin is considered in isolation (Models B and D). In these models, the combination of time and culture accounts for only about half of the variance in support, and most of this is attributable to the coalition of minorities (i.e., to time). In contrast, the performance variables perform considerably better on their own, accounting for about 70% percent of the variance in the model – more than double that explained by culture. Indeed, the net effect of performance on support is substantial even after taking into account the effects of time and culture.

The relative importance of performance versus culture in Russia is all the more impressive given the earlier observation that several of the more statistically significant cultural indicators (for example, the attempted coup and the two Chechen incursions) are ambiguous, at best, as measures of cultural effects. In fact, the nature of their effects is such as to suggest that the public reacted to them on the basis of performance evaluations and not as cultural symbols reflecting nationalist or authoritarian values or symbols. Indeed, hard as we have tried to identify culturally idiosyncratic influences on support for Russian leaders, there is very little in these models to distinguish the dynamics of public support for Russian presidents from the

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<sup>21</sup> In other words, the third stage analysis includes all of the variables in the analysis and is identical to the results in Table 1.

<sup>22</sup> The coefficients for individual variables at each stage are of minimal interest because they are based on incomplete models and suffer inherently from specification error; the impact of specific variables is best judged in Table 1.

dynamics of party and leader support that have been so exhaustively documented in a wide range of new and long established Western democracies.

## **Discussion**

Just as citizens in Western democracies support their leaders to the extent that the country enjoys peace and prosperity, so too Russian citizens reward their presidents during periods of relative peace and prosperity and punish them if the country fails to deliver the performance that citizens expect. In this regard, it's not just the economy that is important, although the economy certainly is a major influence, but it also is the performance of government in avoiding war (or winning it quickly and with little loss of life) and providing citizens with reasons to hope for still better times ahead.

That Russians evaluate their leaders much like citizens in other democratic societies is not, as it might seem, to deny the existence of a distinctive Russian culture or to denigrate its political importance. There is ample evidence that Russians embrace a distinctive set of values, symbols and traditions and that this distinctive culture continues to have important effects on the shape of Russia's constitution, the structure and operation of its institutions, and on public attitudes and behavior (Fish, 1995; Alexander, 2000). Indeed, there are several important hints in our data that Russians do not evaluate their political leaders exactly the same as citizens elsewhere. For example, the evidence that variations in the level of civil and political freedoms in Russia are unrelated to assessments of the president certainly is consistent with traditional Russian culture and its emphasis on order over freedom. It also is contrary to the value ascribed to political freedoms elsewhere, including once-communist regime in Eastern and Central Europe. Similarly, the evidence that Russians evaluate the economy more like "peasants than bankers" – that is that they emphasize retrospective evaluations of their personal economic situations rather than prospective sociotropic evaluations – is just the opposite of what is usually observed in Britain, Germany, the United States, and many of the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (Mackuen, Erickson and Stimson, 1992, and Rose, Mishler and Haerpher, 1998). While the latter could be a consequence of the severity of Russia's economic distress, which has been terrible even by the standards of other transitional regimes, it also is conceivable that Russians' distinctive economic orientation is connected to and conditioned by underlying cultural values. Those who have emphasized Russian pessimism in the wake of centuries of insecurity and economic woes (e.g., Joyce, 1984) would appreciate that contemporary Russians' judgments are grounded in concrete (i.e., past) achievements

rather than hope for anticipated (i.e., future) outcomes. On an even more fundamental level, it is arguable that Russia's culture, with its emphasis on strong leaders and authoritarian rule, increases citizens' expectations for their leaders and predisposes them to hold their leaders more directly responsible for the performance of economy and society than is the case in societies whose values and traditions distribute political responsibility across multiple leaders and institutions, thereby blurring accountability.

Our findings fit nicely with the arguments of those who see a "dual political culture" – embracing both authoritarian and democratic features – emergent in post-Soviet Russia (Petro, 1995; Sakwa, 1995). Russian citizens' continuing desire for order and security are instrumental values of a traditional political culture. Yet as we have also seen, popular well-being has been critical to citizens' assessments. Cohen's (1985) contention that a country's political culture will infuse new democratic arrangements with their own meaning seems particularly relevant to the Russian case. The population may well want more state responsibility for popular well-being (Brym, 1996), qua security and economic advance, and its evolving sense of trust and support for the country's chief executive will reflect the degree to which those varied expectations are being met.

Whatever the "logic" of Russia's traditional political culture – and whether or not democratic expectations have begun to become imbedded in the Russian consciousness – the post-Soviet system has encouraged citizens to act as rational, cost-benefit calculators (in the logic of William Riker) who can influence both electoral outcomes and public policy. Changes in Russian political institutions, together with changes in public discourse (both during the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods), have emphasized citizen participation and the critical role of "civic mindedness" (Putnam, 1993) to the effective functioning of the new system. Increasingly, Russian politicians recognize the logic of Downs (1957) and understand that they must be responsive to citizens' preferences in order to compete effectively for public support. Ten years after the Soviet collapse, Russian citizens appear attentive to their own as well as to their country's economic and political well-being. Much as American voters "are not fools," so also Russian citizens behave collectively as a "rational god of punishment and reward" (Key 1966), judging their leaders based on their economic and political performance and not simply on the congruence of their behavior with cultural values and symbols.

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| Table 1<br>Estimates of Cultural and Performance Influences on Russian Presidential Support |                                   |                                   |                                   |                                   |
|---|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
|   | Model A<br>June 1993-<br>Dec 2000 | Model B<br>June 1993-<br>Dec 1999 | Model C<br>June 1991-<br>Dec 2000 | Model D<br>June 1991-<br>Dec 1999 |
| <b>CULTURE:</b>   |                                   |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| Approve Parliament Suspension   | -.04 (.02)*                       | -.04 (.02)*                       | na                                | na                                |
| Nationalist Ideology  | -.03 (.06)                        | -.14 (.06)**                      | na                                | na                                |
| Executive Decrees   | .002 (.001)*                      | .002 (.002)                       | .003 (.002)*                      | .003 (.002)*                      |
| Changes in Leadership   | -.008 (.004)**                    | -.004 (.004)                      | -.009 (.005)*                     | -.008 (.006)                      |
| Yeltsin Illness   | -.04 (.04)                        | .03 (.04)                         | .07 (.05)*                        | .07 (.04)*                        |
| Coup  | na                                | na                                | .46 (.12)***                      | .46 (.12)***                      |
| White House   | .04 (.08)                         | .04 (.09)                         | .07 (.08)                         | .08 (.09)                         |
| Chechnya 1  | -.25 (.09)***                     | -.26 (.08)***                     | -.32 (.08)***                     | -.31 (.08)***                     |
| Chechnya2   | -.22 (.13)*                       | -.19 (.12)*                       | -.18 (.12)*                       | -.20 (.15)                        |
| <b>PERFORMANCE:</b>   |                                   |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| Log CPI   | -.12 (.04)***                     | -.18 (.03)***                     | -.19 (.03)***                     | -.18 (.04)***                     |
| Personal Finances   | .005 (.002)**                     | .005 (.002)**                     | na                                | na                                |
| Retrospective Economy   | .008 (.004)*                      | .02 (.007)*                       | na                                | na                                |
| Prospective Economy   | .001 (.004)                       | .009 (.005)                       | .001 (.004)                       | .001 (.004)                       |
| Freedom House   | .06 (.15)                         | .06 (.15)                         | .07 (.14)                         | .06 (.14)                         |
| Political Expectations  | .008 (.003)**                     | .01 (.004)***                     | .008 (.003)**                     | .01 (.004)***                     |
| <b>CONTROLS:</b>  |                                   |                                   |                                   |                                   |
| Months  | -.03 (.01)***                     | -.03 (.005)***                    | -.03 (.003)***                    | -.03 (.003)***                    |
| Putin   | .58 (.54)                         | na                                | .11 (.38)                         | na                                |
| AR(1)   | -.54 (.11)***                     | -.32 (.12)***                     | -.33 (.10)***                     | -.33 (.10)***                     |
| R <sup>2</sup> Tot  | .98                               | .96                               | .97                               | .96                               |
| R <sup>2</sup> Reg  | .95                               | .84                               | .94                               | .91                               |
| DW  | 1.89 ns                           | 1.85 ns                           | 1.88 ns                           | 1.89 ns                           |
| LBQ   | 6.44 ns                           | 4.63 ns                           | 10.85 ns                          | 9.03 ns                           |
| LM  | .90 ns                            | .83 ns                            | 1.08 ns                           | 1.44 ns                           |
| N   | 90 months                         | 78 months                         | 114 months                        | 102 months                        |

\*\*\*  $p \leq .01$     \*\*  $p \leq .05$     \*  $p \leq .10$

Table 2

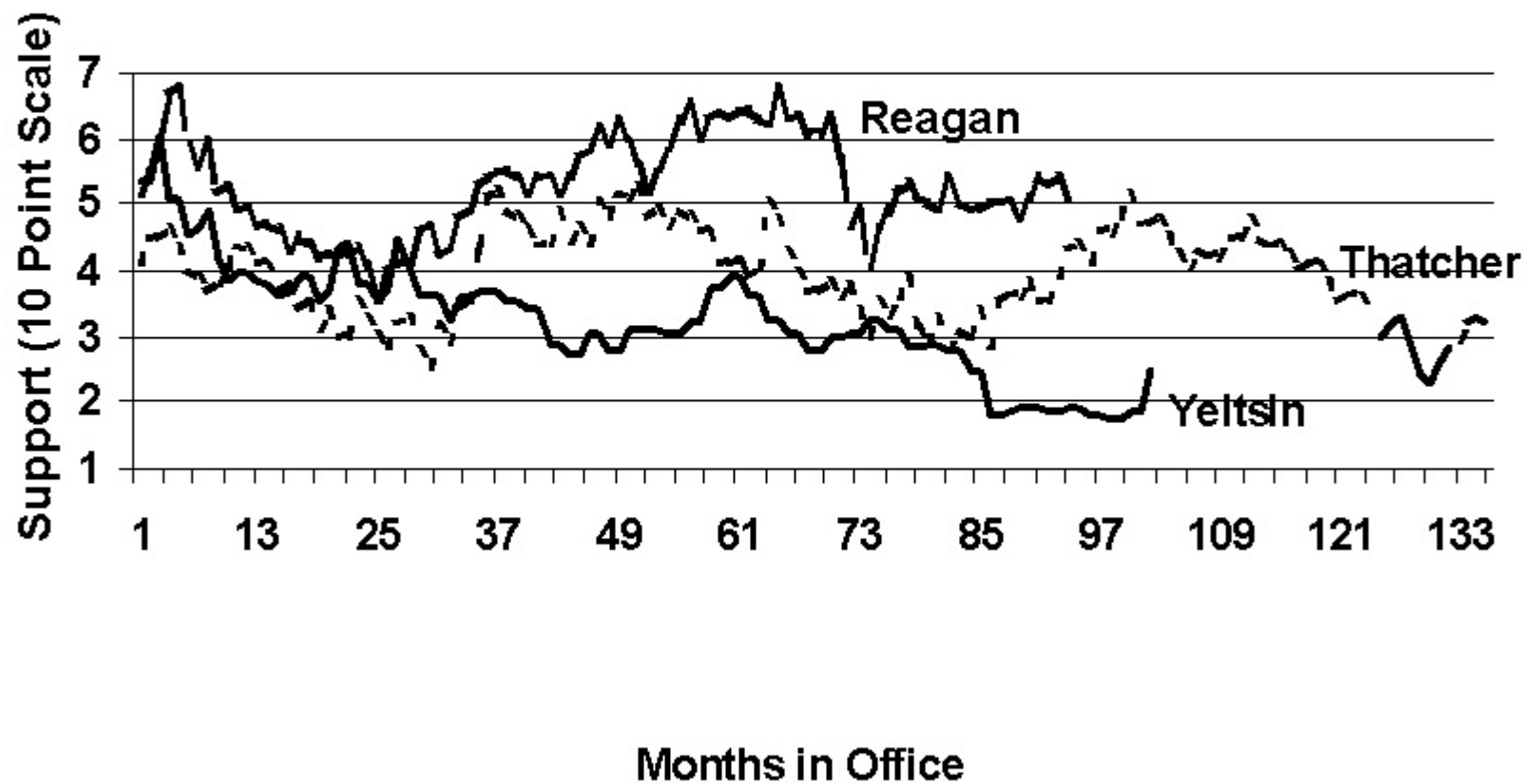
Percentage of Variance in Russian Presidential Support Explained by Cultural Influence and Performance Assessments

|   | <u>Model A</u><br>June 1993-Dec 2000 | <u>Model B</u><br>June 1993-Dec 1999 | <u>Model C</u><br>June 1991-Dec 2000 | <u>Model D</u><br>June 1991-Dec 1999 |
|---|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Control Variables Only                          | 58                                   | 33                                   | 58                                   | 33                                   |
|   |                                      |                                      |                                      |                                      |
| Control Variables Plus Culture                  | 86                                   | 54                                   | 76                                   | 43                                   |
| Control Variables Plus Performance              | 90                                   | 68                                   | 86                                   | 74                                   |
|   |                                      |                                      |                                      |                                      |
| Control Variables Plus Culture Plus Performance | 95                                   | 84                                   | 94                                   | 91                                   |
|   |                                      |                                      |                                      |                                      |

**Figure 1: Trends in Popular Support for Leaders in Russia and the USSR**



**Figure 2: Trends in Popular Support for Yeltsin, Thatcher and Reagan**



## Appendix A

### SURVEY PROCEDURES

The Russian Center for Public Opinion and Market Research (VCIOM) conducts its bi monthly “express” surveys on the third weekend of each month with a national probability sample of approximately 1600 respondents aged 18 years and over. Samples are weighted according to region, type of settlement, sex, age and educational level to obtain full conformity of the sample structure with official statistics. All interviews are conducted, face-to-face, in the homes of respondents and typically run 30-40 minutes. Fieldwork is conducted by 26 regional offices of VCIOM under supervision of regional and Moscow supervisors. The final data undergoes several levels of control (visual control of completed questionnaires, control of coding of open-ended questions, logical data control and sample control of route lists).

VCIOM samples are based on a multi-stage stratification scheme. Ten large economic regions are defined (North and North-West, Central Non-Earth-Black Zone, Central Earth-Black Zone, North Caucasus, Volga-Viatka, Volga, Urals, Western Siberia, Eastern Siberia, and Far East). Inside each region several strata of settlements are defined, taking into consideration: administrative status, population size, and relation to autonomous republics inside Russia. In each stratum, Primary Sampling Units (PSU) including both urban settlements and rural areas are randomly selected out of the list of all urban settlements and rural areas of this stratum, with a probability which is proportional to the size of the adult population. Secondary Sampling Units (SSU) are, then, randomly selected out of the list of electoral districts in each urban PSU. Rural settlements are randomly selected out of the full list of settlements of the rural PSUs. Household selection is made within the selected local points. The survey is carried out by random route sample. Finally, within each household, the interviewer selects a respondent using sex-by-age and sex-by-education quotas. In total, 103 PSUs (35 regional centers, 38 other urban settlements and 30 rural districts in 38 administrative regions of Russia) and approximately 200 SSUs are included in the sample. Sampling error is approximately (+/-) 3 percentage points.

For more details about VCIOM surveys see Levada (1995) and the VCIOM home page at [www.wciom.ru](http://www.wciom.ru).

## Appendix B

### Variable Definitions (Sources), Means, and Standard Deviations

| Variable                      | Definition   | x     | sd   |
|-------------------------------|--|-------|------|
| Approve Parliament Suspension | Yearly percentage of citizens responding "approve" to the question, <i>If Parliament was suspended and competitive parties abolished would you approve or disapprove?</i> (NRB)  | 37.4  | 1.6  |
| Nationalist Ideology          | Factor Score on single dimension measuring public trust of four public officials: Viktor Chernomyrdin, Grigory Yavlinsky, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, Gennady Zyuganov. Higher scores indicate greater trust in Zyuganov and Zhirinovsky (VCIOM) | 0.1   | 1.0  |
| Executive Decrees             | Total number of normative presidential decrees issued (INFOBASE)   | 20.1  | 12.5 |
| Changes in Leadership         | Monthly turnover in the Russian executive (Lysenko, 1997, and "Archive of Resignations and Appointments," National Electronic Library, Moscow)   | 2.0   | 3.3  |
| Yeltsin Illness               | Dummy Variable coded 1 in months in which press reports President Yeltsin as severely ill or incapacitated and 0 in other months.  | .18   | .39  |
| Coup                          | Dummy variable coded 1 in the 6 months following the attempted coup in August 1991 and 0 in all other months.  | .06   | .24  |
| White House                   | Dummy variable coded 1 in the 6 months following the firing on the Russian White House in September 1993 and 0 in all other months   |       |      |
| Chechnya 1                    | Dummy Variable coded 1 in all month between December 1994 and August 1996 and 0 in all other months.   | .16   | .38  |
| Chechnya 2                    | Dummy Variable coded 1 in all month after October 1999 and 0 in all other months.  | .16   | .38  |
| Log CPI                       | Natural log of the annualized percentage change in the Consumer Price Index ( <i>Economist</i> )   | 4.3   | 1.7  |
| Personal Finances             | Difference in the percentage of citizens responding "very good/good" vs. the percentage responding "very bad/bad" to the question, <i>How do you estimate your family's present economic situation?</i> (VCIOM)                            | -46.8 | 8.9  |

**Appendix B** (continued)

Variable Definitions (Sources), Means, and Standard Deviations

| Variable               | Definition  | x     | sd   |
|------------------------|---|-------|------|
| Retrospective Economy  | Difference in the percentage of citizens responding “very good/good” vs. the percentage responding “very bad/bad” to the question, <i>How do you estimate Russia’s current economic situation?</i> (VCIOM)  | -71.7 | 7.5  |
| Prospective Economy    | Difference in the percentage of citizens responding “some/much improvement” vs. the percentage responding “some/much deterioration” to the question, <i>What do you think the Russian Economy can expect in the forthcoming months?</i> (VCIOM)                   | -34.9 | 17.8 |
| Freedom House          | Yearly mean of the two 7-point Freedom House indices of civil and political liberties. ( <i>Freedom House</i> )   | 3.8   | .59  |
| Political Expectations | Difference in the percentage of citizens responding “some/much improvement” vs. the percentage responding “some/much deterioration” to the question, <i>What do you think Russian Economy can expect in the political life in the forthcoming months?</i> (VCIOM) | -26.5 | 17.9 |
| Putin                  | Dummy Variable Coded 1 in January 2000 and afterwards and 0 otherwise.  |       |      |
| Months                 | Number of Months to date that the President has served in office.   | 46.8  | 31,2 |
| Presidential Approval  | Mean aggregate score of public responses on a 10-point scale to the question, <i>What mark on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest) would you give the performance of President of Russia, _____?</i> (VCIOM)   | 3.5   | 1.1  |

Sources: Economist: The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Profile: Russia*, 4<sup>th</sup> quarter, 1993 and various, subsequent issues  
 Freedom House: <http://www.freedomhouse.org>, various years.  
 INFOBASE: INFORIS Internet Center. <http://www.inforis.ru/infobase>.  
 NRB: New Russia Barometer, Centre for the Study of Public Policy, University of Strathclyde, <http://www.cspp.strath.ac.uk> various surveys.  
 VCIOM: The Russian Center for Public Opinion Research, *Economic and Social Change*, various surveys.