Several of the Mershon Center’s professors, including Ted Hopf and Timothy Frye, both Political Scientists, and George Hudson, a visiting scholar from Wittenberg University, perform field research in Russia. The day before the parliamentary elections in Russia in December, these three experts discussed the political situation surrounding the elections.

Hudson began by situating these elections in the larger political climate of the country, arguing that it is important to study these elections because they provide important indicators for the presidential elections.

Hudson said that research data indicates that during the years since 1989, participation in Russian elections had been mixed. While the presidential election consistently draws out more voters, in 1989, almost 90% of Russians voted during the parliamentary elections. By 1993, that rate had fallen to 54%. Hudson said that this may seem dramatic, but in the context of other elections, this is actually quite reasonable: in 2002, German participation in the Bundestag election was approximately 80% and French participation was around 60%. In the United States, the 2002 elections for the House of Representatives had 39% voter participation. Hudson said that Russian turnout rates are “not bad,” compared with other industrialized nations; he maturation of Russian democracy has resulted in a falloff of voter participation and a consolidation of parties as people become more accustomed to representative government.

Timothy Frye said these elections are a good indicator of future elections, since the Duma has strong influence in Russian policy and the country’s laws require a majority to pass legislation. This year is especially important, said Frye, because if Putin is to be allowed a third term, his party will have to elect its legislative candidates in order to amend the constitution to allow for it.

He also said that these elections provide a great window into the operation of Russian business, as well. The Russian parliament has strong and somewhat transparent ties to large Russian businesses, especially in the case of Union of Right Wing Forces. One Russian company—oil giant, Yukos—dominates the party not only because it is so wealthy, but because its leader is such a high-profile media figure.

United Russia, Putin’s party, is strategically weak because there are few dynamic leaders. Frye said that they have been in a somewhat unenviable position, trying to forge a party identity at the same time they are trying to legislate and ensure their own survival.

Ted Hopf’s recent work in Russia indicated that party identification is important, posing possible problems for Putin and his regime. He showed several examples of political party propaganda and discussed how the media, which is largely state-controlled, shows a notable bias against certain parties, like United Russia, and leans toward conservatism even though centrist parties tend to be growing more rapidly. Further, the media tends to heavily promote Vladimir Zhiranovsky, Chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), because his behavior tends to be quite bizarre and entertaining. Hopf said that it is important to recognize that the media plays an important, if biased, role in the elections.