The Impact of Elections on Civic Attitudes: Causal Evidence from Kazakhstan's Staggered Local Elections[*]

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First draft: August 29, 2023
This draft: July 15, 2025

Abstract

Multi-party elections are vital to representative politics, shaping relationships between politicians and citizens. Yet, it is difficult to empirically examine how the introduction of elections changes public attitudes toward politicians, because the timing of national-level initial elections is endogenous and there is no within-country variation across citizens. To identify the causal effects of first-ever elections, we exploit plausibly exogenous variation in the staggered timing of initiating village elections in Kazakhstan. Measuring political efficacy by direct questions and anchoring vignettes, perceptions of corruption using double-list experiment, and preferred candidate characteristics by conjoint analysis, we estimate the effects of the first village elections on those attitudes. We find that elections do not make citizens feel more efficacious nor reward leaders' responsiveness to local needs, but report more frequent bribing of local officials. Our results suggest that introducing elections may foster negative perceptions of government quality, rather than enhancing civic political engagement.

1 Introduction

Holding multi-party elections is the core principle of modern representative politics, which emerged through the long process of transitions from oligarchic rule without suffrage.[1] Since the advent of modern democracy in the West, the practice of selecting political representatives through elections has gradually become the norm in both democracies and autocracies over the past three centuries (Stasavage, 2020). In democracies, these elections are expected to hold politicians accountable to citizens (Przeworski, Stokes and Manin, 1999; Powell, 2000). By providing a crucial channel for securing political accountability, free and fair elections in democracies lead to improvements in public goods provision (Stasavage, 2005; Gerring, Thacker and Alfaro, 2012), increased public confidence in politics (Norris, 2014), and heightened political participation (Birch, 2010). In autocracies, approximately 70% of leaders now hold multi-party elections periodically, making electoral authoritarian regimes the most common form of autocratic rule (Schedler, 2013). In these contexts, multi-party elections do not necessarily ensure accountability to citizens, but they significantly influence how autocrats engage in politics (Magaloni, 2006; Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009; Higashijima, 2022).

An important gap in the literature is about how the introduction of multi-party elections changes citizens' attitudes toward politics and politicians. Any country holding elections had its first-time election, and it was a transformative moment in the institutional relationships between politicians and citizens. This institutional shift is presumed to affect the behavior of citizens by changing their perceptions of evaluating and selecting their political representatives. Two features are desired for studies on this mechanism: identifying the causal effects of first-ever elections and measuring public perceptions of politicians in an environment where elections begin to take place. Although existing studies have attempted to achieve these qualities, institutional and data limitations have allowed them to fulfill either one or the other, but not both.

In advanced democracies, scholars have been examining the effects of initial exposure to elections in the context of extending voting eligibility to younger citizens, with mixed findings (e.g., Bergh, 2013; Eichhorn, 2018; Holbein et al., 2023; Horiuchi, Katsumata and Woodard, 2023). Although these studies leverage the suffrage extension for young voters to estimate the causal effects of first elections, they focus only on a limited age subset of voters who join existing (free and fair) elections. In addition to the lack of generalizability to other age groups, spillover effects of existing elections from older generations make it difficult to

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[1]This paper uses the term "multi-party" and "multi-candidate elections" interchangeably to mean that voters have multiple choices on whom they vote at the ballot box.

draw reliable conclusions about the overall impacts of introducing elections on voters.

In autocracies and mixed regimes, by contrast, researchers have examined the consequences that the introduction of local elections may have for citizens in general (Sjahrir, Kis-Katos and Schulze, 2014; Beazer and Reuter, 2022; Martinez-Bravo et al., 2022; Paniagua, 2022). However, most of these studies have focused on government decisions, such as public goods provision and redistribution, without addressing popular perceptions. The pioneering work of Manion (1996, 2006) explores the relationships between local elections and citizens' political perceptions in China. Yet, her surveys were conducted some time after the introduction of the first village elections, and their design is unable to causally identify the effects of these elections on citizens' attitudes.

Our study possesses both of these desirable features in examining common theoretical expectations regarding how the first-ever multi-party elections shape public political attitudes among citizens. Theoretically, we propose a mechanism through which the introduction of multi-party elections establishes the basis for interactions between representatives and the governed: *Despite fraudulent elections in electoral autocracies, the introduction of such elections may incentivize both politicians and citizens to engage with each other more than in contexts without elections.* Empirically, we exploit the quasi-experimental, staggered introduction of multi-candidate village elections in Kazakhstan.

From the citizen's perspective, direct elections with choices are expected to increase political efficacy, meaning that individuals feel they have more influence in political processes. From the elite's perspective, politicians should be more inclined to implement policies that enhance citizens' welfare: multi-party elections encourage ruling elites to avoid predatory behavior, listen to citizens' demands, and increase the provision of public goods. Consequently, politicians' emphasis on protecting popular interests becomes more credible, leading citizens to prefer those elected politicians over similar ones appointed by autocrats.

Empirical assessment of these theoretical expectations poses two major methodological challenges in the context where the first multi-party elections are introduced. The first is the identification of causal effects of elections. In most cases, the timing of introducing multi-party elections is strategically decided by leaders (Mitchell, 2023), which makes it difficult for researchers to identify causal relationships between elections and public political attitudes. The second is the measurement of the outcome due to the fact that political attitudes are sensitive under authoritarian contexts. The problem of this social desirability bias (SDB) is unavoidable when testing our hypotheses which also involve questions on policies and politicians.

To overcome these obstacles, we combine survey experimental techniques that reduce SDB with a natural experimental setting in Kazakhstan's local politics, where the staggered

introduction of multi-candidate elections for each village chief (*akim*) began in July 2021. Kazakhstan has been an authoritarian regime since national independence in 1991, where national elections were periodically held but village-level leaders were not directly chosen by elections nationwide. Importantly, these elections were introduced only after the term expiration of each village akim, who was appointed by the state legislature under the previous law. This situation offers a rare opportunity to test the causal effect of elections within a quasi-experimental framework. By comparing villages where direct elections have already been introduced with those that still have appointed akims, we empirically assess the impacts of multi-party elections on popular perceptions of policies and politicians.

Based on our preregistered hypotheses, we find that respondents in villages with multi-candidate elections report more frequent experiences of street-level corruption. This result suggests that, contrary to our initial theoretical expectations, multi-party elections do not necessarily deter politicians and bureaucrats from engaging in predatory behavior in their daily interactions with citizens. Moreover, we find no significant differences between elected and appointed villages in respondents' levels of political efficacy, political awareness, expectations of leader responsiveness, or preferences regarding leadership traits. Taken together, these findings indicate that first-ever elections may not lead citizens to feel more heard or politically empowered; instead, such elections fail to improve public evaluations of local leaders and may even contribute to negative perceptions of governance quality. Given that many founding multi-party elections—both historically and in contemporary settings—have been marred by various obstacles, our results offer important insights into the limitations of introducing elections as a strategy for enhancing governance and political accountability.

This paper makes several important contributions. First, to the best of our knowledge, it presents the first causal evidence on the impacts of multi-party election installation on general voters' perceptions of their representatives. By comparing villages with elected officials to those without elections within a quasi-experimental design, we explore whether and how first-time multi-party elections transform citizens' evaluations of politicians in a short time span. In doing so, we contribute to the extensive literature on political institutions and popular political attitudes (e.g., Almond and Verba, 1963; Norris, 1999; Bowler and Donovan, 2002; Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi, 2004).

This article also contributes to the literature on local elections in developing countries. Many developing nations now hold multi-party elections at the local level to enhance grass-roots governance (Martinez-Bravo et al., 2011; Grossman and Baldassarri, 2012). Scholarly findings primarily stem from village elections in China (Manion, 1996; Shen and Yao, 2008; Landry, Davis and Wang, 2010; Martinez-Bravo et al., 2022), while a few studies focus on contexts in Russia (Beazer and Reuter, 2022), Indonesia (Sjahrir, Kis-Katos and Schulze,

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2014), and Argentina (Paniagua, 2022). However, with only a few exceptions (Manion, 1996; Beazer and Reuter, 2022; Paniagua, 2022; Martinez-Bravo et al., 2022), most research concentrates on how the impact of elections varies based on differences in electoral competitiveness rather than comparing municipalities with and without elections. Furthermore, few studies explore the causal relationship between the introduction of elections and popular perceptions of governance. The purpose of this paper is to ascertain whether the introduction of multi-party elections improves grassroots governance from the citizens' perspective.

Finally, this study contributes to the literature on autocratic politics (Magaloni, 2006; Blaydes, 2011; Svolik, 2012; Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018). Previous studies on autocratic elections have primarily relied on macro-level observational data while treating the processes of citizens' political perceptions as a "black box." By focusing on how citizens alter their perceptions following the introduction of multi-candidate elections in autocracies, we empirically test the micro-foundations of arguments regarding the autocratic benefits of holding elections. In doing so, we go beyond observational data by combining a natural experiment with survey experiments, thereby identifying the causal relationships between quasi-democratic institutions and popular perceptions in a methodologically rigorous manner tailored to authoritarian contexts.

2 The Installation of Multi-Party Elections and Its Impacts on Popular Attitudes

2.1 Citizen-Politician Linkages Forged through Elections

Sustainable community development relies on strong, anticipated interactions between public officials and citizens (Ostrom, 1990; Putnam, 1994). For citizens to effectively communicate their policy demands, they need accessible channels to ensure that politicians address the relevant issues in their communities. Similarly, politicians must accurately gauge the policy preferences of citizens and deeply engage in community development to promote good governance. We argue that introducing multi-party elections creates valuable opportunities for mutual interaction between citizens and politicians, fostering responsiveness that is often lacking in communities without electoral choices.

In communities without multi-party elections that offer choice, citizens have limited channels to communicate their policy demands to politicians. One common method for conveying these demands is through direct contact, such as lobbying. However, this opportunity is typically accessible only to a select few community members who have established relationships with public officials and possess the necessary resources to exert pressure on them in certain policy areas in developing nations (Grömping and Teets, 2023; Weymouth, 2012). Protesting

is another option for community members, but for many, organizing and attending protests can be a costly form of political participation. This is especially true in political regimes without elections, such as autocratic regimes, where governments are likely to suppress public dissent forcefully and thus people suffer collective action problems (e.g., Kuran, 1991; Hollyer, Rosendorf and Vreeland, 2015).

From the perspective of political elites, effectively governing communities can be challenging due to the difficulty in grasping the overall public preferences within those communities. Since lobbying is typically undertaken by a small fraction of the population, the information regarding policy demands may become significantly distorted (Grömping and Teets, 2023). Similarly, although public preferences revealed through popular protests may work as an information-gathering tool, they do not accurately reflect the general views of broader communities because whether to protest involves a strong filter of individual self-selection mechanisms (Lorentzen, 2013).

Compared to direct contact with politicians and participation in protests, multi-party elections provide a more effective, broad opportunity for citizens and politicians to engage with each other in three key ways. First, participating in elections is often *less costly for many citizens* than lobbying or organizing protests. Citizens can voice their policy demands simply by going to the polling station on election day, without needing to invest significant resources or organize large groups for political appeals.

Second, elections serve as *a focal point for dialogue between citizens and politicians* regarding policy issues. During election campaigns, candidates must appeal to citizens with their policy promises—ranging from local employment initiatives to the distribution of resources—while also considering the concerns of their communities. This process exposes a larger number of citizens to election campaigning, encouraging them to actively engage in political activities during this time (Higashijima and Kerr, 2023).

Third, in the context of elections as public events that encourage greater citizen participation, *politicians can gather less biased information on public preferences* by hearing a broader range of voices during the election campaigning process and from the election results (Arceneaux, 2006; Karp and Banducci, 2008). While the outcomes of multi-party elections may have limitations as an information-gathering tool in illiberal regimes, where electoral malpractices are prevalent, the overall electoral process enhances communications between citizens and politicians. This, in turn, allows politicians to gain deeper insights into popular policy demands. Indeed, research on autocratic politics indicates that multi-party elections generate valuable information (Magaloni, 2006; Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018) and inspire politicians to collect local knowledge that is essential for identifying various social problems within their communities (Manion, 2015). Together, communities which started

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introducing multi-party elections are expected to strengthen interactions between citizens and politicians more than those without such elections.

2.2 Testable Hypotheses

What aspects of popular perceptions of politicians are likely to be influenced by the introduction of multi-party elections that strengthen engagement between citizens and politicians? We suggest that direct elections with choices enhance individuals' motivation to get involved in politics, particularly in contrast to situations where politicians are appointed by a higher authority. In such cases, citizens do not have the opportunity to express their preferences for leaders. Conversely, multi-candidate elections create broader opportunities for citizens to communicate their preferences to political leaders.

Each candidate conducts an election campaign designed to appeal to voters for winning elections with policy promises that (candidates think) reflect what the electorate expects within their district (Miller and Stokes, 1963; Mayhew, 1974). As voters are exposed to election campaigning, they gain the opportunity to discuss various community issues with candidates and their fellow voters, compare candidates, engage in the electoral process, and vote according to their preferences (Fenno, 1978). This active participation happens in multi-party elections of developing countries which are not completely free and fair (Higashijima and Kerr, 2023), leading citizens to feel that their voices are heard by politicians.

Thus, it is reasonable to expect that political efficacy—defined as citizens' trust in their ability to influence politics and their belief in their understanding of political affairs—will be enhanced by the introduction of multi-party elections. Additionally, the increased interactions among voters, public officials, and electoral candidates during campaign periods may also incentivize citizens to develop their interests in politics and deepen their understanding of political issues. Based on this discussion, we have formulated the following preregistered hypotheses concerning political efficacy and awareness:

> **H1 (political efficacy)**: Residents of a village with elected head have higher levels of political efficacy on average than those with appointed head.

> **H2 (political awareness)**: Residents of a village with elected head are more interested in and more knowledgeable about politics on average than those with appointed head.

The introduction of multi-party elections should not only alter citizens' motivations toward politics but also reshape their experiences, expectations, and preferences regarding political elites. This transformation occurs through a two-step process.

The first step is influenced by the perspectives of political elites. Existing research indicates that even in electoral authoritarian regimes, the presence of opposition parties in electoral competition exerts pressure on elites to be more responsive to their constituents (Miller, 2015; Higashijima, 2022; Beazer and Reuter, 2022). Electoral competition "puts pressure on local officials and deputies to refrain from exploitation and brutality toward constituents and compete on behalf of their areas in the national scramble for schools, clinics, paved roads, and whatever else is given out"(Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018, 141).

Given the electoral incentives stemming from voter engagement, competent local elites are more motivated to adopt the following three measures after the introduction of semicompetitive elections, compared to those appointed by a higher authority.

First, electoral competition encourages local public officials to reduce corruption to attract voters. Specifically, under electoral accountability, these officials are more likely to prioritize the protection of voters' properties and interests in order to secure their votes. As a result, they are motivated to avoid predatory behaviors that could harm citizens' welfare (Ruiz-Rufino, 2018; Mansour et al., 2021).

Second, multi-party elections incentivize local public officials to provide positive inducements in order to garner votes from citizens (Bueno de Mesquita et al., 2003). Specifically, these officials appeal to voters by delivering tangible benefits that address citizens' demands, such as the provision of community-wide public goods and patronage (e.g., Lindberg, 2003; Flores and Nooruddin, 2016). This includes maintaining roads and community facilities, improving utilities and services like garbage collection, and fostering local economic activities.

Third, multi-party elections may encourage local public officials to prioritize local interests over those of the central government when conflicts arise. In contexts where local public officials are directly appointed by a higher authority, they tend to be more accountable to the central government than to the citizens, as the latter lack voting rights (Beazer and Reuter, 2022).

Conversely, the introduction of local elections compels local politicians to consider local interests more seriously. They must be accountable to local voters, which drives them to promote local concerns. Additionally, electoral competition serves as an institutional mechanism for the central government, helping to improve local governance by monitoring the performance of local politicians (Beazer and Reuter, 2022). Together, these career incentives encourage local public officials to focus more on advancing local interests.

These discussions lead us to formulate the following three preregistered hypotheses:

> **H3 (corruption)**: Residents of a village with elected head are less likely to report the practices of street-level political corruption on average than those with appointed head.

H4 (responsiveness): Residents of a village with elected head expect a higher responsiveness of their village head on average than those with appointed head.

H5 (local vs center interests): Residents of a village with elected head evaluate village heads prioritizing village interests over the center's demands more positively on average than those with appointed head.

The second process is viewed from the perspective of citizens. Several theoretical implications can be derived if the aforementioned changes in the incentive structure among elites occur due to the introduction of multi-party elections.

To begin with, Hypothesis 3 regarding political corruption suggests that citizens should expect and experience a reduction in instances of street-level corruption following the introduction of semi-competitive elections. Furthermore, if citizens observe that elected local officials are less corrupt and perceived as working for the benefit of local residents, their expectations for these officials may shift after the introduction of multi-party elections.

One possible outcome is that voters may reevaluate elected local leaders based on their policy responsiveness. With community elites now accountable through local elections, they need to address the policy needs of their constituents. Specifically, in relation to Hypothesis 4 on policy responsiveness, citizens may expect elected leaders to be more responsive to their demands compared to appointed leaders. Consequently, voters are more likely to assess their local leaders based on the policies they propose rather than on the performance of appointed officials.

The second possibility is that voters may become more politically active by directly appealing to local leaders outside of electoral processes. As indicated by Hypothesis 5 on the prioritization of local interests, citizens may perceive elected leaders as being more community-oriented compared to appointed leaders. This significant change in the leaders' incentive structure encourages voters to engage more actively with local leaders about their demands and community needs. In other words, voters are more likely to value elected local leaders who are receptive to petitions and input from the community.

Given these discussions, we posit the following two preregistered hypotheses concerning public perceptions and experiences related to local petitions and policy promises:

H6 (petition from locals): Residents of a village with elected head evaluate village heads willing to listen to petitions and appeals from locals more positively on average than those with appointed head.

H7 (policy promises): Residents of a village with elected head evaluate village heads prioritizing broader community and groups rather than selected locations, businesses, and occupations more positively than those with appointed head.

3 Research Design

3.1 Staggered Introduction of Village Executive Elections in Kazakhstan

Identifying the causal effects of elections on popular perceptions poses two challenges. First, national-level elections are generally held simultaneously across the country, especially the first-ever multi-party elections in regime transitions from closed autocracies. Under such circumstances, all citizens in the country experience the same institutional change at the same time. Second, the decision of introducing elections is not random, thereby making it difficult to identify the causal effect of elections through cross-national comparisons. Given these difficulties, our approach follows Fukumoto and Horiuchi (2011) and takes advantage of the as-if random non-synchronized introduction of local elections in Kazakhstan to tackle this problem.

In September 2020, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan announced in the State-of-the-Nation Address that the country would introduce direct elections of rural municipal akims. In April 2021, related bills were submitted to and approved by the Mazhilis (Lower House) in the country, followed by the approvals of the Senate and the President in the next month, leading to holding the first direct rural akim elections in July 2021. The new law requires every rural municipality holding direct elections (i.e., cities with district importance, villages, and the townships of rural districts) to have more than two candidates, either nominated by registered political parties or by candidates themselves, making all the rural akim elections multi-candidate ones.

The central government decided to introduce multi-candidate village elections to improve grass-roots governance by enhancing the linkage between local public officials and villagers. In so doing, they expected these new local elections to gather grass-roots knowledge by incentivizing local leaders to grasp community needs and legitimize "democraticness" of the regime.

According to government officials, direct elections of akims of villages, settlements, and rural districts allow citizens to increase their activity in the full implementation of their constitutional rights, help increase the responsiveness of local governments to the needs and concerns of the population, know the capabilities and professional qualities of candidates for the position of akim.[2] Put differently, the Kazakh government aimed to strengthen the accountability and information-gathering mechanisms through the installation of direct multi-party elections, thereby improving local governance and nurturing civic rights and

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[2]KazTAG."Predstavlen proekt popravok v konstitucionnoe zakonodatel'stvo RK po vyboram akimov," accessed on October 20, 2020.

responsibilities of local residents.

Intriguingly, when to hold these elections is widely dissimilar across these rural villages. This is because the new law stipulates that rural akim elections be held only after the four-year term of incumbent akims, who were appointed by local assemblies, expires. Pertinently, because of the following reasons, the term expiration of appointed akims is highly likely to be orthogonal to a variety of factors which may influence people's political attitudes. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the assignments of the first multi-candidate village elections are as-if random.

Since the adoption of the first constitution in 1993 until August 2013, village akims were appointed by the governors of a higher entity (*raion* akim). The law stipulated that the president appointed state governors (*oblast* akims), who in turn appointed district akims (*raion*), and *raion* akims appointed rural akims. In August 2013, following revisions to the Law on Local Government and Self-Government, rural akims with a four-year term were appointed through collective votes by deputies in the *raion* legislature (*Maslikhat*) across all 2,533 rural municipalities.[3] Notably, the timing of these appointments by the *Maslikhat* gradually became staggered. By August 2017, only 1,416 village akims were appointed simultaneously by the *Maslikhat*.[4] The first direct elections for rural akims took place in July 2021, when the terms of 730 appointed akims expired. Similarly, 351 akims were elected through direct elections in 2022, while the remaining 499, 585, and 74 akims were scheduled to be elected in 2023, 2024, and 2025, respectively, with different election dates each year, depending on the expiration of their appointed predecessors' terms.[5]

The gradual differences in the timing of rural akim appointments stem from the fact that some appointed village akims resigned for idiosyncratic reasons specific to the individuals themselves. These resignations also contributed to variations in the timing of the first village elections. Some akims stepped down due to illness or death, while others resigned to pursue careers in the public or private sectors. For instance, in Kyzylorda Oblast in 2023, 38 village akims were elected, and 20% left their posts before completing their terms to seek new career opportunities.[6] In other cases, rural akims resigned due to retirement or relocation. For example, in South Kazakhstan Oblast, 74 rural akims were newly appointed by *raion* legislatures between 2014 and 2016—before their predecessors' terms expired—primarily due to health issues, job transfers, retirement, or changes in residence.[7] In our sample

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[3]Novosti Kazakhstana, "V Kazakhstane izberut akimov nizovogo urovnya na mestakh na chetyre goda." April 30, 2013.

[4]Central Election Commission of Kazakhstan. "V Kazakhstane zavershilis' vybory selskih akimov." August 30, 2017.

[5]Kazinform, "Kak budut prokhodit vybory akimov v Kazakhstane," June 3, 2021.

[6]The authors' interview with a public official in Kyzylorda Oblast (conducted on June 28, 2024).

[7]Zakon.kz, "V YUKO izbrany akimy 107 syol." August 25, 2017.

of 56 villages, among 17 villages with elections that resulted in leadership turnover, all departing appointed akims had left their positions for one of the aforementioned reasons. Since these factors are unlikely to be related to villagers' political attitudes, the differences in election timing provide an opportunity to estimate the causal effect of direct elections on civic attitudes.

One potential factor that may violate the exogeneity assumption of electoral introduction timing is the possibility that higher authorities dismiss rural akims. The Law on Local Government and Self-Government stipulates that rural akims appointed by *raion* legislatures can be dismissed by *raion* akims with the approval of *oblast* akims. However, this concern is minimal in our case and research design. Specifically, it presents two key issues. First, dismissals of rural akims in the distant past might influence political attitudes at the time of our survey. However, it is difficult to imagine that dismissals of rural akims in the mid-2010s, or the factors leading to them, would still have a substantial influence on citizens' attitudes in 2023, under different governorships. More specifically, it is unreasonable to assume that past dismissal-related factors would drive any short-term change in people's political attitudes, which are our dependent variable. Moreover, as described below, we randomly sample villages from each *oblast* using careful procedures, which likely offsets unobservable confounding factors between villages with appointed and elected rural akims.

The second issue, which may be even more important, concerns the treatment group (i.e., villages with elections), where former akims appointed by *raion* legislatures are presumed to be suddenly dismissed, prompting immediate elections. However, this is not the case—at least in our sample. A detailed examination of all 56 villages with elections in our sample reveals that in 11 villages, the incumbent akims—previously appointed—successfully won elections. Furthermore, a close inspection of individual cases shows that in the remaining 17 villages where leadership turnover occurred through elections, all departing appointed akims stepped down either due to term expiration or for reasons unrelated to dismissal by higher authorities. Therefore, we consider the introduction of direct elections as an as-if randomly assigned treatment.

Our research design is based on a multi-stage random sampling of survey respondents. We fielded a survey in Kazakhstan's seventeen oblast which started introducing village-level elections on July 2021. We randomly selected two or four villages from each oblast, half with elected akims and the other half with appointed akims.[8] In total, we selected 56 villages as

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[8]For eleven out of the seventeen oblasts, which were not redistricted by administrative reforms in 2022, we randomly selected four villages: two villages with elected akims and the other two with appointed akims. For the rest of the six oblasts that were redistricted (the Abai oblast separated from the East Kazakhstan oblast, the Ulytau oblast separated from the Karaganda oblast, and the Zhetysu oblast separated from the Almaty oblast), we selected two villages from each: one with elected akim and the other with appointed akim. To

| Elected − Appointed (Difference−in−Means) | p−value (OLS with Clustered SE) |

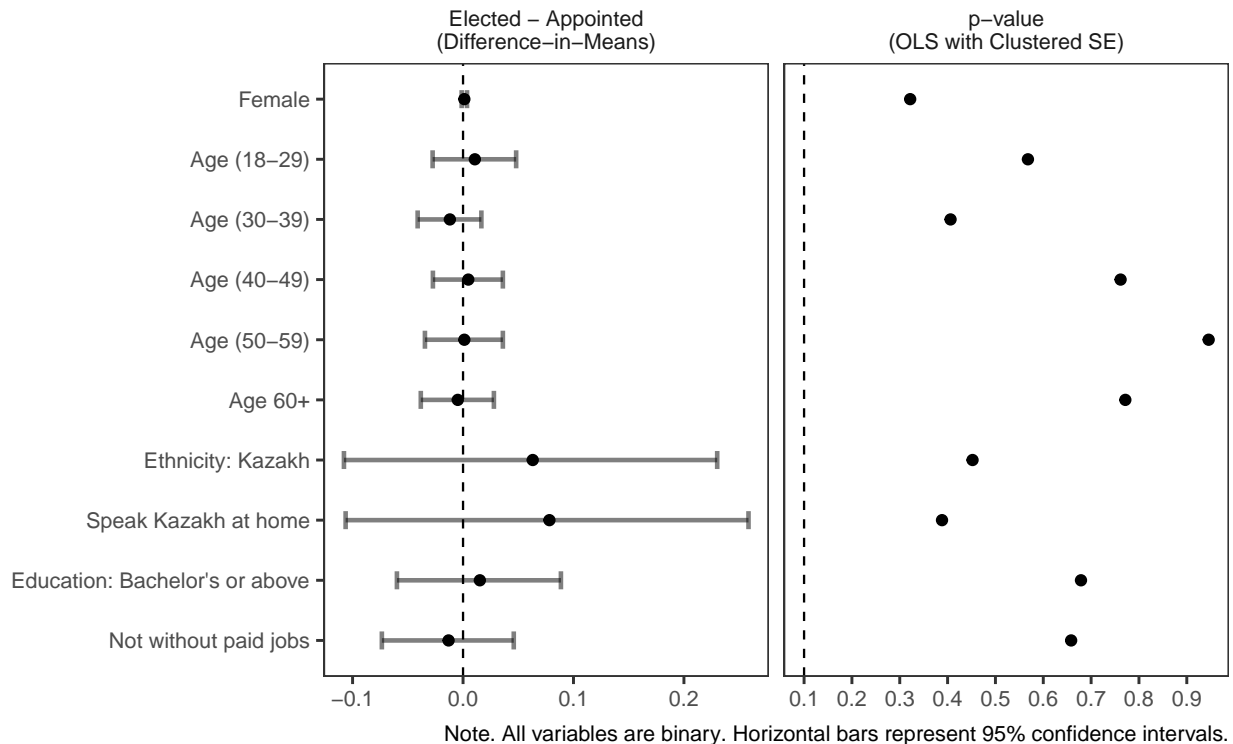Note. All variables are binary. Horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 1: Balance check on individual-level covariates

the primary stage units. The second and third stage units are households and respondents. Sampling started from an arbitrary starting point of a village, and interviewers followed a pre-defined rule to select random households and respondents within selected households (see SI B for the detailed rule). Consequently, the total number of respondents is 1,680. The survey was taken in person between January 16 and April 5 in 2023.

3.2 Covariate Balance

Our identification strategy relies on the assumption that the introduction of local elections is statistically independent of the potential outcomes of citizens' political attitudes. While this assumption is directly untestable, we collected individual- and raion-level pre-treatment covariates to examine the balance between the treated and control groups.

3.2.1 Individual-level Covariates

In addition to the outcome variables described in Section 3.3, we include a number of survey items for collecting individual-level demographic and socio-economic variables. Those variables include gender, age, ethnicity, language spoken at home, education, and employment status. Figure 1 shows the balance of these variables between the treated and control groups.[9]

The figure indicates individual-level characteristics are well-balanced between the treated and control groups on average. The left panel shows the difference in means on the standardized scale between the treated and control groups for each covariate. Mean differences are close to zero relative to the standard deviation for all covariates, and the 95% confidence intervals cover the zero line (the dashed vertical line) The p-values of the t-tests for zero difference in means are all above .3, indicating that the differences are not even close to statistical significance.

3.2.2 Raion-level Covariates

Due to the data scarce environment of Kazakhstan, we could not find data of village-specific pre-treatment variables. It would have been useful if, for example, the population, ethnic composition, and economic and development indicators of the villages were available. Unfortunately, in Kazakhstan such data for each village is not available. As a compromise, we use raion-level covariates to check the balance between the treated and control villages. Of course, raion-level variables are unlikely to be representative of the corresponding village-level variables, since raions are much larger administrative units that contain multiple villages. However, in our multi-stage sampling design, we randomly selected raions and then randomly selected only one village from each raion. Examining raion-level covariates provides suggestive evidence that the treated and control villages are not sampled from largely different raions.

Figure 2 shows the balance of raion-level covariates between the treated and control villages. We collected the unemployment rate, income per capita, proportion of agricultural population, total population, proportions of the Kazakh and Russian ethnics, gender composition, and proportion of working population in each raion. For each variable, we plot the difference-in-means between the treated and control villages as well as the 95% confidence

minimize possible carryover effects across villages, we avoided selecting villages adjacent each other. The list of villages is attached in Supplementary Information (SI) A. Note that two villages, Yubileynoe and Akore, listed in the preregistration document (Higashijima, Kato and Shiraito, 2023) were replaced by Petrovka and Kurma, respectively, due to severe weather conditions that prevented survey enumerators from reaching the originally selected villages. The replacement villages were selected from the same raion as the original ones, but the treatment status of the villages was switched.

[9]Complete results corresponding to each figure in the main text are shown as tables in SI E.
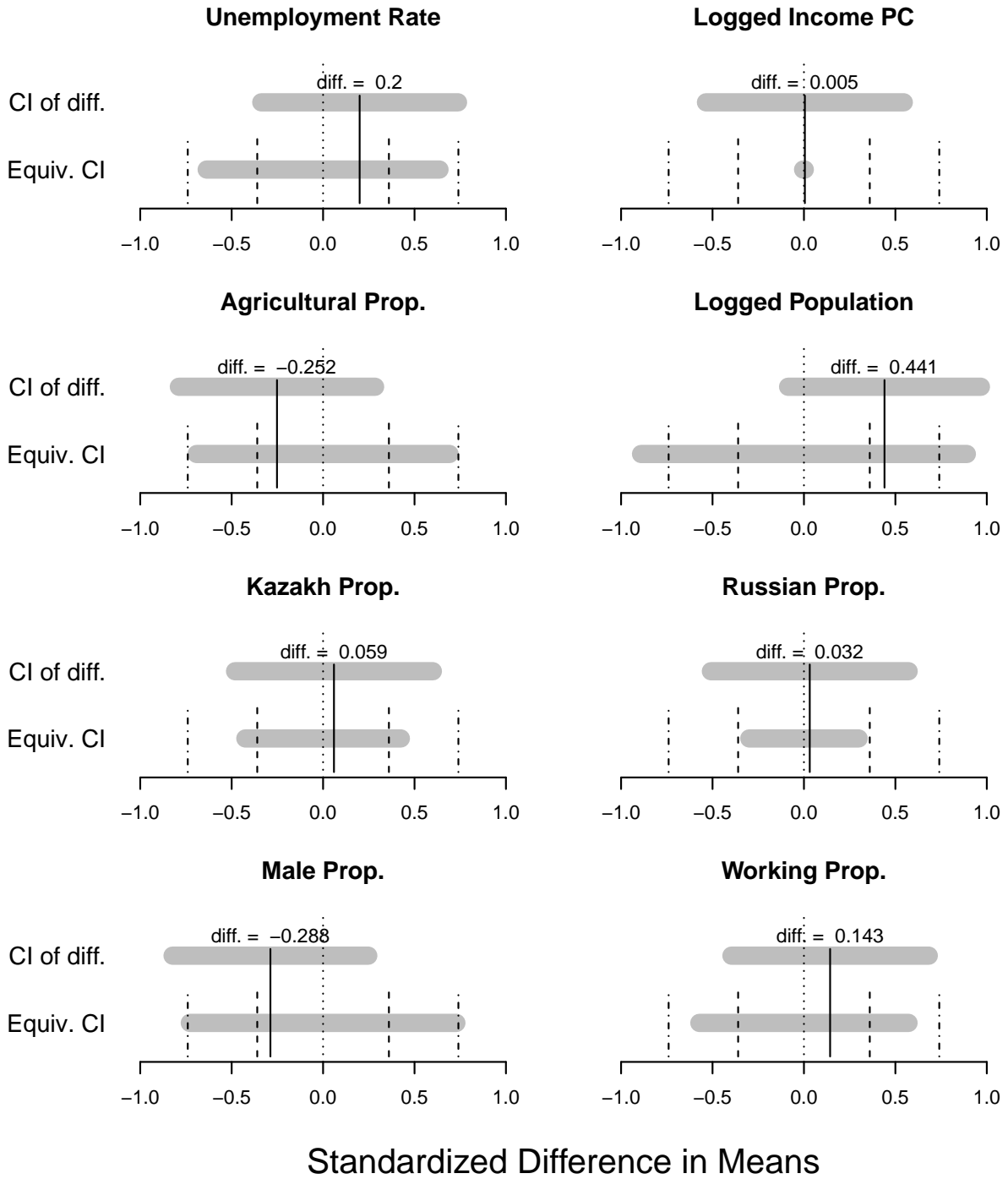
Figure 2: Balance Check on Raion-level Coraviates. Each plot shows the difference-in-means between the treated and control villages (solid vertical line), the 95% confidence interval (top gray horizontal bar), and the equivalence confidence interval (bottom gray horizontal bar) on the standardized scale or each raion-level covariate. The dashed and dot dashed vertical lines indicate .36 and .74 of standard deviations, respectively, which are equivalence ranges recommended by Hartman and Hidalgo (2018) as default.

intervals on the standardized scale. In addition, we also show the equivalence confidence intervals suggested by Hartman and Hidalgo (2018). The traditional approach to balance check, which is based on the difference-in-means with confidence intervals, examines whether researchers can reject the null hypothesis of zero difference between the treated and control groups. In our data, this null hypothesis is not rejected for any of the raion-level covariates, as the confidence intervals (top gray horizontal bar in each plot) cover the zero line (the dotted vertical line). However, failing to reject the null hypothesis of zero difference does not mean statistically significant evidence for homogeneity between the two groups. Equivalence testing, on the other hand, conducts a test on the null hypothesis that the difference between the treated and control groups is larger than a pre-specified equivalence range. The equivalence confidence intervals (bottom gray horizontal bar in each plot) show the minimum value at which the existence of a difference is rejected at the 5% level. The narrower the equivalence confidence interval, the stronger evidence that the treated and control groups are balanced. Except for two covariates, the equivalence confidence intervals are narrower than the default recommendations for equivalence ranges of .36 to .74 standard deviations suggested by Hartman and Hidalgo (2018), suggesting that the treated and control villages are balanced on these covariates. For the logged total population and the proportion of male population, the equivalence confidence intervals are wider than the default equivalence ranges. Because statistical power of the equivalence test for these variables is low (.09 for the logged population and .15 for the male proportion), the fact that equivalence is not statistically significant should not be equated as statistically significant evidence for imbalance, especially given that the zero difference is not rejected.

In sum, although we are unable to conclude definitively on some covariates due to the limitation of the data and underpowered tests, the treated villages and the control villages in our sample are from largely similar raions on average.

3.3   Outcome Variables

To examine the hypotheses described in 2.2, we construct outcome measures from our survey items. Table 1 summarizes the outcome variable and its measurement in our survey.

3.3.1   Political Efficacy and Awareness

Political efficacy is captured by two questions. The first question asks "how much does the rural akim in your village care about issues that you and your neighbors hope to address?" with answer values recoded as 1 if "no care at all", 2 if "little care", 3 if "some care", 4 if "a lot of care", and 5 if "unlimited care". This measurement intends to capture the perceived intention of elites to care about local residents. The second question asks "how much say do you have in getting the rural akim to address issues that interest you and your neighbors?",

Hypothesis	Outcome	Measurement
H1	Political efficacy	Direct response
H2	Political awareness	Direct response
H3	Currption	Prevalence in double-list experiment
H4	Responsiveness	Direct response averaged across survey items
H5	Local interests	Marginal means in conjoint
H6	Peition	Marginal means in conjoint
H7	Promises	Marginal means in conjoint

Table 1: Hypotheses, Outcomes, and Measurement

with answer values recoded as 1 if "no say at all", 2 if "little say", 3 if "some say", 4 if "a lot of say", and 5 if "unlimited say". This measurement intends to capture the self-identified ability of respondents to influence political outcomes.

Three questions are used to measure the political awareness of respondents. The first question measures political interest by asking "how often do you pay attention to what's going on in county-level local government and politics?" Answers are recoded as 4 if "all the time", 3 if "quite often", 2 if "sometimes", 1 if "rarely", and 0 if "never". Other values are recoded as missing. The second and third questions measure knowledge about political facts. The second question asks "how many years are there in one full term of your village/rural county akim?" Answers are coded 1 if respondents correctly choose "for 4 years," but coded 0 if "for 1 year," "for 2 years," "for 3 years," "for 5 years," or "I find it difficult to answer" is chosen. The third question asks 'Through which of the following processes a current akim of your village/rural county is decided?" with answer options are "elected by a local election", "appointed by the Maslikhat", or "do not know/difficult to answer". Answers are coded in the same way as the second question.

3.3.2 Corruption

We use double-list experiments to capture encounters with street-level corruption. In each experiment, respondents are asked to indicate the number of statements with which they agree. All experiments come with a unique set of baseline statements and their treatment condition offers one additional statement. For the first two experiments (*tolerance* experiment), the treated condition contains the statement "to solve everyday issues and work-related problems, you should give money informally to local government officials in exchange for their favour". For the last two experiments (*experience* experiment), the treated condition contains the statement "having to bribe local government officials".

3.3.3 Expected Responsiveness

To measure the expected responsiveness or rural akim in the eyes of respondents, we ask the following question: "think about the performance of your village akim in the next six months. How well do you think will VILLAGE/RURAL COUNTY AKIM perform in your village in the following items?" Respondents are asked to evaluate four statements, "improving utilities and managing community goods (e.g., roads, shared space, garbage collections etc)," "protecting local interests vis-à-vis central government's interests," "aiding minority and economically disadvantaged groups of residents," and "listening to petitioners and appeals." For each statement, the response options are recoded as 0 if "not well at all," 1 if "not very well," 2 if "fairly well," and 3 if "very well." Other answers are recoded as missing. The final outcome variable is generated by the simple average of the answers to four statements.[10]

3.3.4 Preferred Features of Akims

To examine whether the introduction of semi-competitive elections transform the preferred features of rural akims, we designed a conjoint experiment that asks respondents to choose the preferred one from two hypothetical akim profiles. Profiles have eight attributes: "age," "ethnicity," "gender," "party affiliation," "birthplace," "attitude towards the central power," "attitude towards local petitions/appeals," and "promise on public policies." We are interested in the last three attributes in the current study, each corresponds to H5, H6, and H7, respectively. Other attributes are offered to ensure the reality of choice task.

In relation to H5, "attitude towards the central power" has four levels: "said that prioritize what the center demands even if it doesn't fit with local interests," "said that listen to what the center demands but incorporate local interests as much as possible," "said that find local problems and report to the center," and "said that find local problems and report to the center even if it doesn't fit with the center's interests." Earlier levels indicate the prioritization of the center's demands over local interests, and later levels indicate the prioritization of local interests over the center's demands.

Regarding H6, "attitude towards local petitions/appeals" has three levels: "said that don't listen to the voice of the petitioner/the authors of the appeals," "said that willing to hold a meeting to coordinate interests with petitioners/authors of the appeals," and "said that willing to completely meet demands by petitioners/authors of the appeals." Earlier levels indicate a low willingness to listen to petitions and appeals from locals, and later levels indicate a high willingness to listen to petitions and appeals from locals.

To examine H7, "promise on public policies" has seven levels: "improving utilities and

---

[10]The Cronbach's Alpha for the scale is 0.88, which is sufficiently high to be confident with the validity of simple aggregation.

infrastructure," "improving local security," "subsidizing local companies to facilitate their business," "subsidizing local farmers to facilitate their work," "financially supporting the poor," "financially supporting ethnic minorities (non-Kazakh ethnic groups)," and "financially supporting women." The first two levels indicate promises that lead to public goods provisions for the entire community. The next two levels typically relate to sectoral interests such as businesses and farmers. The last three levels indicate promises that concern with the weak and minorities.

3.4   Statistical Analysis

As we describe in Section 3.1, we sampled 56 villages, 28 of which had held multi-candidate elections in the past, and 28 of which had not. 30 respondents were sampled from each village for a total of 1680 respondents. Although the treatment is not assigned by the researchers, assuming that whether a village had held a multi-candidate election is ignorable with respect to the outcomes of interest, our design resembles a cluster randomized experiment with equally sized clusters.

To formally describe our estimators, we first introduce some notation. Let $j = 1, \ldots, J$ denote villages where $J = 56$ and $i = 1, \ldots, m$ denote individuals within each village where $m = 30$. The total number of respondents, n, is $J \times m = 1680$. We denote the treatment variable as T_j, which is indexed only by j to reflect the fact that the treatment is assigned at the village level. Since we have the same number of treated and control villages, the size of the treated and control groups is $n/2 = 840$.

3.4.1   Outcomes Measured by Single Direct Questions

For Hypotheses 1 and 2, we use responses to the corresponding direct question as our measurement of the outcome. Let Y_{ij} denote the response of individual i in village j to the direct question.

We preregistered the following estimator of the average treatment effect (ATE) of experiencing a multi-candidate election on each outcome (Equation (3) of Higashijima, Kato and Shiraito 2023):

$$
\begin{aligned}
\hat{\tau}_{\text{direct}} &\equiv \frac{1}{n/2} \left(\sum_{j=1}^{J} \sum_{i=1}^{m} Y_{ij} T_j - \sum_{j=1}^{J} \sum_{i=1}^{m} Y_{ij}(1 - T_j) \right) \\
&= \frac{1}{J/2} \left(\sum_{j=1}^{J} T_j \left(\frac{1}{m} \sum_{i=1}^{m} Y_{ij} \right) - \sum_{j=1}^{J} (1 - T_j) \left(\frac{1}{m} \sum_{i=1}^{m} Y_{ij} \right) \right) \quad (1)
\end{aligned}
$$

We also preregisterd the asymptotic variance estimator of $\hat{\tau}_{\mathsf{direct}}$ as

$$\widehat{\mathsf{Var}\,(\hat{\tau})} \equiv \hat{\sigma}_1^2 + \hat{\sigma}_0^2 \tag{2}$$

in Equation (4) of Higashijima, Kato and Shiraito (2023) and wrote, "$\hat{\sigma}_1^2$ is the sample variance of Y_i for the treatment group and $\hat{\sigma}_0^2$ is the one for the control group, clustered by the PSU." However, this description lacks the sufficient clarity to be considered a complete specification of the estimator. More precisely, letting $\overline{Y}_{\cdot j} \equiv (1/m) \sum_{i=1}^{m} Y_{ij}$, we estimate the variance of $\hat{\tau}_{\mathsf{direct}}$ by

$$
\widehat{\mathbb{V}}\,(\hat{\tau}_{\mathsf{direct}}) \equiv \frac{\left(\frac{1}{J/2-1} \sum_{j=1}^{J} T_j \left(\overline{Y}_j - \frac{1}{J/2} \sum_{j'=1}^{J} T_{j'} \overline{Y}_{j'} \right)^2 \right)}{J/2}
$$
$$
+ \frac{\left(\frac{1}{J/2-1} \sum_{j=1}^{J} (1-T_j) \left(\overline{Y}_j - \frac{1}{J/2} \sum_{j'=1}^{J} (1-T_{j'}) \overline{Y}_{j'} \right)^2 \right)}{J/2} \tag{3}
$$

Under our design, Equation (3) is equivalent to a conservative variance estimator given by Equation (3.23) of Gerber and Green (2012, 83).

3.4.2 Outcomes Measured by Double-list Experiment

For Hypothesis 3, we use the double-list experiment described in the previous section to measure the outcome of interest. Let Y_{ijk} denote the response of individual i in village j to list question k, $k = 1, 2$. Also, let D_{ij} denote an indicator variable for whether the first list question for individual i in village j includes the sensitive item. D_{ij} is randomized at the individual level, not at the village level, and the sensitive item is included only one of the two lists for each individual. Among $m = 30$ respondents in each village, $D_{ij} = 1$ is assigned to $m/2 = 15$ respondents and $D_{ij} = 0$ is assigned to the other $m/2 = 15$ respondents. We preregistered the estimator of the prevalence of the sensitive behavior described by Glynn (2013) on page 6 of Higashijima, Kato and Shiraito (2023). Specifically, we compute the estimated prevalence for village j, $\hat{\gamma}_j$ as

$$
\hat{\gamma}_j \equiv \frac{1}{2} \left(\left(\frac{1}{m/2} \sum_{i=1}^{m} Y_{ij1} D_{ij} - \frac{1}{m/2} \sum_{i=1}^{m} Y_{ij1}(1 - D_{ij}) \right) \right.
$$
$$
\left. + \left(\frac{1}{m/2} \sum_{i=1}^{m} Y_{ij2}(1 - D_{ij}) - \frac{1}{m/2} \sum_{i=1}^{m} Y_{ij2} D_{ij} \right) \right) \tag{4}
$$

To estimate the average treatment effects of a multi-candidate election on the corruption

tolerance and experience, we use

$$\hat{\tau}_{\text{list}} = \frac{1}{J/2} \sum_{j=1}^{J} \left(\hat{\gamma}_j T_j - \hat{\gamma}_j (1 - T_j) \right) \tag{5}$$

for the point estimate and

$$\widehat{\mathbb{V}} \left(\hat{\tau}_{\text{list}} \right) \equiv \frac{\left(\frac{1}{J/2-1} \sum_{j=1}^{J} T_j \left(\hat{\gamma}_j - \frac{1}{J/2} \sum_{j'=1}^{J} T_{j'} \hat{\gamma}_{j'} \right)^2 \right)}{J/2}$$
$$+ \frac{\left(\frac{1}{J/2-1} \sum_{j=1}^{J} (1 - T_j) \left(\hat{\gamma}_j - \frac{1}{J/2} \sum_{j'=1}^{J} (1 - T_{j'}) \hat{\gamma}_{j'} \right)^2 \right)}{J/2} \tag{6}$$

for the variance estimate.

3.4.3   Outcomes Measured by Multiple Direct Questions

For Hypothesis 4, we use the sample average of responses to four direct questions within each respondent as our measurement of the outcome. Let $Y_{ij1}, \ldots, Y_{ij4}$ be the observed responses of respondent i in village j to the four survey items. We preregistered the OLS estimator for β_1 in the following linear regression model as the estimated effect of experiencing a multi-candidate election:

$$\widetilde{Y}_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_j + \epsilon_{ij} \tag{7}$$

where

$$\widetilde{Y}_{ij} \equiv \frac{1}{4} \sum_{k=1}^{4} Y_{ijk} \tag{8}$$

in page 7 of Higashijima, Kato and Shiraito (2023). We did not specify the estimator of the sampling variance, but we need to account for the clustered assignment of the treatment as well as the fact that the outcome variable is a within-respondent average. To do so, we first weight each unit by the inverse of

$$\mathbb{V} \left(\widetilde{Y}_{ij} \right) = \frac{1}{4^2} \sum_{k=1}^{4} \sum_{k'=1}^{4} \mathsf{Cov} \left(Y_{ijk}, Y_{ijk'} \right) \tag{9}$$

where we plug the sampling covariances within each village into the covariance terms. Then, we use the CR2 variance estimator (Bell and McCaffrey, 2002; Pustejovsky and Tipton,
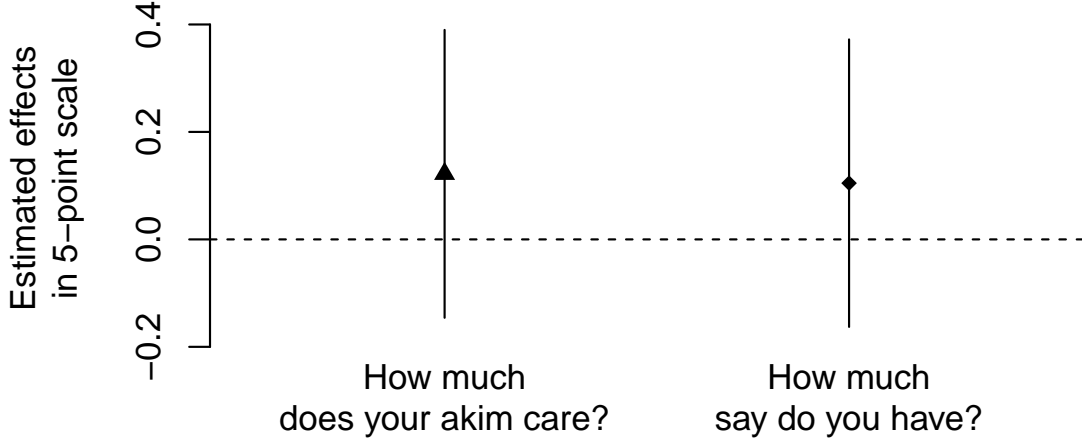
Figure 3: Results for H1 (Political Efficacy). Estimated effects of experiencing an election on political efficacy. The vertical bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Although the point estimates are both positive, neither is statistically distinguishable from zero at the 5% level.

2018) to estimate the variance of β_1.

3.4.4 Outcomes Measured by Conjoint Experiment

For Hypotheses 5, 6, and 7, the outcomes of interest are measured as marginal means for the relevant attributes in the conjoint experiment. Let $\overline{Y}_{jk}$ be the marginal mean of attribute level k computed using the sample within village k. We estimate the average treatment effect of experiencing a multi-candidate election on the marginal means of the attribute level k, $\hat{\tau}_{\mathsf{conjoint},k}$, using the OLS estimator of the simple linear regression at the village level:

$$(\hat{\alpha}, \hat{\tau}_{\mathsf{conjoint},k}) = \operatorname*{argmin}_{\alpha,\tau} \sum_{j=1}^{J} \left(\overline{Y}_{jk} - \alpha - \tau T_j\right)^2. \tag{10}$$

We use the HC2 robust variance estimator to obtain conservative variance estimates (Samii and Aronow, 2012).

4 Results

4.1 Political efficacy and awareness

As in the previous two sections, we present the results of our analysis in the same order as Hypotheses. Figure 3 shows the analysis results for Hypothesis 1. In H1, we predict that the introduction of semi-competitive elections has a positive effect on political efficacy. The left panel of Figure 3 shows the estimated effects on the respondent's perception of the
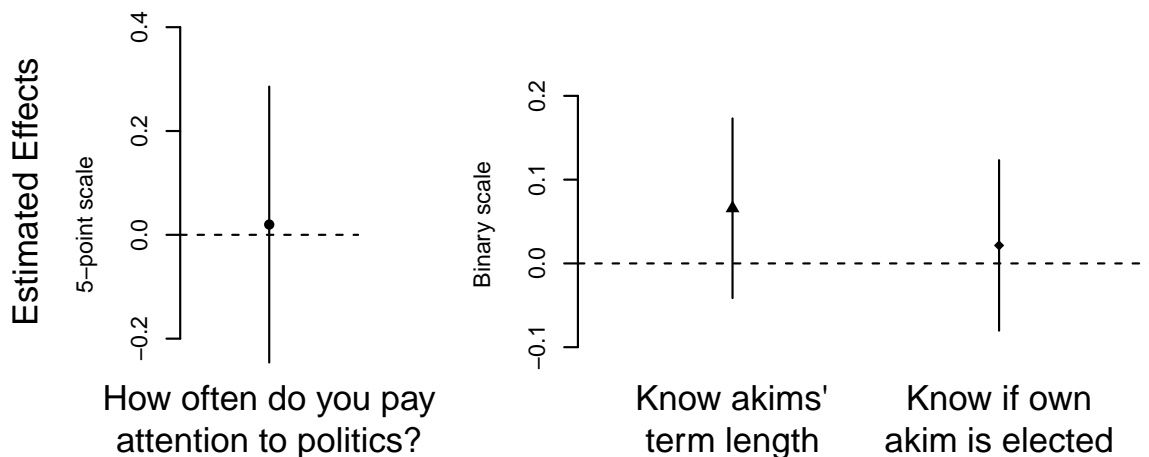
Figure 4: Results for H2 (Political Awareness). Estimated effects of experiencing an election on subjective political interest. The objective knowledge is measured as a binary variable (1 if the answer is correct and 0 otherwise). The vertical bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The point estimates are positive, but none of them are statistically distinguishable from zero at the 5% level.

akim's care for the respondent's and their neighbors' issues, whereas the right panel plots the estimate of the treatment effect on the respondent's perceived ability to influence local politics. We use the estimators defined in Equation (1) and Equation (3).

The figure indicates that H1 is not supported by the data. The point estimates plotted in Figure 3 are both positive, .122 and .105 in a five-point scale. However, both estimates are statistically indistinguishable from zero at the 5% level. The 95% confidence intervals are [−.146, .389] and [−.146, .163], respectively, implying that the null hypothesis of no treatment effect cannot be rejected. These null results indicate weak or no evidence that experiencing a local election strengthens people's belief in their own ability to influence local politics or in the akim's care for their issues.

The main results of the analysis for Hypothesis 2 are presented in Figure 4. H2's prediction is that the local elections facilitate people's political interest and knowledge of local politics. The left panel of Figure 4 shows the estimated effects of experiencing an election on subjective political interest, whereas the right panel shows the results for objective political knowledge. The estimators are given by Equation (1) and Equation (3).

In summary, none of the estimated effects is statistically significant at the 5% level. On the subjective political knowledge, reported by the respondents in a five-point scale, the point estimate of the treatment effect is .020. Its standard error is .136 and the 95% confidence interval is [−.246, .286]. On the objective political knowledge of the term length
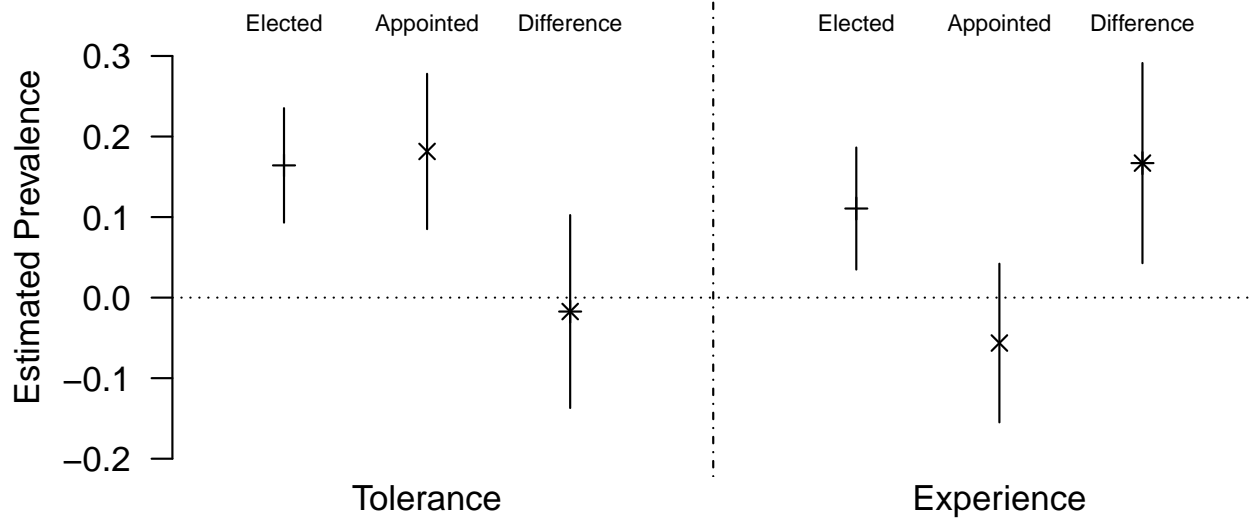
Figure 5: Results for H3 (Corruption). Estimated effects of experiencing an election on tolerance to and experience of local-level corruption. The vertical bars are the 95% confidence intervals. In villages with elected akims, respondents report more experience of corruption than in villages with appointed akims, and the difference is statistically significant at the 5% level.

of the rural akims and of whether the respondent's village has an elected or appointed akim, the estimated effects are .066 and .021 in the 0-1 scale, respectively. Neither is statistically distinguishable from 0 at the 5% level, with the standard errors of .055 and .052. The null result for the knowledge of the selection process might be because over two thirds of the respondents in both treatment groups correctly answered how their own akim is selected (.680 in the control villages and .701 in the treated villages, not reported in the figure). However, fewer than a fourth of the respondents in the control villages could correctly answer the term length of the akim (.235, not reported in the figure). The null results suggest that experiencing a local election does not strongly incentivize people to pay more attention to local government or seek more information about an important aspect of the office that is subject to the election.

4.2 Corruption

Figure 5 shows the results of the analysis for Hypothesis 3. In this hypothesis, we predict that the introduction of semi-competitive elections will reduce street-level corruption on average. We present the estimated prevalence of corruption tolerance and experience in each treatment group, in addition to the estimated treatment effects, as the level of corruption itself might be of interest to the readers. For the estimators used in this analysis, see Equation (4) and Equation (6).

As the left panel shows, public attitudes toward corruption are not significantly different
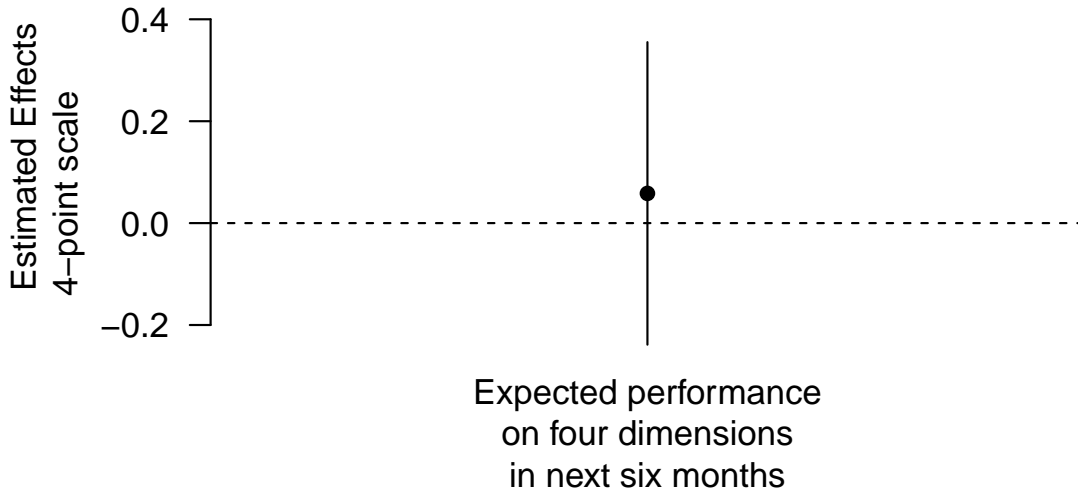
Figure 6: Results for H4 (Expected Responsiveness). Estimated effects on the respondent's perception of the future performance of the rural akim in their village. The vertical bar represents the 95% confidence interval. The estimated effect is positive, but not statistically distinguishable from zero at the 5% level.

between the two groups of villages. The estimated prevalence of corruption tolerance is .164 in the villages with elected akims and .181 in the villages with appointed akims. The standard errors are .036 and .049, respectively, and the estimated treatment effect is $-.017$. But the estimated difference is not statistically distinguishable from 0 at the 5% level (the 95% confidence interval is $[-.137, .102]$). Holding elections does not seem to make residents more or less tolerant of local-level corruption.

A surprising result is shown in the right panel of Figure 5. In villages with elected akims, respondents report more experience of bribing local government officials than in villages with appointed akims. The estimated prevalence of corruption experience is .110 in the villages with elected akims and $-.056$ in the villages with appointed akims. Although the true prevalence cannot be negative, its estimated value can be negative due to sampling error. The negative estimate is statistically indistinguishable from 0 at the 5% level. The estimated effect of an election is .167, meaning that 16.7% of the village residents became to bribe local government officials due to the introduction of local elections. This estimate is statistically significant, and the 95% confidence interval is $[.043, .291]$. Our statistical analysis reveals that, contrary to the prediction of H3, semi-competitive local elections *increase* the prevalence of corruption at the street level.

4.3 Expected Responsiveness

The central result corresponding to Hypothesis 4 is presented in Figure 6. H4 predicts that residents of villages with elected akims will expect more responsive political leadership at the local level than those in villages with appointed akims. The estimation of the treatment effect is described in Section 3.4.3.

Our analysis does not provide strong support for this hypothesis. Figure 6 indicates that those who live in villages with elected akims expect their rural akim to be slightly more responsive than those who live in villages with appointed akims. The point estimate is .058 in the four-point scale on which four questions are asked and the responses are averaged. However, as one can see in the figure, the estimate is not statistically significant at the 5% level. The standard error based on the CR2 variance estimator, which accounts for the clustered assignment of the treatment, is .141, and the 95% confidence interval is $[-.238, .355]$. We do not find supportive evidence for H4 that those who elected their own akims expect more responsive local governance than those who are under appointed akims.

4.4 Preferred Features of Akims

The profile-level choice takes a value of 1 if chosen and 0 if not. Figure 7 presents marginal means of choice probability for each attribute level (Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley, 2020) to examine the suggested hypotheses. The left panel shows marginal means for those who live in villages with appointed akim, the center panel shows marginal means for those who live in villages with elected akim, and the left panel shows the differences. Overall, the bottom three sets of panels indicate that there are no statistically significant differences in preferred features of appointed and elected akims with regard to H5, H6, and H7. There is no evidence that local community-oriented features are more preferred if elected akim compared to appointed akim. For the attributes outside of hypotheses, we find some evidence that locally born akims are more preferred if elected compared to appointed. Also, we see marginal evidence that 65 or plus year old elderly akims are less disliked if akims are elected compared to appointed.

4.5 Discussion

Our analysis thus far revealed that the introduction of multi-candidate local elections in Kazakhstan does not significantly increase political efficacy, political awareness, or expectations of responsiveness among citizens. Furthermore, conjoint experimental evidence indicates that citizens do not significantly change their preferences for leader responsiveness, community orientation, or local accountability after experiencing elections. Contrary to our theoretical expectations, residents of villages with elected akims report a higher prevalence
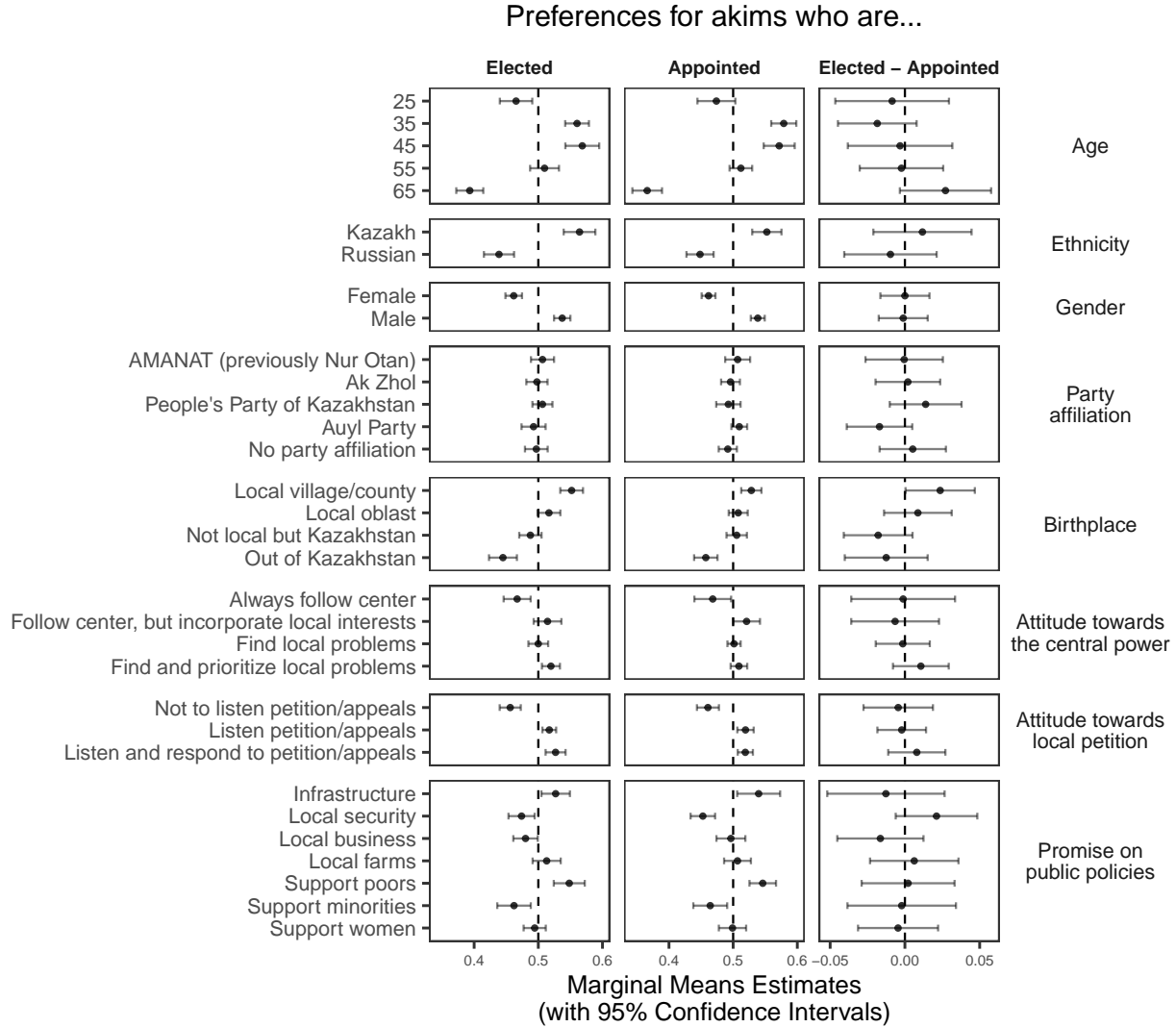
Preferences for akims who are...

Figure 7: The introduction of election does not significantly increase the preference for akims prioritizing local community, but increases the support for akims with local origin

of bribing to local public officials than those in villages with appointed leaders. Taken together, these findings suggest that first-time multi-candidate elections fail to enhance citizen engagement or improve governance perceptions—and may even reinforce negative evaluations of local political institutions.

Given our findings, we discuss three important issues. The first concerns a central puzzle: Why does the introduction of multi-party elections lead to an increase in bribery toward village officials? One possible explanation for this counterintuitive result lies in the institutional design of village-level governance. In villages where elections have been introduced, akims are now required to hold regular public community meetings. While these meetings are intended to serve as forums for residents to raise and discuss policy demands—thereby enhancing lo-

cal accountability—the selection of which demands are ultimately addressed remains heavily influenced by personal connections with the akim and village officials (Zhumashov, 2022). In this context, the introduction of elections may raise citizens' expectations for responsiveness while simultaneously intensifying competition for scarce resources. As a result, individuals may have stronger incentives to engage in clientelistic behavior or offer informal payments, rather than programmatic policy responsiveness, to secure favorable treatment—particularly in the absence of robust accountability mechanisms or transparent criteria for resource allocation. Indeed, consistent with this observation, reported experiences of corruption tend to increase in villages where elections were held 11 to 14 months prior to the survey, suggesting that post-electoral, repeated interactions between villagers and public officials may have created opportunities for bribery.[11] These findings suggest that electoral accountability, on its own, may be insufficient and should be complemented by broader democratic reforms to reduce reliance on informal exchange and enhance programmatic governance.

The second issue concerns the null findings for several indicators of citizens' political engagement.[12] The absence of significant effects on political efficacy and awareness may be, at least in part, a function of timing. Our study measures political attitudes shortly after the introduction of multi-candidate elections, before a full electoral cycle has played out. Without observing the entire process—including campaign promises, policy implementation, evaluation of performance, and the potential for electoral sanction—citizens may not yet have sufficient reason to revise their perceptions of elite accountability or their own political influence. In this early stage after the first elections, elections may be perceived as procedural changes rather than meaningful opportunities for citizen empowerment.

Moreover, structural constraints remain salient. Village budgets tend to be modest even in communities with larger populations and local enterprises, and are especially limited in smaller villages with fewer residents (Siegel, 2016; Zhumashov, 2022). In addition, village offices operate under tight control from higher administrative units, both in terms of policy discretion and fiscal authority (Alzhanov, 2021). In this context, even if elections offer new channels for political voice, citizens may remain skeptical of their elected akim's ability to deliver meaningful policy outcomes. As a result, elections alone may be insufficient to convince residents that political participation will lead to tangible improvements in local governance. Although the Kazakh government has recently promoted fiscal decentralization

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[11]The results are shown in SI Table F.7. Interestingly, corruption tolerance tends to decrease immediately after elections (SI Table F.6), indicating elections may encourage citizens to refrain from corrupt behavior in the very short term.

[12]Our post-hoc analysis of heterogeneous treatment effects using individual- and raion-level variables (e.g., ethnicity, employment, education, income, and share of agricultural population) also did not yield statistically significant effects on the outcome variables (see SI F).

at the municipal level (Zhumashov, 2022), further delegation of authority to grassroots administrative units may be necessary for elections to have a meaningful impact on governance and political accountability.

5   Concluding Remarks

This paper has examined the political consequences of introducing multi-candidate local elections in an authoritarian regime by analyzing the staggered rollout of elected village akims in Kazakhstan. Drawing on original survey data and combining natural and survey experiments—including list experiments, conjoint analysis, and anchoring vignettes—we assessed whether first-time electoral experiences shape citizen attitudes and behaviors in ways consistent with theories of democratic accountability. By leveraging plausibly exogenous variation in the timing of local election implementation, this study offers, to the best of our knowledge, the first causal estimates of the short-term effects of multi-party elections on a range of popular political attitudes in an authoritarian context.

Contrary to optimistic expectations, we find little evidence that the introduction of local elections enhances political engagement. Citizens in villages with elected akims do not report higher levels of political efficacy, political awareness, or expectations of responsiveness. More strikingly, respondents in these villages report more frequent experiences of bribery, suggesting that electoral procedures may inadvertently intensify *perverse accountability* (Stokes, 2005). We interpret these findings in light of the institutional and social dynamics existing under the Kazakh context. Although elections introduce new forums—such as mandatory public community meetings—for articulating policy demands, actual decision-making remains heavily influenced by personal connections and informal networks. In this setting, electoral competition may raise citizen expectations while simultaneously reinforcing incentives to pursue benefits through unofficial, clientelistic means after elections.

Furthermore, our findings underscore the limitations of local electoral reforms when not accompanied by corresponding changes in administrative structure and fiscal autonomy. Village leaders in Kazakhstan operate under significant constraints, with little discretion over budgets or policy implementation. Consequently, even when elections provide new channels for political voice, citizens may remain skeptical about the ability of elected akims to effect meaningful change.

Taken together, our findings suggest that the mere introduction of elections in authoritarian settings is insufficient to generate political accountability or improve governance. When first-time elections raise expectations that cannot be fulfilled through formal institutional channels, they may instead reinforce negative perceptions of local political institutions. These results caution against assuming that electoral engineering alone can foster meaning-

ful civic engagement or constrain state predation in developing countries. This has sobering implications for authoritarian governments that introduce elections in hopes of reaping informational or legitimacy gains (Magaloni, 2006; Geddes, Wright and Frantz, 2018); our findings suggest that such reforms may not improve governance through the mechanisms they anticipate in the short run. Future research should continue to investigate the conditional effects of electoral reforms, particularly under varying levels of fiscal decentralization and institutional complementarity. Moreover, assessing the longer-term impacts of repeated electoral cycles is essential, as political accountability may only take root gradually through institutional learning and iterative experiences with multiparty competition (Anderson et al., 2005; Lindberg, 2006).

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