

Factors Shaping Electoral Outcomes in Kazakhstan's Local Akim Elections

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Abstract

One of the key components of democratic societies are competitive elections. President Tokayev initiated a unique power transition in Kazakhstan by enabling elections of the local executive branch by the people. This study examines the competitiveness of local elections of akims (mayors) in Kazakhstan using a combined analysis of quantitative evidence from the electoral commissions and qualitative data gathered from the interviews and focus groups meetings.

Quantitative data describes how components, such as proximity to the regional urban centres and winning candidates' gender, age, incumbency and party affiliation, predict the competition for the seat of akim. Interviews provide more in-depth insights regarding the factors which influenced the competition in respective districts. The regression results and analysis of stakeholders reviews can fill in the gaps in literature and help understand the electoral processes in Kazakhstan deeper and deliver necessary takeaways for underrepresented groups and new candidates

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

A completely new stage of subnational governance reform is taking place in Kazakhstan involving administrative decentralization and the slow introduction of direct election of local executive leadership, akims. Competing incentives can also drive decentralization in authoritarian environments: incumbents may be interested in administrative and fiscal efficiency and reduce political competition that may bring regime instability (Busygina et al., 2018).

The main institutional reform introduced in Kazakhstan in 2021 was the shift in rural areas governance by an introduction of rural akims election, replacing the previously used appointment-based method for filling the lowest political manager post. Empirical and policy-based research of the first rural akim elections characterizes them as an important stage in the evolution of the local self-government and characterizes procedural and implementation problems that may affect the expectations and perceived legitimacy of the citizens (Kosherbayev & Mussatayeva, 2023). At the same time, the analytical research of the 2021 rural akim elections not only discusses the possible positive outcomes, including more accountability and sensitivity to the local sentiment, but also the threats and limitations, which may lead the electoral process to the previous patterns of elite privilege and non-competition (Kumysbekov et al., 2022).

Subsequent rounds have applied this logic upwards: in 2023, Kazakhstan held a first round of elections for oblast districts and cities akims, which made headlines for continuing a pattern of local elite and politically connected victors. Most winners in the 2023 rounds were already akims or deputy akims, and mostly members of the ruling party, raising questions about whether the new reforms induce competitively viable races (Omarova, 2023).

These reforms were part of a wider set of decentralizing reforms, which include, among others, fiscal decentralization with introduction of the "fourth-level budget" at the local selskiy okrug (village district) level. Together, these initiatives reflect a deliberate effort to advance simultaneous accountability and administrative capacity. A number of studies identified the specific macro-level and governance effects of fiscal decentralization reforms and direct election of rural akims (2021-2023) in specific regions in Kazakhstan and provide contextualization of elections as part of a wider decentralization package (Assanova & Korpysa, 2025).

Simultaneously, research on the course of development in governance of Kazakhstan has also suggested that many reforms are carried out as part of "hybrid governance" models. Therefore, while there is certainly an ability to implement modernizing efforts, at the same time hierarchical administrative methods and limited forms of pluralism still exist (Knox & Orazgaliyev, 2025). In light of this, the elections of akims in Kazakhstan's districts, cities and villages represent a critical case of whether subnational electoral liberalization results in legitimate competition and participation, including improved access for women and political newcomers, or if incumbency status, party-connected networks and information-based inequalities continue to dominate the contests of local elections (Busygina et al., 2018; Knox & Orazgaliyev, 2025).

1.2. Problem Statement

There are few studies to determine if this reform produced significant levels of electoral competition at the local-executive level, and if so, what determines the factors shaping electoral outcomes. An early study of the first rural akim elections illustrates that in spite of establishing the legal foundation for competitive elections, the Constitutional Law on Elections faced application problems which may hinder citizen's evaluation of candidates and overall perception of the democratic nature of the election process (Kosherbayev & Mussatayeva, 2023).

More generally, Kazakhstan's governance system has typically been described as being composed of what appears to be many different institutional components. However, these institutional elements have also operated within an environment of strong state control and co-option. There are some research studies examining the structure and operation of the policy advisory systems in Kazakhstan. The evidence indicates that there are a number of ways that entities, including government agencies, think tanks and other types of advocacy groups, are able

to present themselves as being supportive of official positions despite living in a highly constrained environment of authoritarianism (Mussagulova & Janenova, 2025). This indicates that the large context for evaluating formal reform efforts and actual political competition can differ significantly. As such, the primary issue addressed by this research study was the lack of a systematic nation-wide analysis of competitiveness in the elections of akims at the local level, and the lack of empirical evidence regarding the relationship between candidates' identities, including differences between incumbents and newcomers, male candidates and female candidates, ruling party member or independent candidate. Without such data, researchers cannot accurately determine if the reforms implemented during the period from 2021-2026 are increasing meaningful opportunities for local level political competition or merely modifying formal processes and continuing to leave major obstacles to competition unchanged (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026).

1.3. Research objectives

The purpose of this research is to assess how competitive Kazakhstani local akim elections are, and what individual characteristics contribute to greater competitiveness among all local contests. This analytical area is significant because the decentralization of power in countries that have an authoritarian or hybrid system may provide citizens with a wider variety of voting options than they had before. However, these new voting opportunities may be limited by similar constraints regarding the ability for candidates to compete fairly (Busygina et al., 2018), which can result in some areas experiencing more benefits from the reform than others.

Therefore, the research will address two primary objectives. First, the research will conduct a descriptive evaluation of the level of competition in each local akim election through various

quantifiable measures related to the elections themselves, i.e. margin of victory, number of candidates running, etc. (Kosherbayev & Mussatayeva, 2023). Second, the research will use regression analysis to determine if there is a relationship between individual factors that influence candidate performance and the amount of competition in each contest, including incumbency status, gender, party affiliation (Kumysbekov et al., 2022).

The central research question guiding this study is:

Which individual-level factors explain variation in winning margins across local akim elections in Kazakhstan?

In this study, "individual level factors" are candidate characteristics: incumbency status, gender, political party affiliation and others. They align with what has been described as a growing body of literature in Kazakhstan regarding how the new akims election process works in practical terms.

The importance of this analysis is that it delivers measurable data in the area of sub-national executive elections in Kazakhstan - an area that has undergone relatively little empirical research, in spite of the fact that direct akims elections have become part of the formal institutional structure of government. There is a limited amount of empirical research into how these elections function in practice. One of the important motivations of this study is that it adds to the comparative research on decentralization under authoritarian regimes. It illustrates how competitive elections may be structured differently across jurisdictions after the implementation of electoral reforms. Finally, after the collection of electoral data and winners identities, data analysis offers evidence to assess the degree of inclusion and barriers to participation in local elections in Kazakhstan.

1.4. Methodological approach

The study will employ a mixed-methods methodology using both quantitative statistical analysis of the officially reported election results and qualitative analysis through semi-structured interviews. According to Johnson & Onwuegbuzie (2004), this type of research design is especially helpful when there are measurable outcomes, such as competitiveness indicators, and the mechanism at play has an element of informality or difficulty of observation within administrative data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Quantitatively, the study will initially construct descriptive indicators of electoral competitiveness based upon the level of the contest and will concentrate particularly on contest-level measures such as the margin of victory and the diversity or entry rate of candidates. The analysis can also estimate fragmentation-style indicators which measure how concentrated voting is for a particular candidate(s) or group(s); one common way to estimate fragmentation is through the effective number approach.

To address the research question, the study will use regression models to estimate the relationship between competitiveness outcomes and candidate-level predictor variables including incumbent status, gender, and party affiliation while controlling for relevant contextual variables. This methodological choice is guided by studies that have shown that incumbency can produce substantial effects on winning probability as well as influence the competitive nature of contests. For example, scare-off effects evaluate if incumbents prevent quality challengers from entering races and thus lower levels of competition (Hall & Snyder, 2015).

Interviews allow for identifying obstacles which may appear as invisible barriers in the data from election results, i.e. informal "gatekeeping", unequal distribution of administrative support and limitations on campaigns. In Kazakhstan's framework of reforms, this is particularly

important given the institutional novelty of conducting direct akim elections with reports of problems implementing these elections and differing levels of competition observed during each round of early electoral contests.

This study helps in three ways to existing research. First, it will offer an extensive empirical evaluation of competitiveness in local akim elections conducted since the introduction of direct elections at the sub-national executive level in Kazakhstan (Kosherbayev & Mussatayeva, 2023). Second, the study relates an association between competitive characteristics that candidates display to a set of predictor variables at the candidate level, i.e. incumbent status, gender, political affiliation, utilizing regression analysis. The connection to previous comparative research indicates that incumbents' advantage may affect both election results, as well as the general competitive nature of elections, and as a result - challenger-candidates' entry behavior. Third, the project innovatively combines electoral races data and qualitative interview methods to determine mechanisms that the numerical electoral data alone could not isolate, such as informal gatekeeping, disparate access to resources, and information constraints. This is helpful for understanding these mechanisms in political settings where institutional change is occurring alongside hierarchical governance practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Political system of Kazakhstans

2.1.1. Kazakhstan's political landscape

In the field of comparative politics, Kazakhstan acts as a case study of a specific type of authoritarianism where the regime boundaries of political competition are mediated through executive dominance and controlled institutional change. This institutional evolution is predominantly done through constitutional engineering, or the use of formal rules to ensure

regime stability, while maintaining the appearance of institutional continuity. The case study of presidential term reform in Kazakhstan illustrates the use of constitutional reengineering and election timing to consolidate leadership while giving the illusion of holding regular elections (Nurumov & Vashchanka, 2019).

A second body of work argues that formal regime labels, authoritarianism vs democracy, gloss over a more important "patronal" logic that is common across much of post-Soviet Eurasia. Comparing political attitudes and expectations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan shows that patronal politics is a more important determinant of political attitudes than formal regime labels, indicating that formal regime change will not lead to informal constraint or elite network change (Junisbai & Junisbai, 2019).

The role of the party of power and informal elite networks is a key theme in Kazakhstani politics. According to a peer reviewed journal article on the main party Nur Otan (now Amanat), Nur Otan has a weak ideological orientation and mainly acts as an institutional mechanism for elite cartelization, in which rival informal oligarchic networks are united and synchronized with party and state structures (Isaacs, 2013).

The importance of elections is that such opinion gives the concept that membership of political parties can be used as a guide to resources, political power, and even a job. Another way to explain why competitiveness may be further territorialised despite a similar set of formal rules is that a better party-state organisation and network may result in the establishment of additional barriers to new entrants and more predictable election outcomes.

2.1.2. Kazakhstan's electoral system

Over the years, electoral arrangements in Kazakhstan have been repeatedly redesigned, including return to mixed systems and, most recently, introduction of a new constitutional

framework in 2026. Mixed electoral design has been implemented for 2023 Mazhilis, lower chamber of national parliament, elections: 69 out of 98 seats will be contested in PR (party list) mode and 29 in SM (majoritarian) (IFES, 2023).

The government has described the recent electoral framework as a system based on a combination of proportional-majoritarian principle, emphasizing the reduction of electoral barriers, and an introduction of 'against all' option in the ballot (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023). At the local level, Kazakhstan has combined the elected representative bodies, maslikhats, which represent district, cities and oblast populations within the given locality, with an appointment-based executive system prior to the electoral reform of 2021. The representation of people in the district villages was performed through local community meetings, which also voted for or against the akim, who was appointed by the district akim.

Finally, understanding the cycle is important for getting what "the electoral system" is right now. A national referendum on the new constitution took place in Kazakhstan in March 2026. Analysis of the new constitution shows that it transforms the national legislative bodies - Senate and Mazhilis into a unicameral entity - Kurultai. Its members will be voted by a proportional system, just as it was during the Nazarbayev era's Mazhilis. (Eurasianet, 2026). Thus, the mixed-member logic of the 2023 elections for the Mazhilis is better viewed as one stage in a sequence, rather than a final, permanent state for electoral design.

Taken together, Kazakhstan's electoral history seems best conceptualized as an extended history of reforms, where the balance between the representation components and the institutional set-up of the representative arena are re-shaped and refined continuously. The latter point is especially relevant to what follows, since for the majority of Kazakhstan's

post-independence history local executive political figures, the akims, were kept out of electoral contests prior to the 2021 reforms of President Tokayev.

2.1.3. Election of local akims

Almost the entire post-independence era Kazakhstan had a structure of local government consisting of elected representative bodies and a mostly appointed executive "vertical". Citizens elected local representative bodies, district / cities / oblast maslikhats, which approved the local executive manager, akim, who served political interests of the akim who appointed him or her - district akim or oblast akim. It did have implications on the nature of competition on the local political scene.

This is not entirely unprecedented. In about the turn of the millennium there were proclamations and debates on putting elections to the local executive level too. However, the whole initiative was unstable and was postponed and the results were never a consolidated countrywide system of direct local executive elections. As described by the local media back then: plans to elect village akims were announced, local commentators and political opposition remain dubious and skeptical (Saidazimova, 2004).

This narrative is in tune with the broader comparison argument about decentralization under authoritarianism. It holds that authoritarian regimes would readily adopt changes that will increase their effectiveness and the ability of the central authorities to deal with the local problems, while ruling out any election of officials by electoral competition, which is seen as unpredictable while excluding any selection of local executive leaders through competitive elections, which are regarded as unpredictable (Busygina et al. 2018). Hence the key question is not whether they speak about decentralization but whether they do and how the concept extends to executive election.

2.1.4. Introduction of akim elections

Within President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's broader reform agenda, direct election of district and local level administrators emerged as one of the most visibly institutionally new initiatives for local governance. The reforms were also deliberately announced and phased, moving up from the lowest to the higher levels.

The first main stage, introduced in 2021, involved direct elections of rural akims. Two critical takeaways from studies of this first stage of rural direct elections are: first, that citizens' high hopes for accountability and responsiveness grew directly out of the introduction of direct election; second, that organizational and procedural problems appeared during the first round, which would question if the purely formal introduction of direct elections into the system leads to high quality, or indeed highly competitive elections (Kosherbayev & Mussatayeva, 2023). Similar to the first two points, complementary research analyzed the 2021 rural elections as a significant institutional event but identified a few pitfalls and dangers, such as the possibility that local elections will still be shaped by traditional administrative advantages and selective candidate pools (Kumysbekov et al., 2022).

The subsequent phase of reform led to the election of higher-level local executives: in 2023, Kazakhstan conducted pilot direct elections of district akims and akims of cities of regional significance. Analysis of this round has begun to be published. The pilot program confirmed the continuity of previous results, where candidates had predominantly incumbent status, were previous deputies or closely associated with the ruling party, causing worries about the effectiveness of electoral mechanisms for creating contestation at the district level (Omarova, 2023).

We have considered further elections for city akim posts as the next logical step in the reform progression. An analysis of the media discourse surrounding the upcoming elections for local akim posts demonstrates that holding elections at the local executive level is a politically salient decision and moving it to a more visible and strategically important office carries a special significance (Kazinform, 2025). All of these, a staged introduction of reforms into higher-tier and higher-salience offices - from rural, to district or city of regional importance level and eventually to higher cities, provide an exceptional, although structurally unique, framework for testing how local political competition fares in an era of expanding election entry into more significant executive positions.

The emerging literature on Kazakh local government suggests elections occur in a world of strong vertical accountability and uneven local capacity. There is evidence, even from the lowest level elected offices, of how local governance in Kazakhstan operates within an environment of potent vertical interactions and unequal fiscal and administrative capacities between territories, and that such an environment can mold political contestation and participation (Zhumashov, 2023). From this it can be deduced that local competition will not be uniform across places and election tiers, even within uniform national rules.

This institutional context provides the justification for the analytical step from the description of reforms to that of explanation. Assuming that staging akim elections into higher levels of government and salience may not invariably ensure more uniformly competitive races, the question turns into a test of what factors distinguish more competitive from less competitive elections. At the local executive level, with low information local settings and vertically-organized administration, individual-level variables such as incumbency, gender, and party affiliation may indeed constitute a set of conditions influencing both the flow of

challengers and ultimate outcome margin. In the next section, therefore, research examines the individual-level variables that have influenced competition, and appear most relevant to the developing context of local executive elections in Kazakhstan.

2.2. Individual levels factors

Problems associated with these elections is that small-scale elections do not achieve broad voter awareness in their respective constituencies, and information about candidates' policies or party affiliation may not be spread adequately. However, characteristics on the personal level of a candidate is right there on the table and can be recognized, so these individual characteristics would be very effective in the scope of local elections.

Local politics in Kazakhstan is a subject, which is under-researched and under-reported by media. Even only a voter recognizes candidates name can provide voters to bring vote for candidates, which means there are other factors than just policy choices. Through experiments Kam and Zechmeister (2013) already proved that candidates' names is also a factors that is associated with their successful election. Name recognition will operate to voters a kind of evaluation for the candidates' electability and viability, and this factor could be particularly influential on the local level when voters are less exposed to detailed information regarding policies. Since these processes are dynamics, so personal characteristics on the individual-level have been played role. This could explain why difference can be large or minimal, or elections competitive or non-competitive.

Conditions associated with elections may vary to different places, such as different type of electoral unit (village district, oblast district, township, city), different regions and different competition of seats. However, as a unitary state, Kazakhstan has one law and one electoral process of local elections. Thus, it's not too difficult to study local elections inoblasts and

compares data between oblasts, offering an abnormally diverse set of institutions, electorate pool and electoral setting for local election studies (Marschall et al., 2011). It is the same for Kazakhstan, where electoral reforms have brought about changes in electoral system recently, however, weakness of political pluralism still remains. Elections on a district level are not only subject to candidate-level attributes but also to the electoral context which determines conditions of participation, competition and counting procedures (Freedom House, 2025).

2.2.1. Incumbency

Incumbents will have higher probabilities of winning an election and win by larger margins. But, the definition is not as straight as there is nothing random about the incumbents. Traunstein (2011) proves that there is a causal advantage for the incumbent, meaning they have higher probabilities of seeking reelection and winning again. This supports the hypothesis that incumbent akims can produce large vote gaps and therefore lower competitiveness. Incumbency in Kazakhstan can also take the shape of access to state resources. Reports from OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights stated that during the election campaigns akims benefit from both increased visibility and use of institutional resources. (2023).

The theory explaining the benefits incumbents is based on the argument that they deter strong contenders. However, the scale to which the scare-off effect actually influences the benefit is a fraction of the benefit in Hall and Snyder's analysis. Resource advantages, as well as informational and visibility ones play a major part. Thus, there is a huge vacuity in Kazakhstan and its' solely causes cannot be blamed on the lack of formidable rivals. The scare-off effect is responsible for a small part of the advantage of the incumbent; the main part is correlated with the other benefits.

The advantage of the incumbent in developing democracies is usually framed as accountability test. Re-election occurs at much lower rate than in established democracies. This is biased responsibility. The high election rates are not necessarily correlated with good performance and they can even indicate institutional constraints. (Lewis et al. 2020). Finally, institutional constraints can also limit competitiveness. Level of incumbency can also be used to deter potential opponents. This can range from pressure and even violence against rivals and in exceptional cases against rivals' supporters. The result is lower competition which essentially becomes a zero-sum game. (Das, 2025).

2.2.2. Party affiliation factor

Affiliation to a political party may also be used to help voters navigate through candidates in a brief amount of time. When the party names are on the ballot they serve as guides where one may have minimal knowledge of candidates. A party label may be a low or high moderate given the degree of enlightenment of voters (Titelman & Lauderdale, 2025). In Kazakhstan, party affiliation could be used to advance institutionalization of bureaucracy. Research has suggested that political-administrative boundaries can be anticipated, where central actors within the system are ipso facto members of the ruling Amanat Party, formerly the Nur Otan Party. Thus, party affiliation could serve as a correlate to not only ideological preference of voters, but also to personnel and resource networks (Knox & Janenova, 2023).

While the local level may not benefit as greatly from partisan influences in policy making, a candidate's electoral career may benefit from party politics. Ferreira and Gyourko (2009) suggest that party dominance does not lead to differentiated policies and merely the incumbency of a particular party has a positive effect on reelection prospects. This supports the

assertion that advantage could more often be related to the incumbent akim and local politics, not partisanship.

2.2.3. Gender factor

The study of sex differences in election has been approached in two ways. Firstly, it considers the concept of relative differences, suggesting that the same gender stereotypes regarding qualification can lead to different types of elections, with varying levels of competition and implications for voters. For example, a study of ten thousands of nonpartisan local elections showed that even the biggest marginal advantage for female candidates was observed in the generally competitive races, such as school council, city board etc. Yet the margins go negative and advantages disappear within the executive races. Anzia and Bernhard (2022) also found that the difference was larger in conservative areas and lower information environments.

Secondly, voters thinking about the candidate and his or her relations with the future post are different. The survey experiment shows that voters require better qualified women than men, and even though women were well-qualified, their support could be minor if all other factors were same. With this, we can expect sex differences in election competitiveness when it comes to a place like Kazakhstan, where women were excluded from leadership positions.

2.2.4. Local factor

Another important factor influencing candidate competitive advantage is the degree to which candidates are connected to the locality they run in. This has impacts on candidate preferences and on new candidates entering the race. Hunt and Rouse (2023) examine the local base of US state legislators and show that well-established incumbent legislators have almost double the chances of not running and if there is competition, they are also favored on vote

shares. These numbers not only highlight the relation of localness to voters' support but also to electoral competition. A locally based candidate will be more likely to maintain incumbent motivation, preventing a strong challenger from arising. And when electoral competition does arise, they will be rewarded with an electoral premium.

Interestingly, this so-called localness effect also plays a role in candidate preference. It becomes especially significant where the local element is highly recognizable in the candidates' biographical data. In a survey experiment with actual 2014 candidates, voters' electoral preferences showed a statistically significant preference for candidates with local roots if the local roots of the candidates were easily recognizable on the ballot. (Harfst et al., 2024). However, the motivation driven by personal connections and localness was still more important than how well a candidate could be understood to "represent local interests." This seems to show that localness could be a source of advantages rather than just a policy position held by a candidate.

2.2.5. State-sector factor

To participate in campaigns at the sub-national level, one should maintain some links to the state if one wants to increase chances to win. The advantage can be associated with either publicity as well as resource opportunities (Frye et al. 2019). In a specific case on the study of the Brazilian municipalities Toral (2023) showed how bureaucratic appointments weakened politician-bureaucrats relations. Politicians are the vehicle through which resources are channeled and the latter are reinforced and control or coordination are maximized and amplified. Thus the candidate having previous experience can be elected easily, gaining support without difficulties.

Political exchange and loyalty blocs can often be formed through government careers and recruitment processes. Loyalty is often emphasized more in search for political candidates through clientelism and cronyism within the system of public service, rather than their competence. Public service jobs may then be targeted by party members (Hassan et al. 2024). Both politicians and bureaucrats get involved in clientelism and cronyism. Cornell & Grimes (2023) argued that bureaucrats are direct mediators of clientelism due to the fact that their career prospects are tied to the politicians or parties they serve. Consequently, the bureaucrats and apparatuses can be mobilized as a tool for political recruitment and selective benefit distribution.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Question and Hypotheses

This chapter describes a methodological approach in use to address the central research question: *Which individual-level factors explain variation in winning margins across local akim elections in Kazakhstan?* Taking into account the political context, reviewed literature suggests that variation in electoral margins across the election cycles can be partially explained by measurable candidate-level attributes: incumbency status, party affiliation, gender and institutional affiliation.

In order to produce an answer fitting the nature of this question, the research uses a mixed methods approach to analyse the factors from the statistics and regressions and will use stakeholders' insights to have better understanding of the real factors affecting the competition and to create policy recommendations. Research provides the following hypotheses that will assist in investigation of the candidate-level factors which contribute to variation in electoral outcomes in local akim elections in Kazakhstan:

H1: Incumbent akims get elected easier than outsiders

H2: Party-affiliated candidates are more likely to win

H3: Candidates from farther districts win in less competitive environments than the ones closer to oblast centres.

H4: Female candidates receive less votes than male candidates

3.2. Data Collection

3.2.1. Quantitative Data Collection

Research will collect quantitative data from the websites of the Central Election Commission of the Republic of Kazakhstan and Regional (Oblast-level) and District (Raion-level) Akimats websites. The datasets would consist of candidate general information, such as their party affiliation (*party*) with 1 as Amanat, 2 – Aq Jol, 3 - People’s Party, 4 - JSDP, 5 - Respublica, 6 - Auyl, 7 - Baitaq, 8 - other public associations, 9 - independent candidates; binary variable gender (*gender*), winning margins (*competitiongov*), i.e. the percentage the winning candidate received, residence relevance of the winner (*local*), age (*winnerage*) and winner age binary division on the youth and elder groups (*agegroupbinaryyouth*), binary variable of the incumbency of the winner (*incumbent*), institutional affiliation of each winner (*instafill*), with 0 - unemployed, 1 - akim, 2 - deputy akim / previously worked there (local district), 3 - worked in the higher admin or party organisation, 4 - others. We also created a dummy variable *amanatfix* in order to group Amanat-affiliated winning candidates and other candidates.

Regarding the elections themselves, each election contained information on voter turnout (*turnoutgov*), region (*oblast*), raion (*district*) and proximity (*proximity*) of the election to the oblast centre, as long as such information is available. In order to further streamline the regression analysis, we created binary dummy variables for competitive or not-competitive races (*eq_or_less_than_55*; *eq_or_less_than_60*). Additionally, in order to check the inaccuracies in

the harvested data and possible mistakes of the local electoral commissions we created calculated variables like *turnoutour* to compare it with the given by the akimats turnout numbers labelled as *turnoutgov*.

The dependent variable of this research is electoral competitiveness in a given district, operationalized using the election outcomes. Independent variables consist of gender, incumbency, political party affiliation, with a control variable of proximity to the urban centres. Additionally, in order to test additional independent variables of age, age grouping and Amanat-affiliation will be analysed as well. Regression analysis estimates the association between the variables of incumbency, party affiliation, gender and election margins with controls on the geographical proximity. This analysis will be performed through STATA software.

The quantitative methods play a primary role in the methodology as it was shown by Pelizzo (2023) and Michalak (2023). Incumbency, gender, party affiliation and other statistics can represent the electoral situation and competition. Qualitative methods are critical to expand knowledge about the context in the competitive districts. Nurbekova & Ileuova used qualitative methods to explain the context and develop insights which are beyond the numbers. (2022). Qualitative data will bring more light towards the factors that contribute to competition in the elections.

The quantitative data collection were collected through the Central Election Committee website and the websites of the akimats of the oblasts and districts. Election data does not appear in a singular format, nor does it contain the same data inputs, i.e. victory margins, other candidates etc. The quantitative collection of data should be initiated as soon as possible, since the initiation of the research project in 2024, due to the fact that government websites may not always host the information longer than a calendar year. The data we plan to collect includes all

local elections and their voter turnout, victory margins, candidate biographies, party affiliation and gender. Territorial Election Commissions may validate data too. Other quantitative data for control variables would be collected through National Statistics Bureau websites.

3.2.2. Qualitative Data Collection

The collection of qualitative data includes semi-structured interviews, as it was done by Knox and Janenova (2018) with the stakeholders of the elections, which may include candidates, election officials and NGOs. Qualitative analysis should target competitive districts ($\leq 60\%$). The projected sample size is not large. The distribution of the population interviewed should resemble all general trends, including different socio-economic backgrounds and locations of districts. Regarding the qualitative data, it is to be collected via semi-structured interviews and focus groups with the stakeholders from competitive districts. A district is considered to be competitive if the margin of winning is 60% or less. The stakeholders are the candidates, officials of the election commissions and NGO representatives in the districts.

The research instruments include a data collection template which will include the independent and dependent variables, electoral data and interview replies. The semi-structured interview guide, online-forms, phone interview scripts and necessary documentation for the interviews, i.e. the non-disclosure agreements are used in order to guarantee the anonymity of respondents.

3.3. Data Analysis

The general trends of the electoral races should be defined through descriptive statistics. Through descriptive data, research will show the demographics of the candidates, their general

profiles and identities. Additionally, initial 2021-2025 trends could be described using those findings.

Regression analysis is a common tool to understand the relationships between variables and how they affect the election competition. This research employs two types of regression models. First regression is the linear ordinary least squares regression (OLS), where floating *competitiongov* is the dependent variable. For robustness check we used second regression - binary logistic regression (logit) using the competitiveness thresholds of 55% and 60% as our dependent variables.

The following formula complies with generally accepted norms of statistical analysis and will allow to examine further impacts of the variables: $competitiongov_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 party_i + \beta_2 incumbent_i + \beta_3 gender_i + \beta_4 winnerage_i + \beta_5 proximity_i + \epsilon_i$. Research will evaluate the hypotheses by examining the estimated coefficients' signs and statistical significance. Then we will analyse the model for fitness using the diagnostics.

4. Findings

4.1. Quantitative Findings

For the purpose of this research project, 255 election races were analyzed, which took place in 7 different oblasts (regions) of Kazakhstan, which represent geographical, ethnic and

cultural diversity of the country. Largely, the inclusion of the regions was additionally influenced

Local elections sites included in the study

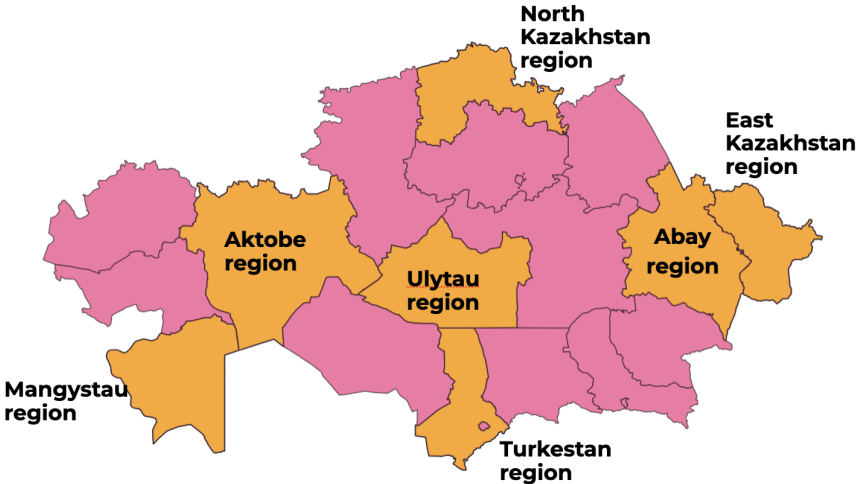


Fig.1, by the authors

by the availability of the election committees’ protocols to the public. Some regions did not fully represent the proportions of winning candidates, their identity or background etc. Despite the unitary governance system of Kazakhstan, the nation lacks not only the unified electoral database, but also lacks a unified system of protocolling and online submissions of protocols. One of the largest samples was taken from the North Kazakhstan region, which was initially taken for statistical tests, with 100 village district elections, 1 local city election and 1 regional district election. 10 village district elections were registered and included from Ulytau region, the newly-formed oblast of Kazakhstan with renewed governance regime. 55 elections were included into the study from the East Kazakhstan region, of which 3 elections took place in local towns and 1 was regional district election. Apart from Ulytau oblast, Abai oblast was newly-formed by President Tokayev, which included 18 local elections. First regional city, Semey, with more than 300 thousand inhabitants, hosted elections in this region, with 1 regional district election as well. The most populated region, Turkestan oblast, was also included with its

22 protocols, with 1 regional district-level election inclusion. 22 elections were included from Mangystau oblast in West Kazakhstan, with 1 district-level town elections. Another western region to be mentioned is Aktobe region, with 26 elections 3 of which took place in district-level towns. On average, electoral stations under the study were distanced 197km from the regional centres.

Region name	North KZ	East KZ	Ulytau	Abai	Turkestan	Mangystau	Aktobe
Village districts	100	51	10	16	21	21	23
Local towns	1	3				1	3
Regional cities				1			
Regional districts	1	1		1	1		

General statistics of the gathered electoral data shows that largely, local elections are not competitive, with winners scoring 73% on average in the electoral cycles. Half of the winners fall between 67% and 81% winning margins with a median of 75%. Competitive elections take up between 8% (under the $\leq 55\%$ margin as per literature) and 15% ($\leq 60\%$). The average rate of turnout is 70,2% throughout the nation. Most candidates, 87%, are insiders within the administrations, serving previously within the akimat (local mayor office) or party apparatuses. The dataset captured only 33 institutional outsiders out of 255 investigated elections.

Incumbents, who were previously sitting as akims (mayors) represent $\frac{1}{3}$ of the winners. Incumbents win elections with larger margins, 75.6%, compared to non-incumbents scoring 71.8% on average. Winning candidates representing political parties receive 74.1%, while

independent candidates receive 68.6% on average. In our dataset, 71% of all elected akims represented the Amanat party, the ruling party of Kazakhstan. While local candidates are much more represented in the elections, with 66% of all winning akims being elected from the same administrative district they ran their campaigns in, both local and non-local candidates win in close margins, 73.7% and 72% respectively.

The average age of a typical winner is 44 years and only 16.8% of women won local elections in Kazakhstan. Youth candidates represent 23% of the pool. 24% of those young akims ran as independent candidates. Female young candidates are underrepresented in their age group 18-35 years, with only 5% of all winner akims being young females. Whereas in the category older, 36-63 years, female candidates represent 20% of all the winners.. The North Kazakhstan region has the highest number of women akims, 30%. While Ulytau and Mangystau regions have no women akims elected at all. Median ages of winning akims by gender also differ, where women most commonly get elected by the age of 48 and male candidates' median age is 42.

4.2. Regression Results

In order to understand how certain factors affect the probabilities of a candidate to score higher, this research used several regressions. In bivariate OLS regressions with *competitiongov*, continuous variable of the winning margin of the candidate, as the dependent variable, incumbency plays a statistically significant role in stronger polling. Winning incumbents receive 3.73 percentage points more vote shares in the elections. Party affiliation also has a significant effect on the elections. Taking *partyoutsider* variable, independent candidates receive 5.52% votes less than party candidates. Personal variables like *outsider*, *local* and *winnerage*, show no statistically significant relationship with the voting margins when using the OLS models. When

we take *incumbent* and *partyoutsider* variables together, both remain statistically significant, with 3.41% more votes for the incumbents and 5.19% less votes for independents.

Under the regressions of this research, *amanatfix* variable (0 = Amanat winner, 1 = non-Amanat or independent winner) is not statistically significant among other winners in spite of their quantitative hegemony over the elections. Even when we restrict the analysis to Amanat vs. other parties (excluding non-party candidates), it is still insignificant. However, when we compare Amanat winner to an independent winner, regressions show that independent akims reliably receive 5.86% less votes than akims from Amanat. Confirming the age gap mentioned within the descriptive statistics, female candidates, according to regression analysis, are statistically significantly 3.6 years older than male candidates.

When considering the analysis through 2022 and 2026, there are some shifts which are important to mention. 2022 and 2026 do not give us a clear picture of those years. 2022 was the initial year of the reform, from which our dataset has only 2 elections. As well as 2026 elections are still to come and only a pair of elections was recorded by the research. Average margins of victory grew from 71.6% in 2023 to 73.6% in 2025. Competitive elections decreased from 22% to 14%. The amount of independent winners decreased as well, from 22% to 17% in the period.

The competitiveness of independent candidates is much different as well. Controlling for incumbency, non-partisan akims substantially face competitive elections 15% more frequent, under $\leq 55\%$ definition and are even 19.3% more likely to be in a competitive race under 60% definition. Additionally, when proximity of the electoral site to the regional capitals is considered, the further the candidate is from the center, the more votes he receives. Regression shows an additional 1.35 percentage points with an additional 100km of distance from the regional capital. Only 5 elections out of 255 are labelled as re-elections (2%).

These regressions results directly address the study's hypotheses. H1 is supported. Incumbent candidates receive statistically significant higher vote margins (+3.73 percentage points using the bivariate OLS method). H2 is also supported: independent candidates receive significantly lower margins when compared to party candidates (-5.52 pp). The effect is higher when compared to Amanat candidates (-5.86 pp). H3 is supported, as there is statistical significance of higher vote margins per 100 km distance from the oblast centers. H4 is not supported by vote margins, as there was no statistically significant relationship between male and female candidates. Although, female winners were 3.6 years older than male counterparts.

4.3. Interview Findings

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with winners in competitive races in several regions and other stakeholders, which include CEC officers and researchers. Analysis of the interviews revealed several recurring themes: incumbency, pre-campaign community engagement, party infrastructure for mobilization of resources, gatekeeping by the state institutions and informal social structures.

Interviewed candidates mentioned that their systematic community outreach prior to the formal campaigns were one of the key factors people recognize and vote for. Having direct connections with households was important for all winning candidates. It was important for initial campaigns, especially when the candidates himself were present and having talks and sharing his campaign merchandise, like calendars and leaflets. For the re-running candidate, it was also important to go beyond the legal boundary of his meetings with oblast district communities. By the law, our interviewed akim was required to have only 12 meetings in a year, whereas he went bound and met 33 times, i.e. once in 1.5 weeks he went to meet with his electorate in distant okrugs.

Our interviewed candidates ran with Amanat and People's parties. The People's Party respondent mentioned his rival, backed by Amanat, as benefitting from administrative resources embedded in public institutions, like schools and hospitals. All of the respondents mention the party as the logistical, institutional and moral support throughout their campaigns. Furthermore, they mention parties as the control instruments people have upon their elected akims, as the party representatives have their metrics which they record during the meetings with the population in the districts.

All of the akims interviewed have not said that Territorial Election Commissions (Oblast and District level commissions of the CEC) create severe gatekeeping. Respondents have different views on the election commissions' gatekeeping measures. One of them said that it is important to have such a filter from 'spoiler' candidates, or the candidates who do not have enough background in management or statesmanship. Another one mentioned that TEC and the District akimats in collaboration have not provided enough places for agitation. He said that instead of three billboards, he only got to be posted on one. Local newspapers also have a 5 days waiting list, which is a big bottleneck for the candidates, as their campaigns may last for 20-30 days on average, as they mention. One of the important concepts discussed by a candidate in Pavlodar region mentioned campaign finance. According to the legislation, local budgets spend certain amounts for each candidate on their campaigns. Our interviewee received KZT 500,000 (~\$1000) in campaign finance from TEC and District Akimat. This is an important equity instrument which helps candidates without large finance resources.

Candidates in more distant and rural places mentioned that their winning was also influenced by their relationships with the informal tribal clans (ru in Kazakh) and the elders (aksakal) coalitions. They are not mentioned as the ones presenting a leverage on the results, but

as an important part of the voters identified by their lineage and age. The majority of campaigns were effective in social media. Social media content is consumed throughout all the ages, thus was easily marketable to younger generations and older voters. For the latter, newspaper and TV coverage is still important as well.

5. Discussion

This study tried to answer which individual-level factors explain variation in winning margins across local akim elections in Kazakhstan. The regressions results and interview finds together indicate that incumbency status and party affiliation are the most consistent and significant predictors of electoral margins variation, while gender and age do not produce statistically significant effects in the quantitative models.

While taking a look at descriptive statistics of the initial wave of local akim elections in Kazakhstan, one may observe high winning margins on the majority of the districts. Literature suggests that if an election was won by a margin of 55% or less, then it is considered competitive. With regards to emerging democratic institutions of Kazakhstan, this research raised another margin of 60% or less to have a wider and regressionable sample. On average, the winning voting margin scored 73%, whereas only up to 15% of the elections can be called competitive.

A direct comparison between Kazakhstan's local elections and those in the established democracies such as the United Kingdom and the United States is not as applicable, as their institutional and electoral systems are different. A more relevant comparison is Turkey with competitive races appearing despite semi-autocratic rule.

Throughout analysis, incumbency and party-affiliation emerge as consistent predictors, which affects the electoral competition. Incumbents, as data and international evidence suggests,

win the elections with higher margins and their participation decreases the probability that the race would be competitive. Theory and practice shows that those local akims, who pursue to be elected have higher visibility due to the administrative resource they have. Apart from that, formal and informal networks within the stakeholders create the informational asymmetries which allow akims to be more visible when compared with other candidates. Qualitative evidence reinforces that creating viable networks with the electorate for the election spanned beyond the election cycle, going over years of discussion and public engagement. Thus, being an incumbent, creates more opportunities for a candidate to build the necessary network to win with.

Party politics, according to the findings, play a role in candidates' win ratio. Independent candidates receive smaller vote shares than the party-affiliated candidates. Elections with winning independent candidates are more likely to be competitive. Such dynamics can be explained by better support that parties create to win the elections. It may include mobilization capacity, local and regional networks and party-administrative familiarity, especially with Nur Otan-Amanat candidates. Elections with independent winners may mark the real local struggle for democracy, representation and battle against the status quo practices taking place in respective localities.

Regarding the gender question, the gap of 6 years is a significant difference between the genders. Women, apart from childcare and weak work-life balance within the social norms, concentrate in the industries with lower salary and career opportunities in Kazakhstan, as per Bekbossinova & Vasa (2025). This may explain why women are less concentrated in akim positions. Women are legally equal with their male colleagues, yet government and party apparatuses do not post them in high executive roles. Only 3 ministers of the national

government are women (12%). (Prime Minister's office, 2026). Women take up only 16.8% of local akim posts with no women akims running oblast akimats. Out of oblast akimats, the range of women in leadership, deputy oblast akims and department heads, spans from 9% in Mangystau oblast and 19% in North Kazakhstan. (gov.kz platform, 2026 a,b). It is also remarkable that within the younger generation, 18-35 years old candidates, only 5% were women. Despite the reform on the representative quota for women in national parliament and regional assemblies mentioned in the introduction earlier, women are still sufficiently underrepresented within the leadership positions.

Contrary to the political agenda and expectations of the research team, outsider status does not significantly affect the competitiveness. In fact, labeling a person 'outsider' may not reflect real political independence, as many political commentators suggest that even the independent candidates, largely unemployed and labeled within the category '9', may be embedded into the local elites within the formal or informal connections, kinship and structures. If the local people were dissatisfied with the local leadership, the research would have shown more continuous representation of winning independent and non-Amanat akims. Yet, analysis shows that independent akims lost 5% of their popularity and are facing even less competitive races more often.

Apart from the incumbency, geographical proximity to the largest urban centers of the oblasts was labeled as significant. The positive relationship between the distance from the oblast capitals and winner candidates victory margins suggests that farther districts may have lower political pluralism, lower information spreading and local elites consolidations.

Low R^2 values suggest that electoral competitiveness is not fully explained by observable candidate characteristics. Hybrid regimes, like Kazakhstan, have problems delivering free elections. Yet, these elections are merely just a first step in the democratic change under the Tokayev administration. Whenever we cannot explain some patterns with formal characteristics, informal mechanisms may dominate. Thus, not only the individual-level variations largely do not matter statistically, but also informal mechanisms may play a role in the overall political processes. Generally, readers may suggest that the average winning margin was 73%, for which one either should be a very prominent figure among the people, or may have administrative ‘invisible hand’ helping them to win.

This flow of the electoral process did not create national-level akim figures. Akims of the village districts (selolyq okrug, selskiy okrug) are extremely limited in their budget capabilities, being limited to town management facilities, including roads, streets, telecommunications, electricity and water. Larger functions of policing are executed by local police station officers (uchaskelik polisia, uchastkoviy), appointed by a district police department under the Ministry of Interior. Schooling is managed by a district akimat’s education department who serve under district akim and regional education departments. Healthcare facilities are also managed by the oblast akimats. Without these vital local government functions, local district akims become merely utility functioneers, with day-to-day utilities and maintenance, occasionally representing residents before the authorities.

6. Conclusion

This study focused on examination of electoral competitiveness levels and factors which affect them on individual and district metrics on the local elections in Kazakhstan. The combination authors made of descriptive statistics, regression analysis and theoretical insights

from similar electoral cycles outside Kazakhstan provide structured assessment of real electoral processes taking place in different regions of the country.

Winning candidates of the 255 electoral campaigns analysed received, on average, 73% of the votes. Generally nation-wide, only up to 15% of all elections can be considered competitive. The domination of insiders (87% of winners), who were previously working in the akimat or affiliated bodies, high representation of winning akims from Amanat candidates (71%) and low representation of women, barely reaching 17% highlight structural asymmetries in election winners composition.

Reduced competition is further reinforced by regressions, especially by incumbency and proximity factors, which were largely the only significant factors affecting the elections from candidates and district perspectives. Linear regressions show that incumbents usually receive 3.5% more in votes at 95% CI. Logistic regressions, additionally, show that incumbency reduces the probability of competitive race by 8%. Other formal factors of candidates, which include gender, party status and age do not predict competitiveness. Geographic remoteness from the oblast centers increases the vote margins when we look at the continuous results.

These findings partially confirm the hypothesis with regard to the incumbency advantage in other elections in Western countries. Nevertheless, the hypotheses regarding gender disadvantage and party-driven competition lack strong statistical evidence. Formal political affiliation under the parties may not fully capture the electoral dynamics as well. Such a low explanatory power of the models suggests that candidates' personal characteristics only play a small portion of variation in overall electoral competitiveness. Due to the above aspects, informal mechanisms may be the real affecting factor in competitiveness.

Generally, Kazakhstan's attempt under Tokayev's administration represents an important milestone on the global scale, where the governing elites freely gave electoral rights to the people in the local elections, which were working primarily through appointment models up to that moment. However, competitiveness is still highly constrained, especially when incumbents are participating in the electoral campaigns in given districts. The findings show that approaching solely procedural reformism alone may not be enough to ensure real electoral competition. Regressions with quantitative data showed statistical picture of the candidates and interviews helped to reveal mechanisms and the processes behind the real victories.

7. Limitations and Suggestions

This study has several limitations regarding the data analysis and interpretation of results. Firstly, due to the dispersed databases and protocols collected from the Central Election Commission and Akimats' websites, some districts lack complete information on candidates and voting. Within the data collection, there were possibilities of omitting the errors. Statistics show 0,8% repetitions (without the reelection cases) in the research dataset. Secondly, identities of other participants are largely unrecognized and it is hard to understand the identities of the electoral losers. This research lacks the financial spendings of the candidates which could have given larger statistical insights for the future candidates on their costs needed to win. Thirdly, associational analysis that the research has shown cannot fully establish the causal effects due to the unobserved and largely informal factors, such as elite networking and political patronage. These aspects may have shaped the competition and electoral outcomes. Finally, the qualitative sample may not recognize all the stakeholders in the localities and is generally small.

In order to further facilitate the democratic processes taking place in Kazakhstan, the research suggests that the national electoral database should be formed. Creating a national-level

database will create more transparency and research value for further researchers. Additionally, it will allow us to map and have all the akims on the map labelled. Such a national map of all the akims will be useful for the local research to have swift connection with any given locality, as well as data transfer and communication between akims of different levels and regions. Furthermore, it will erase the communication barrier which exists currently between the central ministries and localities. The best examples of local election results can be found in the US elections, where data on each county on congressional, presidential and local elections could be found with necessary information on running candidates, party affiliation etc.

Informal instruments should be targeted in further reforms. Informal connections within the local elites, business, especially large farm players hijacking political will and conjecture, should be targeted in order to make sure that democracy will be established for everyone to be heard and get elected. Strengthening transparency, equal media access and administrative neutrality instruments should be considered as instruments for the next package of electoral reforms. Further research should also focus on expansion of variables from formal candidate- and district-level ones, to better examination of underlying mechanisms and informal networks and integrative processes. Expanding the observers institutes in farther districts can decrease the difference in competition levels because of positive effects of the observation on electoral fraud. Further systematic assessment of these democratic developments will remain important for the sake of development of Kazakhstan's electoral system and democracy.

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