Tutelary Power and Autocratic Legitimacy: Experimental Evidence from Kazakhstan's Tutelage[*]

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Abstract

In electoral autocracies where election results significantly influence regime stability, new leaders need to gather public support despite their shaky political support base. To overcome this problem, autocracies often rely on tutelary power in which a regime guardian helps new leaders retain public support. This paper explores whether autocratic guardianship in fact boosts popular support by conducting survey experiments in Kazakhstan, where Kassym-Jomart Tokayev assumed the presidential position from the long-serving autocrat, Nursultan Nazarbayev. By using the item count technique and endorsement experiment to elicit truthful responses, we find that the successor Tokayev is more popular than the guardian Nazarbayev and thus Nazarbayev's involvement in decision-making does not necessarily increase public support for policies. Our analysis suggests that, contrary to the proclaimed benefits of tutelage, whether tutelary power contributes to garnering popular support depends on the perceived quality of guardians.

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Tutelage and Mass Support in Electoral Autocracies

In electoral autocracies, election results significantly influence regime stability. When autocrats fail to win elections overwhelmingly, election outcomes credibly reveal the weaknesses of extant regimes (Simpser, 2013) and activate threats by ruling elites and the opposition. Since excessive electoral fraud often invokes backlash in the form of popular protests, electoral autocrats cannot rely only on such dirty tricks (Higashijima, 2022). Electoral autocrats thus have strong incentives to use various techniques of maintaining regime support, such as economic distribution (Greene, 2009), soft propaganda and censorship (Guriev and Treisman, 2022), and the production of divisions within the opposition (Lust-Okar, 2004).

Securing mass support is particularly challenging for new leaders in electoral autocracies. Their first task as autocrats is often to cement their political support base due to the high uncertainty over their competence: Ruling elites may not loyally work for the new autocrats, while citizens may think twice to vote for inexperienced leadership. Indeed, as we show in Supplementary Information (SI) A, cross-national data suggests that leaders in electoral autocracies tend to score lower vote shares in their first elections. Electoral autocracies must maintain mass support under their shaky political base at the outset of their reign.

Against this backdrop, we investigate an understudied, but not infrequent means of mitigating the problem of new leaders in electoral autocracies: *tutelage*. Tutelage or tutelary regime is defined as the form of government where the power of the elected authority is constrained by non-elected, tutelary powers or guardians (Bünte, 2022, 340). Sources of tutelary powers can be diverse, including religious authorities (e.g., Iran), the military (e.g., Myanmar and Pakistan), monarchs (e.g., Nepal, Morocco, and Thailand), and former political leaders (e.g., Kazakhstan, Russia, and Singapore), but they share a common feature that unelected authorities retain the power to influence elected leaders' decision-making. Although tutelage is often observed in electoral autocracies, little is known about whether it in fact increases mass support for newly elected autocrats, due to the limitation of data and methodological

challenges in studying public attitudes in authoritarian regimes.

In theory, tutelage may carry opposite results. On the one hand, the new leader with elected authority can rely on the guardian's charisma and perceived competence by having the guardian substantively involved in policy-making processes. When citizens see the guardian as competent and their leadership is valuable for the new government, then joint decision-making boosts public support more than single decision-making by either only the new leader or the guardian. Here the tutelage complements the inexperienced but *de jure* legitimate new leader with the competent but *de jure* illegitimate guardian's backup.

On the other hand, tutelary power is not conducive to sustaining public support if the guardian is unpopular. Citizens may view the unelected authority's political involvement negatively due to the lack of procedural legitimacy. Furthermore, the guardian may be seen to be corrupt or have committed significant policy failures, leading to citizens' desire for no political role of the guardian. Together, unpopular guardians undermine the very basis of the tutelage's virtue and lose the effect of joint decision-making on public support.

When tutelage is adopted in an electoral autocracy, the first scenario is expected to occur. Since the guardian no longer possesses electoral authority, decision-making solely by the guardian is not legitimate. Therefore, the tutelage is useful to the authoritarian rule only if the guardian's public involvement in policies boosts public support, despite the lack of formal authority. The guardian who is less popular than the new leader is unlikely to be able to help the new leader in this regard. Even if the guardian is involved in policy-making for other reasons, it should be desirable to hide or obscure the guardian's policy engagement from the public. Therefore, if an electoral authoritarian regime openly adopts tutelage, then it is likely that the guardian is popular and the tutelage is effective in boosting public support.

Given this discussion, our theoretical prediction comprises the following two preregistered hypotheses.[1]

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[1]Our preregistration is available at `https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/G9CD8`

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H1: The guardian of a tutelary regime is more popular than the de jure *leader.*

H2: The joint policy-making of the elected and unelected authorities enhances popular support under tutelary regimes.

Of course, the ruling elites may not always be able to choose tutelage based on accurate forecasts. One important factor is the difficulty of accurately gauging guardians' popularity under autocratic contexts: Due to the strong presence of social desirability bias among citizens, autocracies may mistakenly establish tutelage, expecting it helps increase regime stability. Another possibility is that some guardians simply want to stick to power even if they are no longer perceived as competent. This paper empirically examines the effectiveness of tutelage by accurately measuring public perceptions of authoritarian leaders and the tutelage in Kazakhstan, where a tutelary regime was established in 2019 and collapsed in 2022.

Kazakhstan: Diarchy by Nazarbayev and Tokayev

Kazakhstan is an ideal case for testing our hypotheses by conducting survey experiments. In March 2019, the country experienced the first presidential succession since 1991 from Nursultan Nazarbayev to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. But Nazarbayev retained significant political influence after his presidential resignation by assuming the supreme leader status "Elbasy" as well as the chair of the Security Council. The exact division of authority between the two was opaque and thus it is difficult to attribute political decisions to either leader (Mallinson, 2019). While Nazarbayev was certainly still influential as the guardian, Tokayev operated the executive branch leading policies and issuing decrees. However, the regime made it clearly visible to the public that they shared power, albeit obscuring how they did so. In SI B, we show that the state media frequently reported the activities of both leaders.

To seek an electoral mandate, Tokayev held a snap presidential election in 2019. Despite Nazarbayev's assistance during the campaign [2] and extensive electoral manipulation, Tokayev

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[2] "Nazarbayev progolosoval na vyborah prezidenta," *Azzatyk,* 2019 June 9.

scored only 70.96% of votes, which is significantly lower than Nazarvayev in the 2015 election (97.75%). The country had been ruled under the diarchy of the two leaders until January 2022, when massive protests erupted due to a rapid increase in fuel prices. Protesters accused the government of lingering political corruption under the long dominance of Nazarbayev and demanded his complete exit from politics. Consequently, Tokayev dismissed him from the Security Council and promised a series of political reforms to diminish his influence.

Evidence from Survey Experiments

We conducted survey experiments in Kazakhstan to estimate the effect of tutelage on public support between January and March 2021, approximately a year before Nazarbayev was ousted. To elicit truthful responses to the sensitive questions about support for authoritarian leaders, we employed the item count technique (a.k.a. list experiment, see Glynn, 2013; Blair and Imai, 2012) and endorsement experiment (Bullock, Imai, and Shapiro, 2011). SI C describes the sampling, design, and statistical analysis of our survey in detail.

The results of our analysis are summarized as follows. First, contrary to H1, our estimates using the list experiment indicate that Tokayev recieved greater support than Nazarbayev. Second, our endorsement experiment provides evidence against H2. Nazarbayev's involvement in policies does not increase public support, whether it replaces or supplements Tokayev's initiative. Overall, our results cast doubt on the benefit of tutelage in Kazakhstan.

Overall Support Estimated by the List Experiment

Figure 1 presents the difference-in-means estimates for the rate of support for Tokayev and Nazarbayev based on the list experiment data. The point estimates shown as circles are the average differences between the non-sensitive list group and each of the sensitive list groups. Because each sensitive list includes one additional item, either Nazarbayev or Tokayev, the interpretation of the difference-in-means estimator is straightforward—it simply estimates the population proportion of those who support either of the dictators.

Our analysis indicates that both Tokayev and Nazarbayev received some public support
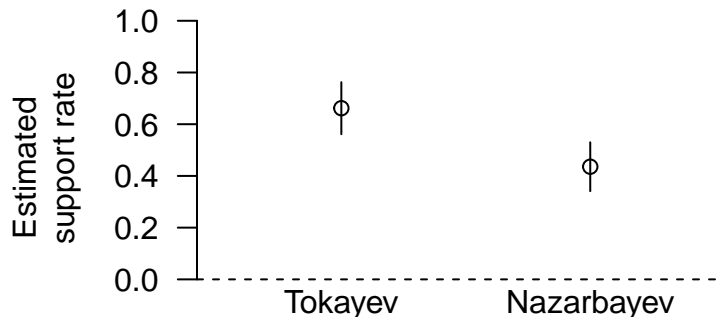
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Figure 1: Difference-in-means Estimates of Public Support for Tokayev and Nazarbayev in the List Experiment. The vertical bars are the 95% confidence intervals. The dashed line at the bottom represents zero public support.

when the survey was conducted. Tokayev's support rate is estimated to be 66.2% whereas the point estimate of Nazarbayev's support rate is 43.6%, and those are statistically distinguishable from zero. The dashed line at the bottom of Figure 1 indicates zero support. The 95% confidence intervals do not cover this dashed line, meaning that the difference-in-means estimates are statistically significant.

Contrary to H1, the results indicate that Tokayev enjoyed greater public support than Nazarbayev. Our estimate of the difference between Tokayev's support rate and that of Nazarbayev is 22.6% and its 95% confidence interval is [11.4, 33.9]. Thus, the difference is statistically significant at the 5% level. The results do not corroborate the important premise for popularity boost by tutelage—the guardian should be more popular than the successor.[3]

[3]All results presented in this section are based on the survey data as collected. However, we realized that the survey firm showed the respondents the wrong choice options after receiving our data. The respondents were not shown the answer option "0". That is, they were not allowed to express that none of the list items applied to them. We conducted two types of sensitivity analysis to address this implementation failure, and the results are shown in SI J. Figure J.1 is the same figure as Figure 1, except that all respondents in the Tokayev and Nazarbayev list groups who answered "1" are assumed to answer "0" in their true intentions. This assumption is the hardest test for our results because it

Endorsement Experiment Results

As described in SI C.3, we examine public support for policies led by Tokayev, Nazarbayev, or both using endorsement experiment. We used policies regarding healthcare, education, green energy, anti-corruption, foreign aid, and artificial intelligence. SI E shows English translation of the survey items, and SI F presents the distribution of responses to each question for each endorser. Throughout our analysis, we use Tokayev's endorsement as the baseline and investigate whether an endorsement of Nazarbayev alone or Nazarbayev in addition to Tokayev has positive support relative to Tokayev alone. That is, we analyze if the guardian's involvement increases the popularity of the regime's actions.

Figure 2 plots estimated latent support for Nazarbayev's sole involvement (left) and joint involvement of Nazarbayev and Tokayev (right) relative to Tokayev only. The quantity of interest is the probability of positive support shown in Equation (6) in SI C.3.1. Its estimate above .5 implies that the endorser is more likely to increase support for a policy

creates the greatest decrease in the average response in the sensitive list groups, given the assumption that the observed response "1" includes the true "1"s and "0"s. The figure shows that while Nazarbayev's estimated support is not statistically distinguishable from zero, Tokayev's support is estimated to be positive and statistically significant. The second sensitivity analysis is shown by Figure J.2, which shows a contour plot of the p-values for the difference between support for Tokayev and support for Nazarbayev under all possible cases of the number of respondents whose true answer was "0." The figure shows that the difference between the two support rates becomes statistically insignificant only when more than 100 respondents in the Tokayev list group and fewer than 200 respondents in the Nazarbayev list group would have chosen "0" if the option had been given. That is, the number of those who would have selected the erraneously hidden option needs to be negatively correlated across the list groups. Since we randomly assign a list to the respondents, we do not expect that these two numbers are largely different. Therefore, we conclude that our empirical results hold even with the failure of the survey implementations.
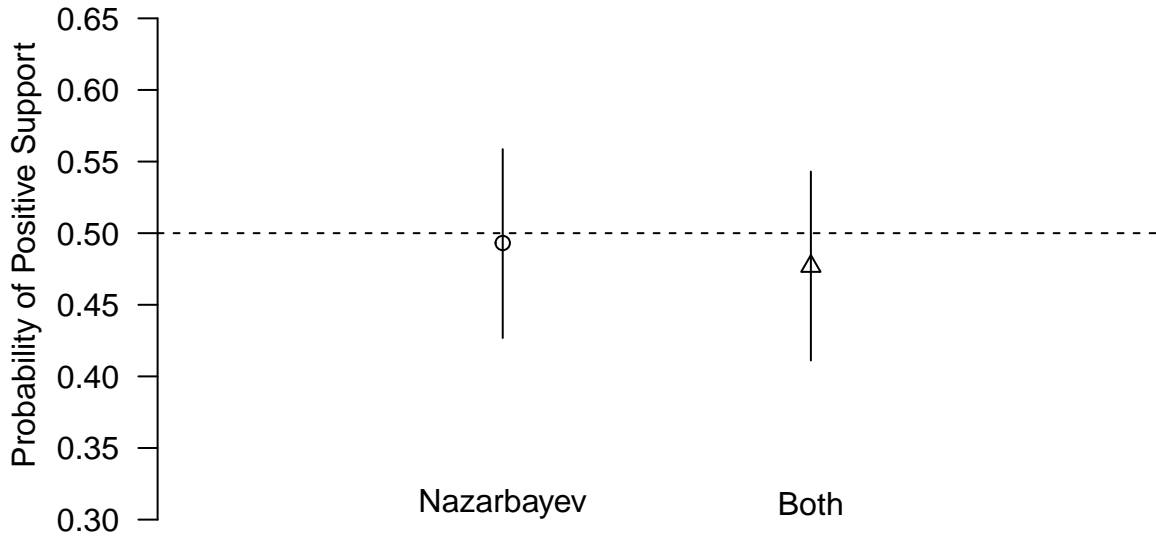
Figure 2: Posterior Median and the 95% Credible Intervals of the Probability that Support for the Endorser is Greater than Support for Tokayev. The dashed line at 0.5 indicates that an endorsement neither increases nor decreases support for policies.

than decrease it. An estimate below .5 indicates that the opposite: the endorser is more likely to decrease support. The posterior distribution is approximated by the Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) draws implemented via **R** package `endorse` (Shiraito and Imai, 2018) and convergence diagnostics are shown in SI L. The point estimates are the posterior medians and the vertical bars are the 95% credible intervals.

Figure 2 shows that H2 is not supported by the results of the endorsement experiment. Both estimates—Nazarbayev only and Tokayev and Nazarbayev as a team—are very close to the horizontal dashed line at .5, meaning that either endorsement does not increase or decrease public support for policies. That is, it is evident that neither single or joint initiative by Nazarbayev is no more popular than Tokayev making decisions by himself.

In sum, we find evidence against the theoretical expectations that we hypothesized to hold in Kazakhstan if its tutelage had helped Tokayev gain public support. Our data reveal that the guardian Nazarbayev was less, not more, popular than the successor Tokayev in 2021. Moreover, we find no strong evidence that Nazarbayev's involvement in policymaking processes increased public support for resulting policies compared to Tokayev's sole initiative.

Although our empirical results contradict our hypotheses, the list and endorsement experiments provide a coherent picture of public attitudes toward Kazakhstan's tutelary regime. We expected that Nazarbayev had been a popular guardian and that his tutelage would have helped Tokayev gain popular support, but in reality it was not the case. Citizens percieved him unfavorably and therefore his tutelage did not assist Tokayev's popularity. In retrospect, the regime failed to recognize this fact and made a strategic mistake by allowing Nazarbayev to remain in the public eye, which ultimately led to the mass protests in January 2022.

Concluding Remarks

Garnering mass support is a challenge for new leaders in electoral autocracies. Authoritarian regimes often introduce tutelage where a former dictator helps a new leader offset the weakness of public support. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to the effect of tutelary regimes on citizens' attitudes to leaders, due to the difficulty of accurately measuring political attitudes in authoritarian countries. We used indirect questioning techniques to address this difficulty and found that the tutelage in Kazakhstan did not achieve its expected benefits in enhancing the succesor's popularity.

This paper advances the literature on how electoral authoritarian regimes cultivate public support, but it also leaves open questions for future research. To the best of our knowledge, this paper is the first scholarly attempt to investigate the causal effect of tutelage on public support. The use of the item count technique and endorsement experiment enabled us to address the problem of accurately measuring public opinion in authoritarian contexts (Jiang and Yang, 2016; Shen and Truex, 2020; Frye et al., 2017). While our results suggest that whether tutelage achieves this goal depends on how citizens perceive the guardian, more research in other contexts needs to be done to generalize our finding. Survey research using a similar design in other countries would provide further evidence on whether the relationship between the benefit of tutelage and the perception of the guardian holds in other electoral autocracies with tutelage.

Another important avenue for future research is to investigate the causal mechanisms behind the adoption, consolidation, and failure of tutelage. As described above, the tutelage in Kazakhstan fell apart a year after our survey was conducted. Our empirical results are consistent with this ultimate failure of the tutelage but inconsistent with the regime's decision to initiate it and keep the unpopular guardian highly visible to the public in the first place. To answer this question, future research needs to explore when electoral autocracies hold the correct or wrong expectation of the benefit of tutelage and how they decide to employ it to gather mass support. Disentangling the relationships between guardians' popularity, competence, and the effectiveness of joint decision-making by designing and conducting additional survey experiments would be a promising way to achieve this goal.

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