

What Makes “Ardent Democrats” in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 489
October 2017

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If Kazakhstan is home to Eurasia’s longest serving ruler, neighboring Kyrgyzstan is among its most competitive polities. We wanted to know if, as a growing body of literature posits, these differences in regime type translate into differences in political attitudes. Are Kyrgyzstanis, as might be surmised from their recent context of political contestation and constitutional reform, more likely to support democratic ideals? Are Kazakhstanis, long led by the same powerful, constitutionally enshrined, and by many accounts popular executive, less likely?

Original public opinion data reveal that, on average, less than 35 percent of respondents in both countries strongly agree with practices associated with democracy. Moreover, on many measures the two populations are attitudinally indistinguishable, with country differences either small or statistically insignificant. At the same time, youth in Kazakhstan (18-29) are distinctively less democratic in their outlook. We account for these findings with a key contextual commonality. Rather than (nascent) democracy versus (entrenched) authoritarianism, public opinion reflects their shared system of patronage politics. Political context matters, but not in the ways often conceived of, which tend to define countries primarily along a democracy-versus-autocracy continuum.

Democratic Values and Political Context

It is nearly universally accepted that certain citizen orientations are more conducive to democracy than others are. These include thinking critically and engaging actively in civic life, as well as exhibiting tolerance, interpersonal trust, and a sense of political efficacy. Democracy is unlikely to take root where these are lacking or are held by a small minority. Yet, how does a society develop pro-democratic orientations? From where do they come?

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An important approach views mass values and attitudes as mirroring the political context in which people live. Through participation in family, school, community, and political life, individuals come to express a set of preferences that match those held by the society in which they are embedded. Much research in this vein investigates how variation in political context, writ large—i.e., regime type—yields variation in public opinion. Consolidated democracies, it is argued, tend to promote the development of democratic attitudes, while authoritarian regimes either inhibit these or foster nondemocratic ones. In democracies, citizens are exposed to competing ideologies, ideas, and political programs, as well as afforded multiple opportunities to participate in competitive politics. In non-democracies, competition, choice, and participation are deliberately constrained by the ruling group and reinforced by control over the mass media and discourse more generally.

The Study

To advance understandings of the intersection of political context and political attitudes, we compare support for democracy in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, two majority Muslim countries in post-Soviet Eurasia.² The two cases do much to highlight the complexity of political context, which is defined in different ways. Context has been framed concretely as regime type, as noted above, but also loosely as “the prevailing historical circumstances,” “the political climate of the times,” and “the larger political environment.” The larger political environment, however, may combine contradictory elements that do not neatly fit or map onto a single regime type, making it difficult to consistently pin down whether a country is clearly democratic or authoritarian.

We observe this contextual complexity in our two cases (see **Table 1**). Looking at regime type, their political contexts appear distinct: Kazakhstan is a presidential autocracy with little to no public contestation, while Kyrgyzstan is an uncertain young democracy with politicians and their followers engaged in competitive elections. At the same time, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are patronage-based and corrupt—as are many post-Soviet polities, from the most democratic to the most dictatorial. Politics tend to revolve around competition over resources rather than around competition over ideology or competing visions for the future. Which aspect of political context matters, then: the regime contrast, as in more democracy versus less, or the convergence in political economy, as in the shared system of patronage politics?

² The “Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan Inequality Survey, 2012” was designed and implemented by the authors.

Table 1. Variation in Political Context, 2012

	KG	KZ
System of government	presidential-parliamentary	presidential
Freedom House score*	partly free (5.0)	not free (5.5)
Polity IV score**	democracy (7)	autocracy (-6)
Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Score***	ranked 154/177 (24)	ranked 133/174 (28)

* Freedom House ranks countries on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the most free and 7 the least free.

** Polity IV ranks countries on a scale of -10 to 10, with higher scores representing stronger democracy.

*** Transparency International uses a scale of 0-100, where 0 means that a country is perceived as highly corrupt and a 100 means that a country is perceived as very clean.

We analyzed responses to four survey items tapping into democratic attitudes (see **Table 2**). Because we are most interested in ardent democratic citizens (those who express the greatest support for democratic principles), we separate out those respondents who indicated strong agreement with each statement. First, we compare the magnitude of ardent democrats in Kazakhstan versus Kyrgyzstan to see if there are country differences and if these align with expectations from prior studies. We follow with regression analysis to ascertain which individual-level factors, most commonly associated with support for democracy, matter in the two countries.

Table 2. Survey Questions Measuring Support for Democracy

[Response options to Questions 1-4: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree.]

Let's talk for a moment about the kind of society you would like to have in this country. Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. Citizens should be more active in questioning the actions of leaders.
 2. Since leaders represent everyone, they should not favor their own family or group.
 3. Opposition parties should regularly examine and criticize government policies and actions.
 4. The news media should constantly investigate and report on corruption and the mistakes made by government.
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Ardent Democrats in Kazakhstan versus Kyrgyzstan

We began with the supposition, drawn from the literature, that strong democratic attitudes should be more observable in Kyrgyzstan, for the simple reason that politics there are comparatively more democratic. Cross tabulations of survey responses, however, reveal slightly higher rates of strong support for democracy among respondents in Kazakhstan (see **Table 3**). Kazakhstanis are somewhat more likely to strongly agree that “the news media should constantly investigate and report on corruption and the mistakes made by government” (by six percentage points), that “citizens should be more active in questioning the actions of leaders” (by five percentage

points), and that leaders should not favor their own group or family (by four percentage points). As indicated by the asterisks next to the relevant figures in the table, cross-national differences are statistically significant for all three of these statements, meaning that there is less than a five percent chance that the difference is a random occurrence.

Table 3. Ardent Democratic Citizens by Country (%), 2012

	KG	KZ	Country Difference
Strongly agree that media should report on government corruption	36.07	41.93	5.86**
Strongly agree that citizens should more actively question government	25.07	30.13	5.06**
Strongly agree that leaders should not favor their own family or group	30.87	34.93	4.06**
Strongly agree that opposition parties should monitor government	28.33	32.27	3.94

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

To account for these results, we return to the central theme of this paper: political context. Kyrgyzstanis may express less intense support for democratic ideals precisely because of their direct experience with the ugly side—the messiness and frustrations—of political contestation. In Kyrgyzstan’s particular context, the practice of democracy often activates latent conflicts along rural-urban, north-south, and ethnic lines. Violence and destruction have accompanied major political events, including large protests in response to the prosecution of an important political figure turned opposition leader in the village of Aksy in 2001, the anti-establishment demonstrations and presidential overthrow known as the Tulip Revolution in 2005 and a second revolution in 2010, and the ethnic clashes in the second largest city, Osh, which also took place in 2010.

A context-centered explanation of political attitudes also offers insight into the aggregate survey results from Kazakhstan. Kazakhstanis, who have never participated in free and fair, competitive elections, may entertain a more idealistic view of democracy for the very reason that they have not yet practiced it. Relatively more Kazakhstanis may desire a stronger watchdog role for the news media and for citizens for the very reason that these are absent. In their political context, few citizens are willing to risk engaging in contentious politics, and there are no strong, independent media outlets to counterbalance state-owned and affiliated sources.

Our interpretations match Maseland and van Hoorn’s [study](#) comparing support for democracy across the globe. They find that individuals living in countries with a democracy deficit exhibit much stronger democratic preferences. Because we value that which we lack, people in autocracies support democratic principles to a greater degree. While we largely agree with this argument—that the performance of democracy may dampen support for democracy as an ideal—it offers only a partial explanation. Few Kazakhstanis or Kyrgyzstanis strongly support key democratic practices. Even where

we do find statistically significant country differences—on the view that media and citizens should serve as government watchdogs and leaders should not favor narrow interests—the country differences never reach 10 percent. For most questions, the country difference hovers around four-to-five percentage points. Thus, while Kazakhstanis are more supportive of democracy than Kyrgyzstanis, the difference is relative and support remains low in both societies.

Individual-Level Factors Associated with Strong Support for Democracy

We also wanted to learn more about the minority of the population that are ardent democrats. Who are they? What attributes increase the likelihood that someone will express the strongest support for democracy? We conducted a regression analysis for the survey questions in which a statistically significant difference between the two countries was found (see **Table 4**) and included as explanatory factors a host of traits that previous studies and our own knowledge suggest correlate with stronger democratic attitudes. Each regression compares ardent democrats to the rest of the population.

With the exception of age, many of the factors that are frequently linked to support for democracy have no clear or strong effect. Interestingly, Kyrgyzstani youth are no different from older respondents in their preference for democracy. Individuals who began their formal schooling after the collapse of the Soviet Union and who were very young (or not yet born) during the most difficult and uncertain times of the years immediately following independence are no more or less democratic than their grandparents, parents, or older siblings. The situation in Kazakhstan is dramatically different. Young Kazakhstanis who were educated and grew up in the era of President Nursultan Nazarbaev's consolidation of power are significantly less likely to express support for democracy. Moreover, country effects are statistically significant for all three questions. Young people in Kazakhstan are distinctive, not only when compared to those who were socialized during earlier political eras, but also from their peers in present-day Kyrgyzstan.

Because young Kazakhstanis' responses closely reflect the practices and values associated with the country's form of strong presidential and patronage-based rule, political context seems to have a notable effect on "impressionable" citizens there, much more so than in Kyrgyzstan. Youth growing up under Kazakhstan's presidential authoritarian regime exhibit attitudes that clearly reflect their political context: They are less in favor of questioning government decisions and less likely to be troubled by nepotism and family rule.

Table 4. Who are Ardent Democrats in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan? (LOGIT)

	MEDIA SHOULD CONSTANTLY REPORT ON GOVERNMENT CORRUPTION			CITIZENS SHOULD BE MORE ACTIVE IN QUESTIONING GOVERNMENT			LEADERS SHOULD NOT FAVOR THEIR OWN GROUP		
	KG	KZ	Country Diff	KG	KZ	Country Diff	KG	KZ	Country Diff
Male	0.05 (0.12)	-0.23 (0.12)		0.14 (0.14)	0.18 (0.13)		-0.13 (0.13)	0.07 (0.12)	
Wealth	0.01 (0.67)	-0.14 (0.07)		-0.14 (0.07)	0.02 (0.07)		-0.01 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.07)	
Urban residency	-0.12 (0.14)	0.20 (0.13)		-0.19 (0.14)	-0.14 (0.13)		-0.19 (0.14)	-0.74** (0.13)	+
Higher education	0.15 (0.14)	-0.17 (0.16)		0.19 (0.16)	-0.06 (0.16)		0.26 (0.15)	0.02 (0.16)	
Internet use	-0.07 (0.17)	0.15 (0.15)		-0.05 (0.18)	0.17 (0.16)		-0.12 (0.18)	-0.03 (0.15)	
Religiosity (daily prayer)	0.05 (0.13)	-0.15 (0.17)		0.16 (0.14)	0.01 (0.15)		-0.14 (0.13)	0.30 (0.17)	+
Religiosity (self-ID as religious)	0.13 (0.16)	0.25 (0.14)		0.02 (0.17)	0.08 (0.14)		-0.34* (0.16)	0.06 (0.14)	+
Muslim	-0.25 (0.25)	-0.36** (0.11)		0.02 (0.28)	0.20 (0.25)		0.19 (0.26)	-0.54* (0.25)	+
Titular ethnicity	0.16 (0.17)	0.63** (0.22)	+	-0.15 (0.18)	0.36 (0.22)		0.17 (0.18)	0.35 (0.21)	
Russian spoken at home	0.24 (0.28)	0.56* (0.22)		0.54 (0.29)	-0.04 (0.23)		0.25 (0.29)	-0.17 (0.23)	
Youth (ages 18-29)	0.07 (0.14)	-0.29* (0.16)	+	0.19 (0.16)	-0.40** (0.17)	+	0.27 (0.16)	-0.21* (0.16)	+
Winner in the transition	0.13 (0.18)	0.11 (0.16)		0.56** (0.19)	0.21 (0.16)		0.26 (0.18)	-0.18 (0.17)	
Paid bribe in last year	-0.01 (0.13)	-0.23 (0.17)		0.02 (0.15)	-0.01 (0.17)		0.19 (0.14)	-0.03 (0.17)	
Satisfaction w/living standard	0.12** (0.04)	0.17** (0.05)		0.23** (0.05)	0.14** (0.05)		0.14** (0.04)	-0.04 (0.05)	+
Satisfaction w/econ system	-0.18** (0.05)	0.19** (0.05)	+	-0.05 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)		-0.09 (0.05)	0.16** (0.06)	+
Satisfaction w/pol system	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.39** (0.07)	+	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.20** (0.11)		0.04 (0.05)	-0.13* (0.07)	
Trust in government	-0.18* (0.09)	-0.30** (0.11)		-0.22* (0.10)	-0.20* (0.11)		-0.23** (0.09)	-0.18* (0.11)	
Constant	-0.90** (0.19)	-0.87** (0.20)		-1.69** (0.46)	-0.92** (0.47)		-0.26** (0.45)	0.48** (0.46)	
Observations	1,278	1,297		1,278	1,297		1,278	1,297	

standard errors in parentheses

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

+ $p < .05$ for interaction with country

That youth in Kyrgyzstan are for the most part indistinct from older people further reinforces the idea that context matters. There is an ambiguity to Kyrgyzstani politics, and this ambiguity appears to muddle socializing messages that reach young people there. On the one hand, Kyrgyz politics are both in their formal aspects (based on the constitution of 2010) and in practice (based on recent political history) more democratic. On the other hand, clientelism as informal practice remains deeply rooted. As a result, the message emanating from Kazakhstan's political context in support of clearly patronage-based authoritarianism is absent in Kyrgyzstan. The bundle or cluster of nondemocratic values that we observe clearly among Kazakhstani youth is absent in Kyrgyzstan, as well.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that, on its own, the democracy-authoritarianism continuum provides little insight into mass support for democracy. When it comes to support for democracy among the population as a whole, it is the two polities' persistent systems of patronage that lend greater explanatory power. At the same time, we find evidence that regime type matters under certain circumstances. When formal (constitutional) and informal (patronage) rules coalesce, the political context is clarified for citizens, as are the values being signaled by the regime. Delving deeper to focus on the youngest adult cohort—those impressionable citizens most likely to internalize the values and attitudes associated with the current political context—we find that young Kazakhstanis are far less likely than older cohorts, as well as their counterparts in Kyrgyzstan, to support practices associated with democracy or to be concerned about the domination of narrow interests over the common good. In Kazakhstan, young people appear to be socialized in accordance with both aspects of political context under consideration in this memo: presidential authoritarianism, which in Kazakhstan has a distinctly paternalistic flavor, and patronage politics. The clear contextual alignment reinforces among youth a set of attitudes that unambiguously reflect the reality in which they live.

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