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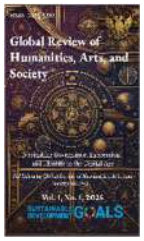
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The Influence of Political Interest and Participation on Satisfaction with Authoritarian Regimes: A Comparative Analysis of Russia and Kazakhstan

Jiasong Li[1]

Kookmin University

Abstract:

This study explores the relationship between political interest, political participation, and regime satisfaction in two post-Soviet authoritarian countries: Russia and Kazakhstan. Drawing on data from the 2018 World Values Survey, the analysis categorizes political participation into institutional, non-institutional, and internet-based forms. Using OLS regression models, the study finds that institutional participation, particularly voting, is positively and significantly associated with regime satisfaction in both countries. Non-institutional forms of participation, such as protests, show a negative relationship with regime trust, especially in Kazakhstan. Although internet-based participation does not demonstrate a statistically significant impact, differences in direction between the two countries suggest varying digital political dynamics. The findings highlight that institutional engagement plays a key role in stabilizing authoritarian regimes, while non-institutional activism reflects underlying dissatisfaction. This research contributes to our understanding of authoritarian durability and the role of individual political behavior in hybrid regimes.

Keywords: Russia, Kazakhstan, political trust, regime legitimacy

[1] **Jiasong Li**, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Graduate School, Kookmin University, 77 Jeongneung-ro, Seongbuk-gu, Seoul 02707, Republic of Korea, Email: jiasongli2@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Why have some post-Soviet countries that continue to operate under authoritarian regimes not transitioned to democracy? While many studies attribute this to the limited activity of NGOs and varying levels of socioeconomic development, another critical factor may be citizens' relatively high satisfaction with the current system. This satisfaction, in turn, contributes to the stability and persistence of authoritarian rule.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, former Soviet republics gained independence and began forming their own political systems. While the Baltic states and countries like Ukraine have made significant strides toward democratic governance—characterized by multiparty systems, free elections, and freedom of the press—Russia and many Central Asian countries have maintained authoritarian regimes. Notably, Kyrgyzstan diverged from this trend by experiencing an anti-government uprising in 2006, which led to the downfall of its authoritarian government and the beginning of democratization. However, most other Central Asian nations have continued to preserve the post-Soviet authoritarian order.

Importantly, not all countries initially chose authoritarian paths. Russia exemplifies this dynamic. After the Soviet collapse, President Boris Yeltsin attempted both political and economic reforms to address Russia's dire economic situation. However, the financial crisis of 1998 undermined these efforts, leading to Yeltsin's resignation in 1999. Vladimir Putin, who succeeded him after winning the 2000 presidential election, initiated a prolonged period of centralized rule. Under Putin's leadership, Russia gradually reverted to authoritarian governance. Although the 2008 Russian constitution limited presidential terms to two, Putin returned to power in 2012 following constitutional amendments that extended presidential term limits.

In Russia, where Putin has maintained power for decades, the potential for public discontent has grown. This discontent has occasionally manifested in protests, raising questions about regime stability. Despite such tensions, authoritarian regimes like Russia's have remained remarkably stable. Moreover, these regimes have sustained high approval ratings for their leaders.

This study investigates why authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space—despite public grievances—continue to maintain high levels of political trust and regime stability. Focusing on Russia and Kazakhstan, it explores the causal relationship between individual-level political interest and participation and satisfaction with the political system. These two countries are selected for analysis for several reasons. Russia has maintained the Putin-led regime since 2000, even in the face of opposition such as the 2012 anti-Putin protests. Similarly, Kazakhstan's first president remained in office for an extended period, exemplifying long-term authoritarian rule. Furthermore, Russia is considered the political and institutional successor of the Soviet Union and remains one of the strongest post-Soviet authoritarian states. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, is the most influential and populous authoritarian state in Central Asia. A comparative analysis of these two cases is thus both relevant and meaningful.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Trust in political systems is a central component of what is broadly referred to as political trust. However, definitions of political trust vary across studies. Some scholars interpret it as an evaluation of satisfaction with the current government in power (Seyd, 2016), while others view it as a citizen's belief that the political system or government is functioning in a way that meets their expectations (Miller, 1974; Citrin, 1974). Political trust thus encompasses individuals' attitudes toward the state as a political community, including their support for democratic institutions and their confidence in legislative and governmental bodies. When dissatisfaction with the

government increases, it often reflects broader discontent not only with political leaders but also with the entire political system.

Research on political trust gained momentum during the 1960s in the United States, especially amid the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal in 1974. These events eroded public faith in democratic institutions, leading to a decline in political participation and trust (Lin Gang & Gu Jiawen, 2016). Scholars responded by investigating the determinants of political trust, with early research focusing on how governments managed social and economic challenges (Miller, 1974; Citrin, 1974; Abramson & Finifter, 1981; Williams, 1985). At the time, unresolved issues such as racial inequality undermined public confidence in institutional performance.

Beyond policy outcomes, institutional performance also plays a crucial role. Citizens evaluate parliamentary effectiveness and the success of economic policies in shaping their trust in political institutions (Feldman, 1983). In democratic systems, elections serve as a key mechanism for such evaluations. When political trust is low, voters are more likely to support opposition parties or third-party candidates in presidential elections (Hetherington, 1999). Similarly, during the 2008 financial crisis, dissatisfaction with the government was highest among those most affected, and their political trust declined significantly. As a result, these individuals became more politically active—primarily through non-institutional means (Martín & Tsirbas, 2021).

Understanding the relationship between political participation and trust is essential. Political participation encompasses more than voting; it also includes political interest, discussions, and activism. Scholars distinguish between institutional participation (e.g., voting) and non-institutional forms (e.g., protests) (Seligson, 1980; Sabucedo & Arce, 1990; Kaase, 1999; de Rooij, 2012). Deth (1986) further categorizes participation into legal and illegal forms. Seligson (1980) proposed a more nuanced typology, identifying four types: withdrawal (non-participation), confirmative participation (institutional only), pragmatic mobilized activism (both institutional and non-institutional), and nonconformist opposition (non-institutional only). Institutional participation generally refers to engagement through elections, whereas non-institutional participation includes protests and demonstrations.

With the rise of the internet, online political engagement has become increasingly prominent. While internet use can amplify social issues, many studies suggest it facilitates non-institutional political participation. Wojcieszak (2009) found a strong correlation between online activity and offline protests in the context of far-right movements in Germany. During the Arab Spring, platforms like social media provided critical information for mobilization, enabling both online activism and offline demonstrations (Schumann & Luong, 2011). Therefore, internet-based participation is often regarded as a form of non-institutional political engagement—especially in authoritarian regimes.

The relationship between political participation and trust is complex. Research indicates that institutional participation, such as voting, is positively associated with higher levels of political trust (Hibbing, 2001; Quintelier, 2012; Zheng, 2020). In democratic systems, citizens who actively vote tend to exhibit greater trust in the political system. Dissatisfied citizens can express their discontent through elections or protests. In contrast, several studies suggest that higher levels of non-institutional participation are linked to lower political trust (Kaase, 1999; Xiong, 2014; Chen & Wang, 2018). For instance, Kaase's analysis of Western Europe showed that increased trust correlates with lower non-institutional participation, and vice versa.

Chen Xingying (2018) further argues that in authoritarian regimes, countries with high internet engagement and low political trust exhibit the highest propensity for protests. Meanwhile, in democracies, internet participation combined with high trust also predicts strong engagement

in protests, albeit for different reasons.

In the post-Soviet context, most studies on political trust rely on qualitative data. While Russia has experienced notable protests—especially before the 2012 presidential elections—these movements have not significantly affected public trust in the regime. This may be due to the government's ability to suppress opposition effectively (Ekman, 2009). If citizens have low regime trust, they are more likely to engage in protests. Conversely, high trust tends to reduce protest participation. To empirically test these relationships, this study uses ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis.

Based on the theoretical framework, this study proposes the following hypotheses. Political participation includes not only voting but also political interest and discussion. It is divided into institutional and non-institutional forms. In authoritarian contexts, non-institutional participation typically includes protest and internet-based activism. As discussed, those who engage in institutional participation are expected to have higher levels of political trust, while those active in non-institutional participation are likely to have lower trust.

Hypothesis 1: Individuals who engage in institutional political participation are more likely to express higher trust in authoritarian regimes than those who do not.

Hypothesis 2: Individuals who engage in non-institutional political participation are more likely to express lower trust in authoritarian regimes than those who do not.

Hypothesis 3: Individuals with higher levels of political interest are more likely to express higher trust in authoritarian regimes.

3. Empirical Analysis

To test the proposed hypotheses, this study employs data from the 2018 World Values Survey (WVS). The dataset includes responses from 1,870 individuals in Russia, collected through face-to-face interviews conducted across 85 administrative regions—including Crimea, which was annexed from Ukraine. In Kazakhstan, data were collected from 1,276 adults aged 18 and over, covering 14 administrative regions as well as the major cities of Astana and Almaty.

The operationalization of both independent and dependent variables is described below.

3.1 Independent Variables

Political participation in this study is categorized into three distinct forms:

1. Institutional Participation
2. Non-institutional Participation
3. Online (Internet-based) Participation

Traditionally, political engagement has included voting and protesting. However, the rise of digital technologies has introduced a new dimension—online political participation, which often functions as a coordination mechanism for protest, particularly in authoritarian contexts. In such regimes, the internet is frequently used not only for information dissemination but also for mobilization via platforms like Facebook and Twitter.

- Institutional Participation is measured through voting behavior. In the surveys, Russia's questionnaire includes both presidential and local elections, whereas Kazakhstan's includes only the presidential election. Therefore, responses in Russia regarding both levels of elections were aggregated for analysis consistency.
- Non-institutional Participation is measured by indicators such as protesting and organizing demonstrations. Specifically, the survey includes questions about encouraging friends to participate in protests and organizing protest

events. These indicators are combined into a single variable representing non-institutional engagement.

- Online Political Participation is considered a non-institutional form in this study. In authoritarian contexts, internet-based activities—such as sharing political content or organizing through social media—often serve to facilitate offline protest actions. Therefore, online participation is treated as an extension of non-institutional political involvement.

Although the questionnaires for Russia and Kazakhstan follow similar structures, key differences in electoral questions are noted and adjusted accordingly. For instance, the survey prompts respondents with the following questions:

- Online Participation: "We would like to ask you about some forms of political participation using the internet or social media, such as Facebook or Twitter. Please indicate whether you have done this, might do this, or would never do this."
- Non-Institutional Participation: "We will describe various forms of political activity. Please indicate whether you have engaged in each activity, might do so, or would never do so."

The distributions of responses to these variables are presented in subsequent tables (not shown here but assumed in the paper's data section), allowing a comparative analysis of electoral, non-institutional, and online political participation across the two countries.

Table 1. Distribution of Responses on Non-Institutional Online Participation (%)

Activity	Response Category	Russia (n=1810)	Kazakhstan (n=1276)
Encouraging friends to participate in protests	Have done	1.8	0.5
	Might do	16.9	12.4
	Would never do	71.4	70.1
Organizing a protest	Have done	1.3	0.7
	Might do	14.6	9.5
	Would never do	74.4	72.5

Source: World Values Survey (2018)

Table 2. Distribution of Responses on Offline Non-Institutional Political Participation (%)

Activity	Response Category	Russia (n=1810)	Kazakhstan (n=1276)
Encouraging friends to participate in protests	Have done	11.5	2.5
	Might do	29.5	18.2
	Would never do	54.1	71.5
Organizing a protest	Have done	2.2	0.5
	Might do	19.6	10.7
	Would never do	72.4	80.5

Source: World Values Survey (2018)

Table 3. Distribution of Responses on Electoral Participation (%)

Response Category	Russia – National	Kazakhstan – National	Russia – Local
Always	43.6	44.7	36.9
Usually	36.9	36.2	39.9
Never	17.6	15.2	20.7
Not allowed to vote	0.1	—	0.2

Note: Kazakhstan data are available only for presidential (national) elections.

Source: World Values Survey (2018)

3.2 Political Interest and Dependent Variable

Political interest is typically defined as the degree to which individuals pay attention to political issues. One common way to measure political interest is by examining whether citizens actively follow political news when consuming media. In this study, political interest is measured using the survey item:

"How interested are you in politics?"

Respondents were given four response options, which were later recoded into binary or ordinal variables for statistical analysis.

Dependent Variable: Satisfaction with the Political System

The dependent variable in this study is trust in the political regime, conceptualized as a subcomponent of broader political trust. As discussed earlier, regime trust not only encompasses confidence in the current government but also reflects broader satisfaction with the political system as a whole.

Operationally, regime trust is measured by asking respondents in both Russia and Kazakhstan the following question:

"To what extent are you satisfied with how the political system is functioning in your country?"

Responses were recorded on a scale from 1 to 10, where:

- 1 represents "Completely Dissatisfied"
- 10 represents "Completely Satisfied"

This variable serves as the primary dependent variable in the regression models. Descriptive statistics for the key variables used in the analysis—including independent and control variables—are presented in the next section, with summary values for each country.

4. Results

The following table presents the results of the OLS regression models for both Russia and Kazakhstan, estimating the effects of political interest and participation on satisfaction with the political system.

Table 4. OLS Regression Results: Determinants of Regime Satisfaction

Variables	Russia (DV: Satisfaction with System)	Kazakhstan (DV: Satisfaction with System)
Political Interest	0.089 (0.111)	0.343* (0.130)
Age	–0.008 (0.003)	0.001 (0.005)
Higher Education	*0.202* (0.117)	0.310 (0.134)
Male	–0.170 (0.110)	–0.155 (0.130)
Internet Participation	–0.232 (0.145)	0.007 (0.208)
Protest Participation	*–0.241* (0.136)	*–1.318* (0.273)
Voting Participation	*0.385* (0.110)	*0.703* (0.163)
Constant	*5.706* (0.180)	*5.611* (0.262)
Observations	1,669	1,165
R^2	0.016	0.048

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

*p < 0.1, **p < 0.05, ***p < 0.01*

These results illustrate the extent to which political interest and participation impact citizens' satisfaction with their respective authoritarian regimes.

- In both countries, political interest has a positive effect on regime satisfaction. In Russia, although not statistically significant, individuals who express political interest are on average 0.089 points more satisfied than those who do not. In Kazakhstan, the effect is both stronger and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.343$, $p < 0.01$).

- Regarding voting (institutional participation), the results are consistently positive and highly significant in both contexts. In Russia, those who vote have satisfaction scores 0.385 points higher; in Kazakhstan, the difference is even greater at 0.703 points.
- Non-institutional protest participation is negatively associated with regime satisfaction in both countries, as expected. The effect is statistically significant in Russia ($p < 0.1$) and even more substantial in Kazakhstan ($p < 0.01$), indicating that those who participate in or are inclined toward protests are less satisfied with the political system.
- Internet participation, while treated as a form of non-institutional engagement, shows mixed results. In Russia, the coefficient is negative but not significant; in Kazakhstan, it is slightly positive but also not significant.
- Control variables such as gender and age have weaker or inconsistent effects. Notably, age has a small but statistically significant negative effect on regime satisfaction in Russia, suggesting that older individuals are marginally less satisfied.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables – Russia (n = 1810)

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Political Interest	0.43	0.50	0	1
Internet Participation	0.20	0.40	0	1
Protest Participation	0.21	0.41	0	1
Regime Satisfaction	5.43	2.18	1	10
Age	45.41	17.12	18	91
Higher Education	0.31	0.46	0	1
Male	0.41	0.49	0	1
Voting Participation	0.45	0.50	0	1

Source: World Values Survey (2018)

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables – Kazakhstan (n = 1276)

ariable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Age	41.25	14.22	18	86
Male	0.45	0.50	0	1
Higher Education	0.39	0.49	0	1
Political Interest	0.43	0.49	0	1
Voting Participation	0.81	0.39	0	1
Regime Satisfaction	6.33	2.22	1	10
Protest Participation	0.07	0.26	0	1
Internet Participation	0.12	0.32	0	1

Source: World Values Survey (2018)

In Kazakhstan, political interest is associated with an increase of approximately 0.343 points in regime satisfaction. Moreover, the relationship is statistically significant, unlike in the Russian case. Regarding non-institutional political participation, the coefficients are negative in both countries. This suggests that individuals who engage in protests or similar activities tend to express lower satisfaction with the political system compared to those who do not participate.

Although internet-based participation does not show statistically significant effects in either case, there are notable differences in direction between the two countries:

the coefficient is positive in Russia but negative in Kazakhstan, hinting at potentially different roles of digital political engagement in each context.

Lastly, institutional participation—specifically voting—shows a strong, positive, and statistically significant association with regime satisfaction. Individuals who vote report satisfaction levels that are 0.385 points higher in Russia and 0.703 points higher in Kazakhstan, compared to non-voters. These findings reinforce the conclusion that electoral participation is a strong predictor of regime trust in authoritarian systems.

5. Conclusion

Over thirty years have passed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, yet many post-Soviet states continue to uphold authoritarian regimes. While some countries initially transitioned toward democracy, others have either maintained or reverted to authoritarian rule. Notably, these regimes appear to be relatively stable, which may be attributed not only to government control over society but also to citizens' high levels of trust in the political system.

This study finds that electoral participation (institutional participation) is a key factor in understanding the resilience of authoritarian regimes. The strong, positive correlation between voting and regime satisfaction suggests that citizen trust plays a crucial role in legitimizing and stabilizing these systems. In this regard, electoral engagement helps explain how authoritarian governments in countries like Russia and Kazakhstan maintain durability and public support.

Moreover, the analysis reveals that non-institutional participation—especially protest-related activities—has a statistically significant negative effect on regime satisfaction in Kazakhstan, but not in Russia. One possible explanation is the relative difference in economic development and state capacity between the two countries. Kazakhstan, with its lower level of economic development, may experience stronger effects of protest participation on regime dissatisfaction. This suggests that in lower-capacity authoritarian states, non-institutional political participation may have a greater impact on citizens' perceptions of regime legitimacy.

Overall, the findings indicate that institutional political participation contributes to the perceived stability of authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet region. Through voting and other forms of structured engagement, citizens not only voice their concerns but also help reinforce the regime's legitimacy. In this way, high levels of institutional engagement—particularly electoral participation—serve as a critical mechanism by which regimes in countries like Russia and Kazakhstan are able to maintain political order and system continuity.

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