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CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF WOMEN IN KAZAKHSTAN'S ELECTORAL PROCESSES

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Abstract. *This study analyzes the impact of electoral system reforms on the level of civic engagement in Kazakhstan in the context of political transformations initiated after the 2019 power transition. Special attention is given to gender stratification within the electoral system and its influence on political representation. The case of Kazakhstan is explored within the broader context of post-Soviet transitional societies, where electoral reforms play a key role in the institutionalization of democratic norms. The applied methodology has a universal character and can be adapted to studies of similar processes in countries with comparable political conditions.*

Keywords: *democracy, elections, civic engagement, gender quotas, process, development, participation.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *demokratija, rinkimai, pilietinis įsitraukimas, lyčių kvotos, procesas, vystymasis, dalyvavimas.*

Introduction

During the early years of its independence in the 1990s, Kazakhstan set a strategic course toward building a democratic, legal, and socially oriented state (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1995). Achieving this goal required comprehensive political, economic, and institutional reforms. One of the key areas of transformation was the reform of the public administration system, including mechanisms for electoral participation across different levels of government. Despite these declared objectives, over the following three decades, Kazakhstan's political system maintained a high degree of centralization. The formation of key state institutions largely followed a vertical power model, which limited the development of civic participation and weakened the accountability of governmental bodies.

Since 2019, following the power transition from President Nursultan Nazarbayev to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, a new stage of political transformation has been initiated (Nazarbayev, 2019). This phase places particular emphasis on modernizing the political system by expanding civic participation and increasing institutional transparency. In this context, electoral reform has emerged as a central instrument for fostering a more inclusive political process.

Among the key changes are the introduction of gender and youth quotas in party lists, the reduction of the electoral threshold from 7% to 5%, the reinstatement of the "against all" option on ballots, the transition to a mixed electoral system, and the implementation of direct elections for local executive officials (akims) (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2021). These measures reflect a broader attempt to institutionalize a more open and accountable model of governance.

This study aims to analyze the outcomes of recent electoral campaigns in Kazakhstan, including parliamentary elections as well as elections for local representative bodies (maslikhats) and the positions of akims. Particular attention is given to women's participation.

Methodological Approach

This article examines the impact of gender on the transformation of political culture and the dynamics of civic engagement in Kazakhstan's electoral processes. The analysis is based on the application of quantitative methods, including statistical processing of electoral data, which enabled the identification of key trends and structural features of voting behavior.

The empirical basis of the research includes a nationwide online survey conducted among women aged 18 and above across all regions of Kazakhstan. The final sample consisted of 30,030 respondents. The survey was administered between February 2 and 16, 2025. Data collection relied on a snowball sampling technique, which allowed broad geographic coverage within a limited timeframe and budget. Although quota sampling was

not applied, post-survey data cleaning and filtering were conducted in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to enhance the representativeness of the sample and ensure internal consistency of the results. The main limitations of the study are the short fieldwork period and restricted financial resources, which influenced the choice of sampling method.

Literature Review

Given the advanced level of scholarly development on this issue, the present study adopts an alternative strategy for conducting the literature review. The relevance and depth of existing research are assessed based on a selection of the most cited and methodologically significant works available in the Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases (Table 1). The review focuses on publications featuring keywords such as "gender quota" from the period 2000 to 2025.

Table 1. Most Cited Recent Scientific Publications on Gender Representation

No.	Author(s)	Article Title	Date of Publication	Citation Count
1	Aili Mari Tripp, Alice Kang	The global impact of quotas: On the fast track to increased female legislative representation	2008/3	830
2	Mona Lena Krook, Joni Lovenduski, Judith Squires	Gender quotas and models of political citizenship	2009/10	244
3	Leslie A. Schwindt-Bayer	Making quotas work: The effect of gender quota laws on the election of women	2009/2	459
4	Mona Lena Krook	Quotas for women in politics: Gender and candidate selection reform worldwide	2010	1,610
5	Pamela Paxton, Melanie M. Hughes, Matthew A. Painter	Growth in women's political representation: A longitudinal exploration of democracy, electoral system and gender quotas	2010/1	408
6	Melanie M. Hughes	Intersectionality, quotas, and minority women's political representation worldwide	2011/8	481
7	Susan Franceschet, Mona Lena Krook, Jennifer M. Piscopo	The impact of gender quotas	2012/3/2	732
8	Drude Dahlerup	Women, quotas and politics	2013/5/13	1,267

Source: the Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases

Studies on the impact of gender quotas on women's political representation have maintained a prominent position in political science discourse. Since the mid-2000s, there has been a noticeable increase in academic interest in this topic, driven both by the global expansion of quota practices and the need to assess the effectiveness of such mechanisms across diverse political-institutional and cultural contexts. Contemporary literature on gender quotas can be broadly divided into two main categories:

- Research assessing the overall effectiveness of quotas in increasing women's political representation.
- Studies focusing on national and regional specificities in the implementation of quota mechanisms.

One of the key scholars in this field is M. Krook, who, in a series of works (Krook, 2006; 2007; Krook and Zetterberg, 2014; Krook, 2025), analyzes how quotas influence the expansion of women's political participation, particularly in developing democracies. In Krook's most cited monograph, Quotas for Women in Politics: Gender and Candidate Selection Reform Worldwide, Krook et al. (2009) provide a systematic analysis of the reasons behind the introduction of quotas and their consequences, classifying quota models (reserved seats, party, and legislative quotas) and examining conditions for their effectiveness.

Continuing the discussion on the effects of quotas, Franceschet et al. (2012) in their work The Impact of Gender Quotas note that academic literature has long focused predominantly on quantitative changes – namely, the increase in the number of women in parliaments. However, as the authors emphasize, there remains a shortage of empirical studies evaluating how elected women actually influence policymaking, initiate legislative changes, and participate in the transformation of political agendas.

A significant contribution to the study of national cases and comparative analyses was made by a team led by D. Dahlerup (2013) in the monograph Women, Quotas and Politics. Based on an analysis of a broad spectrum of countries – from Latin America and South Asia to Europe and the United States – this work investigates the institutional and socio-cultural conditions under which quotas lead to expanded female representation and when they remain merely formal measures without real impact.

While the above studies mainly focus on institutional aspects, Krook et al. (2009), in their article Gender Quotas and Models of Political Citizenship, offer a different perspective by introducing the concept of political citizenship. According to the authors, quota effectiveness depends not only on legal frameworks but also on deep-rooted social attitudes, participation norms, and the type of political culture.

The study by Paxton et al. (2010), Growth in Women's Political Representation, is based on a longitudinal analysis of data from 110 countries covering 1975–2000. The research highlights that the presence of quotas does not always immediately increase the number of women in parliaments. Furthermore, the authors point out that proportional electoral systems are generally more effective than majoritarian ones in promoting female representation.

Contrary to institutionally oriented approaches, Tripp and Kang (2007), in The Global

Impact of Quotas, argue that gender quotas foster increased female representation regardless of levels of democratization, institutional maturity, or cultural barriers. This underscores the universal potential of quotas as a tool for political inclusion. Among regional studies, particular attention has been given to Latin American countries (Htun and Jones, 2002; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2008; Murray, 2010), where the introduction of legislative quotas was accompanied by active transformation of party systems and increased roles for women in politics.

Overall, analysis of the current scholarly base highlights that gender quotas should be viewed within a broader context – through the lens of institutional design, political culture, socio-economic conditions, and transformations in civic engagement. Among the scientific works devoted to gender quotas, the analysis of Kazakhstan is insufficiently represented; therefore, this article will make a practical contribution to the analysis of the implementation of gender quotas.

Results and Discussion

Entering the fourth decade of independence, Kazakhstan embarked on a new phase of political transformation (Bohr et al., 2019). The primary focus has been on expanding formal citizen participation in decision-making processes at various levels of government. This new course is implemented through electoral system reforms and the introduction of new mechanisms for political representation. However, the extent to which these reforms correspond to their practical implementation remains a subject of scholarly analysis and public debate.

One of the key innovations was the holding of the first direct elections of rural district akims in 2021. This measure was positioned as part of a decentralization policy and the development of local self-government, aimed at strengthening the accountability and responsibility of local authorities to the population, as well as stimulating civic engagement at the grassroots level. This was not the first attempt to introduce mechanisms for the direct election of local executive bodies in Kazakhstan. In December 2004, a presidential decree was signed as part of a pilot project to conduct elections for akims of certain districts on an experimental basis (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2004). However, by 2007, this experiment was effectively discontinued. A subsequent decree reinstated the vertical appointment system (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2007), demonstrating the limited political will for decentralization at that stage. As a result, the reforms of 2021 were implemented against the backdrop of a complex institutional legacy, where the formal expansion of democratic procedures had not always been accompanied by their sustainable integration into practice.

The next step was the 2023 parliamentary and local elections, conducted under a mixed majoritarian-proportional system. This model was intended to enhance competition, broaden the political spectrum, and increase accessibility of the political process for

independent candidates (self-nominees). Additionally, gender, youth, and disability quotas were introduced. However, an analysis of the implementation process shows that formal changes to the rules of the game do not always translate into qualitative changes in political behavior and culture.

The 2021 rural district akim elections were accompanied by high voter turnout, which, according to data from the Central Election Commission, exceeded 80% in several regions (Central Election Commission, 2021). The electoral statistics obtained can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, they may indicate increased public interest in local governance issues. On the other hand, they could reflect the mobilizational nature of the campaigns and administrative influence, traditionally characteristic of electoral processes in post-Soviet states.

However, contrary to the official statistics reporting high voter turnout, the results of a sociological survey conducted by the authors among the rural population present a less optimistic picture of electoral activity. According to the survey, only 57.7% of respondents stated that they regularly participate in elections of rural district akims. Of these, 32.9% reported voting every time, while another 9.9% participate in most cases. Meanwhile, 30.1% of respondents admitted that they have never taken part in elections at this level.

Building on the results of quantitative analysis, it is appropriate to examine the internal structure of electoral engagement. In particular, it is important to analyze parameters such as the gender composition of election participants. This approach allows moving beyond superficial turnout metrics toward a deeper understanding of the qualitative characteristics of political participation.

In many countries worldwide, the introduction of gender quotas is regarded as an effective instrument for ensuring political diversity and enhancing the representation of women in governing bodies. This institutional measure aims to eliminate structural barriers that hinder the equal participation of women in the political process. However, an analysis of existing studies indicates that an increase in the number of women in politics does not necessarily lead to a shift in the dominant status of men as the group wielding power and influence (Hughes, 2011). This phenomenon is explained by the fact that formal increases in representation are not always accompanied by transformations in social and cultural norms that sustain patriarchal hierarchies.

Although gender quotas expand women's access to political positions, they often fail to bring about fundamental changes in the distribution of power. At the same time, empirical evidence suggests that groups with higher proportions of women tend to demonstrate greater effectiveness in their work (Woolley et al., 2010), which may be attributed to their propensity for collaboration, inclusivity, and collective decision-making. Thus, the potential of women in politics extends beyond quantitative representation and directly influences the quality and outcomes of collective action.

In Kazakhstan, the introduction of a 30% quota for women, youth, and persons with disabilities on party lists in 2020 should be viewed as an institutional response to global challenges related to representative participation and gender equality. This formally

established mechanism was intended to promote the structural inclusion of underrepresented social groups in the political decision-making process.

However, an analysis of the 2023 election results reveals a significant gap between the normative framework and actual outcomes (see Table 2). While women comprised 40% of candidates nominated to the Mazhilis, which generally corresponds to the established quota (Central Election Commission, 2023), only 18% of women were elected to the lower house of parliament. There is nearly a twofold decrease in the share of women transitioning from nomination to election (from 40% to 18%). A similar trend is observed at the regional level. Women constituted 20.8% of candidates nominated to regional maslikhats and maslikhats of cities of republican significance, yet only 15.5% were elected (Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). The proportion of women among elected akims is only 8.9%, indicating an extremely low level of their representation in the executive vertical at the local level.

Table 2. Election Results for the Mazhilis of Parliament, Regional Maslikhats, Maslikhats of Cities of Republican Significance, and Rural Akims in 2023 by Gender

Level	Nomination		Election	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Mazhilis	201 (60%)	80 (40%)	80 (82%)	18 (18%)
Regional maslikhats, maslikhats of cities of republican significance	79.2%	20.8%	334 (85.5%)	52 (15.5%)
Rural akims	-	-	597 (91.1%)	58 (8.9%)

The analysis of electoral outcomes reveals that the introduction of quota mechanisms has not ensured a substantive increase in women's political representation. Despite formal compliance with candidate nomination quotas, the significant decline in the proportion of women at the election stage indicates the limited effectiveness of this measure in its current form. This imbalance suggests that, given the existing level of women's political activity and engagement, the stated goals of democratic reforms concerning inclusivity and equal representation risk remaining unfulfilled. The key reasons for this discrepancy likely lie in persistent institutional barriers such as party selection mechanisms, electoral preferences, and deeply entrenched gender stereotypes within society.

Under these conditions, the necessity of transitioning from formal quota compliance to a more comprehensive and sustainable approach becomes evident. Such an approach should encompass not only regulatory measures but also the development of support infrastructure, the preparation of women for political participation, and programs aimed at changing societal perceptions of women's roles in the political sphere.

In this context, the experience of other post-Soviet countries (e.g., Georgia and Ukraine) suggests that the success of reforms also depends on the capacity of institutions to adapt to the value heterogeneity of society. In Kazakhstan, this implies the development of feedback mechanisms between citizens and local authorities – such as direct elections of akims – and

the integration of digital platforms to enhance transparency and civic engagement.

The low level of representation of various social groups in the most recent electoral cycles in Kazakhstan reflects not only the limited effectiveness of institutional reforms but also the presence of deep-seated cultural barriers within social cohorts themselves. One of the most pronounced manifestations of this phenomenon is gender stigmatization, which continues to significantly affect women's participation in political life.

According to sociological survey data, 61.8% of women report an unwillingness to participate in politics, indicating a moderate level of both interest and potential engagement. Despite the presence of formal opportunities, the path to active political involvement remains obstructed by a range of structural and socio-cultural factors. The most frequently cited barriers among respondents were:

Widespread gender stereotypes – 34.6%
Lack of support from family and society – 29%
Insufficient political skills and practical experience – 17.2%
Financial constraints – 13.6%
Unwillingness to bear political responsibility – 10%
Low self-confidence – 8.1%

This analysis suggests that women's political engagement is hindered not only by institutional frameworks but also by persistent cultural norms, reproduced within both societal and familial settings. Gender socialization, which shapes perceptions of "traditional" roles for women, continues to limit their political self-expression, despite the state's formal efforts to expand participation.

Conclusion

1. Institutional transformations in Kazakhstan represent a crucial stage in the country's transitional development, aimed at building a more inclusive, transparent, and accountable model of governance. These changes are expected to lay the groundwork for a deeper transformation of political practices, including the expansion of citizen participation in decision-making processes. However, the reforms remain incomplete and require further advancement.
2. Despite the intensification of electoral legislation reforms, there remains a substantial gap between formal procedural norms and the actual level of democratic participation. This is evidenced by empirical data indicating weak political socialization across various social groups. The absence of sustained motivation for civic engagement suggests that institutional reforms alone, without support from socio-cultural factors, are insufficient for fostering a robust democratic culture.
3. In this context, enhancing the transparency of electoral procedures and developing targeted measures for political mobilization – such as supporting women and institutionalizing feedback mechanisms with the population – become critically

important. Only a comprehensive approach that combines institutional reform with the activation of civic participation can facilitate the transition to a substantive model of democracy.

4. Particular attention should be given to political socialization as a systemic process, encompassing educational initiatives, the media environment, and civic engagement practices. Without strengthening these components, reform efforts risk remaining superficial and incapable of transforming the cultural foundations that underpin democratic values.

Future Research

This study is limited in its ability to present a more stratified picture of civic and political participation. Specifically, the analysis does not address age, geographic, or socio-economic differentiation in electoral engagement, which could offer a more comprehensive understanding of participation dynamics amid political transformations. Moreover, in light of the ongoing digital transformation of political communication and institutional interaction, a promising direction for future research is the use of predictive scenarios, including those grounded in digital analytics. Of particular interest is the study of the potential of online platforms as factors capable of reshaping both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of electoral participation – from voter registration to digital campaigning and mobile electoral mobilization.

Overall, further research on political transformations in Kazakhstan should focus on the long-term effects of reforms and the development of mechanisms for sustainable civic engagement. Special attention should be paid to the local level of governance, where the key limitations of existing political institutions are most clearly manifested. To overcome electoral apathy, increase trust in government, and strengthen democratic practices, not only institutional will but also broad socio-cultural support is needed – requiring a comprehensive and systemic approach.

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Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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MOTERŲ PILIETINIS ĮSITRAUKIMAS KAZACHSTANO RINKIMŲ PROCESUOSE

Santrauka. *Šiame tyrime analizuojamas rinkimų sistemos reformų poveikis pilietinio įsitraukimo lygiui Kazachstane politinių transformacijų, prasidėjusių po 2019 m. valdžios perėjimo, kontekste. Ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas lyčių stratifikacijai rinkimų sistemoje ir jos įtakai politiniam atstovavimui. Kazachstano atvejis nagrinėjamas platesniame posovietinių pereinamojo laikotarpio visuomenių kontekste, kur rinkimų reformos atlieka pagrindinį vaidmenį institucionalizuojant demokratines normas. Taikoma metodologija yra universalaus pobūdžio ir gali būti pritaikyta panašių procesų tyrimams šalyse, kuriose yra panašios politinės sąlygos.*

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