

# Institutional Analysis of Uruu/ Village-Based Voting and Mobilisation Patterns in Post- Independence Kyrgyzstan

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Traditional pre-tsarist institutions in Central Asia (CA) are viewed as being crucial in domestic politics, democratisation, transition and nation-building. Political scientists have focused on clan identities and clan politics, whereas anthropologists have proposed kinship and patronage as alternative analytical frameworks. Each side of the debate, however, has not adequately explained or portrayed traditional institutions that affect political voting and mobilisation simply because it is a combination of both proposed frameworks at the same time. This article suggests using Elinor Ostrom's Institutional Analysis framework (IAD) to gain a more comprehensive analysis of the issue. Ostrom's IAD is particularly useful to frame and explain this phenomenon because it was designed as an instrument to understand complex situations for which individuals set rules. Due to difficulty in terming the phenomenon found in the literature, this article favours using the local terms "uruu/uruk" that denote patrilineal genealogy and "uruuchuluk" that broadly stands for patrilineal bonds identity to describe traditional pre-modern institutions that affect political voting and mobilisation. In addition, this article stresses that the uruu/uruk genealogy system is closely linked with its inhabited geographic area and generates a parallel regional identity which tends to be crucial in the political life of Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, the paper treats uruu/uruk and region together as one phenomenon. The uruu/uruk genealogy system is explained via Ostrom's IAD framework and is informed by the existing literature on contemporary elections in Kyrgyzstan along with the author's observations of elections in Kyrgyzstan since 2009. Based on the IAD, I conclude that uruu/uruk-based voting and the development of regional identity in Kyrgyzstan are attractive practices for both individual voters and political candidates because they both benefit from the situation and are committed to maintaining the "structure" of the situation.

**Keywords:** Institutional analysis, voting, uruu/uruk, uruuchuluk, genealogy, Kyrgyzstan

**T**he post-communist transition to democracy in Kyrgyzstan is still an on-going process. Despite formally well-established democratic institutions and values, in practice, traditional institutions and values frequently succeed. On the central level, democracy training in Kyrgyzstan, like in most of Central Asia, mainly legitimated post-communist regimes, while the regimes simulated democracy performance (Murzakulova, 2014). However, on the local level, traditional family network and village network institutions remained strong and challenged modernisation and democratic institutions such as transparent elections and political parties. Since 2013, Kyrgyzstan has shifted to the e-voting system because the government believed that e-voting would help to build a more transparent and democratic election process. However, recent observations report bribery and a strengthening of regional networks and loyalties (OSCE/ODIHR, 2016).

The terms used to denote traditional institutions such as family networks and village networks are disputed in recent scholarship. On the one side of the debate, political scientists suggest terms such as “clan” (Collins, 2004, 2006) and “tribalism” (Junusaliev & Ploskih, 2000). In response, anthropologists argue that the term “clan” is distorted from the local reality and propose instead referring to “kinship and lineage” networks and “patronage” (Hardenberg, 2009; Jacquesson, 2010; Ismailbekova, 2017). Because each side of the debate has not adequately explained or clarified the best use of terminology, and because traditional institutions that affect political voting and mobilisation is a combination of both at the same time, this paper suggests that instead, homegrown terms such as “uruu/uruk” that denote patrilinear genealogy and “uruuchuluk” that broadly stands for patrilinear bonds identity should be used (Ismailbekova, 2018). Uruu is a bigger lineage group composed of several smaller sub-groups or uruks in Kyrgyz genealogy, even though in common everyday usage they are essentially synonyms. It is common to hear both: “*Uruun emne?*” and “*Urugun emne?*” (in Kyrgyz: What is your lineage?). Considering this, the

article treats uruu and uruk as one. Recent studies also take this approach and prefer using the local terms uruu and uruuchuluk (see Ismailbekova, 2018 and Light, 2018).

In addition to kinship as an important feature of uruu/uruk, the paper notes that the uruu/uruk genealogy system is closely linked with its inhabited geographic area, and as a consequence, generates a parallel regional identity along with uruu/uruk. Under the nomadic reality of the past, Kyrgyz uruus moved from one pasture to another in a pre-agreed arrangement with neighboring uruus. This practice consolidated a bond between uruu and land which was essential for herding (Ibraimov, 1992). The link between uruu and the land was further cemented by Soviet sedentarisation policies (see Luong 2002). A regional identity as part of the uruu/uruk genealogy system tends to be crucial, especially during electoral mobilisation in Kyrgyzstan (Jacquesson, 2012; Kartawich, 2005; Sjöberg, 2011). In fact, regionalism contributes to a north-south political cleavage in the country (Ryabkov, 2008). The regional identity as part of uruu/uruk is proposed in this paper as being integral to understanding and studying contemporary kinship and politics in Kyrgyzstan. In the uruu/uruk institutional analysis below, the study considers region as a central component of uruu/uruk imagination and treats “region/village” and “uruu/uruk” as complementary (further stated as uruu/village), despite the value of geographic areas in uruu/uruk not being well established in the existing literature. Schatz, for instance, could not adequately explain how kinship and territory are related, yet he still speaks of clan balancing in Kazakhstan and observes that “umbrella clan corresponds [...] to specific territories” (2005, p. 241).

In this paper I apply an alternative theoretical approach, namely Elinor Ostrom’s Institutional Analysis framework (IAD) (2005), to the study of traditional institutions in Kyrgyz electoral mobilisation and voting. The IAD allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the issue. Ostrom’s IAD is especially useful in framing and explaining this phenomenon

because it was designed as an instrument to understand particularly complex situations, such as those which can be observed in post-independent Kyrgyzstan. This paper contributes to the studies on uruu/uruk and regional networks (village) from the perspective of their institutional structure using Ostrom's (1990, 2005) framework. The institutional analysis literature which uses IAD is lacking. I carried out the institutional analysis by studying patterns of post-communist elections using findings from existing scholarly works as well as media articles, and by analysing my own close observations of elections in Kyrgyzstan since 2009 in my role as an interpreter to OSCE election observation missions and as an independent observer with local NGOs. By using IAD framework, the paper considers elections as a *situation* where uruk/regional affiliation matters. Furthermore, in this paper I also study why uruu/village loyalty matters and how the role of the uruu/village remains an institutional solution for equilibrium. The key questions the paper addresses using IAD are the following: Why do voters prefer voting along uruu/village lines? Why do politicians rely on uruu/village networks in Kyrgyzstan to be elected? Before answering the posed questions, I present Elinor Ostrom's Institutional Analysis framework (2005), I give brief background information on the genealogical uruu system of Kyrgyzstan, and I outline the political implications.

### **Institutional analysis framework as a theoretical frame to explain uruu/village-based voting and mobilisation patterns in Kyrgyzstan**

The IAD framework developed by Elinor Ostrom in 1990 argued that common resources could be successfully self-governed without external regulation through the development of common norms and rules (Ostrom, 1990). The IAD framework is an instrument that can be used to understand the complexity of situations for which individuals set rules. Therefore, the IAD framework is the best-situated framework for understanding and analysing the

complexity of the phenomenon of uruu-based voting and uruu-based support mobilisation patterns in post-independent Kyrgyzstan. In the literature on traditional institutions in Central Asia I have reviewed, in-depth institutional analysis of uruu-based voting and electoral mobilisation is lacking.

According to Elinor Ostrom, institutions are "the prescriptions that humans use to organize all forms of repetitive and structured interactions including those within families, neighborhoods [...] and governments at all scales" (2005, p. 3). The central point for the IAD analysis is the "action situation." The action situation represents the social space where "participants with diverse preferences interact, exchange goods and services, [and] solve problems" (Ostrom, 2005, p. 14). The action situation is regulated by norms and rules. Participants are defined as "decision-making entities assigned to a position and capable of selecting actions from a set of alternatives" (Ostrom, 2005, p. 38). Relevant attributes of participants are the (1) number of participants, (2) status of participants and (3) individual characteristics, such as age, gender and education (Ostrom, 2005, p. 38). Ostrom refers to participants and action situations as "holons" and places them in the action arena. In the process of interaction and impact of "exogenous variables," participants and action situations result in different outcomes (Ostrom, 2005, p. 38).

Ostrom's exogenous variables are made up of three clusters of variables: (1) the rules for organising relationships, (2) the attributes of the biophysical world and (3) the structure of the general community (2005, p.15). Ostrom suggests taking into account all three factors because together they affect actions individuals take and may result in different actions. The concept of "rule" is elaborated as a regulation, instruction or principle. Rules are defined as "shared understandings by participants about *enforced* prescriptions concerning what actions (or outcomes) are *required, prohibited, or permitted*" (emphasis in original) (Ostrom, 2005, p. 18), and have an "OR ELSE component" (Ostrom, 2005, p. 141). Ostrom (2005)

also points to (1) the set of participants, (2) the positions of participants, (3) the potential outcomes, (4) the set of allowable actions, (5) the control that participants have, (6) the information available to participants and (7) the costs and benefits. These seven factors are some of the key variables among exogenous variables that help to analyse action situations (Ostrom, 2005). The institutional analysis provided by IAD is a well-suited theoretical frame that could be used to provide a deeper study of the internal machine or internal logic of the uruu/village institution's operation and to explain uruu/village-based voting and political mobilisation accordingly. As was noted above, this traditional pre-modern institution was studied as informal clan politics, kinship, patronage and tribalism. However, the phenomenon under study is more complex than it seems and needs a more comprehensive approach, which I claim is provided by IAD.

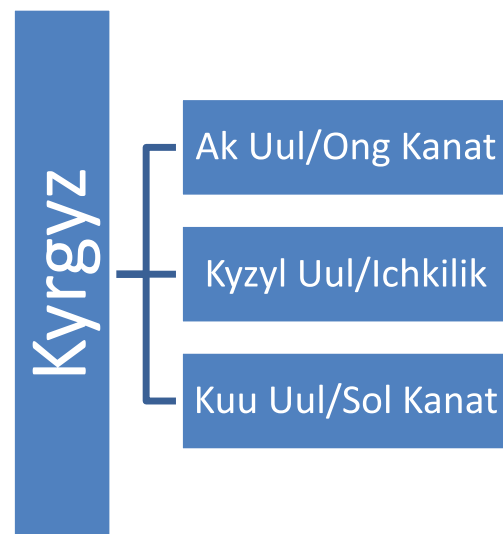
### **Kyrgyz traditional uruu/uruk system, regionalism and political implications**

The Kyrgyz genealogical tree consists of three tribal groupings: the ong (right), the sol (left), and ickilik (central). These uruu groupings are recorded and kept in the genealogical tree called Sanzhıra (transliterated also as sanjyra or sanjıra) as illustrated below (see below Fig. 1, Kyrgyz Genealogy according to Sanzhıra).

Historically, tribal systems in Central Asia replaced functions of the modern state. In Turkmenistan, a tribal system was a form of social, economic and political organisation of society which provided basic services, basic needs, and regulations (see Vasil'eva, 1954, p. 176). Likewise, in pre-modern Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz people could not imagine their lives outside their uruu because it protected and supported them (Kenčiev, 2014, p.9). This was such an essential part of identity that Kyrgyz who did not know their seven ancestors within their lineage were perceived not ethnic Kyrgyz (Ibraimov, 1992, p.66). Usually, tribesmen lost support from uruu if they betrayed, shamed or worsened the well-being of fellows in uruu (Ibraimov, 1992, p.66). In 1920–1940, Kyrgyz became a settled nation only

under the Soviet sedentarisation, collectivisation and “kolkhoz” (collective households) systems. However, despite Soviet reforms, the uruu system has survived up to the present day (Collins, 2006; Roy, 2007; Suny, 1993).

After the country had gained independence, uruu further reinforced its influence both in the socio-economic and political life of the country. Hundreds of books were published on various genealogies of uruus by local historians and amateurs. As noted by Temirkoulov (2004), after the independence, different uruus competed against one another to get access to state resources on national, regional and local levels. According to Torogeldieva (2010), political parties in Kyrgyzstan, during their creation, had no political ideology but were based on regionalism and tribal ideology. Similarly, Kartawich notes that political parties in Kyrgyzstan are “restricted to a specific geographical area” (2005, p. 7). Kurmanov refers to existing factions within the parliament as “unstable” and “amorphous” (2003, p. 4). According to him, an elected MP is more attached to “his/her electors [region or uruu]” rather than “his/her party” (Kurmanov, 2003, p.4). Indeed, a high number of political parties in Kyrgyzstan—203 officially registered political parties in 2016 according to OSCE/ODIHR report (see OSCE/ODIHR, 2016), could speak extensively about the prevalence of regional interests over the national interest.



**Figure 1,** Kyrgyz Genealogy according to *Sanzhıra*

Recent literature on the subject also generally supports the existence of kinship in political life and notes that “kinship replaced the state as the people’s caretaker” (Ismailbekova, 2017, p. 35). Based on observation of parliamentary elections in 2007, Ismailbekova proposes a concept of “a native son,” which asserts that on the private level, kinship provides a support system, while on the political level, kinship is strengthened with the help of “political discourse” and “nation-building projects” (Ismailbekova, 2017, p. 22). For Ismailbekova, the genealogies from the public perception are primordial, but on the other hand, they are “constructed” and “manipulated” (2017, p.13). Based on this, she distinguishes between “desirable” and “undesirable” genealogical connections depending on different contexts. She continues that the genealogy of Kyrgyz was a subject for permanent manipulation:

The Kyrgyz say once an individual becomes wealthy and powerful his kinsmen begin to increase in number; as his kinship network increases in size, it strengthens the whole group. For the patron, the advantage of having many kinsmen is that he can mobilize a large group of people for political purposes. ... When an individual loses his wealth and powerful position, his circle of supportive kinsmen immediately decreases. (Ismailbekova 2017, p.15)

A similar “manipulation” was observed in earlier studies along horizontal and vertical kinship networks in political support. Sheranova (2016) for instance points to horizontal relationships between non-elite uruu members (non-elite level), and vertical relationships between elite and non-elite uruu members (elite-non-elite level or top-down). In the non-elite relationship, non-elites seek to support their own kin, while at the elite-non-elite level or in the top-down relationship, both elite and non-elite uruu members use uruu membership and genealogy to gain political support (Sheranova, 2016, p.12). As noted in Jacquesson’s paper, “[in] contrast to the Soviet type of elections in which people had no choice but to vote for party candidates, in ‘clan-tribal elections’ they at least were supporting a candidate of ‘their own’” (2012, p. 3). Identically,

Fredrik Sjöberg’s study on elections informs that among the “most important groups of people in their campaigning”, respondents noted relatives and kin (2011, p. 33). According to Sjöberg, during election campaigns, kin-fellows usually provide “free labor” to agitate for their own candidates (Sjöberg, 2011, p. 133). Beyer (2016) rightly observes the invitation of community elders, aksakals, from villages to cities for events as one of the support-seeking strategies of elites. The media too blamed the presidential elections in 2017 for practicing regionalism (Orunbekov, 2017). In contrast, in her study of everyday uruu practice in Kyrgyzstan, Light states that role of uruu in social lives is not “central” and a greater “national lineage” has “little import” on social lives (2018, p.1). In brief, the literature I discussed here mostly describes this phenomenon in the political, economic and social lives of Kyrgyz. If authors provide any attempt to conceptualise this phenomenon, they leave out a comprehensive approach in conceptualising this complex institution. Building on the existing literature, in the remaining part of the paper I attempt to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the uruu/village institution in the context of voting in Kyrgyzstan.

### **Institutional analysis of uruu/village-based voting and mobilisation patterns in Kyrgyzstan**

Situating the IAD framework to Kyrgyzstan’s voting and electoral mobilisation context, voting and mobilising political support based on uruu/village lines is ‘the action situation’. The two categories of participants are ‘Participant A’, a voter, and ‘Participant B’, a candidate running for elections. The scholarly literature, media articles and observations of elections show that if both participants are from the same uruu/village, they share common imagined kinship ties and feelings of loyalty. ‘Participant B’ manipulates her/his own uruu and region to mobilise the political support of ‘Participant A’, while ‘Participant A’, in response, relies on support from ‘Participant B’. In this paper I propose four possible guiding norms, if not rules, in the action situation:

1. 'Participant A' is expected to provide support for her/his own uruu/village-fellows OR ELSE 'Participant A' might not receive support from other uruu/village-fellows.
2. 'Participant A' is expected to listen to a commonly made decision within uruu/village OR ELSE 'Participant A' might become excluded for some time from important social events (for instance, not be invited to feasts).
3. 'Participant B' is expected to provide support for own uruu/village-fellows OR ELSE 'Participant B' might not receive political support from other uruu/village-fellows.
4. 'Participant B' is expected to listen to a commonly made decision within the uruu/village OR ELSE 'Participant B' might become excluded from uruu/village political support.

Among the number of exogenous variables proposed by Ostrom (2005), in the action situation, we can elaborate on 'benefits' and 'costs' related to uruu/village-based voting and electoral mobilisation for Participants A and B. Similar to the above presented rules, a list of benefits and costs were developed based on previous studies, media articles and observations. Potential benefits for 'Participant A' of uruu/village-based voting are (i) benefits to residence social-infrastructure improvement if kin or villager gets elected, (ii) benefits from patron-client relationships and (iii) one-time or multiple material rewards from elected kin for loyalty. In the regions, voters expect their elected "sons" or "daughters" to address their social needs and problems, usually connected to improvement of infrastructure: rehabilitation or construction of roads, bridges, schools, polyclinics, mosques or sport and recreation facilities. As noted in 2005 by Radnitz, "one's village of origin remains with a person for life and people readily assume that somebody from their region who gets elected will represent their interests" (p. 417). To this date, this expectation has not changed. To achieve this high expectation, elected deputies try to promote the needs of their own villages in the parlia-

ment and secure state funds or investments ("Kogda v Kyrgyzstan," 2018). Patron-client relationships are important in the political reality of Kyrgyzstan (Ismailbekova, 2017). Elected candidates act as patrons, while voters act as clients. In a mutually beneficial tandem, they use kinship/village ties to resolve their own issues (Korganbaev, 2019). Usually, clients resolve their own problems, get employed, get a job promotion, get access to economic resources, or have own patrons as protectors or "krysha" (translated from Russian as a roof) (Zabyelina & Buzhor, 2018). Finally, elected kins give rewards in exchange for loyalty from uruu/village supporters, such as giving a feast (toi) after winning the elections (Ismailbekova, 2017, p.179).

In opposition to the benefits listed above, the potential costs of voting against uruu/village-based voting for 'Participant A' can be formulated as (i) lack of benefits from social-infrastructure improvement if kin or villager gets elected, (ii) lack of benefits from patron-client relationships, and (iii) lack of one-time or multiple material rewards from elected kin in exchange for loyalty.

Similar to 'Participant A', there are several benefits for 'Participant B' if (s)he uses her/his own uruu/village lines: (i) the benefit of getting elected using uruu/village support, (ii) the benefits from patron-client relationships and (iii) long-term political support from a uruu/region for loyalty. As a rule, the potential costs for 'Participant B' of not using uruu/village support are (i) lack of benefits of getting elected with the help of uruu/village support, (ii) lack of benefits from patron-client relationships, and (iii) lack of long-term political support from uruu/region.

Finally, Ostrom's (2005) framework, in addition to the costs and benefits, also analyses these 'other exogenous variables': (1) the set of participants, (2) the positions of participants, (3) the potential outcomes, (4) the set of allowable actions, (5) the control that participants have and (6) the information available to participants. In the voting and mobilisation action situation, the set of participants

is made of a voter and a candidate representing the same uruu/region. There are four ‘positions’ among participants: a voter is voting/not voting based on uruu/region lines, and a candidate is using/not using uruu/regional lines for political ends. Likewise, there are four potential ‘outcomes’: (1) a voter voted along uruu/region lines, (2) a voter did not vote along uruu/region lines, (3) a candidate used uruu/region lines during elections, or (4) a candidate did not use uruu/region lines. Based on these variables and outcomes, ‘the set of allowable actions’ in the action situation are:

- (1) ‘Participant A’ and ‘Participant B’ both use uruu/regional lines in voting and political mobilisation,
- (2) ‘Participant A’ votes in line with uruu/region, but ‘Participant B’ does not use uruu/regional lines to get elected,
- (3) ‘Participant B’ uses uruu/regional lines to get elected, but ‘Participant A’ does not vote in line with uruu/region or
- (4) neither ‘Participant A’ nor ‘Participant B’ use uruu/regional lines in voting and political mobilisation.

‘The control’ that participants have over entering or exiting their positions is analysed as if they “have no choice” over them, as proposed by Ostrom (2005, p. 41). ‘The information’ available to participants during voting and mobilisation is “complete” and perfect because participants are aware of each other’s positions and preferences. ‘Participant A’ acts based on the assumption that ‘Participant B’ will also act the way ‘Participant A’ did and vice versa. Thus, a general pattern during voting and mobilisation in Kyrgyzstan through IAD can be summarised as voters preferring to vote per uruu and region loyalty, and political candidates tending to “manipulate” or use uruu and regional connections to mobilise voters for their own benefit. The situation of voting and mobilisation in Kyrgyzstan based on uruu/village using Ostrom’s IAD framework that

I have analysed provides an alternative and more comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon. As IAD of pre-modern uruu/village institution has illustrated voting based on uruu/uruk loyalty and regional loyalty in Kyrgyzstan are attractive practices for both the voter and the candidate because they both benefit from the situation and are committed to maintaining ‘the structure’ of the situation.

## Conclusion

When studying and conceptualising traditional pre-modern institutions in voting and mobilisation, political scientists tend to focus on clan identities and clan politics, whereas anthropologists propose kinship and patronage as significant. Instead of entering into a debate, this article suggests using Elinor Ostrom’s Institutional Analysis framework to have a more comprehensive analysis of voting and political mobilisation in Kyrgyzstan based on uruu or village loyalty. Existing literature fails to provide a comprehensive approach, while alternatively IAD can provide a more holistic perspective on the phenomenon. The action situation analysis presented in the paper stated about a mutually productive and beneficial interactions and outcomes between a voter (Participant A) and a candidate (Participant B) if they act in tandem. In other words, I conclude that voting based on uruu/uruk loyalty and regional loyalty in Kyrgyzstan are attractive practices for both the voter and the candidate because they both benefit from the situation and are committed to maintaining the “structure” of the situation. The IAD, by looking closer at the internal logic of the uruu/village institution, provides a valuable explanation to the durability of this pre-modern institution throughout the Soviet era and after independence, something that past approaches to studying this topic have failed to do comprehensively. This theoretical framework suits well to explain why traditional institutions, whether they are referred to as clans, kinships, patronages or tribes, had survived communism, post-Soviet transition and

challenge on-going democratisation in the region. Examination of this traditional institution through the IAD model brings light to the existing scholarship on Central Asia, and suggests a new path in the study of pre-modern institutions.

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