

Thomas Hazell

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Research Interests

Autocracy

Bureaucracy & bureaucrats

Computational social science

Central Asia

Procurement & corruption

Subnational governance

Education

DPhil (PhD) in Politics

2024 –

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford

Funded by an Economic and Social Research Council Studentship. Supervised by Dr Katerina Tertytchnaya.

Visiting Graduate Student

March – April 2026

Department of Political Science and International Relations, Nazarbayev University, Astana

MPhil in Politics (Comparative Government)

2022 – 2024

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford

Grade: *Distinction*. Funded by an Economic and Social Research Council Studentship. Thesis: 'Subnational governance, patronage, and political careers in Kazakhstan,' supervised by Dr Katerina Tertytchnaya.

BA in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics

2019 – 2022

Lincoln College, University of Oxford

Grade: *First Class*. Finals examinations in politics and economics. Thesis: 'Changing the rules of autocracy: the politics of electoral reform in competitive authoritarian Ukraine,' supervised by Dr Jody LaPorte.

Work-in-Progress

Thesis papers

'Personnel appointments in authoritarian bureaucracies'.

Biased hiring by unelected managers undermines state capacity. Recent work focuses on who gets hired, not the conditions under which it takes place. I argue that, under weak rule of law, bureaucratic managers balance the

potential rewards of hiring aligned subordinates with the risk of punishment for breaching civil service regulations. The paper employs novel data on about 7,000 district bureaucrat appointments in Kazakhstan, computationally extracted from over three million administrative records. Combined with hand collected data on manager tenure and detailed administrative statistics, I use two-way fixed effects designs to show that new managers quickly replace subordinates despite civil service regulations, that appointments decline after the departure of their boss, and that there are no equivalent effects for junior staff. The findings highlight how informal politics sustain biased hiring despite civil service reforms.

‘Social connections and the quality of public procurement’.

How do appointment practices affect governance? A growing literature debates the conditions under which discretionary appointments have negative or, less commonly, positive effects on governance, predominantly drawing on evidence from electoral democracies. It is not yet clear whether these findings extend to authoritarian settings, where the threat of political punishment is greater and bureaucrats’ incentives strongly differ. I present new theory on the role of connections in authoritarian bureaucracies, and use novel data from Kazakhstan to test whether bureaucrats’ dependence on their civil service managers influences economic outcome. I use new measures of bureaucratic effort, effectiveness, and corruption risk based on six million public procurement processes alongside text-as-data methods on technical specifications to provide direct evidence on bureaucrats’ behaviour. The paper provides large-scale bureaucrat-level evidence on the roles of informal connections and personnel politics in shaping state outcomes.

‘Which merits matter? Political performance, economic meritocracy, and elite loyalty in authoritarian states’.

Which merits do autocrats care about when selecting officials? Some regimes prioritise economic competence and promote based on growth or unemployment figures. Others view political stability as more important. These effects may be conditional or—in many cases—performance may simply not matter for appointments. Work on autocratic meritocracy, nonetheless, should consider wider operationalisation of political merit, provide stronger evidence of merit not mattering, and study cases beyond China and Russia. I advance the literature using newly collected evidence on governors’ career trajectories in Kazakhstan paired with economic, electoral, and protest data. I use an equivalence testing approach to provide strong evidence that economic merit—even exceptionally good performance—does not matter in this case, while good political performance can somewhat increase a governors’ prospects of promotion. I contribute to work on promotion tournaments and performance incentives under autocracy, while presenting new data from an important but understudied case of hegemonic electoral autocracy.

Other work

'Local elections and elite management in authoritarian regimes: evidence from Kazakhstan'. With Eleonora Minaeva and Kirill Melnikov.

'The governance effects of local elections in autocracies'. With Eleonora Minaeva and Kirill Melnikov.

'Shuffling to co-opt: Subnational governance, co-optation, and political careers in Kazakhstan'.

Invited Talks

'Personnel appointments in authoritarian bureaucracies.' 20 March 2026. Department of Political Science and International Relations, Nazarbayev University, Astana.

Conferences & Workshops

'Which merits matter? Political performance, economic meritocracy, and elite loyalty in authoritarian states.' *Conference of the European Political Science Association (EPSA)*. 27 June 2025. UC3M, Madrid.

'Personnel appointments in authoritarian bureaucracies.' *3rd APSG Conference on Authoritarian Politics*. 23 June 2025. Authoritarian Political Systems Group, King's College London.

'Personnel appointments in authoritarian bureaucracies.' *3rd Conference "New Advances in the Political Economy of Development in Eurasia."* 6 June 2025. Almaty Management University, Almaty.

'Shuffling to co-opt: Subnational governance, patronage, and political careers in Kazakhstan.' *Conference of the Midwestern Political Science Association (MPSA)*. 5 April 2025. Chicago.

'Shuffling to co-opt: Subnational governance, patronage, and political careers in Kazakhstan.' *ESRC Grand Union DTP Annual Conference*. 4 June 2024. University of Oxford, Oxford.

'Shuffling to co-opt: Subnational governance, patronage, and political careers in Kazakhstan.' *Emerging Scholars Workshop on the Study of Challenges in Eurasian Politics and Society*. 24 May 2024. Center for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Presented Online.

Teaching

Undergraduate Tutor (sole instructor for weekly small-group teaching)
University of Oxford

Comparative Government (Final exams core paper). TT (Summer) 2026.

Politics in Russia and the Former Soviet Union (Final exams options paper). MT (Autumn) 2025, TT (Summer) 2026.

Professional & Research Experience

Research Assistant on Non-Violent Repression in Electoral Autocracies
September 2024 – present
Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford

Research assistance to Dr Katerina Tertytchnaya's ESRC-funded project on administrative and bureaucratic repression with an empirical focus on the Russian Federation. Including text-as-data/classification, survey data, and event data tasks.

Election Observer (Short-term), Uzbekistan October 2024
OSCE ODIHR Election Observation Mission

UK-seconded short-term observer for the OSCE ODIHR mission in Samarqand region during the 2024 parliamentary elections.

Consultant Researcher June – October 2024
Ridgeway Information, London

Consultancy supporting the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)'s nuclear non-proliferation work. Open source methods and Russian-language support, especially on projects related to the former Soviet Union.

Research Assistant on AUTHLIB (PI: Stephen Whitefield) September 2023 – January 2024
Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford

Part of the joint UKRI/Horizon Europe funded project 'neo-authoritarianisms in Europe and the liberal democratic response' (<https://www.authlib.eu/>), led at Oxford by Stephen Whitefield, Spyros Kosmidis, and Zofia Stemplowska. Coding tweets from European political parties for NLP training.

Research Assistant to Dr Lenka Buřtiková May – September 2023
Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford

Data collection for projects on illiberalism and irregular armed groups' political role in Ukraine.

Research Assistant on the Oxford University Economic Recovery Project

February – November 2021

Smith School of Energy and Enterprise, University of Oxford

Research assistance, using government and media sources to track state spending in response to Covid-19.

Intern

Summer 2021

Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford

Service

Reviewer for *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* and *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*.

Selected Scholarships & Awards

Grand Union Doctoral Training Programme Studentship, Economic and Social Research Council, 2022–2026.

Competitively awarded doctoral studentship, covering fees and stipend for the MPhil in Politics followed by the DPhil (PhD) in Politics, both at Oxford. Value: ≈ £145,000.

Tatham Exhibition and College Scholarship, Lincoln College, University of Oxford, 2020–2022.

Awarded for academic performance. Value: £450.

Languages

English (Native). Russian (Intermediate). Qazaq (Beginner).

Computer Skills

R (Advanced): Modelling & causal inference methods. Survey data. Visualisation. Managing large datasets. Web scraping/automation. Quarto. Machine learning (`tidymodels`). GIS (`sf`).

Python: Scraping. Data management. Natural language processing/text-as-data/machine learning, including `torch`. GIS.

Other: OpenAI APIs (Batch, Fine Tuning). Git/GitHub. Cloud computing (Azure, Google Cloud). Databases/basic SQL. \LaTeX .

Additional Training

Qazaq language, Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Oxford, November 2025–.

Comprehensive E-learning Course for OSCE/ODIHR Observers, September 2024.

Fieldwork Safety Overseas, University of Oxford Safety Office, June 2023.

Advanced R for the Social Sciences, Social Sciences Division, University of Oxford, February 2023.

International Experience

Intensive Russian language training in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, Summer 2022.

Travel in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia.

References

Dr Jody LaPorte
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International Relations
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Dr Katerina Tertytchnaya
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Politics
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Professor Lenka Buštková
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University of Florida
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