

---

# THE FACE OF “GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY” IN RURAL CHINA

## *Real Versus Cosmetic Elections*

=====  
=====  
===== John James Kennedy

“When the people become masters of the vote,  
it becomes master of the government.”  
—Aristotle, *The Constitution of Athens*

Recent reports suggest that competitive village elections represent substantive democratic reforms in the Chinese countryside, but are villagers satisfied with competitive elections?<sup>1</sup> Can a competitive election ensure an uncertain electoral outcome? A competitive election is one in which the number of candidates exceeds the positions available. Over the last decade, the number of villages in rural China that have held competitive local elections has been on the rise.<sup>2</sup> In these elections, villagers may have a choice between candidates, but who chooses the candidates? If all the candi-

---

John James Kennedy is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Davis. This paper was first presented at the Chinese International Symposium on Village Self-Government and Rural Social Development in China, September 2001, Beijing, China. The author would like to thank the Fulbright Program and the University of California Pacific Rim Research Program for gracious financial support; Northwest University, Xi’an, China, for all the help and administrative support; Kevin O’Brien, Jo Andrews, and an anonymous reviewer for their suggestions and comments; and finally, Shi Yaojiang, for without his help and friendship this project would not have been possible.

*Asian Survey*, 42:3, pp. 456–482. ISSN: 0004–4687

© 2002 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved.

Send Requests for Permission to Reprint to: Rights and Permissions, University of California Press, Journals Division, 2000 Center St., Ste. 303, Berkeley, CA 94704–1223.

1. See Jamie P. Horsley, “Village Elections: Training Ground for Democracy,” *China Business Review* 28:2 (March–April 2001), pp. 44–52; Henry Rowen, “The Short March: China’s Road to Democracy (China as a Democratic State in 2015),” *National Interest* 45 (Fall 1996), p. 61.

2. Shi finds in his national survey that 37% of elections were competitive in 1990, and that figure jumped to 51% in 1993. See Shi Tianjian, *Rural Democracy in China* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2000), p. 4.

dates in a competitive election are pre-selected, then the electorate's choice is heavily restricted. For an election to be considered legitimate, it must guarantee an uncertain election result. The election outcome cannot be known beforehand. Individuals, who pre-select candidates in a closed nomination, can ensure that the election results will reflect their choice, *not necessarily that of the electorate*. The most effective way to ensure uncertainty in an election is to have an open nomination process. The uneven implementation of village elections, however, has led to a variety of nomination methods adopted throughout the Chinese countryside.<sup>3</sup>

Several authors have given insightful and revealing explanations into the *causes* of inconsistent policy implementation.<sup>4</sup> This article, however, will focus on the *political outcomes* of uneven policy implementation. The first section of the article will examine the disparate implementation of the Organic Law of Villager Committees, which has resulted in various forms of leader selection and nomination methods at the village level. The leadership selection types are either competitive elections or appointments (i.e., no elections).

The second section of the paper will introduce the survey data and identify the key dependent and explanatory variables in the analysis. The third section will present the results of the analysis. I conclude that villager satisfaction with the election process does vary with the level of uncertainty. Moreover, villagers are aware of their political environment and display a high level of voter sophistication.

## Theory

The Organic Law of Villager Committees was adopted in 1988 and revised in 1998. The village committee is made up of three to seven elected members and an elected chair. According to Article 14 of the Organic Law, the number of candidates "should exceed that of the positions" to be elected.<sup>5</sup> This, of course, means that elections should be competitive. Moreover, ". . . candidates should be nominated directly by the villagers who are eligible to vote." In addition, the Law lays out elected leaders' responsibilities, such as implementing national policies, developing the local economy, and managing col-

---

3. Robert A. Pastor and Tan Qingshan, "The Meaning of China's Village Elections," *China Quarterly* 162 (June 2000), pp. 490-511.

4. Bai Gang, "Zhongguo cunmin zizhi fazhi jianshe pingyi" [Examining the construction of China's villager self-government and the rule of law], *Zhongguo shehui kexue* [China social science] 3 (May 1998), pp. 88-107; Kevin J. O'Brien, "Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 32 (1994), pp. 33-59.

5. Organic Law, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo cunminweiyuanhui zuzhifa* [The People's Republic of China Organic Law of Villager Committees] (Beijing: Legal Publishing House, 1998), p. 6.

lective property. The dual aim of the Law is to produce elected leaders who will fully implement unpopular national policies, such as grain taxes and the single-child policy, and to make leaders more accountable to the villagers themselves.

One reason for the implementation of the Organic Law is to reduce tension in cadre-villager relations.<sup>6</sup> This places the focus on village leaders, who are frequently caught in the middle. For instance, they must implement unpopular policies and, at the same time, represent villager interests. The local leaders receive pressure from the township to collect taxes and implement the single-child policy, but they can also face villager resistance. At times leaders resort to coercive measures to implement unpopular policies, which in turn make them very unpopular in the village.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, reports suggest that village leaders may also resist pressure from the township government to extract resources from the village.<sup>8</sup> Why is there such variation in village leader behavior? The institutional explanation points to village elections and leadership accountability. An appointed leader is accountable to the officials who provided him or her with the position. These leaders have a narrow constituency. The introduction of elections is intended to broaden the leader's constituency to include the villagers. The elected leader, then, represents the electorate. Indeed, there is much evidence to support the institutional explanation.<sup>9</sup> For example, Manion demonstrates the "electoral connection" by showing the congruence between elected leaders and the village electorate regarding the role of the state in the economy.<sup>10</sup>

Some authors have suggested that, rather than competitive elections, it is party membership that has the strongest influence on leadership accountability.<sup>11</sup> One of the most prevalent arguments regarding the effectiveness of elections and changing the leadership in Chinese villages is the primacy of the Communist Party.<sup>12</sup> If an elected leader is a party member, then he or

---

6. Tyrene White, "Reforming the Countryside," *Current History* 91:566 (September 1992), p. 273.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

8. O'Brien, "Implementing Political Reform," pp. 45–46; also Thomas Bernstein and Xiaobo Lü, "Taxation without Representation: Peasants, the Central, and the Local States in Reform China," *China Quarterly* 163 (September 2000), p. 758.

9. Shi Tianjian, "Village Committee Elections in China: Institutional Tactics for Democracy," *World Politics* 51:3 (April 1999), pp. 385–412; O'Brien, "Implementing Political Reform," pp. 41–46.

10. Melanie Manion, "The Electoral Connection in the Chinese Countryside," *American Political Science Review* 90:4 (December 1996), pp. 736–49.

11. Daniel Kelliher, "The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government," *China Journal* 37 (January 1997), pp. 63–86.

12. Lin Shangli, "Rural Self-Administration and Base-Level Elections" (in English), in *PRC Tomorrow*, ed. Chong-pin Lin (Kaohsiung: National Sun Yat-sen University Press, 1996), pp. 125–38; Jean C. Oi, "Economic Development, Stability, and Democratic Village Self-Govern-

she is under the control of the village party branch. This leader is more accountable to the village party secretary than to the electorate. The argument suggests that, even though leaders are elected in a competitive election, villagers may not have much of a real choice. The evidence seems to support this argument. According to the central government, party members make up less than 5% of the population.<sup>13</sup> Recent studies, however, find that the majority of elected village leaders are in fact party members. In these studies, the percentage of elected leaders who are party members ranges from 60% to 83%.<sup>14</sup> Still, the primacy-of-the-party argument may depend more on who nominates the candidate than on whether or not the leader is a party member. Villagers may nominate a party member because they believe he or she is a capable individual. If the villagers are satisfied with the election process, it may not matter whether or not the elected leader is a party member.

Most of the studies on the Organic Law were conducted in the early and mid-1990s and focus on competitive elections. This is the narrowest definition of a “democratic” election in which the number of candidates exceeds the positions available. O’Brien shows, however, that even with competitive elections, there is still a wide variation among the behavior of elected village leaders.<sup>15</sup> The nomination process may explain this observed variation. Although several studies mention the nomination process, few have focused on the different nomination methods and the various outcomes they produce.<sup>16</sup>

The core concepts I use to assess Chinese village elections are competition and uncertainty. For an election to be considered legitimate, two conditions must be met: (1) no one can modify the outcome of the elections beforehand or ex post facto, and (2) all participants must openly subject their interests to

ance,” in Maurice Brosseau et al., eds., *China Review 1996* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1996), pp. 125–44; O’Brien, “Implementing Political Reform,” p. 54.

13. Xiaobo Lü, *Cadres and Corruption: The Organizational Invention of the Chinese Communist Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 86.

14. Liu Xidang, “Sansheng juxian cunweihui shuju fenxi” [A three-province, nine-county analysis of villager committee election data], *Rural China Villager Self-Government Information, Statistical Analysis*, Ministry of Civil Affairs, Beijing, and Carter Center, Atlanta, 2000, June 28, 2001, at <<http://www.chinarural.org/tjfx.htm>>; Jude Howell, “Prospects for Village Self-Government in China,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 25:3 (April 1998), pp. 86–111.

15. O’Brien mentions four types of villages: up-to-standard, authoritarian, runaway, and paralyzed villages. See O’Brien, “Implementing Political Reform,” p. 51. See also Tyrene White, “Village Elections: Democracy from the Bottom Up?” *Current History* 97:620 (September 1998), pp. 263–68.

16. Pastor and Tan, “The Meaning of China’s Village Elections,” p. 495; Horsley, “Village Elections”; Shi Weimin, “Xuanju zhongde shuzi tongji guize: Zhongguo cunweihui xuanju xinxi xitong yanjiu baogao” [Statistical regularities among elections: A systematic study of China’s villager committee elections], *Rural China Villager Self-Government Information, Statistical Analysis*, Ministry of Civil Affairs, Beijing, and Carter Center, Atlanta, 2000, June 28, 2001, at <<http://www.chinarural.org/tjfx.htm>>.

competition and uncertainty.<sup>17</sup> As long as the election is not “fixed” beforehand, and the results are unchanged once the votes are counted, the first condition is met. If voters and candidates are willing to accept the unknown outcome of the election, with a full understanding that the losers will have another chance at the next election, then the second condition is met. Uncertainty applies both to the candidates and the winners. Before the election, open nominations will produce candidates to challenge the incumbent; then the candidates run in an election with an uncertain outcome. If the candidates are not openly nominated by the electorate but instead are pre-selected by a small group of individuals, then not all interests are subject to competition. The outcome is more certain. The narrow group that selects the candidates can be certain that its interests will be met.

In a survey sample of more than 30 villages in northwest China, I have found three types of nomination methods among villages that report holding competitive elections. These types are villager, party branch, and township government nominations.<sup>18</sup> The theory is that each nomination type is associated with a level of uncertainty. Within the village community, residents know each other and are keenly aware of political relationships between officials and their neighbors. I argue that when the township officials nominate candidates for the election, villagers can be certain which individuals will be selected from the small pool of potential candidates. However, when villager-nominated candidates are selected from a larger pool of candidates, residents are uncertain who will be selected, from the outset.

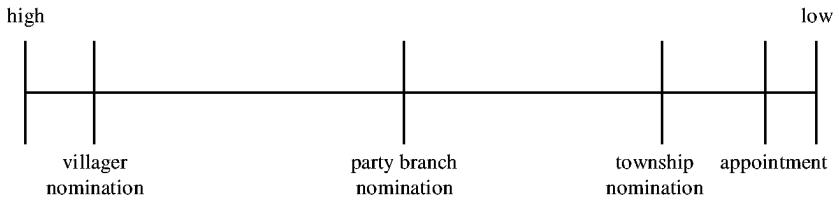
Villager nominations take place in an open assembly where individuals or groups can nominate candidates. The village party branch is made up of the party secretary and two or three vice-secretaries. Typically, in these nominations, it is the party secretary who chooses the candidates. For township nominations, the township party branch usually selects the candidates. The difference between township and village party branch nominations is that the former take place *outside* the village, while the latter occur *within* the village. The villagers have a good idea who the potential candidates and leaders within the village will be, because it is not difficult to identify which villagers have the closest relationship with the village party secretary or the township officials. The list of potential candidates gets shorter and more predictable as relationships move up the administrative ladder from village to township “connections.”

All villages with elected leaders have held competitive elections of one kind or another. The variation among these villages is the level of uncer-

---

17. Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 14.

18. The township is under the county administration and the village comes under the township administration. Under the village are small groups (xiao zu) and natural villages.

FIGURE 1 *Level of Uncertainty*

tainty regarding the nomination of candidates (see Figure 1). For villager nominations, the level of uncertainty is high: many villagers participate in the process, and no one knows the outcome. With village party branch nominations, the level of uncertainty is lower, with fewer villagers participating in the selection process, but most villagers have an idea of who the potential candidates will be. Township nominations as well as appointments have a very low level of uncertainty because most villagers are aware of the narrow group of residents who have township party branch connections. In these villages, leader selection is more predictable.

Thus, given the differences between nomination methods, I expect political outcomes to vary among villages along three critical lines of villager concerns: (1) leaders' party membership; (2) villager satisfaction with the local economy; and (3) villager satisfaction with the election process. Whether or not the local leader is a party member may reflect the influence of the village or township party branch.<sup>19</sup> If villagers have a real choice, then I would expect some level of variation between party membership and the candidate selection process. If villager attitude toward the local economy varies with the candidate selection process, then villagers may hold local leadership responsible for economic development. Finally, I expect villager satisfaction with the election process to vary with the nomination method.

## Survey Data

The data used in this analysis come from a survey of 34 villages, conducted in Shaanxi Province between October and November 2000. The survey is a random multi-stage sample of 34 villages in six counties.<sup>20</sup> Six counties were randomly chosen based on their level of development, using G. W.

19. Kelliher, "The Chinese Debate," p. 82.

20. My survey may be considered a representative sample of rural Shaanxi Province but *not* of rural China. See Melanie Manion, "Survey Research in the Study of Contemporary China: Learning from Local Samples," *China Quarterly* 139 (September 1994), pp. 741–65.

Skinner's core-periphery map of Northwest China.<sup>21</sup> Within each county, two townships were randomly selected. At the township level, three villages were randomly chosen. Within each village, 12 respondents were selected. From the household registration list supplied by the village accountant, nine villagers were randomly sampled. The village leader, party secretary, and accountant were also interviewed. Twelve graduate students from Northwest University, Xi'an, China, were trained to conduct the survey. Thus, each graduate interviewer was assigned one respondent per village. In addition to the survey, I conducted eight village case studies in three different townships. I spent two to three days in each village between March and April 2001. In-depth interviews were conducted with villagers, village leaders, and township officials.

## Dependent Variables

### *Leaders' Party Membership*

In the survey, the leaders were asked if they were party members. Party membership, then, is a dichotomous variable. Most of the studies conducted in the 1990s found that the majority of village leaders were party members, ranging from 60% to 83%.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, I found that 56% of all village leaders in the sample were party members. It is clear that not all elected leaders are party members, but does party membership vary among nomination methods? For instance, do villagers prefer non-party candidates? Are *all* party branch and township-nominated leaders party members?

### *Villager Attitudes toward the Local Economy*

This measure is based on the survey question: "*What do you think of the state of the economy these days in your village? Would you say that the state of the economy is very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad, or very bad?*" This five-point scale is condensed into a single village measure.<sup>23</sup> Given that

21. For a clear explanation of Skinner's model, see Daniel Little, *Understanding Peasant China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 69–104.

22. Liu Xidang found that 83% of the leaders in his survey were party members. See Liu, "Sansheng jiuixian cunweihui shuju fenxi," p. 10. Howell, using information from the Ministry of Civil Affairs, reports that in 1996, 60% of the elected leaders were party members. See Howell, "Prospects," p. 99.

23. In this five-point scale, one is "very good" and five is "very bad." This five-point scale is condensed into a single village measure. In the whole sample, 5% of the respondents reported "Do not know." These observations are dropped from the analysis. Each point on the one-to-five scale is multiplied by the percentage of villager respondents who chose each position. The products are then added together to produce a single village measure 100–500; the higher the measure, the worse the villagers feel about the local economy. Thus, in Table 5, a negative coefficient means the attitude toward the economy is "good," while a positive coefficient means the attitude toward the economy is "bad." The method used to condense the survey question into

village leaders are responsible for local economic development, do villager attitudes about the local economy vary with the type of nomination method?

### *Villager Satisfaction with the Election Process*

This measure is based on the survey question: “*On the whole are you satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the village election process?*” This four-point scale is condensed into a single village measure.<sup>24</sup> Are villagers satisfied with competitive elections regardless of how the candidates are selected? Or does villager satisfaction with the election process vary with the type of nomination method?

### *Competitive Elections and Appointments*

These are the two leadership selection methods found within the sample. According to the Organic Law, Article 11, “No organization or individual is allowed to appoint, designate, remove or replace members of the villager committee.”<sup>25</sup> Six villages in our sample, however, had appointed leaders. Villager as well as leader respondents reported no elections. In four of these villages, the township party branch handpicks the village leaders. The other two villages have a more complex system of local appointments, which includes the village party branch and previous village committee members. Villages with township appointed leaders are similar to what O’Brien calls authoritarian villages, where “township power typically overwhelms participation and village self-government” so that “democratic procedures are ignored or subverted.”<sup>26</sup> As O’Brien predicts, there is little political participation in these villages. For instance, villager assemblies are rarely held. In villages with appointed leaders, only half of the respondents, including leaders, reported to have villager assemblies. The majority of elections, however, have occurred in villager assemblies. Therefore, it is not surprising that village-wide assemblies in these villages are either non-existent or rarely occur.

Over 80% of the respondents reported competitive elections in which the villagers elected the leader and village committee members. All the competitive elections within the sample took place at least eight months before the survey. The earliest election was held in 1998 and the most recent was conducted in early 2000. The majority of competitive elections took place in village assemblies. These elections are single-day events and have several

---

a single village measure is from Bruce Russett, “Doves, Hawks, and U.S. Public Opinion: Impact of Public Opinion Polls on National Security Policy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 105:4 (Winter 1990), p. 515.

24. In this four-point scale, one is “satisfied” and four is “not at all satisfied.” This scale is also condensed into a single village measure. See *ibid.* p. 515.

25. Organic Law, p. 5.

26. O’Brien, “Implementing Political Reform,” p. 51.



stages. All the assembly elections had one or two runoff elections before the final selection. The ballots are typically counted the same day, and the actual election process is an open affair. In order to make sure the elections remain an open affair, township officials observe the process. In the survey, villagers and leaders were asked if township officials were present during the election process. In every village, the respondents reported that township officials were in attendance. The presence of officials, however, does not mean township government interference. In fact, direct township intervention on Election Day can generate a strong and sometimes violent reaction from the village population.<sup>27</sup> The most common form of township intervention is pre-selection of the candidates. For instance, if the township officials nominate all five candidates for villager committee chair, then the township government can be certain that their representative will be in office. This result occurs no matter who wins in the competitive election. Thus, the main focus of this study is on the nomination process.

Although the majority of elections in the sample took place in village assemblies, two competitive elections did not. These are door-to-door (*shangmen*) elections.<sup>28</sup> *Shangmen* election means that, on Election Day, the village cadres go door-to-door with the ballot box and ballots in hand. Here, the township government controls the elections in two ways. First and most important, township officials select the candidates and print the ballots before the election. Second, rather than interfere with the public assembly, which can create a potentially volatile situation, the township government abolishes the assembly altogether. Compared to other studies, our sample has a relatively small percentage of *shangmen* elections. For example, in a 40-county survey in Hubei Province, He finds that 43% of the respondents report *shangmen* elections. According to He, this is an abnormally high percentage, and he cautions that the use of this method leaves room for abuse and local mismanagement.<sup>29</sup> In our sample, the *shangmen* elections are announced

---

27. Residents in one Shaanxi village in a county near Xi'an became violent when the township (zhen) officials came into the village in the middle of the election and began making changes in the well-established election process. A number of villagers beat one official and overturned a police vehicle. See "Hu xian Dayan cun huan jie xuanju cheng naoju" [Elections changes in Dayan Village, Hu County become farcical], *Huashang bao* [Chinese business journal], August 10, 2000, p. 1.

28. Other studies also refer to *liudong piaoxiang*, "roving ballot boxes." See He Xuefeng, "Cunweihui xuanju zhu huanjiede diaocha yu fenxi: Hunan sheng sishigexian cunweihui xuanju xinxi huifang houdong baogao" [An investigation and analysis on the procedures of village committee elections: A report on the data verification of the village committee election in 40 counties in Hunan Province], *Rural China Villager Self-Government Information, Statistical Analysis*, June 28, 2001, at <<http://www.chinarural.org/tjfx.htm>>; Shi Weimin, "Xuanju zhongde shuzi tongji guize," p. 7.

29. He Xuefeng, "Cunweihui xuanju zhu huanjiede diaocha yu fenxi," pp. 5, 7.

two or three days in advance; then the village cadres go house to house with the ballot boxes and pre-printed ballots. When villagers are asked who votes in the *shangmen* elections, the answer is, "Whoever is home." The ballots are collected in a single day and the results are announced three to five days later, either through the village loudspeakers or in writing on the public announcement board. Although the election is competitive, there is little uncertainty about the outcome. Many villagers complain that the ballots are counted in a private office: "Who knows who actually won?" Many believe that the winners had already been selected and the cadres had just gone through the motions of an election. One villager epitomized the situation in a single phrase: "*Shangmen* has the face of an election with an appointed result."

### Key Independent Variables

In the sample, 35% of the villages reported villager nominations, while 21% reported party branch nominations and 26% reported township government nominations (see Table 1). The individual household data is aggregated at the village level using the majority rule in which the number of respondents in the village who reported a specific nomination method exceeds: (1) the number of respondents who reported other nomination types, plus (2) the number of respondents reporting "do not know" answers.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the majority of the villager respondents must match with the leader's response. For villages categorized as villager and party-branch types of nominations, the leader and party secretary responses are aligned with the majority of villagers. The same alignment occurs in many of the villages categorized as township nominations and "appointments." Both the township and local appointments are combined into a single appointment category. In the statistical analysis, all coefficients are implicitly compared to the villages with appointments, which is the dummy variable category left out of the regression models.

### Villager Nominations

In villages where the electorate nominates the candidates, four types of nomination method prevail: "open sea" nomination (*haixuan*), group nomination (*lianming tuijupiao*), small-group nomination (*xiaozu timing*), and head-of-the-household nomination (*gehuhuzhu timing*). "Open sea" or "open" nominations occur when any person or group at the mass assembly can nominate a candidate. The group nomination means that anywhere from five to ten villagers can nominate a single candidate. The group may announce its candi-

---

30. Shi Tianjian, "Economic Development and Village Elections in Rural China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 8:22 (1999), pp. 425-42.

TABLE 1 *Number of Villages by Nomination and Selection Process*

	% (Number of Villages)
Villager	35 (12)
Party branch	21 (7)
Township government	26 (9)
Appointed	18 (6)
Total	100 (34)

date before the election, but in the sample the group candidate was announced at the election assembly. The small-group nomination typically entails a two-step process whereby the residents in the small group (in some cases the natural village) have a small-group assembly to nominate one or more candidates, and then all the candidates from the various small groups compete in a villagewide assembly. The head-of-the-household nominations are smaller assemblies in which a representative from each household meets to nominate candidates and conduct elections.<sup>31</sup> Despite the variation, all these methods yield the same basic results: villager-nominated candidates and ballots are counted the same day. These villages are similar to what O'Brien calls "up-to-the-standard" villages or "model villages," where the election law is fully implemented and most of the villagers are satisfied with the results.<sup>32</sup> For the purpose of this study, all four methods are categorized as "villager" or "open" nominations.

I argue that villagers who participate in an "open" nomination process are uncertain about the identity of the final candidates before the actual nominations begin. That is, villager nominations have a high level of uncertainty. In order to test this association, I propose three hypotheses: (H1) *villages with an open nomination process tend to have elected leaders who are non-party members*. Given that only a small percentage of the population consists of party members, I would expect only a small percentage of villager-nominated leaders to be party members. (H2) *villagers believe that the local economic situation is "good."* Leaders are responsible for local development projects

31. Head-of-the-household is typically male, but in some villages with a large percentage of males working in distant cities, women are the household representatives.

32. O'Brien, "Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages," pp. 41-45.

such as school repairs, village roads, and irrigation systems. A villager-nominated leader who is accountable to the electorate may invest public funds in an effort to improve village conditions. In this situation, villagers may feel that the economic condition in the village is good. (H3) *villagers are satisfied with the election process*. Villagers may feel satisfied with the election process because the open-nominations system provides them with real candidate choice. Even if their candidate did not win in the last election, they can be sure to have a fair chance in the next election because it is uncertain who will run until the nomination process begins.

### *Party Branch Nominations*

In villages with party branch nominations, it is the party secretary who typically chooses the candidates. The candidates are usually pre-selected and their names printed on the ballot before the election. In some cases, the village party secretary announces the candidates at the assembly, and then the villagers elect the village committee members and the village leader. Party branch nominations are not uncommon. In one 1996 study of Shaanxi villages, the researcher reports that the party branch nominated the majority of candidates, while another study of village elections reports only 10% of nominations were by the party branch.<sup>33</sup>

Villages with party branch-nominated leaders have a higher level of uncertainty. In these villages I expect three outcomes: (H1) *villages with party branch nominations tend to elect leaders who are party members*. The party secretary will most likely nominate party members. In fact, the primacy-of-the-party argument would predict all the party branch nominations to be party members. (H2) *villagers believe that the local economic situation is "bad."* In these villages, the party secretary is the key decision maker. One argument is that the party secretary, who is in firm control of village resources, is a non-elected leader and not under the same electoral constraints as the village leader.<sup>34</sup> The party secretary may or may not invest public funds in such a way that all villagers benefit. (H3) *villagers are dissatisfied with the election process*. Because of the smaller pool of candidates and lower level of uncertainty, I expect that these villagers will be relatively dissatisfied with the election process.

---

33. Gao Zhengwen, "Guanyu Shaanxi sheng cunweihui huanwei xuanju guancha baogao" [An observational report about village committee election turnovers], in Wang Zhongtian, ed., *Xiangcun zhengzhi* [The politics of the countryside] (Nanchang, China: Jiangxi People's Publishing House, 1999), p. 171; Shi Weimin, "Xuanju zhongde shuzi tongji guize," p. 4.

34. Jean C. Oi, *Rural China Takes Off: Institutional Foundations of Economic Reform* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 113.

### *Township Nominations*

In villages with township nominations, the township party branch typically selects the candidates. Once the officials have selected the candidates, they print the ballots a few days before the assembly election. In these villages, runoff elections still occur, but all of the candidates are pre-selected. Villagers complain that these elections are not much different than appointments. The common term for these elections is “putting old wine in new bottles” (*xinping zhuang jiujiu*). In the sample, respondents’ attitudes toward the election process in villages with door-to-door elections are similar to those respondents in villages with assembly elections and township-nominated candidates. As a result, door-to-door elections are categorized as township nominations for this analysis.

Village elections with township-nominated leaders have a very low level of uncertainty. I propose three hypotheses to test this relationship: (H1) *villages with township nominations elect leaders who are party members*. The township officials are likely to nominate party members. (H2) *villagers believe that the local economic situation is “very bad.”* The township nomination process takes place outside the village. The township officials who make the selection are not elected and may not even be from the same village. The leaders who are nominated by the township may feel more accountable to the officials than to the villagers. One argument is that these leaders may engage in rent-seeking (corrupt) activities, and that public investments may suffer as a consequence.<sup>35</sup> (H3) *villagers are very dissatisfied with the election process*. Given that the leaders are nominated “outside” the village, and candidates tend to have close relations with the township officials, the level of uncertainty is very low. Thus, I expect the villagers will be very dissatisfied with the election process.

## Control Variables

### *Village’s Mean Household Income*

The mean household income represents a measure of village wealth. It is possible that respondents in rich villages are satisfied with the local economy and village election process regardless of the method of nomination. Although studies suggest that competitive elections occur in relatively well-off

---

35. Lü points out that in the Chinese communist system, local cadres participate in both rent-seeking and rank-seeking behavior. Local leaders who owe their position to higher officials will do whatever it takes to move up the administrative hierarchy. See Lü, *Cadres and Corruption*, pp. 166–68.

villages, these studies give no indication whether or not villagers are satisfied with the local economy or election process.<sup>36</sup>

#### *Village's Mean Land Per Capita*

In the sample, agriculture is one of the main sources of income, and the amount of land each person farms is associated with household earnings. In this analysis, I use land-per-capita as a measure of land use. This is also a measure of population density, such that more remote, sparsely populated areas have higher per-capita land use, while the more densely populated areas have a much lower per-capita land use.

#### *Percentage of Arable Village Land*

Still, it is the quality of land that may have the greatest effect on household income. In this study, I use percentage of arable village land as a quality-of-land measure. Arable land is a natural endowment and a scarce resource. A densely populated village may have less land per capita but a larger percentage of arable land.

#### *County Dummy Variables*

Studies have demonstrated that off-farm labor opportunities and access to large markets for a number of agricultural and non-agricultural products are both associated with distance to urban centers.<sup>37</sup> Village wealth and population density tend to vary inversely with the distance to major urban centers. In this six-county sample, the major metropolitan center is Xi'an, which is also the provincial capital of Shaanxi. Wealth, population density, and quality of land vary with the distance to Xi'an, and the six county dummy variables were generated to control for demographic variation among counties. Counties one and two are located in the more northern remote areas. These are poorer and more sparsely populated counties. Counties three and four are less remote and more densely populated, while counties five and six are in wealthier, more populated areas located near the metropolitan center.

#### *Distance to the County Seat*

In addition to metropolitan centers, distance to smaller markets and urban centers such as the county seat are also associated with off-farm employment opportunities and village wealth.

---

36. Shi Tianjian, "Economic Development and Village Elections in Rural China," pp. 425-42.

37. G. William Skinner, "Differential Development in Lingnan," in Thomas P. Lyons and Victor Nee, eds., *The Economic Transformation of South China: Reform and Development in the Post-Mao Era* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 17-54.

*Distance to the Township Government Offices  
(Market Town)*

Villagers' immediate access to the local rural market is an important economic measure.<sup>38</sup> The township government offices are often located in the market towns where villagers buy and sell local agricultural products as well as sundry items.<sup>39</sup>

*The Number of Relevant Clans in the Village*

Conflicts between lineage organizations may influence villager attitudes toward the local economy and the election process. In northern China, multi-surname villages are more common than the single-surname villages found in southern China.<sup>40</sup> In these northern villages, kinship groups within the village display close social and economic ties between members.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, many Chinese social scientists have argued that the greater the number of relevant lineage organizations within the village, the greater the conflict over village resources, adding that village elections have exacerbated this conflict.<sup>42</sup> In the sample, village accountants are asked to report the number of relevant clans within the village.<sup>43</sup> If the number of lineage organizations within the village influences the local economy and the election process, then we should expect to see greater villager dissatisfaction with the village economy and election process in villages with a large number of relevant clans.

## Results

### *Party Membership*

Model 1, in Table 2, is a logistic regression analysis of party membership. The coefficient for villager nominations is in the expected direction and sig-

38. G. William Skinner, "Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 24:1 (1964), pp. 3-44.

39. In the sample, we asked village leaders the distance from the village center to the township government and the distance to the nearest market. I found that "distance to the township government" is highly correlated with "distance to the local market."

40. Evelyn Rawski, "The Ma Landlords of Yang-chia-kou in Late Ch'ing and Republican China," in Patricia B. Ebrey and James Watson, eds., *Kinship Organization in Late Imperial China, 1000-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 245-73.

41. Myron L. Cohen, "Lineage Organization in North China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 49:3 (August 1990), pp. 509-34.

42. He Xuefeng, "*Dangqian cunmin zizhi yanjiu zhong xuyao chengqing de ruogan wenti*" [A certain number of problems that need clarification in the current studies on villager self-government], *Zhongguo nongcun guan cha* [China rural survey] 2 (2000), pp. 64-71; Zhu Kangdui et al., "*Zongzu wenhua yu cunmin zizhi*" [Clan culture and villager self-government], *Zhongguo nongcun guan cha* [China rural survey] 4 (2000), pp. 64-69.

43. The definition of "relevant clan" is a lineage organization with at least 20 households that has a clan leader (*zuzhang*). In this article, I use the terms "clans" and "lineage organizations," both referring to the relevant clans in the village.

nificant, which means that villager-nominated leaders are overwhelmingly non-party members (see Table 3).<sup>44</sup> In more than 70% of the villages with open nominations, the villagers elected non-party members. This reflects the openness of the nomination process and reduced control from the village and township party branch. During interviews, villagers disclosed that non-party membership represents to them a political "outsider," and these candidates may be less inclined to blindly follow township policies at the expense of the village. As expected, more than 85% of the township-nominated leaders were party members. The coefficient is also in the expected direction and statistically significant. What is surprising, however, is that in the sample of the party branch-nominated village leaders, 40% were *not* party members. The coefficient is negative, but not significant. Interviews revealed two explanations for this outcome: (1) reduced party membership within the village and (2) selection based more on previous business and government experience than on party membership.

Often, the local party branch has had a difficult time replacing older party members with younger recruits.<sup>45</sup> I found that many villages face this problem. For instance, in one village, the newly appointed party secretary had five children, four girls and one boy, all between the ages of three and 12. The first question asked is, How can a man with five kids be appointed as a party secretary, the enforcer of the single-child policy? This outcome is possible when the village has only eight party members and the new party secretary is the only one under 65 years old. The party branch had no choice. The current village leader, nominated by the party branch, is a non-party member, but the party secretary must be a member. Interviews with township and village party secretaries also revealed that cadre experience (previous government work) was an important factor in selecting possible candidates. The party branch may be willing to sacrifice party membership for an experienced and effective village leader. While the village party branch nominates non-party candidates based on experience, villagers may nominate party members for the same reason.

In the sample, 27% of the villager-nominated leaders *were* party members. Does this mean the village party branch controls these villages? The argument based on the primacy of the party implies that the village party branch controls the elections and party members hold the key positions in village leadership.<sup>46</sup> It follows, then, that if the village leader is a party member, the party controls the village committee. The counter-argument is that the vil-

---

44. In Model 1, the coefficient of determination is a pseudo R squared.

45. Daniel Kelliher, "The Chinese Debate over Village Self-Government," pp. 67–68; Oi, "Economic Development, Stability, and Democratic Village Self-Governance," p. 126.

46. See *ibid.*, pp. 81–82; Lin, "Rural Self-Administration and Base-Level Elections," p. 133; Oi, *Rural China Takes Off*, p. 113.



TABLE 2 *Logistic Model Party Membership and the OLS Models Economy and Election Process*

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i> <i>Coefficient</i> <i>(Standard Errors)</i>	<i>Model 3</i>
Villager nomination	-1.40*** (0.39)	0.95 (6.60)	-33.90** (12.07)
Party nomination	-0.60 (0.34)	7.78 (4.89)	-31.25** (11.04)
Township nomination	0.98*** (0.32)	2.78 (4.81)	71.54*** (14.59)
Number of village clans		0.06 (1.95)	12.26*** (3.72)
Village leader HH income	0.01*** (0.00)		
Village mean annual HH income	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.27** (0.11)	-5.89*** (1.22)
Village mean annual HH income squared			0.04*** (0.01)
Per-capita village land holdings (land/pop.)		-11.10*** (1.89)	2.24 (5.13)
% of arable village land holdings		0.21** (0.07)	-2.24*** (0.47)
% of arable land holdings squared			0.03*** (0.00)
Distance to county seat	0.02 (0.02)	0.56* (0.27)	-0.55 (0.53)
Distance to township	0.20*** (0.05)	3.33*** (0.72)	3.45* (1.57)
County 1		60.85*** (8.16)	33.29** (13.37)
County 2	0.06 (0.36)	34.90*** (8.07)	-25.26 (16.09)
County 3	1.18** (0.40)	23.74*** (5.61)	35.70 (29.27)
County 4		72.71*** (6.49)	
County 5	-0.97 (0.66)	23.39*** (6.96)	39.24 (30.79)
County 6	0.15 (0.30)		-10.20 (23.88)
Constant	-1.22* (0.55)	312.07*** (11.37)	306.57*** (34.10)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.34	0.53	0.70

\* $p < .05$

\*\* $p < .01$

\*\*\* $p < .001$

TABLE 3 *Village Leader Party Membership by Village Leader Selection Type for the Last Village Election*

	<i>Villager Nomination</i>	<i>Party Branch Nomination % (Number of Leaders)</i>	<i>Township Nomination</i>
VL is a party member	27 (3)	61 (3)	86 (6)
VL is not a party member	73 (8)	39 (2)	14 (1)
Total	100 (11)	100 (5)	100 (7)

lage elections cannot be considered fraudulent merely because the village leader is a party member.<sup>47</sup> The most important criterion is not party membership but the way the candidate is nominated and the level of satisfaction the villagers feel with the election process. For the same reason that the party branch may select a non-party member based on previous experience, villagers may also select a party member with previous business or government experience whom they feel will best represent their interests.

Other significant factors associated with the village leader's party membership are distance to the township government and leader's income (see Table 2). The coefficient for the distance to the township is positive and significant. The farther away the village is from the township, the more likely that the leader is a party member. It follows, then, that leaders in villages farther away from the township government tend to be township-nominated. One explanation is that, following the argument of the primacy of the party, or at least of the township party branch, officials may select candidates who are party members in order to have greater influence over village politics. In the more remote villages, the influence of the township government is relatively weak, and villagers have opportunities to evade certain policies such as grain procurements or the single-child policy.<sup>48</sup> In order to extend their reach to these more remote villages, officials tend to appoint the party secretary and

47. Pastor and Tan correctly point out that in order to determine the level of party branch influence, one needs to consider the nomination and election process as well as party membership. See Pastor and Tan, "The Meaning of China's Village Elections," p. 510; also see White, "Village Elections: Democracy from the Bottom Up?" p. 266.

48. Using national survey data, Skinner finds that the more remote the village, the greater the number of children per household (see Skinner, "Differential Development in Lingnan"). During my own 2000–01 fieldwork, I also found that the number of children per household is associated with distance to the urban centers.

select the village leader, either through appointment or candidate selection. In this way, the township party branch can have more control over the implementation of extractive policies despite the distance from the township government offices.

The coefficient for the leader's annual household income is positive and significant (see Model 1, Table 2). The level of income for leaders who are party members tends to be high regardless of the nomination process. In fact, within the sample, the annual household income for village leaders, regardless of party membership, tends to be higher than the mean villager income. One explanation of this seemingly large income gap between leaders and constituents is that leaders use their position to extract resources and increase their income.<sup>49</sup> Party branch- and township-nominated leaders, as well as appointed leaders, may have greater latitude to extract village resources and therefore have higher incomes than the villager-nominated leaders.

Are all leaders, including villager-nominated ones, extracting resources from the village to enrich their own families? This does not seem to be the case. Interviews with leaders and villagers suggest that villagers as well as a few village party secretaries nominate residents who have succeeded in private business or agriculture. This may also explain why the party branch nominates non-party members. The idea is that these wealthy candidates might bring prosperity to the village.<sup>50</sup> Almost all of these leaders were fairly well off *before* they were nominated and elected leaders. In fact, several leaders complained that the responsibilities of the job had taken time away from their business or farms, causing them to lose a portion of their income. An ex-village leader said he refused to run again because he needed to devote more time to his construction business. His income had more than doubled in the previous year, and so had villager requests that he run again. Villagers and party branch members said that fairly rich villagers with extensive business experience could be competent leaders.

In sum, party membership *does* indeed vary with the type of nomination process. Villager-nominated leaders tend to be non-party members. The candidate criteria in these villages are based more on previous economic success either in farming or small business than on party membership. In addition, the mean annual household income in these villages is relatively high, and the number of successful farmers and small businesspeople is quite large. Party branch-nominated leaders are not always party members, but a significant

---

49. Guo presents a clear example of the ways by which township-nominated or township-appointed village leaders use their position and relationship with township officials to extract resources (land) from the village. See Xiaolin Guo, "Land Expropriation and Rural Conflicts in China," *China Quarterly* 166 (June 2001), pp. 422-39.

50. Also see Oi, "Economic Development, Stability, and Democratic Village Self-Governance," p. 130.

TABLE 4 *Villagers' Attitude toward the State of the Village Economy*

	<i>Villager Nomination</i>	<i>Party Branch Nomination</i> % ( <i>Number of Respondents</i> )	<i>Township Nomination</i>
"Economy is good"	51 (53)	41 (25)	45 (35)
"Economy is bad"	49 (50)	59 (36)	55 (42)
Total	100 (103)	100 (61)	100 (77)

number are wealthy compared to their village constituents. Thus, village party secretaries may nominate candidates who are more inclined to represent the interests of the villagers than of the township party branch. The large majority of township-nominated leaders are party members. Indeed, given that only a very small percentage of the population are in fact party members, villagers can be certain who the township government will nominate. From Figure 1, then, the level of uncertainty regarding candidate selection is very high with villager-nominated candidates, while it is reduced with party branch nominations, and nearly zero with township nominations and appointments.

#### *Villager Attitudes toward the Local Economy*

If village leaders are actively working to improve the village economy, then there should be variation between electoral institutions and villager opinion of the local economy. In the sample, however, the data reveal a different story. The electoral institutions have no significant influence on villager attitude toward the local economy. Model 2 in Table 2 is an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression for villager attitude toward the local economy. In the model, the coefficients for all three nomination types are *not* significant and *not* in the expected direction (also see Table 4). In fact, the majority of villagers, regardless of the nomination method, believe that the village economic situation is "bad." Villages from every county display a significant level of dissatisfaction with the village economy. Therefore, other factors, such as village per-capita land holdings, village mean annual income, and the distance to the rural market, have a much stronger influence on villager views of the economy. Villager attitudes toward the local economy tend to be swayed by the distance the village is from the local rural market. The coefficient for the distance to township (market town) is positive and significant, which means that residents who live closer to the market town are more satis-

fied with the village economy. Wealthier villages tend to be located closer to the market towns. Therefore, it comes as no surprise to find a relationship between household income, proximity to the local market, and opinion of the local economy. Still, the data show that the coefficient for the percentage of arable village land is positive and significant. This means that in villages with a high percentage of arable village land, residents are unhappy with the local economy, but the percentage of arable land is positively associated with village mean income.<sup>51</sup> Why the inconsistency? It seems that several villages in county four may be influencing this result. In several median-income villages, the accountants report that 100% of their village land is arable. The combination of extreme dissatisfaction with the local economy and the high percentage of arable village land in county four may indeed affect the results.

Interestingly enough, however, it is the quantity of land rather than the quality (i.e., percentage that is arable) that seems to have the most influence over villager attitudes about the village economy. Respondents in villages with high land per capita report that the economic situation in their village is good, but the poorer, more mountainous northern areas have the highest land per capita. In this case, county two seems to be influencing the results. This county is the poorest in the sample and has the highest land per capita, but in three villages, respondents report that economic conditions are good. The villagers in these areas invest little or no money in the land, even for inputs such as chemical fertilizers, and village infrastructure rarely includes an irrigation system.<sup>52</sup> Instead, the villagers rely on the weather for a good harvest. A local saying is “rely on the weather to eat” (*kaotian chifan*). The more land a household farms, the more grain it is likely to produce, and villagers make use of every patch of land. As a result, household income in these areas depends heavily on the quantity of land available.

Finally, the number of clans in the village seems to have no influence on villagers' attitudes toward the local economy. Despite the number of lineage organizations, villagers for the most part feel that the state of the local economy is bad. In the end, there are a number of factors that can influence villagers' attitude toward the local economy. Political factors, such as leader selection process and lineage organizations, however, do *not* seem to have any sway on villager opinion of the village economy.

---

51. Pearson Correlation Coefficient is 0.41.

52. In these remote mountainous regions, it would be virtually impossible to build irrigation systems that would effectively irrigate the mountaintop and cliffside plots.

TABLE 5 *Villagers' Attitude toward the Election Process*

	<i>Villager Nomination</i>	<i>Party Branch Nomination</i>	<i>Township Nomination</i>
	%		
	(Number of Respondents)		
Satisfied with election process	70 (70)	44 (27)	35 (27)
Dissatisfied with election process	30 (33)	56 (34)	65 (50)
Total	100 (103)	100 (61)	100 (77)

### *Villager Satisfaction with the Election Process*

One of the most important aspects of village elections is whether or not villagers are satisfied with the election process. Individuals can be dissatisfied with the election *results* because their candidate did not win, but at the same time they can be satisfied with the election *process*. In a legitimate single-seat, two-candidate contest, as many as 49% of the constituents may be dissatisfied with the results, but a large majority of the voters can be satisfied with the election process. Voter satisfaction with the election process is an indication that all participants are willing to subject their interests to competition and accept an uncertain result; the losers (both candidates and constituents) are willing to accept defeat and wait until the next election.

In the sample, 70% of respondents with villager-nominated leaders and 44% of respondents with party branch-nominated leaders reported they were satisfied with the process. Conversely, only 35% of the respondents with township-nominated leaders reported they were satisfied. As expected, the highest percentage of satisfied respondents were in villages where villagers nominated the candidates. Moreover, the coefficient for villager nomination is significant and in the expected direction (see Tables 2 and 5).<sup>53</sup> Village mean annual household income is also significant, but it has a non-linear influence on villager opinion. Unlike the linear relationship between mean income and villager attitude toward the local economy, in this case income has a curvilinear effect. Villager satisfaction with the election process tends to be highest in both rich and poor villages. The most striking observation is that in villages with a considerable level of dissatisfaction toward the local economy, respondents were notably satisfied with the election process. This is especially the case in villages with an open nomination process. Villagers

53. One village in county six, the last village surveyed, was dropped from the analysis in Model 3 because of measurement error regarding the question on the election process.

with open nominations display a substantial level of institutional support for the leader selection process. Indeed, these villagers are inclined to separate the local economic conditions from the leader selection process. On the other hand, villagers with township-nominated candidates tend to be just as dissatisfied with the local economy as they are with the election process in their village. Unlike respondents in villages with an open nomination process, those in villages with township government nominations tend *not* to separate village economic conditions from local political institutions.

The significance of the various nomination methods also reflects the level of uncertainty involved in each of the leader selection processes. In Figure 1, we see that the more open the nomination process, the higher the level of uncertainty. The data demonstrate that villager satisfaction with the election process is related to the level of uncertainty: the more open the nomination, the more satisfaction with the election process. On the other hand, villagers with township-nominated leaders were inclined to be extremely dissatisfied with the election process. One surprise, however, is that the coefficient for party branch nominations is *not* in the expected direction and *is* statistically significant. That is, in these villages, respondents seem to be more satisfied with the election process than predicted. One explanation is that the village party secretary, though not popularly elected in a villagewide assembly, is from *within* the village. He is a member of the village community and most of the residents in the village know him and his family.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the pool of potential party-nominated candidates, specifically the number of people fairly close to the party secretary, can be quite large. Therefore, the level of uncertainty for candidate nomination, though lower than with villager-nominated candidates, is high enough that a significant proportion of villagers are satisfied with the process. As stated above, the village party branch does nominate non-party members, which is an indication that finding competent leaders may be more important than cohesion of the party. In fact, as White amply points out, the Chinese Communist Party is not one uniform, monolithic authority.<sup>55</sup> Village party secretaries are a diverse lot, and many are indeed accountable to the villagers, though it may only be indirectly through candidate nominations.

Although respondents with villager-nominated candidates have a substantial level of satisfaction with the election process, the degree of influence is not as high as expected. The coefficients in counties one, three, and five are not in the predicted direction. The large majority of villages in county one and county five have villager-nominated candidates, but neither of these counties display a sizable level of villager satisfaction with the election pro-

---

54. All the party secretaries in the sample are male.

55. White, "Village Elections: Democracy from the Bottom Up?" p. 266.

cess. Moreover, 50% of the villages in county three have villager-nominated candidates, and only one of the villages reported township nominated-candidates. Yet county three has a significant level of villager dissatisfaction with the election process. Why do these counties present such dissimilar results? The in-depth interviews and case study data provide two explanations for the statistical variance between the county dummy variables in Table 2. One is the influence of lineage organizations, particularly in counties one and five. Second is the “hoodlum election,” a critical outlier (one extreme village case) in county three.

### *Hoodlum Election*

The “hoodlum election” occurred in a village where respondents reported an open-nomination process, but at the same time this village has one of the highest levels of respondent dissatisfaction with the election process. This is also the clearest example of an *ex post facto* change in the election results and, in this case, reflects the township government’s lack of commitment to maintaining an open election process. The story begins with a village election in spring 1999. A village hoodlum with connections to the township government attempted to run for village leader. The nomination method in this village is via group, and an individual must secure at least 10 votes to get nominated for the first round. The hoodlum was nominated. To the surprise of many villagers, he survived the first runoff election. The results of the final runoff, however, were not in his favor. He publicly lost the election. That evening the hoodlum waltzed over to the ballot counter’s house and proceeded to beat him until he agreed to a recount. The next day, the recount was announced and the hoodlum was pronounced the new winner. Out of fear, no one contested the election. Furthermore, the township government let the illegitimate results stand. Here is a village leader within the sample that was neither elected nor appointed. Changing the election results *post facto* violates every notion of a legitimate election. Consequently, despite the fact that all these respondents reported villager-nominated candidates, everyone expressed extreme dissatisfaction with the election process. The main reason is that the process allowed for a manipulation of the election results.

### *Clan Election*

The number of clans in the village has a linear influence on villager satisfaction with the election process. Villager satisfaction tends to be highest in single-surname villages. In villages with one main lineage organization, residents can be sure that most, if not all, candidates will share their surname. In this way the interests of the lineage organization and the village as a whole are linked. On the other hand, respondents in villages with two or three large lineage organizations tend to display the greatest dissatisfaction with the vil-



lage election process. This may explain the discrepancies in counties one and five because these counties have a number of villages with two or three large clans.

One example is a village in county five, in which elections actually exacerbated clan rivalries, pitting the party secretary and village leader against each other. This village had a long history of conflict between two major clans, which previously had been subdued thanks to a strong party secretary with close ties to the township party branch and a fairly weak appointed village leader. According to villager interviews, despite the non-democratic selection of the village leaders, land adjustments and policy implementation were conducted in a relatively equitable manner. Under this system, no single clan was overrepresented. All this changed, however, after the first open election. After an open nomination process and a runoff election, the two main candidates—each from a competing clan—stood for elections. The winner was from the same clan as the party secretary, and members of the other clan worried that they were going to get the short end of the resource stick. The party secretary, however, sought to maintain the previous balance between the clans, while the new leader used his status to enrich his own kinship group and immediate family. The first conflict was over the timing and method of the next land adjustment. None of the leaders could agree on a plan, which deferred the adjustment indefinitely. In addition, arguments over the control of public funds stalled school repairs and village road maintenance. This village is similar to what O'Brien described as a "paralyzed village," where village governance comes to a standstill.<sup>56</sup> Despite the fact that the village held open elections with villager-nominated candidates, all the villagers expressed dissatisfaction with the election process. This village, however, is an extreme case. The actual intensity of clan rivalries varies among villages, and elections do not always exacerbate clan tensions. Nevertheless, this case does raise some interesting questions about the expansion of village elections and the influence of lineage organizations.

In this analysis, the sample presented is only for northwest China (Shaanxi Province) and does not include southern China. Still, this study and previous studies of village elections suggest that at the village level, clan rivalries may have a greater influence on elections in the northern areas than in the south. Anthropological studies of lineage organizations have long pointed to the prevalence of single-surname villages in the south.<sup>57</sup> Not surprisingly, the most successful accounts of village elections in China are in the southern

---

56. O'Brien, "Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages," pp. 51–53.

57. Maurice Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* (London: Athlone Press, 1958), pp. 1–10; Maurice Freedman, *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung* (London: Athlone Press, 1966), pp. 1–5.

province of Fujian.<sup>58</sup> In northern China, on the other hand, multi-surname villages are more prevalent, and large lineage organizations within the village may attempt to use the elections to secure greater gains for their group. Thus, we might expect greater conflict over village elections between clans within villages. Once the central government allows for township- and county-level elections, however, the situation may be reversed. Of course, it is difficult to predict the ways in which township elections will influence the relationships among lineage organizations, but the evidence at the village level is suggestive.

Out of the three types of nomination method, villages with township-nominated candidates have the lowest percentage of respondent satisfaction with the election process. In fact, less than 40% of respondents are satisfied (see Table 5). The coefficient is in the right direction and degree of significance is quite large (see Model 3, Table 2). Thus, despite the fact that these elections are competitive, respondents are significantly dissatisfied with the election process. Whether the villagers voted in an open assembly or in door-to-door elections, respondents with township-nominated candidates display the same significant level of dissatisfaction. This means that villagers were not simply satisfied with the fact of competitive elections. They can identify unfair elections and the level of township government interference. Thus, there is a clear connection between the low level of uncertainty and a high level of dissatisfaction with the election process.

Finally, the percentage of arable land and distance to the township government are significant factors that deserve some explanation. A number of villages with township-nominated candidates tend to be farther away from the township government. Regarding the quality of land, consider the percentage of arable land in the village. This is a natural village resource and a relatively consistent measure of village wealth: the greater the percentage of arable land, the wealthier the village.<sup>59</sup> Like mean household income, the percentage of arable village land has a curvilinear effect on villager satisfaction. Respondents in wealthier villages with a high percentage of arable land, as well as poorer villages with a low percentage of arable land, were satisfied with the election process.

In short, the type of nomination method used in each village election has a strong impact on villager satisfaction with the election process. Although *all* the village elections in the sample are competitive, villager satisfaction varies with the type of nomination method. In villages with an open nomination process, villagers are notably satisfied with the election process. Even when

---

58. See Horsley, "Village Elections," pp. 50–51; also Rowen, "The Short March: China's Road to Democracy," p. 63.

59. Village mean household annual income and percentage of arable land are positively correlated and significant at 0.41.

the two extreme negative cases, the “hoodlum” and “clan” elections, are included in the analysis, villager satisfaction remains significant. Respondents in villages with party branch nominations were also satisfied with the election process. This may reflect the constraints on the local party branch as well as villager approval with their candidate selection. The party secretary is also a member of the village community, and the candidates he chooses may very well represent a broad range of village interests and concerns. The extraordinary level of villager dissatisfaction in villages with township-nominated candidates demonstrates that villagers are well aware of outside interference and manipulation of the elections. Thus, villager attitudes toward the election process display considerable understanding of a complex process.

## Conclusion

Substantive political reform is occurring in rural China but at an uneven pace. Despite the fact that more than 80% of the villages in the sample held competitive elections, there is a significant difference among villages regarding leaders' party membership and villager attitudes toward the election process. It is important to move beyond the “competitive” classification and focus on multi-dimensional definitions of legitimate elections. In this study, electoral institutions are examined along a continuum based on competition and the level of uncertainty. The most basic definition of democracy must guarantee the uncertainty in election results: the identities of the candidates and the winners are unknown before the election process begins. The more open the nomination process in a competitive election, the greater the level of uncertainty. The principal determinant in this analysis is the type of nomination each village adopted. The nomination process for villages is associated with two important outcomes: party membership of the local leaders and villager satisfaction with the elections process. It is also important to point out that there is no relationship between the nomination process and villager attitudes toward the local economy.

The most prominent finding in this study is that villagers are very aware of their political environment. Indeed, villagers in this sample display a high level of voter sophistication. They can identify the difference between real and cosmetic elections. Moreover, villagers are able to separate economic factors from political institutions and evaluate each on their own merits. The development of village elections is a complex process, and the data reveal that rural residents are complex voters.