

# ASIAN SURVEY

---

---

---

A Bimonthly Review of Contemporary Asian Affairs ■ University of California Press

**Vol. XLIII, No. 4, July/August 2003**

---

■ The Sixteenth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party: Hu Gets What? • LI CHENG and LYNN WHITE ■ How Federalism Influences India's Domestic Politics of WTO Engagement: (And Is Itself Affected in the Process) • ROB JENKINS ■ China and ASEAN: Renavigating Relations for a 21st-Century Asia • ALICE D. BA ■ The Empowering Effect of Village Elections in China • LIANJIANG LI ■ Change and Continuity in the Thai Political Party System • JAMES OCKEY ■ Taiwan's Dilemma across the Strait: Lifting the Ban on Semiconductor Investment in China • CHYAN YANG and SHIU-WAN HUNG ■ The Role of NGOs in Political Elections in South Korea: The Case of the Citizens' Alliance for the 2000 General Election • EUI HANG SHIN ■

---

---

# THE EMPOWERING EFFECT OF VILLAGE ELECTIONS IN CHINA

---

---

Lianjiang Li

## Abstract

This article shows that Chinese villagers feel a higher level of political efficacy after their first free and fair village election because they can now remove unresponsive cadres. It concludes that enhanced efficacy may lead to more active participation, which in turn may affect political restructuring in Chinese villages.

Village elections in China have received considerable attention since their debut in 1988, not only because they have the potential to be free and fair by international standards but also because they are sometimes perceived to be a starting point for bottom-up democratization.<sup>1</sup> Four broad arguments about the impact of village elections have been proposed so far. One group of scholars has explored how village elections may contribute to regime change. Minxin Pei, for instance, has suggested that grassroots

---

Lianjiang Li is Associate Professor at the Department of Government and International Studies of Hong Kong Baptist University. For financial support, he would like to thank the Asia Foundation, the Henry Luce Foundation, the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong, and Hong Kong Baptist University. He would also like to acknowledge a grant from the Research and Writing Initiative of the Program on Global Security and Sustainability of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. For helpful comments on earlier drafts, he thanks Kevin O'Brien, John Kennedy, Hsin-chi Kuan, Linda Chelan Li, Emerson Niou, Hishida Masaharu, Tangbiao Xiao, and an anonymous referee. Email: <lianli@hkbu.edu.hk>.

*Asian Survey*, 43:4, pp. 648–662. ISSN: 0004–4687

© 2003 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. On the origins of village elections, see Tyrene White, "Reforming the Countryside," *Current History* 91:566 (September 1992), pp. 273–77; Kevin J. O'Brien, "Implementing Political Reform in China's Villages," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 32 (July 1994), pp. 33–60; Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Accommodating 'Democracy' in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China," *China Quarterly* 162 (June 2000), pp. 465–89. Every three years, Chinese villagers elect villagers' committees comprising three to seven members to manage local economic, social, and political affairs.

elections may be part of China's "creeping democratization,"<sup>2</sup> and Sylvia Chan has argued that villagers' self-government may become a growth point for civil society.<sup>3</sup> Kin-sheun Louie, however, has cautioned against this optimism and argued that villagers' self-governance can at most make a peripheral contribution to China's democratization.<sup>4</sup>

Other researchers have focused on the role that elections play in raising popular rights consciousness. Zhenyao Wang and Tianjian Shi, for example, argue that after villagers have realized that they can defend their rights and interests by voting out corrupt and coercive village cadres, they may want to do the same at the township level, and thus demand that township heads be popularly elected.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Jude Howell has suggested that villagers' self-governance may create a "discursive opening" for Chinese villagers to demand more democratic reforms.<sup>6</sup> More recently, Gunter Schubert has compared village elections to a "Trojan horse of democracy," in the sense that peasants who feel empowered by the right to vote in village elections may demand additional avenues for political participation.<sup>7</sup>

A third set of studies has examined how village elections affect rural governance and the village power structure. Allen Choate, Kevin O'Brien, and Lianjiang Li have noted that fair elections sometimes enhance village governance, as elected cadres tend to be more responsive to villagers and more impartial in enforcing state policies.<sup>8</sup> Other researchers, however, have questioned the extent to which elections affect who controls what in the village. Jean Oi and Scott Rozelle, for instance, observed that elections did not

---

2. Minxin Pei, "Creeping Democratization in China," *Journal of Democracy* 6:4 (October 1995), pp. 65–79.

3. Sylvia Chan, "Research Notes on Villagers' Committee Election: Chinese Style Democracy," *Journal of Contemporary China* 7:19 (1998), pp. 507–21.

4. Kin-sheun Louie, "Village Self-Governance and Democracy in China: An Evaluation," *Democratization* 8:4 (Winter 2001), pp. 134–54.

5. Zhenyao Wang, "Village Committees: The Basis for China's Democratization," in *Cooperative and Collective in China's Rural Development Between State and Private Interests*, eds. Eduard B. Vermeer, Frank N. Pieke, and Woei Lien Chong (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), pp. 239–56; Tianjian Shi, "Village Committee Elections in China: Institutional Tactics for Democracy," *World Politics* 51:3 (April 1999), pp. 385–412.

6. Jude Howell, "Prospects for Village Self-governance in China," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 25:3 (April 1998), pp. 86–111.

7. Gunter Schubert, "Village Elections in the PRC: A Trojan Horse of Democracy?" Project Discussion Paper no. 19, Institute of East Asian Studies, Gerhard-Mercator-University Duisburg, Germany, 2002.

8. Allen C. Choate, "Local Governance in China: An Assessment of Villagers' Committees," Working Paper no. 1 (San Francisco: Asia Foundation, 1997), p. 10; Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "The Struggle over Village Elections," in *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reform*, eds. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 129–44.

significantly change decision-making in the 32 villages they studied, since the appointed Communist Party secretary typically remained the most powerful person.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Björn Alpermann found that in some Hebei Province villages, elections have yet to generate genuine self-government because elected villagers' committees functioned primarily as administrative appendages of the township government.<sup>10</sup> Recent research by Zhenglin Guo and Thomas Bernstein, however, shows that in Guangdong Province, direct elections have indeed emboldened some elected villagers' committee directors to challenge the authority of village party secretaries.<sup>11</sup>

Arguably, the most influential and extensively tested hypothesis about the impact of village elections centers on whether they enhance villagers' political efficacy. In election studies, political efficacy is usually defined as an individual's feeling that he or she can make some difference in policy making or policy implementation. Political scientists have further distinguished between two kinds of efficacy. Internal efficacy refers to beliefs about one's own competence to understand and participate effectively in politics, while external efficacy refers to beliefs about the responsiveness of governmental authorities and institutions to citizens' demands.<sup>12</sup> Although they do not always use the term "efficacy," quite a number of sinologists have suggested that insofar as free elections provide villagers with the opportunity to remove unpopular cadres, villagers may be developing a stronger sense of external efficacy vis-à-vis elected cadres.

Kevin O'Brien was the first to suggest this empowerment argument. He noted that although elections in the early 1990s did not always allow villagers to choose whomever they liked most to serve as village cadres, they at times

---

9. Jean C. Oi and Scott Rozelle, "Elections and Power: The Locus of Decision Making in Chinese Villages," *China Quarterly* 162 (June 2000), pp. 513–39.

10. Björn Alpermann, "The Post-Election Administration of Chinese Villages," *China Journal* 46 (July 2001), pp. 45–67.

11. Zhenglin Guo and Thomas P. Bernstein, "The Impact of Elections on the Village Structure of Power: The Relations Between the Village Committees and the Village Party Branches," forthcoming, *Journal of Contemporary China*. For a similar observation, see Li and O'Brien, "The Struggle over Village Elections," p. 142.

12. On efficacy and its measurement, see George I. Balch, "Multiple Indicators in Survey Research: The Concept 'Sense of Political Efficacy'," *Political Methodology* 1 (Spring 1974), pp. 1–43; Stephen C. Craig, Richard G. Niemi, and Glenn E. Silver, "Political Efficacy and Trust: A Report on the NES Pilot Study Items," *Political Behavior* 12:3 (September 1990), pp. 289–314; Richard G. Niemi, Stephen C. Craig, and Franco Mattei, "Measuring Internal Political Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study," *American Political Science Review* 85:4 (December 1991), pp. 1407–13. For a debate on the political efficacy of Chinese citizens, see Tianjian Shi, "Voting and Nonvoting in China: Voting Behavior in Plebiscitary and Limited-Choice Elections," *Journal of Politics* 61:4 (November 1999), pp. 1115–39; Jie Chen and Yang Zhong, "Why Do People Vote in Semicompetitive Elections in China," *Journal of Politics* 64:1 (February 2002), pp. 178–97.

enabled villagers to get rid of cadres they disliked most. (O'Brien has also argued, more recently, that in some places, elections have enabled villagers to demand citizenship rights they have never enjoyed, while making it appear that they had just been deprived of them.<sup>13</sup>) In the same vein, Xu Wang and Ann Thurston have also argued that village elections may give villagers a sense of empowerment because they can now remove unpopular cadres through the ballot box.<sup>14</sup> Interviews and case studies by Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li have likewise shown that resourceful villagers are quick to see that voting can be an effective means to dislodge corrupt, partial, and/or incompetent cadres, and that some villagers have successfully used the *Organic Law of Villagers' Committees* (1987, revised in 1998) to demand free elections for precisely that purpose.<sup>15</sup>

Survey research has also produced evidence in support of the empowerment argument. Melanie Manion found that contested elections are positively correlated with improved congruence between cadres and villagers, presumably because such elections enabled villagers to choose candidates with similar ideological outlooks.<sup>16</sup> Tianjian Shi's 1990 national survey showed that although semi-competitive village elections have little effect on rural respondents' internal efficacy, they improve villagers' external efficacy.<sup>17</sup> Along the same lines, Lianjiang Li has noted that in places where village elections are procedurally freer and fairer, villagers are more likely to ask village cadres to raise objections if the township government has made harmful decisions that do not accord with central policies.<sup>18</sup>

As provocative as all this research is, prior treatments of the empowerment hypothesis suffer from certain limitations. Interviews and case studies of single villages cannot help but produce ambiguous, even contradictory, results. Earlier survey studies also have problems. First, the measurement of the procedural quality of village elections is often somewhat crude. As O'Brien and

---

13. O'Brien, "Implementing Political Reform," pp. 44–45; Kevin J. O'Brien, "Villagers, Elections, and Citizenship in Contemporary China," *Modern China* 27:4 (October 2001), pp. 425–29.

14. Xu Wang, "Mutual Empowerment of State and Peasantry," *World Development* 25:9 (September 1997), pp. 1431–42; Anne F. Thurston, *Muddling Toward Democracy: Political Change in Grassroots China* (Washington, D.C: United States Institute of Peace, 1999), p. v.

15. Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "The Politics of Lodging Complaints in Chinese Villages," *China Quarterly* 143 (September 1995), pp. 756–83; Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Villagers and Popular Resistance in Contemporary China," *Modern China* 22:1 (January 1996), pp. 28–61.

16. Melanie F. Manion, "The Electoral Connection in the Chinese Countryside," *American Political Science Review* 90:4 (December 1996), pp. 736–48.

17. Tianjian Shi, "Cultural Values and Democracy in Mainland China," *China Quarterly* 162 (June 2000), pp. 540–59.

18. Lianjiang Li, "Elections and Popular Resistance in Rural China," *China Information* 15:2 (2001), pp. 1–19.

Li have noted, the commonly used criterion of being contested or semi-competitive (*cha'e*), in the sense that there are more candidates than available posts, can be manipulated quite easily.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the surveyors themselves tend not to trust fully the election data provided by township governments, and therefore must turn to data collected from individual villagers. But data so produced is often inconsistent and difficult to interpret. Both Shi and Li have noted that respondents from the same village often give different answers to simple questions about whether and how elections have been held, making it necessary to use inherently arbitrary cutoff criteria when aggregating individual-level data on elections into village-level data.<sup>20</sup> A second shortcoming of existing survey research is the lack of longitudinal data. Limited to cross-sectional data collected at one point in time, the pioneering quantitative researchers on Chinese elections were unable to adequately control for the effects of confounding variables, particularly when data on suspected confounding variables was not collected.

This paper offers a more rigorous test of the argument that free and fair elections increase villagers' external efficacy. It is based on a two-wave panel survey of 400 individuals from 20 villages in T county of Jiangxi Province, where free elections were inaugurated in November 1999. The pre-election survey was conducted between October 14 and 20, 1999, and the post-election survey was conducted between November 27 and December 18 of the same year (see Appendix, below, for more information about the survey). The analysis begins with a comparison of the 1999 election in the selected villages with the previous election held in 1996, and shows that the 1999 election was notably more free and fair in procedural terms. It then shows that after the 1999 election, significantly more respondents indicated that if villagers' committee cadres did not implement beneficial policies promoted by higher levels, they would (1) not vote for such cadres in the next election; (2) persuade other villagers not to vote for such cadres in the next election; and (3) join other villagers to put forward an impeachment motion. In addition, significantly more respondents in the post-election survey said that if a township government made a decision that was contrary to central policies, they would ask the villagers' committee director to protest it. A confirmatory factor analysis shows that these four indicators measure the same theoretical construct. It also shows that the same group of respondents felt more efficacious after the election than they did before it. The paper concludes that enhanced external efficacy may encourage more active participation in village politics, which in turn may induce elected village leaders to

19. See O'Brien and Li, "Accommodating 'Democracy'," p. 485.

20. See Tianjian Shi, "Economic Development and Village Elections in Rural China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 8:22 (1999), pp. 425-42; Lianjiang Li, "Elections and Popular Resistance," pp. 11-12.

challenge overbearing village party secretaries and abusive township governments.

### The 1999 Village Election in T County

Interviews with villagers and village cadres confirmed that elections before 1999 in the 20 selected villages were either indirect, or tightly controlled by the township government and the village Party branch. Ordinary villagers were not allowed to nominate candidates; primaries were either absent or mere formalities. Though in some villages, elections appeared to be contested, in that there were more candidates than available posts, in all elections, there was only one candidate for the position of villagers' committee director. In nearly half of the selected villages, ordinary villagers were not allowed to vote. Instead, only village cadres, villagers' small group heads, party members, and selected villager representatives were permitted to cast ballots. In the villages where all adult villagers were permitted to vote, ballots were usually collected with roving ballot boxes, and villagers were often asked to fill in their ballots in the presence of the officials who accompanied the ballot boxes.<sup>21</sup>

The 1999 election in T county was procedurally far more democratic.<sup>22</sup> The following practices were used in all 20 villages: (1) direct nomination of candidates by villagers; (2) contested election of villagers' committee members; (3) anonymous voting; and (4) open count of votes.<sup>23</sup> Election observ-

21. For detailed reports on elections in 19 of the 20 selected villages, see Xiao Tangbiao, Qiu Xinyou, and Tang Xiaoteng, eds., *Duowei shijiao zhong de cunmin zhixuan* [Direct village elections in multiple perspectives] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2001), pp. 188–218, 219–47, 280–306, 307–29, 330–57, 413–40, 441–471; Li Lianjiang, Guo Zhenglin, and Xiao Tangbiao, eds. *Cunweihui xuanju guan cha* [Observations of villagers' committee elections] (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2001), pp. 44–112, 113–63, 164–219, 220–50, 306–70, 371–96, 428–90, 777–815; Xiao Tangbiao, Yu Liedong, and Luo Xingzuo, eds., *Zongzu xiangcun quanli yu xuanju* [Lineage, rural power and elections] (Xi'an: Xibei daxue chubanshe, 2002), pp. 66–109, 271–97, 353–81; Dong Leiming, "Zhidu yinru guocheng zhong de boyi yu tuoxie" [Gaming and compromise in the process of introducing a new institution], paper presented at the International Conference on the Impact of Village Elections, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, March 16–18, 2001.

22. For discussions of the importance of election procedures, see Choate, "Local Governance in China," p. 10; Jorgen Elklit, "The Chinese Village Committee Electoral System," *China Information* 11:4 (1997), pp. 7–9; Thurston, *Muddling Toward Democracy*, p. 26; Robert A. Pastor and Qingshan Tan, "The Meaning of China's Village Elections," *China Quarterly* 152 (June 2000), pp. 495–96; and O'Brien and Li, "Accommodating 'Democracy'," pp. 465–66. On the impact of different modes of nomination, see John J. Kennedy, "The Face of 'Grassroots Democracy': The Substantive Difference between Real and Cosmetic Elections in Rural China," *Asian Survey* 42:3 (May–June 2002), pp. 456–82.

23. Election observers were instructed to collect information on the following nine electoral procedures: (1) if all candidates were nominated directly by villagers; (2) if the official candidates were selected based on the number of nomination votes or through primaries attended by

ers noted that in some villages, enforcement of these procedures was not overly rigorous, owing to interference from the township government and/or the village party branch, as well as the lack of active participation by ordinary villagers. But the observers agreed that local cadres were, by and large, careful not to flagrantly violate procedural requirements laid out in the *Organic Law* and in Jiangxi's provincial regulations on implementing the *Organic Law*. The post-election survey also showed that the 1999 election was perceived to be freer and fairer than the previous one: 76.6% of the 400 respondents said they were very satisfied or basically satisfied with the conduct of the election, as compared to 35.8% who said the same about the 1996 election in the pre-election survey.

#### *Indicators of External Efficacy*

The key hypothesis that this article aims to test is that free and fair elections enhance villagers' external efficacy vis-à-vis elected cadres in regard to the implementation of central policies. More specifically, the hypothesis focuses on what villagers would do if they found that local authorities did not comply with policies made by the central government. It focuses on external efficacy because internal efficacy is unlikely to change over a short period of time; it focuses on policy implementation because free elections at the grassroots level do not generally open institutional channels through which villagers can affect policy formulation. The choice of misimplementation of central policies as a stimulant is based on the observations that many villagers complained that local officials did not implement beneficial central policies, and that some villagers have engaged in various forms of protest against local authorities who make unlawful "local policies" (*tu zhengce*).<sup>24</sup>

Since the problem of neglecting central policies and concocting harmful "local policies" is often attributed to villagers' committees, village party

---

villagers or villager representatives; (3) if there were more candidates on the ballot than available posts on the villagers' committee; (4) if there was more than one candidate for the position of villagers' committee director; (5) if candidates delivered any campaign speech either at the primary election or on election day; (6) if balloting was anonymous; (7) if secret balloting booths were set up; (8) if voters were required to use the secret balloting booths; and (9) if votes were counted under the supervision of villagers or villager representatives. Most of these criteria were derived from the *Organic Law* and the provincial regulation; others were based on scholarly analyses of election procedures in Chinese villages.

24. See Kevin J. O'Brien, "Rightful Resistance," *World Politics* 49:1 (October 1996), pp. 31–55; Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China," *Comparative Politics* 31:2 (January 1999), pp. 167–86; Thomas P. Bernstein and Xiaobo Lü, "Taxation without Representation: Peasants, the Central and the Local States in Reform China," *China Quarterly* 163 (September 2000), pp. 742–63; Xiaolin Guo, "Land Expropriation and Rural Conflicts in China," *ibid.*, 166 (June 2001), pp. 422–39; Kevin J. O'Brien, "Collective Action in the Chinese Countryside," *China Journal* 48 (July 2002), pp. 139–54.

branches, and township governments, I designed three hypothetical questions, each addressing one possible culprit. The first question is: “If cadres of the villagers’ committee did not do things according to relevant policies of higher levels, would you engage in the following activities?” The second question has the same wording except that “cadres of the villagers’ committee” is replaced by “cadres of the village party branch.” The question about the township government is: “If you felt that the township government made a decision that did not accord with central policies and regulations, what would you do?”<sup>25</sup> For each question, a list of alternative courses of action was provided, ranging from complaining in private to outright resistance. Whether respondents indicated they would act as suggested is treated as an indicator of their external political efficacy. Frequency distributions of positive responses to these questions in both surveys are summarized in Table 1.

Four indicators of external efficacy are of particular interest: (1) whether respondents indicated that they would not vote for cadres who disregard higher levels’ policies in the next election; (2) whether they indicated that they would persuade other villagers not to vote for such cadres in the next election; (3) whether they indicated that they would join other villagers to seek the impeachment of such cadres;<sup>26</sup> and (4) whether they indicated that they would ask the villagers’ committee director to raise objections if the township government made a decision that did not accord with central policies.<sup>27</sup> I assume that these four indicators measure a theoretical construct that I call external efficacy in regard to villagers’ committee cadres; I also assume that they are sensitive to changes in electoral procedures. Since external efficacy is based on an individual’s judgment and expectation of the responsiveness of political authorities, its increase or decrease should correspond with institutional changes that affect elite responsiveness. Now that villagers’ committee members in the selected villages are no longer appointed by the township, but directly elected by villagers, I assume that more villagers would feel that they could hold rogue or unresponsive village cadres to account.

Table 1 shows that villagers’ responses to the four indicator questions were indeed significantly different in the pre- and post-election surveys. Between the two surveys, the number of villagers who said they would not vote for

---

25. In theory, local officials could be doing something popular by ignoring policies of the higher level or the central government, but it is well understood in China that whenever the terms “local policy” or “violating central policies” are used, the term “central policies” refers exclusively to those that are beneficial to ordinary citizens, and “local policies” are harmful. Chinese villagers often use “higher levels” (*shangji*) and “the Center” (*zhongyang*) interchangeably.

26. For a discussion of impeaching villagers’ committee directors and members, see Yang Haikun and Zhou Xiaomei, “You bamian cunweihui yinqi de falü sikao” [Legal reflections on impeaching villagers’ committees], *Faxue* [Jurisprudence] 2 (February 2002), pp. 13–17.

27. For a discussion, see Lianjiang Li, “Elections and Popular Resistance.”

TABLE 1 *Frequency Distributions of Respondents' Intended Reactions to Violation of Central Policies by Villagers' Committee Cadres, Village Party Branch Cadres, and the Township Government in Pre-Election and Post-Election Surveys*

	<i>Villagers' Committee</i>	<i>Village Party Branch</i>	<i>Township Government</i>
Complain behind their backs	61.3 (70.0)**	62.3 (67.3)	59.5 (64.0)
Raise objections face-to-face	52.0 (59.3)*	50.0 (56.5)	—
Ask village Party secretary to raise objection	—	—	31.0 (39.5)*
Ask villagers' committee director to raise objection	—	—	27.3 (37.3)**
Disobey	20.3 (24.8)	20.0 (24.0)	14.3 (21.3)**
Write letters of complaint	11.0 (10.3)	9.5 (11.0)	6.5 (11.8)**
Visit higher level government by oneself	6.3 (7.0)	5.8 (7.5)	4.3 (7.8)*
Join other villagers to lodge complaint	6.3 (7.0)	5.0 (8.3)	4.0 (6.3)
Do not vote for them in the next election	41.0 (64.5)***	—	—
Persuade other villagers not to vote for them	12.3 (22.3)***	—	—
Persuade Party members not to vote for them	—	9.5 (16.3)**	—
Join other villagers to propose impeachment	6.5 (12.3)**	—	—
Join villagers from other villages to lodge complaint	—	—	3.0 (4.8)
File administrative lawsuit	—	—	7.8 (7.3)
Follow the crowd	36.3 (40.3)	37.0 (39.8)	39.5 (41.5)

SOURCE: By author.

NOTE: N = 400. Non-response is recoded as negative response; entries are percentages of positive responses in the pre-election survey; the results of post-election survey are in parentheses; "—" indicates that the option was not provided.

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p \leq .001$ , two-sided test.

rogue villagers' committee cadres in the next election rose from 41% to 64.5%; those who said they would persuade other villagers not to vote for such cadres rose from 12.3% to 22.3%; and those who said they would join other villagers to make an impeachment motion rose from 6.5% to 12.3%. A significant change also occurred in regard to unlawful township decisions, as the number of respondents who said they would ask the director to protest such decisions rose from 27.3% to 37.3%. All of these observed differences are statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

We have five reasons to believe that the observed changes in these four indicators of efficacy are most likely a result of the free election that took place between the two surveys. First, responses to most of the other questions that were not expected to be sensitive (at least in the short term) to

improvements in election procedures remained largely unchanged. As we see in Table 1, respondents were just as likely to disobey rogue villagers' committee cadres before and after the election, and they were just as likely to lodge complaints, individually or collectively, against such cadres. Moreover, they were just as likely to lodge complaints or file administrative lawsuits against the township government for making unlawful decisions. It thus seems reasonable to conclude that the 1999 election in T county encouraged villagers to take advantage of the new opportunities brought about by the free election, but it did not materially change their assessment of how responsive villagers' committee cadres are to other forms of contention.<sup>28</sup>

Second, other than the election, no obvious dramatic event that might have changed villagers' attitudes toward villagers' committee members took place between the two surveys. There were, for instance, no notable confrontations or instances of collective action in any of the 20 villages.

Third, the rate of election turnover is usually a good indicator of whether elections are free and fair. This is especially true when free elections are introduced for the first time, as the turnover rate can help us ascertain whether elections have enabled villagers to choose their preferred candidates. In this research, however, high turnover rate could be a confounding factor, as it would make it harder to determine whether the observed attitudinal changes were due to freer election procedures. In a small community like a village, the personality and character of village leaders may have a larger impact on residents' sense of efficacy than elections do. In theory, we could observe similar attitudinal changes if new villagers' committee cadres happen to be popular, even when there is no significant improvement in electoral procedures. It turns out that this potentially confounding factor can be excluded, as 15 of the 20 newly elected villagers' committee directors were incumbent directors, only two were ordinary villagers, and three were ordinary party members before the election. It is thus clear that although three-fourths of incumbent villagers' committee directors won reelection, villagers seemed to have begun to see them differently because they were popularly elected, rather than appointed by the township.

Fourth, there is indirect evidence that the 1999 election process improved villagers' sense of efficacy. The *Organic Law* (1998) does not apply to the village party branch (Article 3).<sup>29</sup> Still, two indicators of villagers' external

---

28. On lodging complaints, see O'Brien and Li, "The Politics of Lodging Complaints." On administrative litigation, see Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Suing the Local State: Administrative Litigation in Rural China," paper presented at the Conference on Law and Society in China, School of Law, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, California, U.S.A., September 20–21, 2002.

29. Yawei Liu, "Consequences of Villager Committee Elections in China," *China Perspectives* 31 (September 2000), pp. 19–35.

efficacy vis-à-vis the village party branch turned out to be sensitive to changes in election procedures. After the election, significantly more villagers said they would ask the village party secretary to confront the township if the latter made unlawful decisions, and significantly more respondents said they would try to persuade party members not to vote for party branch cadres who cooked up “local policies.” This increase of external efficacy can be attributed to the fact that the villagers’ committee and the village party branch often have considerable personnel overlap. It is a common practice that an elected villagers’ committee director be selected as deputy party secretary if he or she is already a party member, or be recruited into the party if he or she has not joined prior to winning an election.<sup>30</sup> Among the 20 newly elected villagers’ committee directors, 13 had been members of the village party branch before the election, and two were party members. For this reason, villagers may not always clearly distinguish the village party branch from the villagers’ committee, particularly when it comes to dealing with the township government. So when villagers feel empowered vis-à-vis the villagers’ committee by the introduction of free elections, they may extend that sense of stronger efficacy to the village party branch.

Last, the observed attitudinal changes are not very likely to be caused by the surveys themselves. Admittedly, the presence of interviewers in these villages might itself have affected villagers’ responses to attitudinal questions in various ways. For instance, the fact that interviewers came from the provincial capital might have led some respondents into believing that the survey was sponsored by the provincial government, so they might have given what they thought were politically correct answers.<sup>31</sup> But the presence of the same outsiders should have affected both surveys in similar ways. The fact that interviewers had to stay in the villages for an extended period of time to administer the surveys and observe elections might have allowed them to establish some personal rapport with the interviewees, which also might skew the results of the post-election survey. But there is little reason to assume that such rapport would systematically encourage respondents to sound more efficacious after the election than they did before it. Some villagers might like to sound more efficacious in front of acquaintances, while others might feel more relaxed about expressing their lack of confidence in the election system.

---

30. For a discussion of the relationship between the villagers’ committee and the village party branch, see Guo and Bernstein, “The Impact of Elections.”

31. See Tianjian Shi, “Survey Research in China,” in *Research in Micropolitics: Rethinking Rationality*, vol. 5, eds. Michael X. Delli Carpini, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Y. Shapiro (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1996), pp. 213–50; Melanie F. Manion, “Survey Research in the Study of Contemporary China: Learning from Local Samples,” *China Quarterly* 139 (September 1994), pp. 741–65.

## A Confirmatory Factor Analysis

We have thus far assumed that the four election-sensitive indicators measure the same theoretical construct, which I call external efficacy regarding villagers' committee cadres. But do they really do so? Moreover, if they do, did respondents score significantly higher on the theoretical scale of efficacy after the election than they did before the election? A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to answer these two questions.<sup>32</sup>

The analysis shows that the four indicators do seem to measure the same theoretical construct.<sup>33</sup> The model that assumes the four indicators constitute the same factor turns out to be an acceptable fit on the data, as it passes the exact test of goodness-of-fit for both data sets ( $p = 0.362$  for the pre-election data;  $p = 0.638$  for the post-election data). It also has adequate close fitness indices (for pre-election data, CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.000, RMSEA = 0.005; for post-election data, CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.000, RMSEA < 0.001).<sup>34</sup>

The analysis also shows that the mean level of efficacy of the respondents increased significantly after the election. More precisely, if we assume that the respondents' mean level of efficacy was zero before the election, then their mean level of efficacy after it rose to 0.570 (the standard error of this estimate is 0.106). The probability of observing a difference of such magnitude by chance is less than one-tenth of a percent ( $p < .001$ ).

## Conclusions

In the absence of fully controlled experiments in which one group of randomly selected villagers is allowed to take part in elections while another group is not, we will never be completely certain whether and how free elections affect villagers' sense of efficacy regarding elected leaders. Because no

---

32. On confirmatory factor analysis and its difference from exploratory factor analysis, see Rex B. Kline, *Principles and Practice of Structural Equation Modeling* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998), pp. 55–60, 189–243.

33. After non-responses are deleted, the pre-election data have 296 cases, and the post-election data have 318 cases. All four indicators are binary, but they can be considered as a crude measurement of a latent continuous factor. Following the recommendation of Karl Jöreskog, the goodness-of-fit of the model was estimated with weighted least-squares method, using tetrachoric correlation matrix of the four indicators. See A. Aish and K. Jöreskog, "A Panel Model for Political Efficacy and Responsiveness: An Application of LISREL 7 with Weighted Least Squares," *Quality and Quantity* 24 (1990), pp. 405–26. The results reported here were obtained with Mplus.

34. In more conventional statistical testing of hypothesis, the null hypothesis assumes no relationship between selected variables. In structural equation modeling, however, the null hypothesis assumes that the proposed model fits the data perfectly. Here an insignificant chi-square ( $p > 0.05$ ) generally indicates that the model is a good fit, while a significant chi-square ( $p < 0.05$ ) indicates a poor fit. CFI = Comparative Fitness Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index (also known as Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI)); RMSEA = Root Mean Square Errors of Approximation.

such experiment can be conducted, a two-wave panel survey in a place where free elections are introduced for the first time takes us a step closer to detecting the effect of free elections on political efficacy and isolating it from the effect of other factors. This research suggests that, at least in T county, free elections did significantly enhance villagers' external efficacy. Whether this finding applies to other places in China, of course, requires further study.

Three tentative conclusions may be drawn from my findings. First, since low efficacy tends to evoke political apathy and withdrawal, and high efficacy tends to motivate people to engage in political activities, we may expect that as free village elections continue and spread, more villagers will become more active in village politics. If villagers' committee cadres fail to comply with a central policy, more villagers may try to remove them in the next round of elections, or even try to impeach them. If the township government issues unlawful decisions that are detrimental to villagers' interests, more villagers may press elected village cadres to challenge them.

It is, of course, one thing for free elections to improve villagers' efficacy; it is quite another to also make elected village leaders more responsive. Tensions may therefore grow between more assertive villagers and elected cadres who fail to live up to heightened popular expectations. Tensions may also mount between elected villagers' committee directors and appointed village party secretaries, should the former become more responsive than the latter. As mentioned earlier, with ordinary villagers rallying behind them, elected villagers' committee directors have begun to challenge the authority of appointed party secretaries on grounds that they do not have a popular mandate. Free elections have thus perhaps spurred a *de facto* political restructuring in some villages. Furthermore, when elected villagers' committee cadres respond to their constituents' demands to defy unlawful township policies, free elections may play a role in transforming election-based elite-mass solidarity into a capacity for association and participation in local politics.

Lastly, while stronger political efficacy could be a short-term blip that dissipates soon after the election, it may also indicate the early stirrings of the notion that political power comes from the consent of the people. Villagers may feel empowered because they know that they can retract their consent through impeachment or at the next election. In order to hold onto the new ground they have gained, villagers may work hard to ensure that free elections continue to be held. In the long run, repeated elections may gradually induce a far-reaching change in villagers' understanding of political legitimacy. Free and fair balloting may first become an accepted way of political life in the village, and then an established political value that villagers wish to see apply to all political authorities.

## Appendix: Research Design and Data Collection

T county in Jiangxi Province was chosen to be the field site for two reasons. One was that I learned from my earlier fieldwork that elections in many villages of this county were either indirect or were tightly controlled by the township government, before 1999. The other was that I expected that the 1999 election would be freer and fairer in procedural terms, because the revised *Organic Law of Villagers' Committees* (1998) had not only made direct elections mandatory, but also required that candidates be nominated by villagers, that elections be contested (*cha'e*), and that balloting be secret. Moreover, the Jiangxi provincial government had required that the 1999 election be conducted according to the *Organic Law*, and the provincial civil affairs bureau had enacted a detailed regulation on the implementation of the *Law*. I suspected that if freer and fairer elections were to have any immediate impact on villagers' political attitudes, a two-wave panel survey would work best to detect such impact and isolate it from that of other factors.

There were 26 townships and 364 villagers' committees in T County in 1999. The county population was around 510,000, and the number of registered rural voters was 278,329. The selection of townships and villages was conducted in two stages, both according to the principle of probability proportionate to population size. Five townships were chosen first, then four administrative villages from each township. Within each village, a simple random sample of 40 individuals over the age of 18 was drawn based on household registration records, regardless of the village population size. The random sample of 40 villagers in each village was then randomly divided into a base group and a backup group. If a selected villager in the base group was not available or turned down the request for an interview, then a villager with similar demographic background in the backup group would be approached. Fieldworkers were from a number of universities and party schools in Jiangxi and Hubei Provinces, and from Beijing. They received 10 days of intensive training in Jiangxi's provincial capital before they traveled to the field site.

In order to minimize the confounding effect of events that might occur in between, the two surveys were administered within a period of two months. The pre-election survey was conducted from October 14–20, 1999, and the post-election survey was conducted between November 27 and December 18 of the same year. The starting date of the post-election survey varied according to the actual date of voting in individual villages. Interviewers observed the whole election process, and used a detailed form to collect data on each village's population size, geographical features, lineage structure, number of registered voters, voter turnout at primaries, and on election day, election turnover and campaign activities of the candidates, as well as nomination processes and results, the selection of official candidates, the balloting, and

the ballot counting. All but one interviewer wrote detailed election observation reports, 18 of which have been published in three Chinese-language books (see note 21).

In both pre- and post-election surveys, 20 individuals from each village were interviewed, all in their homes. For each interview, a respondent was paid an honorarium of 20 yuan (approximately \$2.50), which was attractive, given that the officially announced annual per capita net income of rural residents in 1999 was 1,700 yuan (US\$205). The non-response rate in the first attempt of the pre-election survey was around 5%, and the attrition rate in the post-election survey was about 3%, primarily because respondents were ill or out of the village at the time of the interview. In those cases, villagers with similar demographic backgrounds in the backup group were interviewed. Non-responses to attitudinal questions ranged from 3% to more than 20% in both surveys. In general, women and the elderly were more likely to give non-responses.

Interested readers may request the survey data (stored in SPSS format) and the codebook (in Chinese) from the author.