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Elections in Rural China: Competition Without Parties

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Abstract

Village elections in China present scholars with the case of a single-party regime that allows voters to reject candidates regularly. Using a micro survey of 698 voters in 30 rural election districts, the authors demonstrate that when some candidates can lose, voters participate. A comparison of models of voter turnout and running for office further demonstrates that even when competition is structured to the benefit of party members, the perception of competition as choice between candidates is sufficient to engage voters and increase their perception that the electoral process is fair. These findings hold regardless of a respondent's age, gender, membership in the Communist Party and Youth League, and general knowledge level and access to media. Village wealth and geographical isolation also do not demonstrate a strong substantive impact. One theoretical implication of these findings is that contested elections in authoritarian regimes may simultaneously strengthen demand for accountability and loyalty to the regime.

Keywords

political competition, electoral choice, authoritarianism, China, village elections, participation, voting, candidacy, fairness

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Political scientists conventionally regard contested elections as essential for democratic politics, and scholarship that articulates explicit definitions of democracy generally requires contested elections whereby incumbents face some risk of defeat (Przeworski, 1988; Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub, & Limongi, 2000, chap. 1). Thus recently, there has been scholarly interest in regimes that do not conform to democratic principles but nonetheless hold elections where voters have the power to reject at least some candidates in each round of elections (Diamond, 2002; Geddes, 2005; Hermet, Rose, & Rouquié, 1978; Levitsky & Way, 2002; Magaloni, 2006; Schedler, 2006, pp. 1-23). Perhaps because political parties are so central to the extant literature on elections, elections in regimes that ban parties (or only allow a single one) are not well incorporated into the theoretical literature on authoritarianism. However, using the recent experience of village-level elections in the People's Republic of China, we demonstrate how the opportunity to reject some candidates and choose others for local village councils affects both behavior and attitudes of ordinary citizens. Quite simply we find that (a) when rural voters know that they have the power to eliminate candidates, they are more likely to vote and (b) if they vote in elections, they are more likely to engage in a backward justification of the elections as fair.

To date very few studies have rigorously evaluated the impact of choice on turnout independent of multiparty competition. And even fewer have tested the impact of turnout on popular perceptions of fairness at the individual level. One may argue that choice among candidates all vetted by a single ruling party, the Communist Party in the case of China, is only an illusion of participation. Having more candidates than seats means little if independent candidates cannot emerge. Two candidates may oppose each other on election day for the post of village committee (VC) chairman, but if they do not differ in terms of party affiliation, electoral competition amounts to little more than a random selection between twins. This perspective suggests that elections in one-party states are merely a form of political mobilization that may produce high nominal turnout but leave village elites insulated from even mild electoral pressure.

If the critics of procedural democracy are correct, the existence of limited competition will not by itself be sufficient to elicit voter interest. In the absence of institutional restraints on the ruling party and without multiple parties or democratic culture, authoritarian regimes will tolerate local elections simply because they are able to manipulate them. Voters may be compelled to produce a high turnout, but we should not expect them to engage in such electoral activities as running for office. Nor would we expect them to find the elections fair. By contrast, proponents of minimalist definitions of democracy stress

that limited competition is not trivial. As long as a few incumbents can lose, village elections may have a disciplining effect on local political elites. If this view is correct, we would also expect the public to support the institution of elections by turning out voluntarily when it regards races as competitive. We would also expect that election participants are those who report higher levels of satisfaction with the election process.

We evaluate these competing claims using data collected in 2004 in a probability sample of working-age adults in a rural county of southwestern China. After a brief discussion of the history of village elections and recent procedural reforms, we describe the data and research design and then analyze the impact of individual and community characteristics on citizens' behavior and attitudes. We first evaluate voter turn out and show that voters are highly responsive to the provision of even limited competition. We then contrast the impact of the same variables on another mode of electoral participation—running for office—and finally turn to explore how voters evaluate of the degree of electoral fairness. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for the theoretical literature on authoritarian regimes. A regime that provides minimally competitive local elections does not necessarily regard such elections as a tool of popular mobilization. Instead, the regime can build the loyalty of its citizenry by providing electoral institutions that can appeal to voters and create a sense that these institutions are fair, even when they do not conform to any conventional interpretation of electoral democracy. One implication of the recent Chinese experience is that contested elections in authoritarian regimes may strengthen both demands for accountability and loyalty to the regime.

The Institution of Village Elections in China

In the high Mao years (1958–1976), the lowest level of state power ended at the people's commune, an administrative unit that supervised and coordinated the economic and political life of up to 50,000 people living in 10 to 20 villages. Villages were subdivided into production teams, usually organized around hamlets or natural villages. Teams were supervised by production brigades, and brigades, which were usually large administrative villages, were supervised by commune governments. County-level officials appointed commune leaders, who in turn appointed leaders in each brigade and production team. Between 1980 and 1983, the post-Mao government decollectivized agriculture and abolished communes with their nested hierarchy of control that reached down into each of China's then nearly one million villages. Township governments replaced communes and villages were to be governed

by elected VCs. However, although the 1982 Constitution (Art. 111) indicated that villages would be governed by elected committees, only in 1987 did the Draft Organic Law on Villagers' Self-Governance specify provisions for direct elections, and only in the 1998 Organic Law did village elections become mandatory nationwide.

VCs and their elected leaders have significant power. They oversee the (re)distribution or lease of village land, which remains collectively owned and which since the 1980s has become increasingly valuable. They are also responsible for mediating local civil disputes and for implementing the one-child policy.[1] Each VC consists of at least three members and is headed by a chairperson.[2]

The 1998 Organic Law mandates that candidates be nominated directly by eligible villagers and that all eligible voters can run for office in their own village. Elections must be competitive in the sense that the number of candidates nominated should exceed the number of seats on the VC.[3] Election overseers must count the ballots publicly and announce the results immediately. An election is valid only if a majority of eligible voters cast their ballots, and candidates win if they receive a majority of valid votes. If neither condition is met, new elections must be organized.

Village elections are politically consequential. Based on a two-wave survey of 400 respondents in 20 villages in one county of Jiangxi during the first semicompetitive election in 1999, Li (2003) finds that elections have an empowering effect, in the sense that political efficacy increases once villagers acquire the experience of removing unpopular leaders from office. In addition, multiple studies suggest that the conduct of village elections has improved leadership accountability and the quality of governance as well as the level of popular satisfaction with village governments (Birney, 2007; Kennedy, Rozelle, & Shi, 2004; Manion, 1996, 2006).[4] A high level of electoral participation also empowers the elected VC vis-à-vis the unelected village branches of the Communist Party, particularly when VCs control substantial economic resources (Guo & Bernstein, 2004; Li & O'Brien, 1999; Oi & Rozelle, 2000).

Village elections are more than a plebiscitary exercise because the number of candidates for office must exceed the number of seats available. Hundreds of thousands of candidates lose routinely, and 48% of elected village officials are not Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2005; Shi, 2000). In sum, Chinese voters make choices and candidates must successfully compete for votes or lose. Indeed, proponents of the Schumpeterian notion that democracy emerges when incumbents lose elections have raised the prospect that village elections may become a training ground for China's future democratization (Horsley, 2001).[5]

Moreover, the institution of the election itself offers a range of possible activities beyond simply casting a ballot. According to the 1998 Organic Law on Villagers' Committees, villagers are expected to monitor electoral proceedings by designating an election commission (Art. 13). They may also nominate candidates (Art. 14) or run for office directly. Finally, between rounds of elections, villagers' representative assemblies are to meet regularly and monitor village leaders (Art. 17-19).[6]

Mandatory elections have been introduced in the context of two decades of reforms that decisively eliminated the economic institutions of the socialist era. However, these economic reforms have left untouched the political monopolies of the CCP (Oi & Rozelle, 2000). Only the posts of village head and VC members are open to popular vote, and non-CCP members who run are not allowed to organize as a political party.[7] Village elections therefore provide a channel that allows villagers to select some of their leaders and reject others, but they are not intended to displace the CCP as the single ruling party.

Data

During the summer of 2004, we conducted a household survey in 30 administrative villages in a rural county of Yunnan Province here identified by the pseudonym of Gaoyuan, a county where 90% of adults work in agriculture.[8]

In the national context, Gaoyuan is typical of noncoastal agricultural counties. All of its major socioeconomic indicators lie within one standard deviation of either the provincial or the national mean (see Table A1). The county is slightly richer than average for Yunnan and therefore approaches the national averages for per capita GDP and fiscal revenue. Thus, although we do not claim that our sample is representative of China or Yunnan in a strict statistical sense, we believe that patterns in Gaoyuan speak directly to the general situation of inland rural counties.

Although Gaoyuan County was purposefully selected, our respondents constitute an equal probability sample of working age adults in the county. To guarantee that we captured both economic and ethnic diversity of the county, we first stratified the 15 townships into two groups: those where the majority of the population belongs to one of China's 55 ethnic minorities and those where the majority are not ethnic minorities. We then randomly selected by two townships (*xiang*) from the first group and three townships from the second. Within each township, we selected a number of administrative villages proportional to the number of households in the township.[9] In total, we drew 30 administrative villages (*xingzhen cun*). Within each administrative village, we randomly selected two natural villages (*ziran cun*).[10]

Because this survey initially focused on understanding current school enrollment, the final respondents in the sample were adults (mostly parents) who were raising children of school age as of July 2004. In each natural village, we established a list of households with such children and drew 12 of those at random. Within households, the gender of the parent to be interviewed was also randomized. The procedure yielded a sample of 698 adults clustered in 30 electoral districts (administrative villages) where elections had been held several weeks before fieldwork was conducted. Because our respondents are primarily parents, our sample captures the set of villagers who are in the labor force and are active members of their communities. Elderly and younger respondents are underrepresented because they were captured only if they effectively raised children because of unusual circumstances in their household. The oldest respondent is 71 and the youngest is 22, with an average age of 38.[11] The Gaoyuan sample does not allow point predictions over the entire adult population of the county, but it is appropriate for multivariable analysis of a wide range of individual- and community-level variables relevant to the study of election participation.

The Gaoyuan sample is one of a handful of samples that analyzes voting behavior since the implementation of the 1998 Organic Law on Villagers' Self-Government and is the only one to our knowledge that has extensive information on both the individual voter and the local community.[12] It has particularly high-quality and rich data because fieldwork was executed only a few weeks after the second round of village elections in Yunnan Province and systematically gathered data on the economic, social, and political life at both individual and village levels. While interviewing village leaders in VC offices, we were often able to directly observe that election results were still prominently displayed, including in some cases lists of candidates and the number of votes they had received. Clearly, the election exercise was still fresh in most respondents' minds, which leads us to believe that data were less prone to measurement error than those in earlier studies that primarily relied on interviews conducted many months or even years after elections had been held.

Estimating Turnout and Degree of Competition

Officials who run authoritarian elections have strong political incentives to maximize turnout, and variation in turnout reflects not individual-level decisions but instead the performance of local officials as election organizers. In the case of Chinese VC elections, officials who face the risk of low turnout can resort to many measures to ensure a high reported turnout. At the end of the voting period on the village square, team leaders can carry roving boxes

to the doorstep of the household that did not appear on the square and ask one (or more) member of the household to cast a ballot. This person is ordinarily expected to vote on behalf of the other members of the household if they are not present, whether a formal proxy has been signed or not.[13]

Given the regime's incentives to inflate turnout rates, Zhong and Chen (2002) propose a strict definition of voluntary participation in the election process. By counting as voters only the villagers who personally cast their own ballot, their approach is useful if one is interested in voters who engage in particularly assertive forms of political participation, but it does not conform to standard definitions of turnout.[14] Our benchmark is less restrictive than theirs but differs from the maximalist measure of official turnout reports: We chose instead to simply ask respondents whether or not they voted during the 2004 round of village elections. Thus, voters who filled formal proxies, asked a family member to vote on their behalf, or voted at a roving ballot box are coded as having voted.[15]

To gauge perceptions of competition at the village level, we rely on our respondents' assessments of the election held approximately 2 months before the interviews. Because our respondents were selected at random from two natural villages in each electoral district (also randomly selected), we are confident that estimating the share of respondents who perceive that the election was competitive is a reasonable indicator of the underlying nature of competition in the village. By this yardstick, we find that village elections are significantly less competitive than official reports indicate. We obtain instead a continuum of competition, ranging from the worst case where a bare majority reported competition to a village where all 24 interviewees were unanimous about the existence of competition.

We also find a strong correlation between the perception competition and turnout, a sign that elections are more than a mere plebiscitary exercise in mass mobilization (see Figure 1). Villagers do not simply turn out because they were told to do so. They seem instead to respond to the extent of political competition.

Explaining Voter Participation

Why do Chinese villagers choose to go to the polls? The mobilizational view of elections in authoritarian regimes generally ignores individual voter preferences or characteristics. But in the 1960s and 1970s, scholars of Soviet politics argued that nonvoting was a form of protest against the lack of meaningful competition in Soviet elections and individual attributes could be decisive (Gilison, 1968; Jacobs, 1970; Nelson & Amonashvili, 1992; Swearer, 1961;

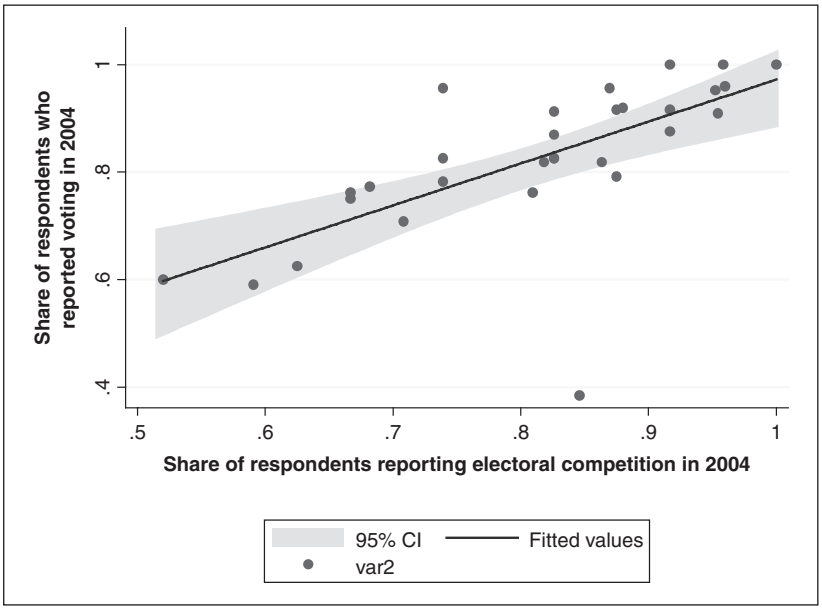

Figure 1. Estimates of perceived electoral competition and voter turnout in 30 Gaoyuan villages

Zaslavsky & Brym, 1978). Several recent studies of Chinese elections similarly confirm a role for individual-level characteristics. Shi (1999b), Chen and Zhong (2002), Zhong and Chen (2002) agree that subjective motivations drive voting behavior, though they disagree about the specific causal mechanisms behind turnout. Shi concludes that people with greater political attentiveness and internal efficacy vote in semicompetitive local elections to fight corruption and abstain from uncompetitive elections as a form of protest. By contrast, Chen and Zhong contend that only those who identify with the regime will vote.

In our study, we assume that political orientation of potential voters affects their response and that that some voters will be more responsive than others to the exhortation of village and township officials to go to the polls. Given the prestige, power, and monopoly power of the CCP, we hypothesize that party members will be more likely to vote than nonparty members and that long-time members will be most likely to vote.[16]

Other individuals who may be more likely than others to vote are current or former members of the Communist Youth League (CYL). Although CCP

Table 1. Education and League Membership

Educational attainment	Percentage among respondents	Percentage of Communist Youth League (CYL) members by education level
Illiterate	10.0	2.1
Some primary	14.8	8.3
Primary	30.5	15.7
Lower middle	38.8	29.7
Vocational secondary	0.4	62.8
High school	5.2	70.6
Some tertiary	0.4	63.9

Note: Test of association between level of education and CYL membership: design-based $F(5.12, 143.35) = 15.10$, $p = .000$.

membership is rare in rural areas, membership in the league is widespread and is seen as a means to socialize the best educated youth (see Table 1) to perform a range of civic duties and participate in collective activities. The most promising league members are expected to eventually join the Communist Party (Bian, Shu, & Logan, 2001).

The interaction between league membership and education has important implications for the range and intensity of current political activities in the villages. Not only are former league activists and educated villagers personally likely to turn out, but also village leaders can count on them to mobilize other community members on election day.[17] Because 21% of the sample reported having joined the CYL, the mobilizational capacity of this group is likely to have a measurable impact on turnout.

Given the power of village officials to oversee land allocation and supervise economic development, those with the most assets might also be more likely to vote than those with less. Thus, one might predict that voting is tied to one's economic and political interests in village affairs. Shi (1999a) argues that the reform process that turned farmers into key resource providers of local governments has made them more assertive in the face of official predation. This type of activism dovetails with the expectations of reformers in Beijing—specifically the Ministry of Civil Affairs—who conceived of elections as an instrument of good governance (Shi, 1999b).

In previous analyses, political economic models of voting in China have taken the village as the unit of analysis. The implicit assumption in this approach is that village-level politics is best explained by village-level

variables because economic variability is greater across rather than within villages. Both Lawrence (1994) and Oi and Rozelle (2000) contend that elections are less likely to develop in economically advanced regions because local elites have few incentives to experiment with alternative political institutions when they are successful. Shi (1999, p. 436), by contrast, reported that the relationship is nonlinear.

It also is true that there have been very few unofficial (nongovernment) surveys prior to ours that collected voter-specific data. For example, in their study of 1996 village elections, Oi and Rozelle (2000) demonstrate that the power of officials was closely linked to the nature of the village economy. However, because they did not collect data at the voter level, the link between the nature of the village economy and turnout is indeterminate. A focus on the village level was valid in an era when the central legislative apparatus did not mandate the provision of competitive elections, and it is not surprising that voter turnout and the overall quality of elections varied by village economic or political characteristics. However, Article 14 of the 1998 Organic Law requires all villages to hold elections in which there are more candidates than seats.[18] This does not mean that all villages implement the law faithfully or that the degree of competition is uniform but rather that the incentives for local official have clearly changed since village elections became mandatory. Regardless of economic circumstances, the civil affairs bureaucracy ensures that elections are held, and township officials are dispatched to monitor their implementation. Furthermore, propaganda through the media has increased public awareness of proper elections procedures. In fact, courts have intervened in election disputes when villagers have challenged incompetence or outright fraud.[19] Townships officials also insist that turnout should be as high as possible because clear documentation of turnout is now one of the regular benchmarks that must be reported upward within the civil affairs bureaucracy. This combination of greater voter awareness with the institutionalization of election procedures suggests that turnout in village elections may vary significantly by individual characteristics of voters.

Multivariate Models of Voting and Running

To test these predictions, we turn to a multivariate probit regression of voting behavior in which we estimate the impact of a wide range of individual and village characteristics. Building on previous work on voter turnout in both democratic and authoritarian regimes, we assess economic, political, and educational background of individual voters controlling for their age, gender, and ethnicity. Economic status is captured by ownership of 20 consumer

durables,[20] education by years of formal schooling, and political position by membership in the CCP and Communist League. In addition, we use frequency of newspaper reading and score on a short general knowledge quiz to assess their active knowledge as opposed to educational credentials.[21] To capture the relative economic standing of respondents' households relative to that of other respondents in their village, we use the deviation of a household's score on the possession index from the village mean on the possession index. This measure of deviation from village means provides a more accurate measure of within village inequality than Hu's (2005) self-reported assessment of economic standing. It also allows us to test whether those with the greatest economic stake will be more likely to vote or run for election than poorer villagers (see Table A2 in the appendix for a summary of all independent and dependent variables).

Voting

As one can see in the models that estimate the decision to vote and the decision to run for a position on the VC in 2004, both individual and village characteristics had a statistically significant impact on the political behavior of villagers (see Table 2). But the results did not perfectly confirm our initial expectations. For example, we find that neither Communist Party nor Youth League membership increases turnout. However, we detect a nonlinear relationship between wealth (measured by the possession index of the household) and turnout: The negative (and significant) coefficient for the wealth squared variable suggests that both the poorest and the most economically successful families either are disengaged from village affairs or see no value in participating.

Although the higher villagers' educational attainment the more likely they are to vote, the impact is only marginally significant ($p < .1$). Similarly, and somewhat contrary to expectations that turnout would vary by the age gender, and reading habits, we found no significant impact of being older, being male, or reading a newspaper daily. Even more surprising given past research that shows minority members to be politically marginalized, we found that in this county ethnic minorities were more likely to vote, a pattern that we attribute to the pre-1949 incorporation of ethnic minority Yi leaders into the communist guerilla forces and the active recruitment and promotion of Yi leaders into the county leadership since the early 1950s. Thus, although in some parts of China minorities are isolated from or resistant to mainstream political life, in a county where the minority is almost the majority and where for more than 50 years they have merged community leadership and party

Table 2. Electoral Participation in 2004

Number of observations	689		689	
Number of strata	2		2	
Number of PSUs (villages)	30		30	
Design *df*	28		28	
F(15, 14)	6.28		9.32	
Prob > *F*	.001		.000	
	Voting in 2004 election		Running for office in 2004	
Nominated candidates	0.237	0.422	1.236	0.348***
Communist Party membership	–0.188	0.221	1.379	0.333***
Male	–0.058	0.166	0.282	0.466
Age	–0.028	0.076	–0.234	0.148
Age squared	0.000	0.001	0.002	0.002
Wealth	0.044	0.074	0.008	0.137*
Wealth squared	–0.005	0.004	–0.002	0.006
Wealth deviation from village mean	0.026	0.089	0.184	0.264
Ethnicity (Han majority)	–0.273	0.134**	0.167	0.435
Knowledge	–0.020	0.019	0.024	0.057
Communist Youth League (CYL) membership	–0.014	0.427	–2.029	1.210
Education	0.071	0.033**	0.143	0.064**
Education × CYL	0.002	0.068	0.134	0.142
Newspaper reading	0.312	0.454	–0.003	0.232
Electoral competition (village level)	2.852	0.597***	0.438	1.167
Constant	–0.959	1.801	1.011	2.840

Note: PSU = Primary Sampling Unit. Standard errors corrected for survey design effect.
*$p \leq .1$ **$p \leq .05$. ***$p \leq .01$.

membership, minorities are well integrated into official positions and the party eagerly reaches out to recruit them.[22]

Turning to village characteristics, we find that the degree to which the election was competitive is most decisive. In sum, in the 2004 village elections, although family wealth, individual education, and ethnicity significantly affected participation rates, it was the institutional character of the election process, in particular the perception of choice and competition, that was the single most important factor behind voter turnout.

Running for Village Office

Chinese village elections should not be confused with municipal elections in democratic systems. Formal candidates emerge from a process that resembles straw polls in which villagers are expected to openly nominate peers for the posts of village chair, deputy chair, and ordinary committee members. But in most cases, the Communist Party Branch, the outgoing VC, and township authorities have favorite candidates and have ample formal and informal means of making their preferences known to the villagers, although the voters can theoretically override these preferences in the open nomination process. The top two vote getters in the straw poll usually compete against each other for the post of chairman, whereas the remaining nominees—ranked in decreasing order of votes received—run for the post of ordinary committee member. For example, if a VC has one chairman and three ordinary members, two candidates will be on the ballot for chairman whereas four others will compete for the remaining three seats on the VC. By design, the odds of defeat are far lower among candidates for committee membership than for those seeking the chairmanship of the village.

In Gaoyuan, 12 of our respondents claimed that they were candidates in 2004. Among these we found 5 party members, including 1 of the 2 female candidates. Although one sixth of all CCP members in the sample ended up on a ballot, CCP membership was not an absolute requirement for final candidacy, and the majority of candidates were not party members. Nor is there clear evidence that other political filtering mechanisms prevented ordinary villagers from reaching candidacy. One may argue that the party indirectly filters candidates by allowing nonparty nominees to run formally as long as their spouses are party members. This hypothesis is easily rejected: In the Gaoyuan sample, not a single candidate's spouse was a CCP member.

Because party membership is rare in rural areas, one may also hypothesize that the regime's second best solution is to rely instead on the much larger group of past (or even current) members of the CYL. Because league membership is still a marker of political reliability, officials bent on controlling elections should favor league members over ordinary villagers. Youth League members can easily be asked to join the Communist Party once they are elected to village offices, in contrast to nonleague members, who often lack the educational credentials required to join the party. Even if they do not join, the fact that league members have been politically mobilized and socialized during their youth is likely to increase the odds that they will follow the CCP's lead in the village rather than use their elected office as a platform to

challenge the authority of party leaders. Yet we find that none of the seven nonparty candidates were admitted into the Youth League. It is also striking that their educational attainment was far lower than that of party candidates, and they were also considerably younger. We can confidently conclude that in practice both party and nonparty members were allowed in run the Gaoyuan 2004 village elections and that nonparty candidates emerged from strata of villagers that are unlikely to be incorporated in the formal, nonelectoral political institutions that dominated village life before the introduction of elections.

Despite the apparent heterogeneity of candidates, once we control for individual- and village-level characteristics that we used to predict turnout, the multivariate analysis identifies one dominant pathway to candidacy: party membership. When we fit a probit model of candidacy in 2004, party membership has a large impact and is statistically significant at the .01 level (Table 2, "running for office" model). On the other hand, party membership did not guarantee electoral success: Only 2 out of 12 respondents who stood for election were victorious, and neither was a party member. We also find that villagers who nominate candidates were also more likely to run, probably because self-nominations are allowed. It is striking that apart from education (which is also only marginally significant), none of the remaining key factors that would ordinarily be associated with elite political status approach statistical significance: Household wealth does not explain candidacy, nor does political awareness (captured in terms of substantive political knowledge) or frequent reading of newspapers. The ethnic variation we found in voting also disappears. Nor do we detect any evidence that the nature of the community has any impact on candidacy.

In conclusion, if we take the villagers' account of the degree of electoral competition at face value, elections were competitive in most villages and voter participation was directly related to the competitiveness of the election process. Voters reported not only that there were more candidates than seats to be filled (as mandated by law) but also that the CCP allowed some ordinary villagers to emerge from the nomination process who would otherwise be excluded from the historical institutions of Chinese communism: They were not party members, had never joined the CYL, and (with a single exception) had never held political posts in the villages. At the same time, the party plays a decisive role in the grooming of candidates who ended up on the ballot: Party members were far more likely to run than nonmembers. Given our small sample of candidates, we cannot estimate the odds of victory reliably, but we did show without a doubt that nonparty members both ran and won in these contested village elections.

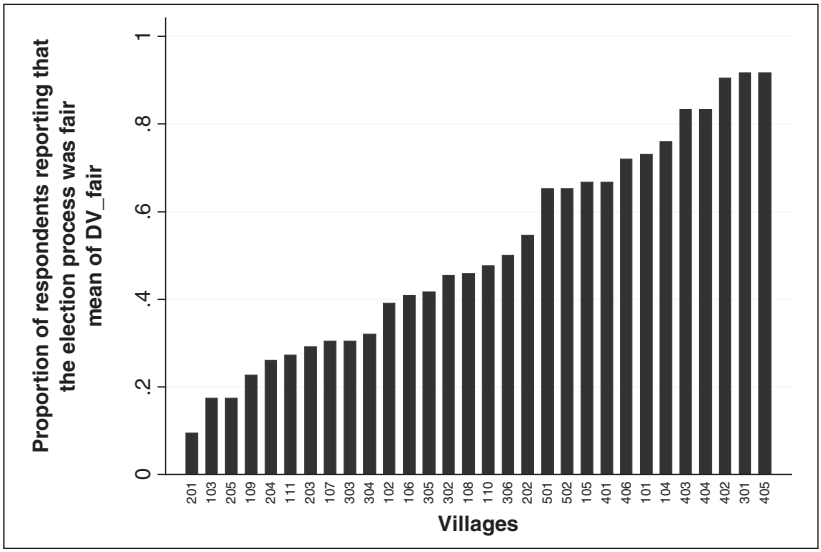

Figure 2. Level of election fairness, aggregated by village
Note: Bars represent village means by aggregating the respondents' answer to the following question: "Do you think that the way of counting ballots in the last election was fair?"

Were Elections Fair?

In addition to the dimension of electoral participation, the quality of election procedures is an important benchmark of the credibility of electoral institutions. Previous studies of Chinese village elections show that free(er) and fair(er) elections improve the responsiveness of leaders and the quality of village governance (Brandt & Turner, 2007; Kennedy et al., 2004; Li & O'Brien, 1999). Lianjiang Li (2003) argues that more villagers participate in politics after they experience "free and fair election" (p. 652). An increased sense of political efficacy encourages voters to press elected village leaders to constrain (and even confront) village Party Branch leaders or abusive township officials, thus making local leaders more accountable to voters.[23]

In the 2004 survey, we asked voters whether they believed that procedures for counting ballots in their village were fair or not. The villagers of Gaoyuan County held sharply different views about the fairness of the election in which they participated. Because we were concerned that some

villagers may not have dared report that the election was unfair and would have claimed instead that they did not know or refused to answer the question, we coded as 1 all respondents who affirmed that the process was fair, and all other answers were recoded as 0. Using this benchmark, only 47% of the respondents reported that their village election was fair, and such assessments systematically vary across electoral districts (Figure 2). Given that the politically correct answer was to reply that elections were fair, we take this variation as a sign that respondents were truthful when answering the question.

Electoral participation—especially voting—is probably correlated with individual perceptions of fairness, but the direction of the causal link is contested. Although Birch (2005) contends that satisfaction with electoral procedures encourages turnout, in the context of noninstitutionalized elections where voters have little experience with voting, it is far more likely that individual experience with casting a ballot, observing how ballots are counted, and seeing whether the most vote getters are actually confirmed as election winners all shape individual perceptions of electoral fairness decisively. Furthermore, researchers must live with the constraint that existing data generation efforts allow testing only the impact of elections on attitudes but not whether attitudes measured via surveys after elections have taken place affected voting behavior. Several analyses ignore this temporal sequencing difficulty. For instance, Chen and Zhong (2002, pp. 185-190) use villagers' "support for the regime" and "internal efficacy" or "democratic orientation" measured during postelection interviews as predictors of turnout. Similarly, Shi (1999, p. 1129) used measures of democratic orientation and interest in politics collected after the voters' encounter with elections as predictors of turnout. We agree with Lianjiang Li's conclusion that voters' experience with elections has important psychological consequences. The experience of elections should not only affect voter efficacy but also increase the sense of fairness among the subset of voters who were exposed to "better" elections. Without panel data at the voter level, we contend that only factual or behavioral variables should be used as predictors in cross-sectional designs.[24] Such variables as age, gender, ethnicity, party membership, and number of candidates may be collected following elections, and because they are not influenced by the respondent's voting experience, these variables can be used legitimately as predictors of multivariate models based on cross-section data.

Because we detected a strong positive impact of competition on voting, estimates of the impact of experience with voting on the perception of electoral fairness require an empirical strategy that accounts for the possible

endogeneity of our key variable, voting. Y^*_{Vote} and Y^*_{Fair} are latent variables, for which we obverse dichotomous indicators of voting and finding the election was held fairly.

$$Y^*_{Fair} = \beta'\mathbf{X}_1 + u_1 \text{ (where } Y_{Fair} = 1 \text{ if } Y^*_{Fair} > 0, 0 \text{ otherwise)}$$
$$Y^*_{Vote} = \delta_2 Y_{Vote} + \beta'\mathbf{X}_2 + u_2 \text{ (where } Y_{Vote} = 1 \text{ if } Y^*_{Fair} > 0, 0 \text{ otherwise)}$$

This specification closely resembles Maddala's (1983, p. 122) classic exposition.

However, Wilde (2000, p. 311) has since shown that the identification strategy needed to estimate such a model is not as intractable as Maddala suggested, provided that at least one varying exogenous regressor is present in each equation. Altonji, Elder, and Taber (2005) also suggest that bivariate probits may be more appropriate than the traditional instrumental variable approach, which is unworkable with dichotomous endogenous regressors.[25] Jaenicke (2008) has performed Monte Carlo experiments that confirm that bivariate probits with endogenous dummy repressors perform well if the sample size is sufficiently large.[26] We estimated such a *biprobit* model, and because the error terms are not correlated across equations (rho is not significant), we also report the simpler probit specification (Table 3).

In addition to voting, we also account for the experience of deeper electoral engagement, namely, nominating candidates for village office. In this case, the nominated candidates variable is coded 1 if one has ever nominated a candidate in a village election, 0 otherwise. This variable can help adjudicate between those who contend that voting is central to the election experience and those—such as Baogang He (2006) and Kennedy et al. (2004)—who emphasize the importance of more active forms of participation.

We also control for membership in the village political elite, in the sense that Communist Party members, and to a lesser extent Youth League members, were identified as regime supporters in the process of joining these institutions at an earlier point. These individuals are more likely to perceive that elections are fair even if they are not, quite simply because they hold some political clout in their village. Finally, we account for the ethnicity of the respondent because of nature of the research site. In Gaoyuan, the Yi ethnicity was critical to the development of Communist Party as early as the 1930s. Thus, members of the group are more likely to support electoral institutions in a region where they have played a major political role since the foundation of the regime, in contrast to the Han ethnic majority that dominates national but not county politics.

What accounts for the variation of the sense of fairness among villagers? The results are suggestive of a causal chain linking competition to voting,

Table 3. Were Elections Fair?

	Bivariate probit with binary endogenous regressor		Probit	
Number of strata	2		2	
Number of PSUs (villages)	30		30	
Number of observations	689		696	
Population size	902.9		910.3	
Design *df*	28		28	
F	7.78		4.92	
Prob > *F*	.003		.002	
	Fair equation		Fair	
	β	*SE*	β	*SE*
Voted in 2004 election	1.638	0.769**	1.013	0.285***
Nominated candidates	–0.030	0.136	0.001	0.117
Communist Party membership	0.449	0.282	0.355	0.198*
Ethnicity (Han majority)	–0.270	0.196	–0.294	0.167*
Newspaper reading	0.336	0.279	0.413	0.323
Electoral competition (village level)	0.914	1.022	1.430	0.747*
Constant	–1.997	0.493***	–1.907	0.507***
Voted in 2004 equation				
Nominated candidates	0.230	0.432	—	—
Communist Party membership	–0.143	0.262	—	—
Male	–0.099	0.182	—	—
Age	–0.034	0.071	—	—
Age squared	0.000	0.001	—	—
Wealth	0.064	0.097	—	—
Wealth squared	–0.007	0.005	—	—
Wealth deviation from village mean	0.037	0.099	—	—
Ethnicity (Han majority)	–0.219	0.157	—	—
Knowledge	–0.017	0.018	—	—
Communist Youth League (CYL) membership	–0.007	0.415	—	—
Education	0.073	0.035**	—	—
Education × CYL	0.002	0.069	—	—
Newspaper reading	0.361	0.463	—	—
Electoral competition (village level)	2.774	0.524***	—	—
Constant	–0.908	1.612	—	—
Rho	–.411	.431		—

Note: PSU = Primary Sampling Unit. Standard errors corrected for survey design effect.
**$p \leq .05$. ***$p \leq .01$.

and in turn voting to fairness. As we found in Table 2, electoral competition is the strongest predictor of turnout. Turning to the fairness equation, we find a large substantive impact of voting (though not as strongly significant as in the simple probit version). The findings are strongly consistent with the hypothesis that villagers' experience with electoral institutions clearly affects their sense of fairness. Villagers who voted were more likely to claim that the elections were fair. These results hold regardless of the respondents' political standing in the village or their ethnicity. In contrast to Kennedy's (2002) findings, we find no evidence of a link between the process of nominating candidates and the individual assessment of electoral fairness, which suggests that villagers who are engaged in complex acts of political participation (e.g., nominating candidates) are not necessarily self-selected regime supporters. We conjecture that the 1998 law may have the effect of preventing the type of blatant interference by higher-level officials that he documents in earlier rounds of elections in Shaanxi Province. Thus, we find no evidence to support the argument that ordinary villagers are routinely disengaged from elections controlled by village elites.

These findings also extend to Communist Party members. Because the party is so influential, one may anticipate that CCP members who benefit from their ties to the party would be more likely to state that the election was fair than nonmembers. But in fact this prediction was not confirmed. Instead, villagers strongly subscribe to the notion that a fair election is an election in which voters have the power to reject some candidates despite the single party's critical role in structuring competition among candidates, and this opinion holds regardless of political status, media usage, and ethnicity.

Conclusions

Gandhi and Przeworski (2006, p. 21) claim that "regimes that exhibit seemingly democratic institutions" are not democracies because "in spite of the celebrating event they call 'elections,' [they] do not allow for the possibility that incumbent rulers could be forced to abandon power as a result of the people's vote." We obviously do not claim that village elections in China are evidence of democratization in a single-party system, but we do stress that villagers' response to the incentives of greater competition makes incumbents frequently lose elections and that being allowed to choose between multiple candidates drives the perception of electoral fairness. Therefore, the experience of Chinese village elections encourages political science to scrutinize the vitality of electoral experiments in

authoritarian regimes to consider the impact of choice on individual voter behavior.

Two chains of events are especially noteworthy in the Chinese case. First, voters seem highly responsive to the competitiveness of elections. When candidates must compete for votes or lose office, voters participate and perceive elections as fair. Villagers who lack choice tend not to vote and find elections unfair. The contrast between models of voting and running further demonstrate that even when competition is structured to the benefit of party members, competition defined as choice between candidates still is sufficient to engage voters.

The second chain of events is seemingly less positive for the evolution of the Chinese political system but helps illuminate the logic behind a single party's decision to hold competitive elections: The ruling party disproportionately recruits from the well-educated and those who have been socialized in long-standing institutions of the regime such as the Youth League, and party members are in turn highly likely to appear on the roster of candidates. These candidates do not always win, but the selection mechanism minimizes the risk that elections will be hijacked by political entrepreneurs whose loyalty to the regime has not been tested. The crucial point is that voters seem to be satisfied even with elections that are heavily controlled and offer only a limited degree of choice. This suggests that elections are not only a means to increase accountability but also an instrument that with little political risk the regime can use to bolster popular confidence in the fairness of political institutions.

The mechanisms that we highlight in this article have implications beyond one-party Leninist regimes. An increasing number of authoritarian regimes hold local elections without party competition, even when they do not always do so at the national level. Political scientists should not assume that these local contests are pure window dressing without implications for the nature and durability of the regimes that sponsor them. We suggest that the connections among minimal competition, turnout, and perceived fairness that we found in Chinese village elections should be investigated in the wider set of regimes where multiparty elections are not allowed but where voters nevertheless have some capacity to reject incumbents or proregime candidates.

Appendix

Table A1. Comparison of Gaoyuan County With Yunnan and the Rest of China (1999)

		Deviation from	
	Gaoyuan	Yunnan *M*	China *M*
Total population	480,000	–0.58	0.05
Rural population	424,000	–0.36	0.11
Rural labor force	257,000	0.22	0.34
Total GDP at current prices (yuan)	292,923	–0.26	0.14
Total value of primary sector (yuan)	40,791	–0.92	–0.47
Total value of secondary sector (yuan)	216,811	0.61	0.66
GDP per capita (yuan)	6,103	0.40	0.29
Local financial revenue (yuan)	11,480	–0.24	0.25
Local financial revenue per capita (yuan)	240	0.48	0.22
Financial expenditures (yuan)	17,202	–0.20	0.21
Number of students in school per 10,000 people	1,713	–0.34	–0.05
Number of doctors per 10,000 people	23.6	0.93	0.26

Source: Data computed from National Bureau of Statistics (2001).
Note: Deviation is defined as $(x_{gaoyuan} - \overline{x}_{ref})$ / (standard deviation (x_{ref})) where $\overline{x}_{ref}$ is the mean value of variable x, either in Yunnan or in the entire dataset. Data include all counties and county-level cities but not urban districts.

Table A2. Summary of All Variables

Number of strata	2
Number of PSUs	30
Design-based degrees of freedom	28
Number of observations	689

	M	Linearized *SE*	95% confidence interval	
Dependent variables				
Voted in 2004 election	0.817	0.024	0.768	0.866
Ran for office in 2004 election	0.015	0.005	0.004	0.026
Election was fair	0.475	0.036	0.401	0.549
Individual-level independent variables				
Ever nominated a candidate	0.270	0.034	0.200	0.339
Communist Party membership	0.061	0.023	0.014	0.108

(continued)

Table A2. (continued)

	M	Linearized *SE*	95% confidence interval	
Gender (*male* = 1)	0.518	0.046	0.424	0.611
Wealth (possession index)	7.444	0.293	6.844	8.043
Wealth relative to village mean	0.030	0.026	–0.023	0.083
Age	38.499	0.269	37.948	39.050
Ethnicity (Han majority)	0.771	0.042	0.684	0.857
Knowledge	3.069	0.122	2.820	3.319
Communist Youth League member	0.217	0.029	0.157	0.278
Education (years)	5.587	0.199	5.179	5.994
Newspaper reader	0.073	0.008	0.056	0.089
Village-level independent variables				
Per capita income (yuan)	1339.67	38.51	1260.79	1418.56
Time to nearest bus stop (walking minutes)	24.206	7.257	9.339	39.072
Electoral competition	0.815	0.021	0.772	0.857

Note: PSU = Primary Sampling Unit. All estimates account for design effect.

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Notes

1. Article 2 of the 1998 Organic Law specifies that village committees handle public matters (*gonggong shiwu*) and the provision of public goods (*gongyi shiye*), mediate civil disputes, assist and protect public order, and inform people's governments about the opinions, demands, and proposals of villagers (National People's Congress [NPC], 1998).
2. This information comes from the Organic Law. The Yunnan Provincial Regulations on Implementing the Organic Law allow a Village Committee consisting of between five and nine members.
3. Initial candidates can be nominated by individual voters as well as by groups of villagers. Individual voters may nominate others or themselves. Candidates

who emerge from this initial process can reject or accept the nomination. Once a formal list of nominees is finalized, candidates are elected by popular vote.

4. Su and Yang (2005) also argue that elections help improve governance, but they do not base these claims on survey data or large-*N* cross-village comparisons.
5. Throughout this article, we call an election competitive when some candidates must lose because the number of candidates is greater than the number of contested seats. This conforms to the narrow provisions of the Chinese 1998 Organic Law on village self-government. We cannot take into account the degree to which races are competitive in the sense that the spread between winners and losers is small because electoral data on village elections are exceedingly difficult to obtain unless researchers are physically present in the village on election day.
6. The villagers' representative assemblies can also decide on and amend the village compact.
7. Village elections fall in the category of elections that reveal information about the performance of local officials to their political principals (Geddes, 2005).
8. In 2003 it had a population of nearly a half million residents, of whom 40% were ethnic minorities, primarily Yi.
9. Because of rounding, our sample slightly overdraws the minority stratum. Probability weights were adjusted to account for this small discrepancy in our statistical analyses.
10. At each stage (township, administrative village, and natural village) the sampled units were selected with probability proportional measures of size, which ensures that any household in the sample has the same probability of being selected as any other household in the sample. Because the number of sampled villages varies by townships, the sample is naturally self-weighting at the administrative village level. By selecting two natural villages in each administrative village, we were able to limit clustering to groups of about 12 households per natural village.
11. Throughout our analysis, we also leverage against possible bias by including the respondent age (and its squared value) as a control variable. Nevertheless, the coefficients associated with age should be interpreted with caution. Because our distribution is truncated on the left and on the right, our estimates of the impact of age may be biased downward.
12. Empirical studies of elections that preceded the 1998 law include the work of Manion (1996), Shi (1999b), and Oi and Rozelle (2000). By contrast, Zhong and Chen (2002) conducted their survey work in Jiangsu in 2000.
13. Election observers in China have noted that formal proxies are rarely used among family members: In practice, whoever has access to the voter's registration at the time when the roving box arrives will cast as many votes as there are cards in the household.

14. For instance, absentee ballots or vote by mail are lawful and routine methods of voting in many democracies, and in some American states (e.g., Oregon) they are now the only legal way of casting ballots. Such voters would be excluded under Zhong and Chen's (2002) definition.
15. We accept the possibility that some respondents who claim not to have voted may unknowingly have been counted by the authorities, but we regard such "voters" as nonparticipants.
16. Among 698 interviewees, 30 (or 4.3%) reported being Communist Party members. Probability weights account for the slightly higher estimate (6.0%) when the survey design is taken in account. The 95% confidence interval is [.01, .11].
17. Communist Youth League Membership lapses at the age of 28, though it is possible to join the Communist Party at the age of 18.
18. Article 14 of the Organic Law states that "the village committee is elected from candidates who are nominated directly by eligible voters in the village. The number of candidates must exceed the number of positions" (NPC, 1998).
19. See, for example, People's Court of Tianhe District, Guangzhou municipality, May 10, 2002: "Demand by Wen Zhijian to be reinstated on the list of eligible voters of Lingtong Village following his exclusion by the Lingtong Village Election Committee for failing to meet the rules about the timing of returning residents to the village."
20. The percentage of households that owned each of the 21 items was table (98.0%), electric rice cooker (70.0%), color television (65.0%), bicycle (56.0%), sewing machine (53.0%), DVD (45.0%), desk (29.0%), washing machine (27.0%), telephone (26.0%), motorcycle (23.0%), radio (19.0%), electric fan (18.0%), VCR (9.0%), electric water heater (8.0%), pressure cooker (8.0%), bookshelf (6.0%), camera (6.0%), refrigerator (6.0%), microwave oven (1.0%), computer (0.3%), and air conditioner (0.0%). We excluded beds from the computations because all households reported owning at least one bed. The mean household possession index is 6.97, with a standard deviation of 3.23.
21. We compute an index ranging from 0 to 10 from the number of correct answers to the following questions: "In which city is the seat of [this] prefecture located?" (49% correct answers), "Who is the President of the People's Republic of China?" (40%), "Who is the President of the United States?" (12%), "What is the world's highest mountain?" (51%), "In which year will China host the Olympics?" (23%), "Of which country is Hanoi the capital?" (26%), "Which city is the capital of Iraq?" (8%), "What is the name of China's longest river?" (29%), "In which year was the PRC founded? (39%), and "What is the value of Pi?" (15%). As for the question "Who is the President of the United States?" any reference to President "Bush" or "George Bush" (*bushi, xiao bushi*) is coded as correct. For the value of Pi, the correct integer is sufficient to be considered a valid answer (therefore 3.5 is coded as correct). The combined knowledge score has a mean of 2.9 and a standard deviation of 2.7, with an actual range from 0 to 10.

22. Also because non-Han tend to live in smaller villages than Han but each village must have a party branch with three members, we hypothesize that the likelihood for admission will be higher for minorities.
23. Other sources of leadership accountability can exist beside elections. Solidarity groups can be an efficient pathway to elite responsiveness, as Tsai (2007) contends. But we believe that the conduct of village properly run elections encourages local officials to be responsive to villagers' needs (Birney, 2007; Manion, 1996).
24. Li (2003) is a rare exception to the lack of panel data collected both before and after a round of elections.
25. The reliability of instrumental variable models (and especially their probit specification) has been widely debated in the recent methodological literature. The trade-off between the efficiency and the erogeneity of instrumental variables has plagued their estimation (Bartels, 1991). Dunning (2008) cautions that a focus on the usual discussion of the exclusion restriction alone is not sufficient to guarantee a successful estimation. Altonji, Elder, and Taber (2005) suggest that bivariate probits may be more appropriate, but their approach is not suitable in our case. We thus caution that our IV-probit results are only suggestive of the plausibility of our theoretical mechanism linking competition, turnout, and fairness.
26. Arendt and Larsen (2006) have applied this technique to the relationship between trust and vote in bivariate and trivariate specifications.

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