Economic Development and the Implementation of Village Elections in Rural China

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Based on survey data from rural Fujian Province of China, this paper shows that economic development, especially village collective revenue, plays an important role in village elections. With economic development and industrialization, collective revenues will increase and differentiated interests will develop among villagers. Village elections are institutional channels for villagers to articulate their interests. The research findings show that it is the collective revenue and the relative living standard of the village compared with other townships within the same county or district that arouse villagers’ interests for participation and candidates’ motives for campaigning, and thus enhance the implementation of elections. The paper concludes that village-level economic development is crucial for the implementation of competitive elections. With economic development, village committees will control more collective revenues, thus increasing the stakes villagers have in elections. This will result in greater participation by villagers in elections, and in more competitive elections. Increased competitiveness of elections will facilitate changes in the institutions regarding village committee elections.

There has been a longstanding debate about the relationship between economic development and democratization. Since most theories have focused on explaining democratization at a national level, there has been little systematic analysis of intranational differences in the implementation of democratic reforms. This paper fills this gap by presenting evidence showing that in localities where economic development leads to higher government revenues, villagers participate more actively in newly instituted elections and competition between election candidates is more intense. Democratic reforms in these areas are more likely to become institutionalized rather than remain formalities.

Theoretical arguments

Theoretical arguments about the relationships between economic development and democratization can be traced back to Lipset, who proposed: ‘Perhaps the most
widespread generalization linking political systems to other aspects of society has been that democracy is related to the state of economic development'. According to Lipset, two important factors related to economic development will enhance the likelihood of democracy in a country. First, economic development is associated with increases in education, which in turn promotes political attitudes conducive to democracy. Second, economic development alters the social structure by increasing the population of the middle-class, which is the main pro-democracy force in the society. Lipset's observations have generated a large body of research in comparative politics, which has been supported and contested, revised and extended, buried and resuscitated.

The relationship between economic development and the village elections in rural China, which are the only grassroots elections under an authoritarian regime, is different from the national level democracies studied by social mobilization theorists. In other words, if relationships between economic development and village elections in rural China are to some extent similar to what has been suggested by mobilization theorists, the mechanisms and rationales behind them are totally different. First, the relationships studied by modernization theorists are macro-level phenomena and related to national states, while village elections are local-community level democratic practices. Second, mobilization theorists suggest that authoritarian regimes will begin the transformation process to democracies when per capita GDP reach $5,000–6,000. If making a comparison between village elections in rural China and residential committee elections in urban areas, we will find that the former is more contested, which seems to contradict mobilization theories, for the per capita GDP in rural areas is far below that in urban areas. Finally, mobilization theorists stress the importance of social structure transformation, arguing that with the increase of the middle class population, more people will receive higher education and they will become more interested in politics. However, the case in rural China is different. It is the increased collective wealth, not the transformation of social structure that directly arouses villagers’ interests in participation. Furthermore, for national level democracy, it is important for voters to receive a basic level of education and to have some knowledge about domestic and foreign policies to make political participation more efficacious, while for grassroots democracy in rural China things are different. Although it is arbitrary to presume that there is no relationship between education and villagers’ participation, the level of formal education is not a prerequisite for villagers to participate in local public affairs within a small community with a population of several hundreds to thousands. Uneducated villagers, even illiterates, know who will be more suitable to be their village leaders and who will represent their interests best and do things more fairly. So mobilization theories do not adequately explain what is happening in rural China.

In order to understand politics in rural China, we need to develop new theoretical arguments and explore the relationships between economic development and village

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elections under a broader social and cultural context. Historically, peasants in China depended on landlords economically and on family and lineage networks socially. After the Communist Party took power in 1949, with the collectivization of land and the suppression of clan lineage, peasants became highly dependent on brigades and production teams under the Commune System. Beginning in the 1980s, the process of de-collectivization began with the introduction of the household responsibility system. With the de-collectivization after the introduction of the household responsibility system, peasants became the most independent and autonomous stratum in Chinese society. Their political participation has been transformed from the so-called mobilized participation in the Commune period to autonomous participation in the present period. When participating in elections and other public affairs, villagers will weigh costs and rewards and try to maximize their interests. Villagers spend time and energy to nominate candidates and compare candidates before voting. Candidates need even more time, energy and other resources to participate in campaigning. Therefore, only when villagers benefit more from the results than cost paid will they actively participate in elections; and only when candidates will be rewarded more when elected than they have paid into a campaign will they enthusiastically campaign.

As self-government organizations, village committees shoulder double tasks of implementing state policies, such as family planning and tax collecting, and enhancing public goods, including construction of village roads and schools. Since the Organic Law on Village Committees passed by the standing committee of the National Congress in 1987, provincial laws on village elections have been promulgated. According to these laws, village committees are elected directly by villagers every three years. Although there are differences in the election procedures in different provinces, it usually requires great effort, energy, time and other resources both for organizers to hold elections and for voters to participate in elections. Take Fujian as an example, candidates nominated by villagers directly are called preliminary candidates (chubu houxuanren). The number of preliminary candidates nominated by villagers usually is several-times to ten-times the positions to be elected. The village committee usually has five to six members: one director, two vice-directors and two to three general members. The average number of preliminary candidates in each village was 7.2 for the village committee director, 16.3 for the vice-directors, and 33 for the two to three positions of general members in the 1997 election in Heshan Township, Xiamen. These preliminary candidates must be nominated through a process called primary election (yuxuan), in which all village representatives vote to determine official candidates (zhengshi houxuanren). And

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4. According to John Burns, peasants under the Commune System in Mao Era were mobilized to participate in politics aiming at implementing state policies. Rong Hu discusses villagers' political participation in village elections and insists that peasants' political participation has transformed from mobilized participation to autonomous participation. Johns Burns, Political Participation in Rural China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Rong Hu, ‘Cunmin Weiyunhui Xuanju Zhong Cunmin De Zizhu Shi Changyuan’ [‘The autonomous participation of villagers in village elections’], in Lianjiang Li, ed., Cunweihui Xuanju Guangcha [Observations of Village Elections] (Tianjin Renming Chubangshe, 2001).
finally, this list of official candidates, usually more than the positions to be elected, will be published and voted on by all villagers aged 18 and above on the election day. In addition to the human and financial resources put into elections by the election committees, villagers must also spend a great deal of time and energy to nominate candidates, to compare and distinguish strong-points and weaknesses of each candidate, to participate in election conferences and voting, and even to campaign for some candidates. As for candidates, more resources are required for campaigning. In other words, election requires cost, both for voters and candidates.  

Therefore, to villagers, what can make the village committees so important for them that rewards from the results of elections will exceed the cost of their input into elections? To candidates, what can make their benefits from being elected and holding posts on village committees exceed their costs both for campaigns and for holding office? As the self-government organizations of local communities, village committees enjoy considerable power, which ranges from the distribution of land for building houses and construction of local schools, mediating disputes among villagers, providing certifications for villagers who migrate to urban areas for business or work, to collection of state taxes. If we compare village committees with resident committees in urban China, we will find the former is much more powerful. For in urban areas, under the planned economy, work organizations not only pay for their employees, but also provide housing, medical care, and other related welfare services for them. Although reforms have tried to reduce their dependence, urban residents have been and still are highly dependent on their work units, and resident committees are less important for them. Furthermore, villagers are also more autonomous than commune members in Mao’s era. Under the commune system, peasants worked collectively in production teams and brigades, and they depended on collectives for grains. After the household responsibility system, peasants were liberated from the control of collectives and became the most autonomous stratum in Chinese society. Therefore, as rational actors, villagers will weigh costs and rewards when they participate in election and rewards from the election results are most important for villagers’ participation.

There are many factors that contribute to the impact of village elections on villagers’ rewards; the most important factor is economic development. The economic development level, especially village collective wealth, is directly related to how much villagers and candidates will be rewarded from the results of elections. In economically more developed areas, where village committees control more collective wealth and

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10. Oi, *State and Peasant in Contemporary China*.
11. According to the Rong Hu, four important factors contribute to villager participation in elections: (1) incumbent village leaders’ behavior: if leaders abuse their power during office terms, more villagers will participate in elections to vote against the incumbents; (2) election fairness: the fairer the election, the more efficacious villagers feel, and the more they participate in elections; (3) economic development: economic development will increase the competitiveness of elections; and (4) characteristics of local communities, which decrease the anonymity of voters, also contribute to high turnout under some occasions. Rong Hu, ‘Cunmin Weiyunhui Xuanju Zhong Cunmin De Zizhu Shi Changyu’.
resources, villagers have a bigger stake in elections, and they participate in elections actively. In these areas, village committee members usually have more power and are rewarded more for holding positions, so more candidates will run for village offices and more resources will be put into campaigning. On the contrary, in poor areas where village committees control less or even no collective wealth and resources, villagers’ stake in village committees and their elections is low. Fewer villagers’ care who will be their leaders and fewer villagers want to be elected to village committees to do these thankless jobs. Given such low participation from villagers and the high cost for elections, the complex election institutions cannot be implemented effectively and elections will inevitably become mere formalities in these areas. Therefore, the economic development level is crucial for the effective implementation of elections, and a certain amount of collective wealth is the prerequisite for successful elections. Only when village collectives control a certain amount of economic resources, no matter where these resources come from, is it possible for villagers to get more rewards than costs from participation. Then they will actively participate in elections, and elections will be implemented effectively.

As a matter of fact, village election is an institutional mechanism to promote interests and to settle disputes among villagers. With economic development and industrialization, collective revenues will increase and villagers’ interests will be sparked. Differentiated interests will develop among different natural villages, teams, clans, occupation groups and even age groups in an administrative village. These interests will need to be articulated through some channels and mediated via certain mechanisms. Village elections are such channels for villagers to articulate their interests, and village committees are such mechanisms to mediate interest disputes among fellow villagers.

**Research design and variable measurement**

Of the considerable research on village elections in rural China, many have explored the relationship between economic development and village elections. For

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13. Some village collective wealth comes from collective enterprises, some from compensation from the state for land confiscation, others from fees collected from villagers.


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example, Lawrence argues that poor villages will take a leading role in the implementation process of village elections,\textsuperscript{15} while O'Brien suggests that village elections are more likely to succeed in rich villages.\textsuperscript{16} However, Oi proposes that there may be an inverse relationship between the level of economic development and progress in the implementation of the democratic village rule.\textsuperscript{17} Epstein suggests that provinces with the middle level of economic development have developed their elections more successfully.\textsuperscript{18} Shi further claims that the relationship between economic development and village elections is a concave curve: economic wealth increases the likelihood that a village will hold semi-competitive elections for people to choose their leaders, but its impact diminishes as economic wealth increases.\textsuperscript{19}

Although these studies are helpful for our understanding of community politics in rural China, most of them are based on case studies, anecdotes or official archives, and only some have tried to analyze the relationship between economic development and village elections based on national-wide survey data. Shi did a survey in 1993–1994 and Oi and Rozelle based their analysis on a 1996 survey.\textsuperscript{20} However, these studies, careful as they are, have noteworthy limitations. First, their measurements are too simplistic and problematic. For example, one important measure in Oi and Rozelle’s study is the frequency of villagers’ assembly meetings. Although stipulated in the Organic Law as the highest decision-making body in the village, villagers’ assembly meetings are seldom held in practice,\textsuperscript{21} for it is so difficult to assemble several thousand villagers aged 18 or above who live in scattered natural villages. Because of such practical and logistical problems, villagers’ representative assemblies in many provinces have replaced villagers’ assemblies. Therefore, it does not make any sense to use such a rarely assembled village body to measure elections. On the other hand, Shi measured elections by asking respondents whether their villages had held elections for them to choose leaders and whether these elections provided them with candidate choices, while Oi and Rozelle asked whether elections were contested as dependent variables in their regression analysis. These variables might have been adequate to measure village elections at the beginning of the implementation of the Organic Law more than ten years ago. However, they are too simplistic to measure the present electoral reality where contested election with multiple candidates is the common phenomenon in most provinces. Our survey data shows that all the 40 villages in our sample have implemented elections with more candidates than posts. Furthermore, Shi uses county-level data of economic development, per capita GDP in 1993 and economic development speed calculated from per capita GDP of 1982–1993, to explain village-level politics. As a matter of fact, disparities of economic development not only exist among provinces and counties, but also among townships and villages within a county. Although there are

\begin{itemize}
  \item Lawrence, ‘Democracy, Chinese style’.
  \item O’Brien, ‘Implementing political reform in China’s villages’.
  \item Oi, ‘Economic development, stability and democratic village self-governance’.
  \item Shi, ‘Economic development and village elections’.
  \item \textit{Ibid}.; Oi and Rozelle, ‘Elections and power’.
\end{itemize}
some relationships between county-level economic development and village-level economic wealth, it is inaccurate to explain village election by using county-level data.

Second, these studies were based on nationwide survey data, without taking institutional differences among provinces into consideration. Although originated in two counties of Guangxi in the early 1980s, village committees and their elections were stipulated by laws and implemented from top to bottom (zi shang er xia). After the Organic Law passed by the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress in 1987, provinces passed implementation measures in successive years. Since provincial level officials had different attitudes towards the Organic Law, it has been implemented unevenly among provinces. Fujian and Zhejiang passed the implementation measures in 1988, Gansu, Guizhou, Hubei and Hunan in 1989, Heilongjiang, Liaoning, Qinghai and Shaanxi in 1990, Tianjin, Shanxi, Sichuang, Jiling and Xingjiang in 1991, Tibet in 1993, Jiangsu and Jiangxi in 1994, and finally Guangdong in 1998. It took more than a decade for provinces to promulgate implementation measures of the Organic Law. Furthermore, the differences also exist in the stipulations of election measures. For example, in the 2000 village elections in Fujian Province, it was stipulated that a single villager could nominate candidates and formal candidates were determined by primary elections (yuxuan) participated in by village representatives, without a process of qualification examinations (zige shenchang); while in the 2002 election in Guangdong, candidate qualifications were examined and it was stipulated that four kinds of persons would be deleted from the list, such as villagers who violated family planning policies.

It is hard to make comparisons about how the electoral institutions have been implemented in different provinces, for the institutions per se vary so greatly. If we want to understand the real relationship between village elections and economic development and base our study on nation-wide survey data, we should take institutional differences of village elections into consideration and try to draw samples from provinces with similar election institutions or consider institutional differences as a control variable in the analysis. For example, although Shi and Oi drew samples from different provinces, they failed to take into account these institutional differences when they did their surveys.

The data for this paper comes from a survey conducted in October–November 2001 in Shouning County and Xiamen Municipality of Fujian Province. Rather than drawing samples from different provinces, in this study we only make comparisons within one province. Even though there are differences in the implementation of the Organic Law in different counties and townships, the basic institutional settings are the same throughout the province. Besides the Organic Law passed by the national congress, the basic institutions of village elections consist of Implementation Measures of the Organic Law, Election Measures of Village Committees and related

22. About the origin and development of village elections, see O’Brien and Li, ‘Accommodating “democracy” in a one-party state’.
laws passed by provincial congresses, and administrative norms stipulated by provincial bureaus of civil administration. Therefore, the institutional consistence within one province is a solid basis for our comparison between different areas with different economic development levels in understanding how the same institutions are implemented differently.\textsuperscript{27}

A multi-stage sampling method was adopted. First, Shouning County and Xiamen Municipality were chosen purposively. Consequently, five townships were drawn randomly from each area, and then four villages from each township. At the final stage, 25 villagers were drawn from each village. The total sample consists of 1,000 villagers, 40 villages and 10 townships. Out of the total sample of 1,000, some 913 villagers were interviewed successfully. Of the 913 respondents, 56.3\% are male and 43.7\% female; 24.4\% are under age 30, 24.4\% are from the age range 31–40, 23.6\% from the age range 41–50, 12.9\% are aged 51–60, and 11\% are older than 61.

In order to correct shortcomings in existing research on village elections, more sophisticated variables are needed to measure the election. Variables in this study can be categorized into three sets: first, a dependent variable to measure elections in each village; second, two intermediate variables, villagers’ participation, which is a dependent variable in Model 1, and election competitiveness, which is a dependent variable in Model 2, will be used as independent variables in Model 3; and third, independent variables measuring economic development, such as collective revenue and per capita income, and other predictors such as education and village distance to the county seat.

Let’s examine the dependent variable measuring elections first. As mentioned above, Shi and Oi and Rozelle’s measures of elections are too simplistic.\textsuperscript{28} In order to measure the election, we designed a more complex and comprehensive scale, including nomination and determination of candidates and voting methods. We asked respondents: ‘Were any of the following measures practiced in your village in the 2000 election?’ Fifteen items listed in Table 1 followed this question. Of the 15 items, the following six items are related to the nomination process of candidates: (1) villagers nominate candidates directly (includes villagers nominating candidates individually or jointly); (2) the village Party branch nominates candidates; (3) township leaders nominate candidates; (4) the incumbent village committee nominate candidates; (5) villager representatives nominate candidates; and (6) a villager nominates oneself as a candidate. Of these six items, items (1), (5) and (6) are positive, which means that the more affirmative answers to these questions, the more open and fair the nomination process is. Items (2), (3) and (4) are negative questions. If more respondents give affirmative answers to these questions, the nomination process would be less open and fair.\textsuperscript{29}

Candidates nominated by villagers are called preliminary candidates (\textit{chubu houxuanren}). How official candidates (\textit{zhengshi houxuanren}) are finalized from the

\textsuperscript{27} It might be interesting to explore how provincial institutions have been set up and why the Organic Law was implemented differently among provinces. But this is not the focus of this paper. We take institutions as a given in this study.

\textsuperscript{28} Shi, ‘Economic development and village elections’; Oi and Rozelle, ‘Elections and power’.

\textsuperscript{29} John Kennedy stresses the importance of nomination in village elections. See John Kennedy, ‘The face of “grassroots democracy” in rural China’, \textit{Asian Survey} XLII(3), (May/June 2003), pp. 456–482.
In Fujian, candidates were finalized through a process called ‘democratic consultation’ (minzhu xieshang) until the 1994 election, in which the election leadership group would determine official candidates by soliciting opinions of villagers and the township government. As a matter of fact, organizational intentions (zuzhi yitu) from the township government would prevail in this winnowing process. From the 1997 election on, a process called primary election (yuxuan) has been introduced and candidates are finalized by villager representatives’ votes, which will increase the chance of villager-favored candidates to be placed onto the list of official candidates. In order to measure to what extent this stipulation has been implemented, we asked respondents these questions: (7) whether official candidates were finalized by villagers’ voting; (8) whether official candidates were determined by the Party branch; (9) whether official candidates were determined by township government; and (10) whether official candidates were finalized by villager representatives’ voting. If questions (7) and (10) receive more affirmative answers from respondents, the new stipulation regarding candidate finalization has been implemented. If questions (8) and (9) receive more affirmative answers, that means the new stipulation has not been implemented and villagers’ will has not fully been expressed.

The last five questions in Table 1 focus on voting methods: (11) whether there were more candidates than positions to be elected; (12) whether an election meeting was held for villagers to vote; (13) whether roving ballot-boxes (liudong piaoxiang) were used; (14) whether fixed polling stations (guding toupiaozhan) were set up; and (15) whether secret polling booths (mimi huapiaojian) were set up. Roving ballot boxes, carried by election staff to collect ballots from door to door, have been used since the

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Table 1. Items measuring village elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Villager nominate candidates directly (+)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) The Party Branch nominates candidates (−)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Township government nominates candidates (−)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Incumbent village committee nominates candidates (−)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Villager representatives nominate candidates (+)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Villager nominates oneself as candidate (+)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Official candidates finalized by villagers’ voting (+)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Official candidates determined by the Party branch (−)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) Official candidates determined by township (−)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) Official candidates finalized by villager representatives’ voting (+)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(11) There are more candidates than positions to be elected (+)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12) Villagers vote in election meeting (+)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(13) Roving ballot boxes are used (−)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(14) Fixed polling station is set up (+)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15) Secret polling booth is set up (+)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND VILLAGE ELECTIONS
beginning of village elections in rural areas. Although this measure increases voter turnout significantly, it is also easy for election staff to cheat and manipulate the result. In the 1997 election, Fujian Bureau of Civil Administration stipulated that roving ballot boxes should be abolished and fixed polling stations should be set up. So we added items (15), (16) and (17) to our list to measure to what extent these new regulations were implemented in the 2000 election.

However, for our purposes of analysis, we want to know not only how many respondents answered our 15 questions affirmatively, but also how many villages in our sample practiced the 15 items listed above in the 2000 election. Because official statistics are usually contaminated by local bureaucrats and not so reliable, we prefer to deduce figures about villages. For differences of participation in and knowledge about elections among villagers, respondents from the same village might give different answers to the same question. Each question had three different answers: ‘Yes’, ‘No’, and ‘Don’t know’. Of the 20–25 respondents from each village, if more respondents answered a question ‘Yes’ than ‘No’, then we deduced that this village practiced this measure in the 2000 election. Otherwise, we deduced that the measure was not practiced in this village. Table 1 lists the deduced results, including the percentage and number of villages in our sample that practiced each election measure in the 2000 election. Of the 17 items, some were practiced by more villages, such as items (13) and (14), while others by fewer villages. Then we calculated a score for each village. As mentioned above, all the 17 items in Table 1 are divided into two categories: positive items, which are designated by ‘+’, and negative items, which are designated by ‘−’. If one measure with a positive sign was practiced, the village will get a score of one, and if the measure has a negative sign, the village will receive a score of minus one. The total score of each village is then calculated. Table 2 shows numbers and percentages of villages with different scores.

We assume that economic development influences implementation of election institutions partially through villagers’ participation and competitiveness of elections, which are used as intermediate variables in the regression models. The more developed a village’s economy, the more resources are controlled by the village committee, then it can be hypothesized that the villagers will have a higher participation in the election and that the election will be more competitive. Village participation is a dependent variable in Model 1, while it is an explanatory variable in Model 3. We asked respondents to report whether they had participated in any of the 15 kinds of activities listed in Table 3 during the election. Some percentages are quite high, such as some 79.5% of villagers participated in voting, while others are lower such as only 6.1% of villagers nominated candidates. Each respondent’s participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scores</th>
<th>−4</th>
<th>−3</th>
<th>−1</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Village N. (%)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
score is calculated according to how many items he or she participated in, with a score of 1 for each item.

Another intermediate variable is election competitiveness. In order to measure election competitiveness, we asked respondents: ‘During the last election, did any candidate in your village use the following methods to campaign?’ This question was followed by nine items: (1) solicit villagers’ support door to door; (2) invite fellow villagers to dinner; (3) ask clan heads to campaign for candidate; (4) mobilize relatives and friends to get support; (5) promise to do some real things (bang shishi) after being elected; (6) promise to take less fees from villagers after being elected; (7) promise to help villagers become rich after being elected; and (9) promise to spend candidates’ own money to do public goods after being elected. Respondents’ answer to each item of the question is listed in Table 4. The more campaign methods used by candidates in a village, the more competitive its election. Then we calculated a score for each respondent by adding up his or her affirmative answers to the nine items, with a score of 1 for each item. Of course, this is only the individual respondents’ scaling of competitiveness of the election in his or her village. In order to get a village-level score, we calculated a mean of each village by adding up all respondents’ scores and then dividing by respondents’ number from the village. This village-level mean score, ranging from 2.09 to 5.25, represents the competitiveness of elections in the village, and is entered as a dependent variable in Model 2 and a predictor in Model 3.

We designed three variables as predictors in the models to measure the economic development level. The first variable is the annual per capita village collective revenue. The second variable is respondents’ rating of the living standard of their village by comparing with other townships within the county or district. We asked respondents: ‘How do you rate the living standard of villagers in your own village compared with villagers in other townships of your county?’

Table 3. Villager participation (Have you participated any of the following activities during election?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominate candidates individually</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilize other villagers to nominate candidates</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominate candidates with other villagers jointly</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominate oneself as candidate</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate in primary election meeting</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobilize others to vote for one’s favored candidates</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuade others not to vote for one’s opposed candidates</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate in voting</td>
<td>726</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help to campaign for your favored candidates</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give suggestions for improving election organizations</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend meetings for introduction of candidates</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask candidates questions on campaign speech meeting</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend campaign speech meeting of candidates</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refuse to vote for improper election arrangements</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuade others not to vote for improper election arrangement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Five answers were provided: (1) much better, (2) a little bit better, (3) the same, (4) a little bit worse, and (5) much worse. Scores from 5 to 1 were given from ‘much better’ to ‘much worse’ in that order. The third variable is the annual per capita household income, which is the annual household income of each respondent divided by the number of family members. Some observers of Chinese rural politics use county-level per capita GDP to predict elections, while others emphasize the distinction between income sources.\textsuperscript{31} We argue that explanation of village elections should be based on village-level data, especially village collective revenues.

Besides variables of economic development, villagers’ education, distance from the county seat and percentage of out-migrant villagers are added to Models 1, 2 and 3 as control variables. Villagers’ education is a continuous variable, measuring years of villagers attending school. Social mobilization theorists argue that education increases political participation. If this argument is applicable to rural China, respondents’ education will increase participation in our models. Village distance from the county seat is added, for some observers argue that the presence of county officials facilitates elections. Finally, the percentage of out-migrant villagers is calculated in every village.\textsuperscript{32} Since the household responsibility system was introduced to the countryside, many surplus laborers in poor rural areas have migrated to urban areas and richer villages to find jobs with private and foreign enterprises. Some observers have proposed that as out-migration increases, the amount of participation decreases.

\textsuperscript{31} Shi, ‘Economic development and village elections’; Oi and Rozelle, ‘Elections and power’.

\textsuperscript{32} We also calculate a percentage of in-migration in every village, which is not included in the models for its co-linearity with collective revenue (with a correlation coefficient of 0.561).

### Table 4. Election competitiveness (During last election, did any candidate in your village use the following methods to campaign?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Solicit villagers’ support door to door</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Invite fellow villagers to dinner</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Ask clan heads to campaign for candidate</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Mobilize relatives and friends to get support</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Promise to do some real things (bang shishi) after being elected</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Promise to take less fees from villagers after being elected</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Promise to investigate corruption of the incumbent leaders after being elected</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Promise to lead villagers to become rich after being elected</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) Promise to spend candidates’ own money to do public goods after being elected</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

The results of regression models shown in Table 5 reveal that: first, villager’s relative living standard greatly influences their participation in elections. In Model 1, villager participation is a dependent variable and the three economic development variables and other control variables, such as education and village distance from county seat, are entered as predictors. Of the three variables measuring economic development, only villager’s rating of the living standard of their village influences dependent variables with statistical significance, which means that the relative living standard is crucial for villagers’ participation. In other words, it is neither the household income nor the collective revenue, but the relative economic development level that motivates villagers to participate in local politics. If one village’s relative development level in the county or district is high and villagers enjoy a high living standard, they will participate in elections actively. Otherwise, if one village’s economic development lags behind in the county or district, villagers’ interest in participation will wane.

It is interesting that the relative living standard has a such strong positive effect on villager participation (and election implementation in Model 3). The rating of living standard of the village is a complex index reflecting the economic development level of the village in comparison with other townships within the county or district. In the two areas we surveyed, respondents from villages with more convenient transportation and communication usually rated their living standard higher. For example, the two villages rated highest in Shouning County are Aodong village and Datong village, which are located at the suburb of the county seat, while the two villages rated highest in Xiamen are Tongxing village and Chuangdong village, which are in the vicinity of the district seat of Tongan. Thirteen percent of respondents rated their village’s relative living standard as ‘much better’ and 56.5% as ‘a little bit better’ in Aodong village of Shouning; 8.7% of respondents rated their village’s relative living standard as ‘much better’ and 34.8% as ‘a little bit better’ in Datong of Shouning; 28% of villagers rated their village as ‘much better’ and 68% as ‘a little bit better’ in Tongxing village of Xiamen; 30% of respondents rated their village as ‘much better’ and 50% as ‘a little better’ in Chuangdong of Xiamen. However, the relative living standards in villages far from the county seat and with poor natural resources were rated very low. For example, Kengdilin village and Cuntong village were rated the lowest in Shouning, and Xidong village and Aoxi village were ranked lowest in Xiamen. No respondents rated their living standards as ‘much better’ or ‘a little better’ in Cuntao village of Shouning. Similarly, none of the respondents from both Xidong village and Aodong village rated their living standards as ‘much better’ or ‘a little better’ than that of any other villages.

Furthermore, the rating of their living standard is related to per capita household income to some extent. The living standards of Aodong village and Datong village were rated highest in Shouning, while their average per capita household incomes are ranked fourth for Aodong (2,716.15 yuan) and fifth for Datong (2,423.2 yuan). The two villages with the lowest living standard rating in Shouning are Kengdilin village
Table 5. Regression analysis of factors influencing implementation of village election institutions (standardized coefficients in parenthesis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Model 1: villager participation</th>
<th>Model 2: election competitiveness</th>
<th>Model 3: implementation of elections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Per capita collective revenue</td>
<td>-1.24E-04 (−0.041)</td>
<td>2.96E-04 (0.23)**</td>
<td>4.660E-04 (0.105)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative living standard</td>
<td>0.292 (0.146)***</td>
<td>6.27E-02 (0.074)!</td>
<td>0.55 (0.186)****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita household income</td>
<td>-1.52E-05 (−0.42)</td>
<td>2.98E-07 (−0.002)</td>
<td>3.66E-05 (0.069)!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education in years</td>
<td>3.79E-02 (0.084)*</td>
<td>2.90E-04 (0.002)</td>
<td>-5.23E-02 (−0.079)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from county seat</td>
<td>-1.81E-02 (−0.143)***</td>
<td>-2.09E-03 (−0.039)</td>
<td>-9.10E-03 (−0.049)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of out-migrant villagers</td>
<td>1.876 (0.105)**</td>
<td>2.523 (0.328)****</td>
<td>0.776 (0.029)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villager participation</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.046E-02 (0.071)!</td>
<td>0.181 (0.123)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral competitiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.097 (0.32)****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.787*</td>
<td>2.76****</td>
<td>-2.061****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance level: !$P \leq 0.1$; *$P \leq 0.05$; **$P \leq 0.01$; ***$P \leq 0.001$; ****$P \leq 0.0005$. 
and Cuntou village, and their average per capita household incomes also rank at the bottom of the 20 surveyed villages, seventeenth for that of Kengdilin, with an average per capita household income of 1,358.55 yuan, and twentieth for that of Cuntou, with an average per capita household income of 1,050.92 yuan. In Xiamen, the living standards of Tongxin village and Chuangdong village were rated highest, and their average per capita household incomes also rank as fifth (5,146.39 yuan) and first (15,540.2 yuan), while the average per capita household incomes in the two villages with the lowest living standard ratings also rank seventeenth and twentieth, 2,319.26 yuan for Xidong village and 1,495.37 yuan for Aoxi village. Despite the connections between rating of living standards and per capita household income, they represent different aspects of economic development. Respondents rate all villagers’ relative living standard as a whole and the ratings for villagers from the same village are similar, while the gap of per capita income among different households is much greater. The coefficients of variation of per capita household income in each village is much bigger than that of living standards. For example, in Datong village of Shouning, the coefficient of variation of per capita household income is 106%, while the coefficient of variation of the living standard is only 36.81%; in Aoxi village of Xiamen, the coefficient of variation of per capita household income is 91.55%, while the coefficient of variation of the living standard is only 11.16%.

Thus, the higher the rating of the living standard, the more the economic opportunities in the village, and the more powerful the village committee will be. With more economic development opportunities related to or controlled by the village committee, villagers will be more interested in local politics and more candidates will participate in the campaign, which makes the election more competitive.

Second, collective revenue influences election competitiveness significantly. Of the three independent variables measuring economic development in Model 2, both per capita collective revenue and relative living standard have a positive and statistically significant effect on election competitiveness, and the former with a much bigger coefficient. However, per capita household income, which has a negative coefficient, fails to attain statistical significance, showing household income is not an important factor influencing election competitiveness.

Why does collective revenue enhance competitiveness among candidates so greatly? Collective revenue comes from enterprises owned by villages, rent of collective owned workshops, or appropriations from higher authorities. Usually, villages in more developed areas have higher collective revenue. Cadres in rich villages can benefit from high collective revenue in the following ways. First, cadres from developed areas have higher salaries. For example, the monthly salary for each of the village committee members in Heshan Township of Xiamen is 1,000 yuan, while in poor mountainous villages of Shouning, only the village committee chairman and the Party branch secretary receive a subsidy of 200 yuan from township government each month. Second, village cadres in rich areas have more chances to

33. However, some villages in poor areas may get a big sum of appropriation from higher government during some period. For example, Weishan village, a poor village in Xiqi township of Shouning county got 1,000,000 yuan appropriation from county government to build a road in 1997, which made the village election highly competitive. Interview, May 1997.
34. Interview, October 2001.
run their own profitable enterprises. The social networks and ties with government
developed during their term of office are helpful to their own business. Third, there
are more resources controlled by village committees in rich areas and village cadres
are more powerful. And finally, it is much easier for village cadres to implement
some unpopular policies of higher authorities, such as family planning and levying of
agricultural tax. For example, in Heshan Township of Xiamen, village committees
pay agricultural tax for every household with collective revenue. Although it is
more time-consuming and demanding to hold a position on the village committee in
rich areas, the above rewards related to high collective revenue make the elections in
developed areas highly competitive.

Third, collective revenue and living standards have a positive and significant effect
on implementation of village elections. In Model 3, both per capita collective revenue
and living standards have considerable effects on implementation of village elections
with statistical significance. However, per capita household income’s effect on the
dependent variable fails to gain statistical significance.

Fourth, the more competitive the election, the better the elections will be
implemented. In Model 3, besides the three economic development variables, more
control variables, such as respondent’s education, villager participation, election
competitiveness, village distance from county seat and out-migration are included to
predict implementation of elections. Of the four control variables, election
competitiveness has the greatest effect, showing that the more competitive the
election, the better the elections were implemented.

Fifth, the more villagers that participated in the elections, the better the elections
were implemented. Of the independent variables in Model 3, villager participation
has a considerable effect on the dependent variable, with the third biggest
standardized coefficient, which shows that the more villagers participated in
elections, the more effectively implemented were the election institutions.

Sixth, education’s effect on villager participation and election competitiveness is
limited. Social mobilization theorists argue that economic development enhances
political participation by improving citizen’s education. Although villager’s
education influences villager participation slightly in Model 1, with a standardized
coefficient of 0.084 at a 0.1 significance level, it has a negative effect on election
implementation and fails to gain statistical significance on election competitiveness.

Seventh, county officials’ presence facilitates villager participation. The effect of
distance from the county seat is a dependent variable of Model 2. Competitiveness of
election fails to gain statistical significance, showing village distance from the county

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35. According to Kevin O’Brien, wealth and a flourishing collective economy may ease completion of state tasks,
raise cadres subsidies, and soften villagers’ resistance to state duties. I fully agree with O’Brien’s argument. However,
I don’t think higher collective income will reduce incumbent’s fear of electoral defeat.

36. Although considerable research suggests that higher education can make people more involved in politics, Shi
finds that citizen education is only weakly correlated with political efficacy, weakly supports political change, and
negatively influences support for economic reform. See Lipset, ‘Some social requisites of democracy’; Gabriel
A. Almond and Sidney Verba, Civil Culture (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Norman H. Nie, Bingham
G. Powell Jr and Kenneth Prewitt, ‘Social structure and political participation: developmental relationships, part I’,
American Political Science Review 63(2), (June 1969), pp. 361–378; Norman H. Nie, Bingham G. Powell Jr and
Kenneth Prewitt, ‘Social structure and political participation: developmental relationships, part II’, American
Political Science Review 63(3), (September 1969), pp. 808–832; Tianjian Shi, ‘Cultural values and democracy in the
seat has no effect on competitiveness of the election. In Model 1, distance from the county seat has a negative effect on the dependent variable and with statistical significance. This shows that the presence of county officials, especially officials in County Bureau of Civil Administration, facilitates villager participation. In Model 3, distance from the county seat’s influence on the implementation of elections fails to gain statistical significance.

Eighth, out-migration increases villager participation and election competitiveness. Differing from the assertion that out-migration will decrease villager participation, regression models in Table 5 show that out-migration has an influence on villager participation and election competitiveness with statistical significance. While out-migrant villagers may have less interest in village elections for their economic interests lie outside of the village boundaries, those who stay in the village may increase their interest for participation in elections. For the out-migrant fellow villagers, the more information from the outside that they may bring back every Spring Festival when they return home might stimulate renewed interest in the local election process. Furthermore, in villages with higher out-migration, villagers who stay home may also have some experience of out-migration and know more about the outside world, which will help enhance their effectiveness of participation and so they may more actively participate in elections as candidates.

Conclusions

The research findings show that economic development facilitates implementation of village elections. More concretely, it is the collective revenue and the relative living standard of the village compared with other townships within the same county or district that arouse villagers’ interests for participation and candidates’ motives for campaigning, and thus enhance the implementation of elections. Based on the above analysis, we may conclude that village-level economic development is crucial for the implementation of competitive elections. The more economically developed, the more collective revenues village committees control; the bigger stakes villagers have in elections, the more villagers will participate in elections, and elections will be more competitive. With increases in the competitiveness of elections, institutions regarding village committee elections, which are mechanisms for interest articulation and mediation among villagers and candidates, will be implemented more successfully.

Although our study focuses on the basic-level village elections and our conclusions differ from mobilization theories, it does not mean that our conclusions have no relationship with the democratization of the country. As a matter of fact, many observers have taken village elections as the starting point for bottom-up democratization. As a developing country in the process of industrialization, China has the biggest agricultural population who live in the countryside. By participating in village elections, a huge number of rural residents will learn

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37. For example, Mingxin Pei suggests that grassroots elections may be part of China’s ‘creeping democratization’ and Sylvia Chan argues that villager’s self-government may become a growth point for civil society. See Minxin Pei, ‘Creeping democratization in China’, *Journal of Democracy* 6(4), (October 1995), pp. 65–79; Sylvia Chan, ‘Research notes on villagers’ committee election: Chinese style democracy’, *Journal of Contemporary China* 7(19), (1998), pp. 507–521.
democracy by practice. Village elections will help cultivate among Chinese peasants core democratic values, e.g. political equality, electoral legitimacy, peaceful competition for power, elite accountability, majority rule, minority rights, and political tolerance.

For those who are promoting democratization in China, our conclusions may have some implications. Besides village elections, there are still more direct elections in China, for example, people’s representatives to county-level congresses and residential committees in urban areas. However, most of them are only formalities under an authoritarian regime. There are many factors that make these elections formalities. For example, manipulation from the Party, and lack of voter motivation and interest in these elections. In order to make these elections competitive, it is necessary to increase the importance of positions to be elected. For resident committees, interest seems, to a great extent, dependent on privatizing of government enterprises in which employees will become less dependent on their work units and care more about community affairs. For representatives to county congresses, the crucial issue is how they exercise the real power as the highest decision-making body at the county level as stipulated by the constitution. If the county congress is the real decision-making body, more people will compete to serve as representatives and more voters will participate in the elections to express their interests.