


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Manipulation without Resistance: Consensus Elections in Rural China

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Abstract

The Chinese Communist Party has been increasing its control over village elections since the early 2010s, yet this move has not triggered any widespread popular resistance. Drawing on ethnographic evidence from village elections held in 2017 in a county in Hunan province, I conceptualize a form of electoral manipulation I term “consensus elections,” in which the Party engineers a pre-electoral consensus with ordinary villagers on whom to select while deterring challenges from village elites. Consensus elections are rooted in the Chinese political elites’ ideal that favours electoral participation over competition. While participation increases regime legitimacy, competition threatens regime authority. Propaganda promoting this electoral ideal shapes the views of ordinary villagers, laying a basis of legitimacy on consensus elections. The villagers embraced voting as being oriented by a unitary common interest and developed a cynicism whereby campaigning was equated with corruption. Comparison of the processes involved in engineering consensus elections in five villages suggests popular support for such elections. Whereas popular resistance was mounted against the lack of participation, popular complicity helps the Party to deter challenges from village elites. Consensus elections have facilitated the fall of Chinese village elections without undermining the Party’s legitimacy, but consensus elections will also encourage more political challenges from village elites through non-institutionalized channels.

摘要

中共对村庄选举的控制自 2010 年代初以来在不断加强。这种控制为何没有引起民众广泛的抵制呢？通过对 2017 年湖南某县村庄选举的民族志研究，我提出了一种选举操纵的形式：共识选举。共识选举指的是在选举前党在普通村民之间就“应该选谁”制造一种共识，同时阻止村庄精英挑战这一共识。共识选举植根于中国政治精英的选举理想，即要参与不要竞争。参与有利于增加政权的合法性，但竞争会威胁到政权的稳定。对这一选举理想的政治宣传塑造了普通村民的选举观念，从而为共识选举奠定了合法性基础。村民们认为投票应是为了实现单一的共同利益，并且毫无差别地将竞争等同于腐败。我通过比较党在五个村庄实现共识选举的不同过程来证明村民对这种选举操纵的支持。当一些村庄的选举缺乏参与时，村民做出了各种形式的反抗。然而在另一些村庄，当村民的“共识”遭到村庄精英的挑战时，村民会与党合谋来遏制这种的挑战。共识选举在强化党对村庄选举控制的同时维护了其合法性，但共识选举也将促使村庄精英转向非制度化渠道来提出政治挑战。

Keywords: village elections; manipulation; consensus elections; participation without competition; electoral ideal

关键词: 村庄选举; 选举操纵; 共识选举; 有参与无竞争; 选举理想

In 1987, China’s central government granted Chinese villagers the right to elect village committees. The government’s intention was that this form of grassroots democracy would help in monitoring rural agents and increase the legitimacy of rural cadres in the wake of popular protests against illegal

taxation practices and other corrupt activities of rural cadres.¹ In 1998, the government legally recognized democratic procedures such as open nominations, multiple candidate options and the use of secret ballots. Following the nationwide implementation of these reforms,² village elections turned increasingly competitive and began to challenge the hegemonic leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in rural areas.³ Following Xi Jinping's 习近平 ascension in 2012, the central government shifted towards eliminating competitive village elections and strengthening the Party's direct control over village elections and rural governance through a series of nationwide campaigns, starting with "Anti-corruption" and "Party building" (*dangjian* 党建), launched in 2012, and continuing with "Sweeping away black societies and eradicating evil forces" (*saohei chū'e* 扫黑除恶) and "Rural revitalization" (*xiangcun zhenxing* 乡村振兴), both of which were launched in 2018. In particular, the "one shoulder pole" (*yijiantiao* 一肩挑), whereby village Party secretaries are elected and serve as village committee directors through village elections, is explicitly promoted in electoral regulations.⁴ In practice, this institution has been remarkably successful: by 2022, over 90 per cent of villages in China had followed the "one shoulder pole" policy, according to the Ministry of Civil Affairs.⁵

How did the Party under Xi reassert its control over village elections without triggering widespread popular resistance? Drawing on an ethnographic study of village elections held in 2017 in a county of Hunan province, along with documentary analyses of government policies on village elections, this paper conceptualizes a form of electoral manipulation by the Party – "consensus elections" – in which the Party engineers a pre-electoral consensus with ordinary villagers on which candidate to select, while at the same time deterring challenges from village elites.⁶ As such, voting in consensus elections serves as a ritual to ratify a pre-determined outcome set by the Party.

Consensus elections represent the central Party leaders' electoral ideal: elections which favour participation over competition. Whereas competition challenges the regime's authority, participation supports its legitimacy. In this plebiscite form of elections, participation is more appearance than reality owing to the limited voting choices and the Party's overwhelming influence on the expression of voting preferences. In government narratives on village elections, the Party's leadership and the "democratic rights" of villagers are simultaneously emphasized. This kind of political ideal is rooted not only in the communist ideologies positing that political conflicts do not exist under communist systems⁷ but also in the longer history of elections in modern China, during which political elites have aimed to ritualize voting as a display of regime support, a practice in voter education or the fulfilment of a citizen's duty.⁸

The electoral ideal of political elites was echoed among ordinary villagers. While appreciating the right to vote, they perceived voting as oriented by a unitary common interest that is often defined by the Party. In response to electoral competition, they developed a remarkable cynicism towards the campaign process and attached negative economic and social meanings to voting in competitive

1 O'Brien and Li 2000.

2 Tsai 2010.

3 Martinez-Bravo et al. 2017.

4 "Zhongguo gongchandang nongcun jiceng zuzhi gongzuo tiaoli" (Regulations on the work of rural grassroots organizations of the CCP). *Gov.cn*, 10 January 2019, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-01/10/content_5356764.htm. Accessed April 2023.

5 "Zuohao jiceng shanzhi, dianji daguo zhizhi" (Good governance at the grassroots level will lay the foundation for the governance of a great nation). *MCA.gov.cn*, 20 September 2022, <https://www.mca.gov.cn/n152/n166/c45960/content.html>. Accessed April 2023.

6 For simplicity, ordinary villagers (villagers, hereafter), village elites and the Party are defined as three distinct parties of interest. Village elites could be within or outside of the Party, but they are distinct from the Party. While the Party manipulates village elections to ensure Party-endorsed candidates win, village elites are the potential forces to challenge the endorsed candidates.

7 Pravda 1986; Shi 1999; Hu, Peng 2018.

8 Nagao and Kennedy 2021; Hill 2019.

elections. This electoral perception partly results from the prevalence of elite capture of competitive village elections,⁹ but more importantly is caused by the Party propaganda that equates campaigns with corruption, without differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate campaigns. State narratives are commonly borrowed by ordinary villagers to illustrate the corrupt nature of competition.

The popular support for consensus elections is reflected in two processes that are used by local parties (mainly at the township and village levels) in engineering consensus elections. Absorbing mass opinion in the decision making on endorsing candidates and extensive persuasion are used to seek ordinary villagers' consensus on the selection of Party-endorsed candidates. Meanwhile, a variety of economic and political means are used to deter village elites from challenging the consensus. Alongside villagers' high opinion of the success of the two processes, the sharp contrast in popular responses when either of the two processes fails renders the popular support for consensus elections more explicit. Popular resistance was mounted when the Party failed to include villagers into the selection of endorsed candidates. In contrast, when the Party failed to deter challenges from village elites, villagers encouraged the Party to impose heavier punishments on the challengers or even helped the Party to shame the challengers out of electoral politics. This kind of popular complicity significantly entrenches the authoritarian practices.

By explaining how the CCP's manipulation of village elections is intended to eliminate competition while maintaining participation, and how ordinary villagers support this manipulation as an electoral ideal, this article sheds light on the Party's success in its ongoing attempts to tighten its control over village elections and rural governance in general, without undermining its legitimacy. The failure of what was once the most inspiring grassroots democratic experiment under the party-state nonetheless implies more political challenges from village elites through non-institutionalized channels.

This article is organized into six sections. First, I review the literature on Chinese village elections with an evolutionary perspective and illustrate how my research engages with the literature. Second, I outline my data collection methods. Next, I discuss Chinese political elites' electoral ideal of participation without competition, which underlies consensus elections, with reference to government policies and the history of Chinese elections. Then, I analyse how the electoral ideal echoes that of ordinary villagers. In the following section, I compare how the Party engineered consensus elections and popular responses in five villages to illustrate the popular support for consensus elections. Finally, I discuss the research implications for the future of Chinese village elections and authoritarian stability in rural China.

The Fall of Chinese Village Elections: Manipulation and Popular Responses

Following the introduction of village elections in the late 1980s, substantial research was devoted to examining the implementation of the democratic institution and its effects on rural governance and bottom-up demand for higher-level elections.¹⁰ However, since Xi's takeover in 2012, academic interest has gradually waned as the Party's control over village elections and rural governance has significantly increased. Following "the fall of village elections," as claimed by some scholars,¹¹ an important question has yet to be adequately addressed: how did the Party tame grassroots democracy without spurring widespread popular resistance?

This question is puzzling, given that numerous earlier studies have mentioned the popular demand for democratic rights in rural China.¹² Participation in competitive elections has been found to increase the popular demand for democracy.¹³ In particular, voting out unpopular

9 Zhao 2018; Kennedy 2010; Takeuchi 2013; Yao 2012.

10 Kennedy, Rozelle and Shi 2004; Li 2003; Manion 1996; 2006; Pei 1995.

11 Martinez-Bravo et al. 2017.

12 O'Brien 2001.

13 Sun 2014.

incumbents significantly improves villagers' sense of efficacy in elections.¹⁴ In terms of behaviour, there is a positive association between the implementation of electoral procedures and voter turnout.¹⁵ A large number of studies have also suggested the prevalence of popular resistance against the illegal behaviour of rural authorities who tamper with electoral procedures.¹⁶ The popular resistance to manipulation became one of the most important driving forces behind the improvement of electoral procedures in the early 2000s.¹⁷

In 2009, Kevin O'Brien and Rongbin Han called for attention to the exercise of power as another dimension of democracy in addition to access to power. They pointed out that despite the improvement in electoral procedures, the power of elected village cadres was remarkably constrained by the Party and other social forces.¹⁸ Since then, a substantive body of literature has examined the different strategies and institutions used by the Party to undermine or limit elected cadres' power, especially their financial power, without manipulating the electoral process.¹⁹

However, manipulation by the Party remains prevalent, albeit in a more implicit way than breaking electoral procedures. Township governments' economic control over villages significantly enhances the incumbency advantage over challengers.²⁰ Relatedly, the Party widely uses vote buying and patronage to win elections.²¹ Furthermore, some studies have pointed out the consequences of popular grievances and declining popular efficacy in elections.²²

The popular support for consensus elections identified in this study does not conflict with these previous studies. On the contrary, it agrees partly with them by suggesting that elite capture behaviour such as vote buying serves as an important reason for the declining popular faith in competitive elections, which becomes a basis of legitimacy of consensus elections. Besides, in consensus elections the Party may also use economic means to deter challenges from village elites. However, consensus elections are distinct in that they separate participation from competition, two supposedly indispensable and mutually influencing dimensions of democracy. By eliminating competition but maintaining participation, the Party secures control over electoral outcomes without undermining its legitimacy.

This study is also one of the first to bring attention to people's electoral perceptions in the context of village elections. What constitutes a good election for ordinary villagers has largely been ignored, even though it is essential for understanding the popular response to the Party's electoral manipulation. One strand of the literature applies a top-down approach to evaluate village elections with a set of elite-recognized democratic principles and electoral procedures.²³ Opinion surveys of ordinary villagers are also inadequate to explore the popular perceptions in depth.²⁴ Taking advantage of ethnographic methods, this research presents rich accounts of one electoral perception among Chinese villagers that favours participation over competition, echoing the finding of one opinion survey that choice between candidates is sufficient to make Chinese villagers evaluate the process of village elections as fair, even if the competition structurally favours the Party.²⁵ It also shows how Party propaganda and villagers' own experiences of elections lead to this perception. This electoral perception will help us to understand a variety of electoral behaviours beyond popular responses to manipulation in rural China.

14 Li 2003.

15 Su et al. 2011.

16 O'Brien 2001; O'Brien and Li 2006; Tong 2014.

17 Zhou 2009.

18 O'Brien and Han 2009.

19 Zhang, Xiaoming, and Cao 2016; Zhang, Han, Chen and Wang 2019; Wong, Tang and Liu 2020; Martinez-Bravo et al. 2017; Oi et al. 2012.

20 Luo 2018.

21 Ruan and Wang 2023; Liu 2022.

22 Ruan and Wang 2023; Jacka and Wu 2016.

23 Pastor and Tan 2000; Tan and Xin 2007.

24 Zhong and Chen 2002; Landry, Davis and Wang 2010.

25 Landry, Davis and Wang 2010.

Ethnographic Data from Five Villages

The data used in this study were collected through an ethnography of village elections in H county in Hunan province. Electoral manipulation always happens covertly, as do popular responses to it, owing to the repressive authoritarian environment. Therefore, I used ethnographic methods to capture the important but invisible political dynamics.²⁶ Rather than focusing on voting/non-voting and open protests, which the literature has mostly centred on,²⁷ I paid more attention to the meanings that villagers attached to their ballots, popular perceptions and subsequent covert political actions. The “thick description”²⁸ and focus on the “weapons of the weak” enrich and deepen our understanding of Chinese village elections.²⁹

Five villages were sampled based on my personal connections and variances in the villages’ economic conditions. My personal connections, accumulated through my experience of growing up in the county and my prior ethnographic research there, were important in granting access to the communities, gaining the trust of the local people and providing a rich knowledge about the context of the villages and the structure of rural governance there. The economic conditions of villages also have a significant influence on electoral competition and village–Party relations.³⁰ Among the five villages, one is poverty-stricken and receives financial aid from the provincial government, three are better-off agricultural villages, and one is considered rich, with an outside mining enterprise and related industries collectively owned by the village. Notably, a common ground shared by the five villages is the large-scale migration to cities, with the elderly left behind. This demographic characteristic has a significant influence on popular perceptions of elections.

The study in the five villages lasted for three months, from May to July 2017. Characterized by the investment of intensive government resources and personnel during the electoral cycle,³¹ this campaign-style governance provided me with good opportunities to observe elections and interview a variety of stakeholders, including dozens of ordinary villagers, candidates and local Party cadres, i.e. village Party cadres and township officials, using snowball sampling. In the five villages, I asked villagers a set of common questions concerning their normative perceptions of what constitutes an idealized election and also observed different electoral processes and popular responses to the processes. This comparative approach enabled me to understand the mechanisms of consensus elections and the popular support for such elections.

A documentary analysis of government policies for managing village elections was also conducted to understand the policy basis of the Party’s manipulation of the village elections and the effects of propaganda on popular perceptions. I collected a number of national publicized policies from government websites and local internal documents from the township governments and asked local cadres about their understanding of the policies.

Policy Context and Historical Origin: Participation without Competition

For Party elites, participation without competition is an important electoral ideal underlying consensus elections. This ideal is reflected in government policies from central to county levels and in the township and village authorities’ understanding of the policies.

First, for the sake of maintaining stability, the Party considers mass opinion as an important criterion when endorsing candidates. As Xueguang Zhou points out, maintaining stability is a highly

26 Scott 1990.

27 See, e.g., Chen and Zhong 2002; O’Brien and Li 2006.

28 Geertz 2008.

29 Scott 1985.

30 Hu, Rong 2005; Luo 2018.

31 In the county’s village elections, following the pre-electoral preparations there were open nominations, through which two nominees were selected for each position in the village committees. The two nominees then competed in the final round. The candidate receiving most of the votes and more than 50% of all votes was elected. It is notable that owing to the high number of migrant workers, proxy ballots were allowed.

prioritized political task when managing village elections, but sources of political instability during elections may differ across local contexts. Whereas Zhou argues that instability comes from electoral manipulation by local authorities, I suggest that many forms of popular protest mobilized during village elections result from grievances against village incumbents.³² Despite the limited democratic implications, authoritarian elections provide significant opportunities for voters to elevate grievances to upper-level authorities and the general public (for example, the media, scholars), increasing the likelihood that the grievances will be addressed. The Party is also sensitive to the fact that grievances against village incumbents in everyday governance are a major source of instability during village elections. According to one local government document: “Some villages have accumulated many conflicts and problems around land compensation, resettlement of households, and the implementation of favourable rural policies and so on. The conflicts are likely to erupt all at once during elections.”

A variety of local institutions and organizations are mobilized to identify mass opinion on village committee and Party members. Local institutions include the performance evaluation of village cadres by villagers (*minzhu pingyi* 民主评议) and letters and visits (*xinfang* 信访). Working teams composed of upper-level authorities also travel to villages to survey mass opinion. Local organizations include village Party organizations, villager groups (*cunmin xiaozu* 村民小组), the oversight committees of village affairs (*cunwu jiandu weiyuanhui* 村务监督委员会), collective economic organizations and social service organizations, among others. A local government document described their information collection role: “Before village elections, all Party members in villages are required to help the government understand villages’ conditions and collect mass opinion. Retired village cadres should be encouraged to join mass organizations so that the Party can take advantage of their local knowledge.”

Based on mass opinion, unpopular village incumbents should be ruled out from becoming Party-endorsed candidates, which is articulated in the official guidelines as “holding elections only after disciplining cadres” (*xian zhengdun hou huanjie* 先整顿后换届). It is noticeable that such discipline goes beyond village committee cadres to involve village Party cadres as part of the “Party-building” and “Anti-corruption” campaigns.

While absorbing mass opinion, the Party also focuses on influencing mass opinion. To quote a speech by the county Party secretary in a government meeting, “All township governments need to let Party members and the masses understand what kind of people should be selected and what kind should not.”³³ An important justification for the fact that the Party’s dominant influence accords with the principle of participation is the villagers’ lack of knowledge and judgement. As a former village Party secretary explained, “Mass participation is important, but the masses sometimes cannot see who is good or bad, so we Party cadres are obliged to guide them to make the right choice.”³⁴ Through absorbing and influencing mass opinion, the Party aims to engineer a pre-electoral consensus with villagers on whom to select. The consensus was described as “the consistency of the will of the masses with the will of the Party” in a local government document.

In contrast to the recognition of villagers’ right to participate, government policies signal a negative attitude towards competition in village elections. In addition to promoting the policy of the “one shoulder pole,” the Party places many constraints on the candidate vetting process. For example, certain types of villagers, such as young, educated and wealthy villagers and retired government officials, receive preference in nominations. In contrast, other types of villagers, such as those involved in petitioning and religious activities, must be screened out.³⁵

32 Zhou 2009.

33 Local government documents collected by the author.

34 Interview in village E, 3 June 2017.

35 Local government documents collected by the author.

The Party holds a remarkably hostile attitude towards campaign activities in particular. It labels election campaigns as crime and corruption, with little effort made to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate campaigns. The constraints on campaign activities increase at lower levels of government: eight kinds of activities are banned in provincial policies, nine in municipal policies and 30 in county policies.³⁶ Legitimate campaign activities such as messaging, leaflet distribution, oral commitments and in-person visits are treated on a par with illegitimate activities such as vote buying, intimidation and violence. Clanship and religious groups are also regarded as potential sources of election sabotage alongside criminal groups.³⁷

The ideal of participation without competition, as reflected in village election policies, can be traced back through the history of Chinese elections. As Joshua Hill describes it, Chinese political elites have never considered elections as a means for the public to express its free will; rather, the purpose of elections is to select the right people who can build a bridge between the public and the state. Competition is viewed as corrupt because it undermines the making of the “right” choice. From the late Qing dynasty to Republican China, competition was narrowed down through electoral laws, from restricted voter participation in competitive elections to universal suffrage for non-competitive elections.³⁸ In Communist China, the 1953 Law of People’s Congress Elections regulated the selection of a single candidate. The plebiscitary elections, during which participation was highly ritualized as an acclamation of the Party’s choice, were propagated as a representation of socialist democracy. Although the 1979 revised law mandated multiple candidates and voter nomination for township and county congress elections, the electoral law still presents a remarkably unfavourable playing field for independent candidates.³⁹

Popular Electoral Perception: Unitary Participation and Aversion to Competition

The electoral ideal of participation without competition significantly shapes the views of ordinary villagers, thus constituting an important basis of legitimacy for consensus elections. The villagers in this study widely recognized their right to vote in elections. Regarding voting rights as a symbol of citizenship, some villagers complained when they were not registered as voters or were not notified by the authorities when it was time to vote. In addition to its symbolic meaning, voting is more importantly appreciated as an expression of popular preference. The top-down decision making on candidate selection has little legal or moral ground for villagers: “Cadres cannot of course be appointed by above. It should be for us to decide. Whoever gets the majority ballots wins.”⁴⁰

However, consistent with the elite ideal, the expression of voting preferences is not free but merely a means to realize a unitary “common interest,” implying that divergent voting choices are morally wrong. As a female farmer illustrated: “Villagers can of course vote according to their own will, but we should all vote for good men who are concerned with mass interests. If some villagers vote for bad men, it is not democracy because it is for special interests instead of for mass interests.”⁴¹

The villagers constantly borrowed state narratives that implied a pre-electoral consensus, such as uniformity (*yizhi* 一致), centralization (*jizhong* 集中) and solidarity (*tuanjie* 团结), to explain the meaning of democracy or what constitutes a good election. As a middle-aged villager concluded: “As long as villagers are so uniform as to pursue the common interest without conflicts, it is a good election.”⁴²

Furthermore, the unitary “common interest” in the eyes of villagers is largely defined by the Party. For example, leadership cohesion, particularly that between village Party branches and village

36 Local government documents collected by the author.

37 “Nongcun jiceng ganbu lianjie luxing zhize ruogan guiding” (Certain provisions on the integrity of rural cadres). *Gov.cn*, 23 May 2011, http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2011/content_1913163.htm. Accessed April 2023.

38 Hill 2019.

39 Manion 2017.

40 Interview in village C, 3 May 2017.

41 Interview in village C, 3 May 2017.

42 Interview in village E, 3 June 2017.

committees, is one of the most common ways of understanding the common interest. As many studies have noted, village elections often cause conflicts between the two power organizations owing to their different sources of power.⁴³ Leadership cohesion, in this regard, becomes a highly effective framing used by the Party to convince villagers that electing Party-endorsed candidates is a means of realizing the common interest.

The dominance of the “common interest” viewpoint means that voting is perceived as subject to monitoring to ensure consistent voting choices. Some villagers proposed using open ballots in place of secret ballots to address the monitoring problem. The nostalgia for open ballots in communist-era elections offers an example: “At that time, people voted through raising their fists, and good guys were elected instantly. Not like today, when people vote secretly so they can play tricks [to let bad guys win].”⁴⁴

The popular desire for a pre-electoral consensus is closely associated with the popular aversion to competition by village elites. Vote mobilization is condemned as factionalism (*labang jiepai* 拉帮结派) or separatism (*gao fenlie* 搞分裂) and comes at the expense of the common interest. This kind of perception is evident in the Party’s propaganda on the merits of the one-party system. A retired teacher, for instance, illustrated his dislike of electoral competition by comparing China’s one-party system with party competition in Western democracies: “Parties organize factions to compete for political power, so even after they are elected, they only represent factional interests. Different from the West, China is united. For instance, the People’s Congress and the People’s Political Consultative Conference do not compete for power but cooperate to achieve the common interest.”⁴⁵

In particular, the Party’s negative narratives that equate campaigning to corruption promote a popular cynicism regarding the motives of village elites running for election, regardless of the legality of the campaign. This cynicism is further intensified by the prevalence of the elite capture of competitive village elections through corrupt campaign strategies such as vote buying and factionalism, as well as the negative impacts on village governance such as power grabbing by bullies and gangsters and the rampant corruption surrounding collective properties.⁴⁶

The villagers often dismissed candidates’ self-declared desire to serve the public and instead assumed that elites had corrupt motives. “Scrambling for power and profit” (*zhengquan duoli* 争权夺利), for example, was the most common way for villagers to make sense of the candidates. I often heard comments that focused on the potentially corrupt or immoral intentions of candidates: “Why did he compete so hard for that position? He must intend to make money from the public office rather than do good for us; otherwise, he would not have made so much effort to win.”⁴⁷

Such cynicism is particularly explicit when village elites attempt to justify their honest intent to run for office. Not only does this trend impede the democratic process but it discourages activism for the community. One man had spent considerable time and money petitioning to solve the village’s environmental problems, which earned him a good reputation. Nevertheless, he was still met with cynicism after announcing his decision to run for election. He explained that he would be in a better position to address environmental problems if afforded the responsibilities of a village cadre,

43 Sun et al. 2013; Guo and Bernstein 2004.

44 Interview in village C, 3 May 2017.

45 Interview in village E, 3 June 2017.

46 For academic papers, see Zhao 2018; Kennedy 2010; Wang and Mou 2021. For media reports, see “Jiceng cunweihui xuanju huixuan you zengduo qushi” (There is an increasing trend in vote buying in village committee elections). *Sina.com*, 4 August 2008, <https://news.sina.com.cn/c/2008-08-04/013714260718s.shtml>. Accessed April 2023; “Siwan ming cunganbu bei qingchu, Zhongguo shi ‘cunba zhicun’ beihou” (40,000 village cadres were removed, behind the Chinese style “village bully rule”). *Sina.com*, 3 December 2020, <https://news.sina.com/gn/2020-12-03/detail-iiznezxs4912019.d.html>. Accessed April 2023. For government documents, see “Guanyu renzhen jieju cunji zuzhi huanjie xuanju zhong huixuan wenti de tongzhi” (Notice on properly solving the problem of vote buying in the elections for village-level organizations). www.12371.cn, 21 August 2006, <https://www.12371.cn/2021/01/04/ARTI1609754149304373.shtml>. Accessed April 2023.

47 For example, interview in village A, 4 June 2017.

but his fellow villagers refused to believe his justification: “They said I had become corrupt and would not care about the environment anymore,” he lamented. “People just criticize you even if you intend to do good things.”⁴⁸

The villagers were also sceptical when village elites challenged corrupt incumbents with legitimate reasons and campaign strategies. A middle-aged businessman returned from the city to run for election. He justified his decision by sharing his intention to force a corrupt incumbent to step down. He invited a local TV station to expose the incumbent’s corruption, proposed a plan for village development and invested in a village road. Nonetheless, the villagers still treated his campaign efforts with cynicism: “The more money he used for his campaign, the more incentive he must have had for corrupt practices after winning; otherwise, why did he spend that much money to win?”⁴⁹ Even members of his own clan were sceptical of his intentions. As a senior clan member said, “We did not know whether his real motive was to do good [works for] us or to seize power [for personal benefit].”⁵⁰

The cynical belief that “good men would not bother to compete for power” discouraged village elites with a moral reputation from running, even if they expected a likely victory. Some elites, for example, rejected nominations by villagers; others actively asked people not to nominate them. A 50-year-old man, who was a senior member of one of the biggest clans in his village and often played a leading role in community affairs, preferred to become a village cadre through recruitment rather than through election. He explained that his electoral aversion was not because he feared defeat but because he did not want to get involved in the “corrupt” competition: “If I compete, there is an 85 per cent chance that I will win. Many people asked me why I refused to join elections. I try to avoid the dirty affairs. The water is too deep. In some villages with more collective income than ours, the water is deeper.”⁵¹

Popular cynicism, along with moral elites excluding themselves from election, significantly reduces the electorate’s faith in competitive village elections. Expecting few opportunities to hold leaders accountable through the elections, some villagers were indifferent to the whole process. After a very competitive nomination in one village, for example, the villagers did not bother to check the nomination result, as they believed that the election was a game exclusively for elites. Other villagers sold or used their ballots as a personal favour to candidates. One villager explained that he voted for a candidate whom he despised because a moral elite did not wish to stand: “There were some people I really liked. They are not only moral but also capable, but they asked us not to nominate them. So, I nominated this guy just to satisfy his greed for power.”⁵²

Popular Support for Consensus Elections: Comparison of Five Villages

Ideally, a pre-electoral consensus is formed as early as the open-nomination stage. The majority of the votes are concentrated on the first-place nominee (i.e. the Party-endorsed candidate). Moreover, the difference in the number of votes between the first- and second-placed nominee, whom the Party may also purposely select to meet the requirement for multiple choices, is usually so large as to imply little uncertainty in the outcome of the final round of voting. Two processes are applied in engineering a consensus election. The first involves forming a pre-electoral consensus among villagers on whom to select by absorbing mass opinion in the decision-making process for endorsing candidates and using extensive persuasion (i.e. allow participation). The other is to deter village elites from challenging the consensus (i.e. deter challenges). [Table 1](#) presents the different outcomes of the two processes and the corresponding popular responses in the five sampled villages. The comparison suggests popular support for consensus elections.

48 Interview in village D, 12 June 2017.

49 Interview in village E, 5 June 2017.

50 Interview in village E, 5 June 2017.

51 Interview in village C, 10 May 2017.

52 Interview in village E, 5 June 2017.

Table 1. Outcomes of Engineering Consensus Elections and Popular Responses in Five Villages

Village	Economic Condition	Allow Participation	Deter Challenges	Outcome	Popular Response
A	Agricultural	Yes	Yes	Consensus elections	Support
B	Poverty-stricken	No	Yes	Party appointment	Resistance
C	Agricultural	No	No	Competitive elections	Resistance
D	Industrialized	Yes	No	Competitive elections	Complicity
E	Agricultural	Yes	No	Competitive elections	Complicity

Popular participation: support and resistance

Village A witnessed a typical consensus election in which the endorsed candidate for the position of village director won 900, and the second candidate won 300, of the 1,808 ballots in the open nomination round. The election was highly ordered and ran smoothly as the villagers queued to vote in front of the fixed ballot boxes set in each villager group. The consensus election was praised by both villagers and Party cadres as an example of community solidarity with good selection outcomes. The success of this election lay partly in the screening out of the incumbent village committee director, who was held in low public regard owing to his lack of integrity. It took a substantial amount of persuasion and networking by the Party to discourage the incumbent from seeking re-election. The township official in charge of the election in this village emphasized his concern about a “harmonious” election process, although he had a high opinion of the director’s administrative experiences and political loyalty: “He is a very straightforward person and hence offended many villagers. More seriously, he was involved in scandals related to some economic issues in the village. Even if we picked him, the masses would oppose, so we finally decided not to pick him.”⁵³

The success of the election was also attributed to the manipulation of mass opinion, the effectiveness of which was enhanced by the screening out of the unpopular incumbent. The township official described this form of persuasion and the subsequent positive feedback from villagers: “We told villagers why some incumbents or other potential candidates were not suitable to be village cadres. For example, he was too old or had this and that kind of problem. We of course would not directly ask people to vote or not to vote for someone, but they had a tacit understanding.”⁵⁴

Without popular participation, there is minimal support by villagers for consensus elections. One example is the Party appointment in Village B, a poverty-stricken village financially supported by the provincial government. With substantial economic control over the village, the Party had less incentive to include villagers in the decision making on endorsing candidates. As such, the election in this village turned into appointment by the Party. On election day, instead of using fixed ballot boxes, as happened in Village A, the Party cadres had to carry the ballot boxes around to villagers and inform them of which candidate to vote for. The election was over within a few hours with the endorsed candidate for the village committee director receiving 650 out of a total of 670 votes. At the conclusion of the election, one official from the county government delivered a speech in which he applauded the election for “fully realizing the Party’s will.”⁵⁵ While most of the villagers obediently complied with the voting process, some still aired their grievances about the lack of proper participation: “The names of cadres have been decided by above. Why come to me for my vote?” a villager asked when the team of Party cadres approached him and other fellows in the village games room.⁵⁶

53 Interview in the county, 13 May 2017.

54 Ibid.

55 Participatory observation in village B, 4 May 2017.

56 Interview in village B, 4 May 2017.

In villages like Village C, where the Party has less economic control, popular resistance against the lack of participation is more likely to be openly expressed and hence the elections are more competitive. The village Party secretary in Village C was notorious for his corrupt use of government funds; however, thanks to the patronage of his superiors in the township government, he escaped punishment. Similar to Village B, ballot boxes were carried around and the voting was monitored by local authorities. Some villagers, however, asked for privacy to be able to write a different name from that of the endorsed candidate; some even openly showed dissent by writing a random name on the ballot in front of the authorities. An anonymous complaint letter was circulated at the ballot counting location to embarrass the authorities. As a result, the nomination result was so close that the second-place nominee unexpectedly took the chance to announce his intention to run. One of the township officials who supervised the elections criticized the village Party branch: “The nomination in this village was the most chaotic I have ever seen! The mass work [before elections] was done so terribly.”⁵⁷

Elite challenges: popular complicity as entrenchment

Apart from the lack of participation, consensus elections fail also because of challenges from village elites to Party-endorsed candidates. In contrast to the popular resistance demonstrated in the scenarios outlined above, popular complicity with the Party to eliminate challenges was also observed. Many studies have found electoral challenges to be particularly prevalent in rich villages, where collective village revenue can increase the desire of village elites to compete for village leadership,⁵⁸ and the lower level of economic reliance on local governments suggests a higher likelihood of winning the challenge.⁵⁹ For elites from poor villages, the Party’s endorsement of their candidacy is more important as it signals access to Party patronage.⁶⁰ This is one of the most important reasons why the Party faced few challenges from elites in the above-mentioned agricultural villages.

Consensus elections in the industrialized Village D, for instance, faced a more difficult challenge, from a former village Party secretary. The man was dismissed from his position before elections were held because some villagers had reported his corruption in connection with the expropriation of land to the township government. He then decided to run for village committee director, despite the Party’s endorsement of another candidate with a cleaner record and the villagers’ agreement with the decision. He proposed that he would step down from running for office only if the Party let him continue to serve as the chief executive of a collective enterprise in his village. The Party initially rejected the audacious proposal; however, when he almost won the final round through vote buying, the Party had to accept the proposal to prevent him from participating in future elections.

In this case, some villagers blamed their Party branch for lacking the capacity to deter the challenge in the first place. This kind of blame serves as a form of complicity to encourage the Party to be more coercive in deterring challengers in the future. According to one villager: “It is better to have a Party-endorsed candidate. Another village was like this. The Party-endorsed candidate was capable; selecting him also aligned with the villagers’ will. In our elections, our Party secretary was to blame. He was too weak to force the guy out of the elections.”⁶¹

Aside from economic conflicts, the types of Party–village elite conflicts have grown alongside the rise of elites who have profited from doing business in cities since the market reform in 1978. Village elections provide a rare opportunity for these entrepreneurs to transform their wealth into political power. Although the Party often sponsors these elites to gain control of the village

57 Interview in village C, 3 May 2017.

58 Hu, Rong 2005.

59 Luo 2018.

60 Liu 2022.

61 Interview in village D, 12 June 2017.

leadership, it still faces two kinds of challenges that are less likely to be addressed by economic means. One type of challenge results from the divisions among entrepreneurs in terms of social networks, ideas about village development and so on. The other challenge arises when farmer cadres resist the transfer of power to entrepreneurs, who have different class and life experiences.

Elections in the agricultural Village E, for example, witnessed the two kinds of challenges with the return of several entrepreneurs. As one of the entrepreneurs was appointed village Party secretary and lobbied for one of his closest entrepreneur friends to be made village committee director, another, more recently returned, businessman announced his intention to compete for this position. A female farmer, who had served as the women's director for over two decades, also insisted on seeking re-election despite discouragement from the Party. Her disapproval of the entrepreneur Party secretary originated from their very different understandings of the responsibilities of a village cadre. She criticized the entrepreneur cadres in the village: "They are not farmers but businessmen. Unlike us, they have little experience with village affairs. They never go to the masses, and they do not even know the names of all of the villagers. All they have is money. They'd better go back to doing business!"⁶²

Despite the challenges from the two elites, the village Party branch had remarkable persuasive power over the villagers thanks to its outstanding performance in providing public goods and its amicable relations with villagers. In this case, the villagers' complicity with the Party to engineer consensus elections took the form of shaming the disobedient elites out of electoral politics. This use of "weapons of the weak" is especially effective in traditional agricultural villages, where reputation provides important social capital for communal life.⁶³

The disappointing experience of the businessman candidate illustrates the point. The villagers' low opinion of him was largely attributed to the persuasion of Party cadres. The retired Party cadre explained: "After he announced he would run, I investigated him in secret. Once at a town market fair, I overheard from someone that he was close to some gang members. I then came back to tell villagers that this kind of man must not be picked."

When the election turned competitive, the businessman was slandered and mocked by the community for "sabotaging" the consensus election. Even when the Party illegally miscounted the votes in order to win the election, the villagers still did not offer him any sympathy but instead criticized him for his disobedience.

The female farmer candidate was also subjected to a similar shaming. Many of the villagers described her as an ambitious, arrogant and unruly person. "Since the village has decided on the name [to select], why did she still come to make trouble?" After she lost, some sarcastically commented, "What a pity no one is calling you cadre any longer!"⁶⁴

As this section suggests, we cannot overestimate the CCP's capacity to successfully engineer consensus elections when the electoral laws recognize the rights of village elites to compete for power, when the elites can buy votes to win elections without the need to challenge the Party's monolithic policy platforms,⁶⁵ and when the elites possess rich economic and social resources. However, the complicity of villagers, through either supporting the Party in its imposition of heavy punishments or by shaming electoral challengers, significantly enhances the Party's capacity to deter opposing elites. The above-mentioned businessman expressed his great disappointment with the villagers and decided to avoid participating in future elections: "Since the elections, I have not come back to the village. They just mock you even if you lose. I am not interested in village elections anymore. I will neither compete nor vote in the future."⁶⁶

62 Interview in village E, 3 June 2017.

63 Scott 1985.

64 Interview in village E, 5 June 2017.

65 Takeuchi 2013.

66 Interview in the county, 11 May 2017.

Conclusion and Implications: the CCP's Control over Rural China

Through this ethnographic study, I conceptualize consensus elections as a means for the CCP to manipulate village elections without inciting popular resistance. Consensus elections represent not only a form of electoral manipulation but also an electoral ideal of participation without competition. This kind of ideal addresses the important electoral trade-off between regime legitimacy and stability that faces Chinese political elites and authoritarian leaders beyond China. Propaganda promoting this ideal significantly shapes the views of ordinary villagers to provide popular support for consensus elections. Such popular support not only maintains the Party's legitimacy but more importantly also serves as a significant force of complicity with which to entrench its authoritarian practices.

As the five villages in this study are not representative of rural China as a whole, the applicability of my theory is limited. One demographic attribute shared by the five villages is that their populations are elderly and there has been a large outflow of young villagers; this is one of the most important reasons the Party's propaganda surrounding consensus elections works effectively on villagers. Furthermore, if villagers experienced less elite capture in competitive elections, the effectiveness of the Party propaganda would also be weakened, as implied in Lianjiang Li's work.⁶⁷

Despite its limited generalizability, my theory offers important insights into the future of Chinese village elections. Consensus elections are already being, or will be, rolled out in other rural areas of China not only because they are so effective in maintaining regime legitimacy but also because they are deeply rooted in Chinese electoral history. For example, Ming Ma and Yi Kang's research in Guangdong province likewise reveals that the Party's intervention in village elections is intended to mediate conflicts and create "harmonized" elections.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, recent media propaganda has explicitly signified the Party's intent to further eliminate competition in village elections and turn them into a Party selection process.⁶⁹ In this regard, the popular support for consensus elections revealed in this research implies the wider use of consensus elections and, ultimately, signals the end of grassroots democracy in rural China.

In the long term, consensus elections nonetheless pose a significant threat to the Party's control of the countryside. The manipulation process is far from a substantive or enduring way to settle political conflicts with either villagers or opposing elites. Party–villager relations will inevitably deteriorate again after the elections, as the elected leaders cannot be held accountable to villagers given the lack of free voting and fair competition. Similarly, the obedience of opposing elites is mainly contingent on economic co-optation and coercion, which are neither permanent nor sustainable options. When elections are closed to the elites, they are likely to instigate more political challenges through non-institutionalized channels.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank Xi Chen, Lianjiang Li, Kevin Lo, Allison D. Evans, Olga Avdyeva and Chan Ka Ming for their insightful comments.

Competing interests. None

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⁶⁷ Li 2003.

⁶⁸ Ma and Kang 2022.

⁶⁹ See, e.g., "Wei quanmin tuijin xiangcunzhenxing hangshi zhulao zhandou baolei: quanguo cunliangwei huanjie gongzuo shunli wancheng" (Building a solid fortress for the comprehensive promotion of rural revitalization: elections of village "two committees" have been successfully completed). *Gov.cn*, 22 May 2022, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-05/22/content_5691762.htm. Accessed April 2023.

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