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Abstract
Do government officials in a authoritarian state take into account public opinion when they make policies? Drawing on a field survey of 116 villages in rural China conducted by the authors in 2005, we analyzed whether the implementation of village election institutions, as administered by local government, was a system that was influenced by the public opinion of villagers. We found that if more villagers believed a certain electoral institution was ideal, the probability increased that such an electoral institution would be implemented in practical village elections. The tight opinion-policy linkage results more from the intervention of the central government as well as the pressure of villagers' collective protests rather than from the institutionalized participation of the powerless and careful deliberations.
Whether governmental policies should follow or reflect public opinion within democratic countries has been the subject of intense debate in the public opinion literature. Many democratic theorists believe that democratic governments should respect and reflect the preferences of ordinary citizens.\(^1\) On the other hand, however, there are also oppositions which strongly doubt whether the public has the cognitive capacity, knowledge, experience, and seasoned judgment necessary for influencing policy. These critics assert that public interest will suffer substantially if policy makers try to “pander” to ordinary citizens. They claim that, because of such a possibility, the public opinion debate is not worthy of serious attention and that, therefore, the autonomy of policy making process should be encouraged.\(^2\) Empirical evidence regarding opinion-policy relationship also produces mixed views, showing that the true relationship between public opinion and policy is far from being clearly defined.\(^3\)

In contrast to the continuous controversies over the public opinion-policy making relationship in democratic countries, the lack of an opinion-policy link in authoritarian system is tacitly accepted. The reason is practically self-evident, since a notorious feature of an authoritarian regime is the strict censorship of news media, as well as the absence of free speech. Both of these factors are widely believed to be inevitable contributors to the dearth of vocalized

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public opinion. Moreover, because under such a regime the major officials and even the whole bureaucratic system are appointed by higher authority, rather than being elected, politicians have few incentives to respond to the preference of ordinary citizens, since they run no risk of losing their offices. As a result, the opinion-policy relationship, which is a popular topic in democratic countries, appears to be a spurious issue in an authoritarian regime. It is for similar reasons that few efforts have been made to explore how this relationship has been embodied in countries making recent transitions to democracy.4

However, this pessimistic view of the opinion-policy relationship under an authoritarian regime may be an oversimplified approach. Many institutional characteristics revealed by recent literature on authoritarian regime in effect suggest that dictators and their subordinate officials, even if they are not elected to the office, will not always turn a blind eye to public opinion and lack motivations to respond to the will of the people. These include that political elite in non-democratic countries are still very concerned with the legitimacy of their ruling,5 even autocrats are dependent upon a certain threshold of public support to remain in office,6 and in the

hierarchical system institutions are designed to funnel citizen opinions to leaders in order to strengthen high-level monitoring of subject officials' performance, and so forth. Although these scholarship do not aim at exploring opinion-policy linkage under authoritarian regime, they do render likely mechanisms through which policymakers pay attention to the people’s preference and take actions on the public's behalf in authoritarian context.

In this research we take up the question of if and to what extent public opinion influences the formation of village electoral institutions in rural China. We chose China as the analytical subject because, on one hand, China is a typical authoritarianism country in which there are no open political competitions at any administrative levels and also it is a place where the news media is under strict control by the party state. On the other hand, since the mid-1980s China has been conducting democratic experiments under the leadership of the ruling party, which might open the course of policy making to the ordinary villagers. The initiation of economic liberalization since the late 1970s has been broadening the scope of economic liberty for all villagers and has sparked demands for institutional arrangement that match their increasing wealth. Therefore, the China case is a useful example for examining opinion-policy linkage in a non-democratic system.

**Research Design and Data Description**

In order to study this problem, we draw on a unique dataset from a field survey conducted

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by the authors and their colleagues in 2005. The survey was originally designed to examine in 120 villages, 60 townships, and 30 counties located in six provinces the status and impact of village elections across the country. All of these villages held their most recent village committee elections in 2004 or 2005. Due to uncontrollable factors, including natural disasters (flood) and little coordination from local governments, in the end we were only able to collect data in 116 villages, 58 townships, and 30 counties. The respondents (surveyed villagers) totaled 1918. The sampling strategy is as follows: first, one province was randomly selected from each of China’s 6 large regions. These are Shaanxi (Northwest), Sichuan (Southwest), Hebei (North), Jilin (Northeast), Jiangsu (East) and Fujian (Southeast). Secondly, five counties in each province were identified by dividing all counties within the province into five quintiles, based on their income levels and then selecting one county per quintile. Next, two townships within each county and two villages in each township were randomly selected. Finally in each village there were 16-18 households randomly selected for the survey.

A critical feature of this data is that it contains both information of what actual electoral institutions are in practice and also what kinds of electoral institutions are regarded by the ordinary villagers as ideal. For the former, we asked five respondents (including one incumbent village committee cadre, one also-ran candidate in last election, and three ordinary villagers)

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8 This survey was conducted in cooperation with The Center for Chinese Agricultural Policies (CCAP) and the Chinese Academy of Sciences and was administrated by students who were recruited from economics, sociology, and other related disciplines. Most of these students have received professional training in similar surveys organized by CCAP during the past decade, therefore they know how to properly survey respondents.
what electoral institutions were officially implemented in last election. For each type of electoral institution, the answer with the highest frequency was taken as the correct response. For the latter, we elicited the preference of surveyed villagers' preference by asking them to describe their ideal electoral institutions. Table 1 reports the full list of the questions (totaling 21 questions) that ask respondents what the ideal electoral institutions ought to be. By measuring this "ideal institutions vs. actual institutions" gap, we can examine if and to what extent the formation of official electoral institutions reflect the preference of villagers. Another strength of this data is that it also covers a wide range of information about the local economic and political conditions, the local regulations on rural economy, social and historical contexts and other considerations. This enables us to control for other factors that may influence the opinion-policy relationship. 9

**Does the Preference of Villagers Count for the Formation of Electoral Institutions?**

Unlike China’s market-oriented economic reforms, which have been carried out for almost three decades, salient political reform was not initiated until the late 1980s. In November 1987, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress approved a provisional Organic Law of Village Committee (OLVC) that regulates how village polity should be organized. The law was revised and made permanent in 1998. According to the law, the villagers’ committee is a community administration set up to manage village affairs. In addition, elections must be held every three years for positions on the village committee. Every adult has one vote. Candidates are

9 A limitation of this data is that it does not trace the information over a lengthy period of time so that we cannot assess the dynamic changes of opinion-policy linkage.
not required to be members of the Communist Party. The law also specifically states that the township (鎮) government¹⁰ "... must not interfere with the affairs that are in the purview of the villagers’ committee"(Article 2).

Does Public Opinion Matter?

There are a good number of village election literatures on China’s village electoral institutions. Many researchers have observed that the implementations of the village election in China not only have been undergoing substantial changes over different periods but also demonstrate considerable geographical variations across localities. For one thing, many students of the village election share the consensus that village electoral institutions, touching on issues such as voter registration, setting up steering committee, candidate nomination, etc, have been improved in the last two decades. More and more villages have held fair and open elections.¹¹ On the other hand, the formation and implementation of electoral institutions have shown astonishing variances in different places.¹² A telling example is the limitations on proxy voting. For instance, proxy-voting are banned in Fujian, Chongqing, and Gansu. There are 28 provinces that still permit it but impose their own restrictions: all limit the number of votes proxies can cast, five provinces require written authorizations, and fifteen require prior consent by the village

¹⁰ China’s administrative hierarchy includes (in a descending order): central, provincial, city, county, and township government. The village committee is not an administrative agency.


¹² For a detailed comparison of the differences of electoral institutions in different locations. See O'Brien and Han, ‘Path to Democracy? Assessing Village Elections in China’, p. 359-78.
election committee.\textsuperscript{13} The nature and quality of the electoral institutions and its impacts also have drawn enormous attention. Free, fair, and open elections not only have much bearing on local political life, for instance, enhancing feelings of political efficacy and making elected leaders more accountable to villagers,\textsuperscript{14} but also exert some influences over villager’s political attitude \textsuperscript{15} and citizenship consciousness \textsuperscript{16}, and increase village public investments.\textsuperscript{17}

This body of literature mentioned above, however, more or less omits one salient issue: are elections implemented in a fashion that fits with the villagers’ preference? Or, in other words, does the formation of official electoral institutions reflect the preference of villagers? In practice, it is the local county and township officials, who have the final say on determining which official


electoral institutions will be implemented in village elections. Given China's political regime, we might reasonably expect that the gap between the official institutions and public opinion will be substantial. However, the experience of our field study suggest that under some circumstances Chinese local policymakers will have the incentive to care about what kinds of electoral institutions villagers prefer. In reality, it is not rare that a well-organized election that satisfies villagers will foster the people’s trust in local government and make them to cooperate with local officials, e.g., peasants are more willing to pay taxes that they refused to submit previously, thereby reducing the governing cost of local government. To boost the legitimacy of their ruling and elicit the cooperation of villagers, local officials can bring about village election in a manner to meet villagers' preference.

Besides, the interplays between villagers and local government can intervene between the demand of the former and the decision making of the latter. Depending on whether they are meek policy-receivers or active game players, villagers' likely reactions to official electoral institutions will enter local officials' cost-benefit calculus. In this regard villagers in and of themselves differ a lot. While some villagers may behavior like passive bystanders, others are never subservient lambs. In fact, in many villages we found that if villagers perceived the official electoral institutions to be discriminatory, unfair, or unjust, they may implicitly or explicitly demonstrate their dissatisfactions, by, say, refusing to vote on election day. In one village election in Jiangsu province, for example, the local government attempted to interfere with the election by stipulating that villagers can only elect candidates nominated by local officials. The disaffected villagers took the exit strategy by keeping away from polls on the election day so that the ballots
did not attain the required minimum number for the election result to be valid. Eventually the local government had to change the nomination method in order to have decent turnout.

On some occasions villagers took more assertive approaches, i.e., by petitioning to a higher authority with complaints, etc,\textsuperscript{18} which can expose local officials to endless troubles that they will have to deal with cautiously. In one village in Jilin province, the village cadres told us that if village election does not proceed in an open and fair manner, then candidates will appeal to the provincial authority. Villager can also initiate collective actions that are more confrontational. In another village election in Heilongjiang province, the county party secretary tempered with vote counting in order to guarantee his favored candidate to be elected. When his trick was revealed, the angry villagers spoiled the ballot box, interrupted the election, and besieged the local officials sent by the county government to oversee the election. At last, the villagers got the re-election as they wanted and the county party boss was forced to resign. These events confirm the findings public defiance is an effective way of generating pressures on local government to push for popular policies.\textsuperscript{19}

Besides imposing direct pressures on local government, the indirect impact of villagers'
collective resistances on the opinion-policy relationship can be prominent too. That is, villagers' collective petitions, protesting, riots, etc, no matter whether they are election-relevant or not, change how local officials view them. From previous lessons, local officials learn of villagers' strength as a group and foresee what will take place once they fail to meet the public's preference. If they want to minimize the risk of facing those angry villagers, they will make the policymaking not to provoke them. In other words, by signaling their collective action capacity to local officials, villager's collective resistances can force them to be more attentive and responsive to what villagers want, including their demands for ideal electoral institutions.

A related concern is that even if local officials are willing to pay attention to public opinion, they may not actually know what the true public opinion is and therefore are unable to respond to it. Do they and can they? The answer revealed by our research is yes. In our case, because the experiments of village election have been practiced for many years, local officials have had enough time to learn what types of electoral institutions villagers prefer, even if they had no or little such knowledge at the outset of these elections. In practice, before an election is held, local government usually convene meetings, formal or informal, with village committee cadres and villagers to listen to their opinion on how to organizing the election. Therefore, the absence of free news media is not an insurmountable obstacle to the access to public opinion.

Finally, a critical question remains: can the relationship between public opinion and the formation of official institutions we discuss above be seen as causality, i.e., both villagers' preference and official electoral institutions are reflective of the influence of the third variable? This is not an unwarranted worry. As mentioned above, the OLVC requires the practice of village
self-governance, and moreover, it provides a general framework as well as some concrete guidance on how to implement village elections, such as voting method, candidate nomination, and so on. Therefore, the OLVC could affect local government's formulation of electoral institutions; and at the same time it may affect villagers' perceptions on the nature of electoral institutions as well as their strategies when dealing with local government. We will address this problem in our empirical analysis.

In summary, with respect to the formation of official electoral institutions, both theoretical discussion and practical observations suggest that the views of villagers can have an impact on the decisions made by local officials. However, to what extent the formation of official electoral institutions reflect villagers’ preference is still to be measured. We will address this problem in the next section.

**Measuring Explanatory and Dependent Variables**

In practice, a village election is administrated through a set of officially implemented electoral institutions, which regulate the way that candidates are nominated, voter qualifications, voting methods, the validation of election results, and so forth. As mentioned earlier, local governments have the decisive weight in determining which electoral institutions will be implemented in villages under their jurisdictions. As a result, different villages can have their own official electoral institutions. Corresponding to each official electoral institution

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20 As O’Brien and Li point out, villagers learn relevant laws (such as electoral laws) and use them as resources in doing battle with officialdom. See O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistances in Rural China*. 

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implemented in the election, we asked questions about villagers’ perceived ideal electoral institutions (Table 1), from which we learned the preferences and views of villagers. The explanatory variable can be derived from these questions. For example, the first question (direct/indirect election question) asks, "Do you think the village committee election should be a direct election (village committee leaders are elected by villagers’ ballots) or be an indirect election (village committee leaders are elected by villagers’ representatives)?". Based on respondents’ answers, we are able to learn what the ideal institutions are in their eyes, and also the proportion of those who hold a specific opinion in a village. The dependent variable is created as a dichotomous (0-1) variable to code the existence of a specific implemented official institution. For example, as to the direct/indirect election question, if a direct election is implemented in a village, then in this case the dependent variable is assigned the value of 1, otherwise it is assigned the value of 0. Correspondingly, the explanatory variable is defined as the proportion of villagers whose preference is identical with the implemented institution.

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21 As far as the first question is concerned, their answers will be either "should be direct election" or "should be indirect election".

22 We can also code the existence of indirect election as the value of 1, otherwise the value of 0. The way of coding will not alter our findings, as long as we code the dependent variable consistently across all villages. In this research, we try to code the dependent variable (DV) in a way that the assigned values reflect the democratic nature of the election. For example, as to direct/indirect election question, we code DV=1 (0) if the actual election was a direct (indirect) election. As to the 11th question in Table 1 (whether speech should be allowed in the campaign), we code DV=1 (0) when in the election speech was (not) allowed.

23 As an example, if in a village direct election is implemented, the dependent variable value should be scored 1 and the explanatory variable value is the proportion of those who believe the
Since there are 21 questions in Table 1, we finally have 21 separate dependent variables and 21 corresponding explanatory variables.

**Estimation and the Results**

We use the regression method to investigate the impact of villagers’ opinion of ideal electoral institutions (explanatory variable) on the implementation of official electoral institutions (dependent variable). The testing equation is

\[ \text{Model 1: } \text{OEI}_{ih} = \alpha + \beta_h \cdot \text{IEI}_{ih} \]

Where subscript \(i\) and \(h\) indicate the \(i^{th}\) village (\(i=1, \ldots, 116\)), and the \(h^{th}\) (\(h=1, \ldots, 21\)) official electoral rule (OEI) or ideal electoral rule (IEI). OEI is the actual electoral rule implemented in election, assigned the value of 1 if a specific rule was implemented in the election and the value of 0 if otherwise. IEI is the proportion of villagers who favored that rule. Because OEI is a dichotomous variable which only takes the value of 1 or 0, we will estimate Model 1 using the Logit method. If public opinion influences actual policies, we will expect the estimated coefficient \(\beta\) to be positive and statistically significant. The implication is that the ideal electoral institution should be direct election, say, 0.85. In another village, if indirect election is implemented and 40 percent of villagers believe the ideal one should be indirect election, then the dependent variable should be scored 0 and the explanatory variable value should be 0.4. For multiple-choice survey questions, such as question 5 in Table 1, if the dependent variable is scored 1 when in practice the candidates are elected by villagers, then the proportion of villagers who choose answer A, such as 0.25, will be the value of the explanatory variable in that case. Correspondingly, in another village where the candidates are engendered by other means, the dependent variable will be scored 0, and the proportion of villagers who choose answer B, or C, or D, will be the value of explanatory variable for this particular case.
greater the percentage of people supporting or favoring an electoral institution, the more likely it is that the institution will be implemented.

Column 1 of Table 3 reports the estimation results for Model 1 for all 21 issues, which reflect the policy-opinion relationship from various aspects. In 14 out of 21 issues, the policy-opinion relations are found to exist significantly and the coefficients have the expected signs. These results suggest that, for most issues, the actual electoral rules are indeed responsive to villagers’ opinions. We can further calculate the marginal effect of opinion on the formation of electoral institutions, which is calculated as the OEI elasticity of IEI. For example, a percentage point increase of a proportion of villagers who believed that in the election it is necessary to set up a secret voting booth (the 3rd issue) corresponds to 3 percentage point increase of the probability that in the election the secret voting booths were set up. From column 2, we know that among the 14 significant policy-opinion relationships, 9 of them can be regarded as strong, for their elasticity coefficients are greater than or nearly equal 1, while the remaining 4 as relatively weak for their elasticity coefficients are smaller than 1.

Apart from Model 1, we employ a second strategy to investigate policy-opinion relationship by redefining the explanatory and dependent variables. When interviewing villagers, we know not only how many of them hold the same opinion on a specific electoral institution but also the opinion with the highest frequency. In other words, we know what electoral institutions most villagers prefer. Therefore, public opinion on a particular electoral institution in a village will

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24 Here we refer to "most villagers" as a plurality, as opposed to a majority, though in most cases "most villagers" indeed accounted for a majority, sometime the absolute majority, of villagers.
be calculated as the proportion of respondents who have the same view with the highest frequency in all respondents. For instance, if in one village we randomly surveyed 6 respondents by asking them, "What is the optimal voting method in your eyes?" (the 2nd question in Table 1) and 3 of them gave the answer of "one-voter-one-ballot", 2 of them gave the answer of "one-representative-one-ballot", and 1 of them had the answer of "one-household-one-ballot", then public opinion regarding the "optimal voting method" issue is "one-voter-one-ballot" because most respondents held this view, and this index will take the value of 0.5 (=3/6). Using a similar method, we can know what public opinions are for other ideal electoral institution issues, and calculate the values for these public opinion indexes, respectively.

Correspondingly, the new dependent variable is not the existence of a particular institution but whether the implemented electoral institution is congruent with the preference or views of most villagers. If the preference of most villagers with regard to the optimal voting method is "one-voter-one-ballot" and the official institution implemented in the election is also "one-voter-one-ballot," then we assign the value of dependent variable to be 1 (otherwise 0), which means the implemented institution is congruent (otherwise incongruent) with most villagers’ preference of voting method. The strength of the newly introduced definitions is that they enable us to analyze to what extent policy making reflects what most people want for each type of electoral institution, which is similar to the congruence notion emphasized in comparative democracy literature.25 Another appealing feature of the new definitions is that they place

villagers and local official preferences across different types of electoral institutions on the same metric, in order to make possible the assessment of overall relations between election implementation and opinion, as we will touch on in following texts.

By redefining explanatory and dependent variables in this way, we then test

\[
\text{Model 2: } \text{COI}_{ih} = \phi + \rho \cdot \text{MII}_{ih}
\]

Here MII is public opinion on an ideal electoral institution, measured as the proportion of most villagers who shared the same belief of what the ideal electoral institution ought to be. COI measures whether the official electoral institution that is in force in the village is congruent with the preference of most villagers, which takes the value of 1 if the official institution is congruent with what most villagers prefer and the value of 0 if otherwise. Because COI is still a dichotomous variable that only takes the value of 1 or 0, we will estimate Model 2 by using the Logit method. If public opinion influences the formation of official electoral institutions, we will expect the estimated coefficient \( \rho \) to be positive and statistically significant. The implication is that as the size of majority increases, the more likely it is that the village has policy congruence with public opinion.

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of public opinion on each type of ideal electoral institution across villages (MII1-21, Panel A) as well as the proportion of villages in which policy is congruent with opinion (COI1-21, Panel B) for each type of institution. As we can see in Panel A,

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26 It is consistent with intuition that, as the group size in terms of its proportion in total population increases, say, increasing from 40 percent to 60 percent, the importance of the views of this group will correspondingly become more significant.
the mean of MII is very high, from the lowest of 56% (MII6) to the highest of 98% (MIR21). This means that for each type of electoral institution, in many villages the preference of most villagers enjoys a majority, sometime even an absolute majority, status.

Panel B tells more about the responsiveness in terms of opinion-policy connection in the countryside. On average the proportion of villages where the implemented official institutions are congruent with most villagers’ preferences is quite high, ranging from 54 percent to 100 percent. For example, when it comes to the direct/indirect election issue, 92 percent of villages (the mean value of COI1 across all villages) have the actual institutions that are in harmony with most villagers’ preferences. As to the 20th issue (the necessity of sending local officials to supervise village election), the congruence level (the mean value of COI20 across all villages) even comes to 100 percent.

Table 3 reports the estimated results of Model 2 for all 21 issues. From these results we find that the views shared by most villagers significantly influenced the formation of official electoral institutions, which is indicated by the positive and significant estimated coefficients of MIIs. (The lone exception is the last issue, Question 21, which asks, “Do you think the result of the election should be announced immediately after polls close?”). These results suggest that as the size of majority who hold the same opinion increases, the probability that the implemented electoral institution is congruent with the majority preference will accordingly increase.

The last column of Table 3 reports the marginal effects of public opinion (MIIs) on the formation of official electoral institutions (COIs). These marginal effects tell us the changes in probability of having an opinion-policy congruence produced by one percentage point increase in
the size of majority, ranging from 0.1 percentage point (MII_4) to 2.3 percentage point (MII_6). For example, for the direct/indirect election issue, if the proportion of most villagers who have the same preference in total villagers (MII_1), say, preferring direct election to indirect election, increases by one percentage point, the probability that the official institution stipulates that the election is a direct election will increase by 0.3 percentage points. Similarly, we can know that a 1 percentage point increase of the proportion of most villagers who prefer secret voting booth (MII_3) corresponds to the increase of the probability by 1 percentage point that in an actual election, secret ballot booths will be set up (COI_3). Put simply, what most villagers want indeed influences the formation of official electoral institutions.

**Does Public Opinion Matter? A Holistic Perspective**

Both Model 1 and Model 2 test the opinion-policy relationship for all 21 issues one by one. Although this helps us examine the opinion-policy relationship from various aspects of an election, it doesn’t tell us from a holistic perspective if and to what extent public opinion can influence the formation of official electoral institutions. In other words, what’s the overall opinion-policy relationship in village elections?

To examine this overall opinion-policy relationship, we create two new opinion-policy indexes to see whether the official institutions, from a holistic perspective, match the preferences of most villagers. To create the new dependent variable, we first average scores across COI_1 through COI_21 and then use the averaged value to measure the overall congruency of the official institutions with which most villagers prefer.

As to the new explanatory variable, we use the Principal Component Analysis (PCA)
method to combine all MIIs, from MII1 to MII21, into principal components, which are the linear combination of all the original variables (MII_i). We take the first principal component as the final variable standing for overall public opinion on ideal electoral institutions. This new variable accounts for 84 percent of the original information embodied across all MIRs. PCA is ideal when we need to measure a phenomenon that is not precisely reflected in any given variable. In this manner, analysts are not forced to choose the variable that best reflects the phenomenon, nor do they have to worry about the covariance between several variables that measure the same phenomenon. At last, the value of the new independent variable is therefore the score of the first principal component, which is derived from the calculation of first principal component. Its implication is obvious: A higher value of this index indicates the greater size of the majority who share the same preference of what ideal electoral institutions ought to be.

PCA transforms a number of correlated variables into orthogonal variables, namely principal components. The first principal component accounts for as much of the variation in the data as possible, and each succeeding component accounts for as much of the remaining variation as possible. See George H. Dunteman, *Principal Components Analysis, Sage University papers series. Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences, No. 07-069* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1989). In a recent study, Tsai used PCA to measure the implementation of village electoral institutions in rural China. See Lily L. Tsai, ‘Solidary Groups, Informal Accountability, and Local Public Goods Provision in Rural China’, *American Political Science Review, 101* (2007), p. 355-71.

In our calculation, the value of the first Principal Component = 0.22* MII_1 + 0.23* MII_2 + 0.20* MII_3 + 0.22* MII_4 + 0.20* MII_5 + 0.22* MII_6 + 0.20* MII_7 + 0.23* MII_8 + 0.20* MII_9 + 0.22* MII_10 + 0.22* MII_11 + 0.21* MII_12 + 0.21* MII_13 + 0.21* MII_14 + 0.22* MII_15 + 0.218* MII_16 + 0.22* MII_17
By doing so, we will estimate following equation

\[
ACOI_i = \alpha + \beta \cdot PMII_i + \gamma \cdot X_i
\]

where \(ACOI_i\) is the average value of \(COI_{ih}\), where subscript \(h\) indicates the \(h^{th}\) type of electoral institution \((h=1, \ldots, 21)\). Therefore \(ACOI\) is a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 1, suggesting that we can estimated Model 3 by using the General Linear Method with a logit link function.\(^{29}\) \(PMII_i\) is the score of the first principal component of all \(MII_{ih}\). If the overall opinion-policy relationship holds as predicted in democratic theory, the coefficient \(\beta\) should be positive and pass the significance level. The implication is that the as the majority size becomes greater, the degree of congruence between the actual institutions and the ideal institutions will be greater.

In addition, in Model 3 we also control for the effects of other relevant variables, \(X\). The controlling set \(X\) includes: \textit{Income}, the average household net income of a village (in logarithmic form). Democratic theory posits socio-economic development level as an environment that has a shaping and conditioning influence on the political system’s characteristics and which then affects how much the policy-making is responsive to public opinion.\(^{30}\) By controlling for the effect of income level, we can examine whether public opinion is able to influence policy-making,

\[+0.21^*\bar{MII}_{19}+0.23^*\bar{MII}_{19}+0.23^*\bar{MII}_{20}+0.23^*\bar{MII}_{21}\]


no matter if a village is poor or rich; \textit{Edu}, the percentage of the villagers who have finished at least the primary high schooling. Those people who receive more education are more knowledgeable and more likely to be able to affect the policy formulation and make institutions more congruent with their preferences. Therefore we expect a higher education level is associated with a higher degree of congruency between institutions and the majority preference; \textit{Party}, a dichotomous dummy variable which is assigned the value of 0 if the village party secretary was elected or nominated by all party members with one-voter-one-ballot method, or the value of 1 if was appointed by the party committee cadres or by the higher party authority. Thus \textit{Party} represents the extent to which the party-state controls the village party branch. Many observers have noted that village party branches, as the vehicle of the party state to interfere with village affairs, are likely to impair village democracy. We expect that an autonomous party branch is conductive to the opinion-policy congruence; \textit{Towncadre}, the proportion of the households with at least one family member who is a cadre in town or county government. Once village cadres have tight link with the local government, they tend to rely on the patronage network to abuse their power and make defiance against villagers' preference, which suggests that a lower degree of policy-making responsiveness to public opinion; \textit{Regulation}, whether local government directly assigns mandatory production tasks to the households living in a particular village, i.e., requiring them to grow particular kinds of crops. Regulation is therefore a dichotomous dummy variable which is scored 1 if such kind of regulations exists, otherwise 0. The more mandates a local government assigns to peasants, the more it tends to tighten the reins on village democracy,
as they fear more democracy encourages more resistance from farmers.\textsuperscript{31} We expect that Regulation is negatively associated with the congruency between the majority preference and official institutions. Finally, we control for county fixed effects in Model 3.

So far the specification of Model 3 does not take villagers' resources into account. Our discussions of the interactions between villagers and local government, however, point to the importance of citizens’ capacity to articulate their demands and impose pressures on local governments when dealing with them. To capture this mechanism, we add the variable Protest, a dichotomous variable indicating whether a village experienced big-scale collective protests three years before the time when the last election was held, and an interaction term of Protest*PMII into Model 3. We define an collective event with at least 50 villagers involved in as a big-scale collective protest event. It is worth noting that most collective resistances in our sample were due to land appropriation, birth planning, etc, that have nothing to do with the disputes on village electoral institutions. This shows the Protest variable stands for a broad environment in which local officials are under villagers’ pressures from various aspects so that they could anticipate what probably will happen to a big opinion-policy gap. In our survey, big-scale collective protest took place in 15 out of 116 villages.

Finally, we need to consider the impact of the OLVC. In fact, 10 out of the 21 survey questions (question 1-6, 8, 9, 19, 21) in Table 1 are specifically addressed by relevant articles in

OLVC. If we take these 10 questions out of the simple bivariate logit estimation in Model 1 and Model 2, then the effect of public opinion on electoral institution formation becomes smaller. As we can see from Table 3, among the remaining ten estimations, five of them in Model 1 now have the marginal effects that are greater than 1, while in Model 2, only three. To address the positional endogeneity problem association with the OLVC, we employ a different estimation strategy in which all the 10 institutions which are legally required by the OLVC are thrown out of the calculation of ACOI and PMII and then we re-estimate Model 3.

Table 4 reports the estimated results of Model 3. In Panel A, we presented the results when all 21 items of Table 1 are included in the empirical analysis. Not surprisingly, in both columns PMII has a positive and very significant estimated coefficient, which indicates that an overall policy-opinion relationship indeed holds strong. These results show that, after controlling for the effects of other independent variables, the formation of the official electoral institutions is indeed reflective of what most villagers prefer. In column 2, the magnitude of the effect of public opinion on the formation of official institutions can be derived from the estimated coefficient of PMII. When other variables are fixed at the mean levels, a percentage point increase of PMII at its mean level, which measures the overall public opinion of villagers on what electoral institutions should be, leads to 0.22 percentage points increase in the overall level of congruence of official institutions with the majority preferences.

In column 3 of Panel A, both PMII and the interaction term Protest*PMII are statistically significant at 1 percent and 5 percent level, respectively. These results substantiate our hypothesis that the presence of big-scale collective protests before village election creates pressure on local
policymakers so that they pay more attention to what most villagers prefer. In addition, based on the estimation results, we can infer that on all occasions public opinion's marginal effects are greater when there were collective protests (protest=1) compared with that when there were no collective protests (protest=0), as shown by figure 1(a1). The average marginal effect of PMII when there were Protest suggests that a unit increase of PMII corresponds to a 10 percentage points increase in the level of congruence, whereas when Protests did not take place, a unit increase of PMII on average led to only 3 percentage points increase in the level of congruence. Besides, figure 1(a2) shows the change of the marginal effect of Protest against the varying values of PMII, when other variables are fixed at their means. The results are very interesting in that the marginal effects of Protest are negative when the size of majority (PMII) stays low. But as the size of majority increases, the impacts of Protest also increase and finally become significantly positive after the size of majority attains a certain level (PMII=4.56). This indicates that local officials in effect behave in an opportunistic fashion when facing those disobedient villagers: when the size of majority is small, local government tends to take hardline approach to the powerless, by, e.g., denying their demands for ideal electoral institutions. In fact, this result is consistent with the finding that peasants' collective resistances may backfire as they provoke local government to be more suppressive.32 Our analysis here shows that only when the size of majority becomes sufficiently large, which probably means the pressure of collective resistances is worthwhile noting, is local government willing to take villagers' preferences seriously.

On the other hand, if we exclude the institutions with the force of law (OLVC) from consideration, the significance of PMII disappears, which is shown by the results in Panel B of Table 4. In column 2, for example, the coefficient of PMII is no longer significant in two-tail test, although it is barely significant at 10 percent level in one-tail test. In column 3, the coefficients of PMII are far from achieving conventional statistical significance. This suggests that for the electoral institutions which are not required by OLVC, the opinion-policy linkage becomes rather weak. But an encouraging finding is that in column 3, Protest and the interaction term Protest*PMII still are statistically significant at 5 percent and 10 percent level, respectively. This indicates that although public opinion does not matter per se, in villages with protest experience prior to the village elections, villagers' preferences have significant impact on opinion-policy congruence degree. As figure 1(b1) shows, when protest=1, PMII's marginal effects are positive on all occasions and are statistically significant, while when protest=0 its marginal effects are reduced to be insignificant from zero. In fact, when all other variables are fixed at their mean level and collective protests were present, on average a unit increase of PMII will increase the opinion-policy congruency level by 13 percentage points. Figure 1(b2) illustrates the change of marginal effects of Protest on ACOI along the whole range of PMII. Similar to figure 1(a2), the marginal effect of Protest is negative when the size of majority is low, and become positive and significant after the latter attains an enough high level (PMII=3.3). Again this result suggests that villagers' assertive attitudes toward government will only enhance the policy-opinion congruency degree until the size of majority is sufficiently high.

Combining these results together, we can infer that as far as rural grassroots election is
concerned, public opinion of villagers indeed can impact the formation of official electoral institutions. But this effect in large part reflects the force of Law (OLVC) and in effect the requirement of the higher authorities, among others the central government. As for the institutions which require huge deliberations and information exchange between villagers and local government, the opinion-policy relationship is not that certain. On the other hand, however, if villagers are able to show their ability of engaging in collective actions, this will enhance their negotiation power before local officials substantially. In the meantime, only when enough villagers attain the consensus regarding what institutions they want can their assertive stances add to their cause. Otherwise such kind of confrontational strategy is likely to backfire by inviting local government's iron fist in response to their demand.

As far as other variables are concerned, Regulation has a negative and significant estimated coefficient in most results, except for in column 1 of Panel B. This suggests that, when other things are equal, the existence of regulations by local government on farmers’ production decisions leads to a lower responsiveness of rule making to public opinion. The policy implication is that when local government regulates rural agricultural production, the decision making will be made in a manner that favors the implementation of regulations, rather than in a manner favoring the villagers. According to the estimated result, we can infer that, compared to villages without such regulations, villages with regulations will cause the level of congruency of official institutions with the majority preference to drop by 5 percentage points.

Other socio-economic variables, like Income, Party, Edu, and Towncadre, etc, seem to have no significant influence on opinion-policy linkage, though the signs of the variables are in correct
direction. The policy implications of these findings are ambiguous. As far as the impact of Party is concerned, for example, on one hand a pliable village party committee may suggest the relative ease by which local government can force villagers to be more obedient to its ordinance as assigned through village party branches. On the other hand, however, if village party secretaries play a dominant role as the village "number one", and they are subject to the demands of the local governments, then the necessity on the part of local government to manipulate the formation of electoral institutions will become less. These two mechanisms working together but in opposing directions may eventually account for the lessening significance of Party. Thus the insignificance of these socio-economic explanatory variables may not indicate a weak opinion-policy linkage after all, but in fact, may be shown to exert their influence through very complex mechanisms with effects that ultimately cancel each other out. This possibility suggests that future further research is needed to examine the effects of socio-economic variables on the policy-opinion relationship.

**Conclusion**

So far we have presented enough evidence to show that in village elections, official electoral institutions to a large extent fit well with public opinion: on the whole the probability that an electoral institution would be implemented will increase if more villagers prefer this institution, and, in most villages, the official electoral institutions implemented by local policymakers are congruent with the preferences of the vast majority of villagers. Our findings suggest that village

elections can be viewed as an experiment of grassroots democracy rather than a shell game manipulated by local government and the centre. Our findings cast doubt on the conventional wisdom that says under an authoritarian regime, policymakers are apathetic to what their subjects are thinking about.

On the other hand, however, the significance of the tight opinion-policy linkage should not be overstated. The seemingly solid opinion-policy linkage can hardly be attributed to the institutionalized participation of peasants or the deliberation between villagers and policymakers but result more from the directives from above (OLVC) as well as from the pressures from below (peasants' collective protests). Hence it cannot be interpreted as the improvement of democratic governance at any local administrative levels.

A more worrying point is that even if the actual electoral institutions come about in a way that do meet the preferences of most villagers and they enable villagers to have fair and open elections, it is not that optimistic when we look beyond the sphere of village democratic election and ask a more general question: will local government bring about policies that are favored by most villagers. i.e., those encouraging more entrepreneurship, protecting their property rights (among others land), and providing more social welfares, and so forth? Unlike the implementation of rural democracy, in which local officials lose little from villagers' self-governance because they still monopolize most local political and economic resources all the while, any substantial improvement of policymaking embodied by a greater degree of opinion-policy congruency may likely come at the cost of local officials' rent-seeking capacity or even their power per se and hence is unlikely to be seen in the foreseeable future.
By the same token, the mechanism posited by our theoretical reasoning concerning the formation of actual electoral institutions may simply not work in other spheres of policymaking and governance. Given the authoritarian nature of China's political regime, the central government is unlikely to impair its local agents' power foundation to court the powerless. And villagers' assertive strategies, such as collective appeals and protests, etc, can hardly apply enough pressure on local government to force the latter to concede. As the incumbent in power, local officials always have abundant tools and resources to divide the dissents, spoil its leadership, divert its supporters, and minimize the intervention from higher levels. As a result, in reality most collective protests in the countryside are small-scale, short-lived, and isolated without mutual connections and coordination.\textsuperscript{34} Unless China is blessed with a broader and deeper democratization beyond villages, few observers would make a huge bet on a real and sound opinion-policy linkage.

Table 1 Surveyed Questions Regarding the Ideal Election Institutions Favored by Villagers

1. Do you think village committee leaders should be a directly elected by villagers or by their representatives?
2. In your opinion, what should be the optimal voting method in an election? A) one-villager-one-ballot; B) one-villager representative-one-ballot; C) one-household-one-ballot
3. Do you think secret ballot should be used so that other people do not know who you are voting for when you mark your ballot?
4. Do you think there should be more candidates than offices?
5. In your opinion, what is the optimal way to engender the candidates in the primary election? A) elected by villagers; B) recommended by villagers; C) recommend themselves as candidates; D) others
6. In your opinion, what is the optimal way to determine which candidates are qualified to run for the position of chairman of the village committee? A) depends on the results of the primary election; B) depends on the appointment of local government, village party committee or incumbent village cadres; C) others
7. Do you think the qualification of candidates should depend on the approval of local government?
8. In your opinion, what is the minimum voter turnout of villagers necessary to guarantee the validity of the election result?
9. In the election, what is the minimum percentage of total ballots the candidate needs to win?  A) >50% of all qualified voters; B) >50% of voters who turn out to vote; C) no minimum requirement is necessary, as long as one gets the most votes.
10. In your opinion, Should electoral campaigns be allowed?
11. Do you believe candidates should be allowed to give campaign speeches?
12. Do you think the village party committee election (VPCE) should be held before the village committee election (VCE), or should VPCE be held after VCE?
13. Do you think the village party secretary should be allowed to run for the position of chairman of village committee?
14. Do you think the village party secretary should be allowed to be a member of the village election committee?
15. If a resident does not have registered permanent residence in the village but has lived in the village for more than three years, do you think he/she should be given the right to vote in a village election?
16. What about a villager who has a registered permanent residence in the village but does not actually live there? Do you think he/she should be able to vote in village elections?
17. Do you think proxy voting should be allowed?
18. Do you think villagers should be allowed to vote through mail?
19. In your opinion, what is the optimal way to select members of the village election committee? A) appointed by local government, by village party committee, or by incumbent village cadres; B) elected or recommended by villagers, by household representatives, or by villager representatives.
20. Do you think the local government should send officials to the village to supervise the election process?
21. Do you think the election results should be announced immediately after the polls close?
Table 2  Descriptive Statistics of Opinion and Congruence Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel A</th>
<th>Ideal Electoral Institutions Favored by Most Villagers Across All Villages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MII1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Dev.</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panel B</th>
<th>Congruence of Official Institutions with Villagers’ Preferences Across All Villages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COI1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. Dev.</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: MII(k) is the proportion of most villagers in a village who shared the same opinion of what the (kth) ideal electoral institution ought to be; COI(k) measures in a village whether the official electoral institution that is in force in the village is congruent with the preference of most villages.
### Table 3  The effect of Public Opinion: The Logit Estimation results of Equation (1) and (2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Basic Model 1</th>
<th>Basic Model 2</th>
<th>No. of Obs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Estimated Coefficient</td>
<td>Marginal Effecta (%)</td>
<td>Estimated Coefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No. of Obs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI1</td>
<td>0.89 (0.74)</td>
<td>-- b</td>
<td>MII1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI2</td>
<td>n.a. c</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>MII2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI3</td>
<td>7.38 (1.53) ***</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>MII3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI4</td>
<td>-1.17 (9.45)</td>
<td>-- b</td>
<td>MII4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI5</td>
<td>7.51 (1.42) ***</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>MII5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI6</td>
<td>5.64 (1.14) ***</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>MII6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI7</td>
<td>6.51 (3.33)***</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>MII7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI8</td>
<td>14.73 (4.62)***</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>MII8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI9</td>
<td>5.43 (1.7)***</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>MII9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI10</td>
<td>1.7 (1.89)</td>
<td>-- b</td>
<td>MII10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI11</td>
<td>2.96 (1.58)*</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>MII11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI12</td>
<td>3.16 (1.34)**</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>MII12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI13</td>
<td>5.93 (1.33)***</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>MII13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI14</td>
<td>7.0 (2.03)***</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>MII14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI15</td>
<td>4.92 (1.57)***</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>MII15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI16</td>
<td>9.74 (2.62)***</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>MII16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI17</td>
<td>5.94 (2.24)***</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>MII17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI18</td>
<td>5.16 (1.34)***</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>MII18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI19</td>
<td>4.17 (2.12)***</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>MII19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI20 c</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>MII20 c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEI21</td>
<td>9.16 (6.14) d</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>MII21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *, **, and *** indicate coefficients that are significant at 10%, 5%, and 1% level, respectively. Figures in parentheses are robust standard errors corrected for cluster effect at the township level. The dependent variables in Basic Model 1 and Basic Model 2 are OEI and CON, respectively. a. The marginal effect is the probability change due to a percentage point increase of IERs or MIRs. b. No results are reported because the estimated coefficient is insignificant. c. No results are reported because there are no variances of the dependent variables (all values are 100 percentages). d. If we use the Probit model rather than the Logit model, the estimated coefficient will be significant at 10% level.
Table 3 Overall Opinion-Policy Linkage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GLM Model</th>
<th>GLM Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Panel A: All 21 items are included</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMII</td>
<td>0.29 (0.09)**</td>
<td>0.25 (0.10)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protest*PMII</td>
<td>0.43 (0.15)***</td>
<td>-1.69 (0.60)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protest</td>
<td>-1.69 (0.60)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.08 (0.23)</td>
<td>0.09 (0.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edu</td>
<td>0.83 (0.71)</td>
<td>1.17 (0.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>-0.05 (0.23)</td>
<td>-0.08 (0.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towncadre</td>
<td>-14.4 (14.3)</td>
<td>-17.44 (14.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regulation</td>
<td>-0.39 (0.11)***</td>
<td>-0.52 (0.13)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County fixed effects</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Panel B: items which are legally required by the OLVC are excluded</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PMII</td>
<td>0.25 (0.17)</td>
<td>0.13 (0.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protest*PMII</td>
<td>0.78 (0.36)**</td>
<td>-2.21 (1.19)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protest</td>
<td>-2.21 (1.19)*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.09 (0.28)</td>
<td>0.02 (0.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edu</td>
<td>1.1 (1.11)</td>
<td>1.06 (1.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.29)</td>
<td>-0.1 (0.21)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Towncadre</td>
<td>-10.5 (13.2)</td>
<td>-13.5 (12.2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regulation</td>
<td>-0.23 (0.24)</td>
<td>-0.42 (0.22)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>County fixed effects</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** *, **, and *** indicate coefficients that are significant at 10%, 5%, and 1% level, respectively. Figures in parentheses are robust standard errors cluster on county.
Figure 1(a1): marginal effect of villagers' opinion

Figure 1(a2): marginal effect of collective protest