Patterns of Authority and Governance in Rural China:  
Who’s in Charge? Why?1

Xin Sun, Travis J. Warner, Dali L. Yang and Mingxing Liu

Xin Sun and Travis J. Warner are doctoral students of political science at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago respectively; Dali L. Yang is Professor of Political Science and Faculty Director of the Beijing Center at the University of Chicago; Mingxing Liu is Associate Professor at the China Institute for Educational Finance Research at Peking University. Please direct correspondence to daliyang@uchicago.edu

Abstract:
A “dual-power structure” governs the Chinese countryside. Branch committees of the Chinese Communist Party, traditionally the centers of power in the villages, increasingly share their authority with elected villagers’ committees. Seeking to illuminate the factors contributing to the division of authority between these “two committees,” we view Party branch secretaries and the chairs of villagers’ committees as the agents of two distinct principals. Party branch secretaries tend to derive their authority from township authorities, while villagers’ committee chairs derive theirs from their village electorates. We predict that the division of authority between the two committees varies with A) the relative levels of activism exhibited by the principals, and B) the perceived legitimacy of the agents, as determined by their method of s/election. Through analysis of a unique data set, we test four hypotheses derived from this framework. Our findings contribute to a better understanding of the “exercise of power” in rural China and shed light on the dynamics of China’s political evolution.

1 We wish to thank the journal’s anonymous reviewers for their suggestions and to Professor Ran Tao of Renmin University of China for allowing us to use the survey data and for his encouragement of this project.
In one of his most provocative works, Robert A. Dahl famously asked: “In a political system where nearly every adult may vote but where knowledge, wealth, social position, access to officials, and other resources are unequally distributed, who actually governs?”

Dahl’s question of “Who Governs” is particularly worth asking in rural China, where concerns about village governance have long troubled national leaders and villagers alike and have persisted throughout the post-Mao period.

The configuration of power and authority in rural China has undergone significant transformation in recent decades. In the Mao era, secretaries of local Communist Party branches held sway in rural communities. Since the 1980s, decollectivization and the introduction of village elections have attenuated the Party’s monopoly at the village level such that Party branches increasingly share their authority with elected villagers’ committees. Results from our survey indicate that, while Party branches still wield ultimate authority in a plurality of sample villages (50%), elected villagers’ committees (VCs) either share this authority or serve as the centers of power themselves in 32% of villages surveyed. A “dual-power structure”

---


(eryuan quanli jiegou) thus exists in today’s Chinese countryside, making the Dahlist question all the more pertinent.6

There has been little systematic research on the authority relationship between the “two committees” (liangwei).7 Nonetheless scholars have recognized this lacuna in the literature on rural Chinese politics, which has tended to focus on the causes and effects of village elections. O’Brien and Han, for example, applaud the spread of grassroots political reform, but advise against overstating its effects. They contend that while village elections have increased villagers’ “access to power,” they have done little to alter the actual “exercise of power” in villages where Party branches, township authorities, or social forces (such as clans and even local mafias) continue to dominate. They and others argue persuasively that further research into the dynamics and effects of grassroots political reform in China requires a full accounting of authority relations at the village level.8

In this article, we expand upon Dahl’s question and ask: who governs in rural China, and why? We seek to offer a comprehensive account of authority relations at the village level and illuminate the role of the Party branch, which has been under-studied by Western scholars accustomed to studying politics in terms of elections. We begin with an overview of the dual-power structure in rural China. We then present a theoretical framework for exploring factors behind the division of authority between Party branch and villagers’ committee leaders. Drawing on a unique dataset from a nationwide survey, we describe the current state of Party branch secretary selections by providing a snapshot of the configuration of authority between

---

7 As we discuss below, a major exception is Oi and Rozelle, “Elections and Power: The Locus of Decision-Making in Chinese Villages”.
Party branches and villagers’ committees. Finally, we empirically test the hypotheses derived from our theoretical framework and discuss the implications of our findings.

Our findings point to the importance of political and institutional variables in defining the contours of the dual-power structure. For the purposes of theory building, we view Party branches and villagers’ committees as the agents of two distinct principals; Party branches generally derive their authority from township governments, while villagers’ committees tend to derive theirs from the village residents who elect them.9 In general, we predict that the division of authority between the two committees varies with A) the relative levels of activism exhibited by the principals, and B) the perceived legitimacy of the agents, as determined by their method of selection.10 We hypothesize that Party branch secretaries are more likely to maintain their leading positions in village governance where 1) township leaders depend more heavily on village authorities for fulfillment of mandatory policy goals, and 2) selection procedures for Party branch secretaries are more representative. The villagers’ committee chair, on the other hand, is more likely to share power with the Party branch secretary, or even to exercise ultimate authority, in places where 1) villagers display a high degree of activism, as measured by their use of collective

9 Guo and Bernstein, “The Impact of Elections on the Village Structure of Power: The Relations between the Village Committees and the Party Branches”.
10 We use the term “legitimacy” with some trepidation and largely in the sense of electoral legitimacy. China observers frequently refer to the greater “legitimacy” (hefaxing) possessed by elected officials, but we recognize that China is ruled by a single political party. Legally speaking, one could plausibly argue that local representatives of the Chinese Communist Party are the “legitimate” authority figures in their communities. We use the word as customarily used by observers of, and participants in, rural Chinese politics. By perceived “legitimacy,” what we mean is something akin to “popularity” or “prestige,” though these words are merely implied in most of the relevant literature. The accounts attributing greater “legitimacy” to elected villagers’ committees generally describe these leaders as simply being more popular among villagers than their unelected party branch counterparts. Moreover, in our own fieldwork, respondents refer to the greater “prestige” (weixin) possessed by officials selected via more representative means. Whatever the term used, however, the key point is that more representative selection procedures tend to increase the popular support of village leaders.
petitions, and 2) election procedures for villagers’ committee chairs are more representative.

From a broader comparative perspective, we believe our project may help advance the larger comparative literature on elections in authoritarian contexts. Existing works in this area have mainly focused on the impact of elections on the durability of authoritarian rule on the one hand, and on government accountability on the other. Taking a step back, our project asks: when is an elected body likely to gain genuine power in a non-democratic environment? And how do electoral institutions shape the resulting distribution of authority? We hope this endeavor may contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of authoritarian elections.

The dual-power structure in the Chinese countryside

In this section, we trace the development of the dual-power structure in rural China. We make the case for viewing Party branch secretaries and villagers’ committee chairs as the agents of two distinct principals and outline the implications of this analytical framework for further research.

During the late Mao era, a “unitary power structure” (yiyuan quanli jiegou) under the leadership of the Party was the norm in rural China. The Party branch secretary served as “the undisputed boss of the village,” with his power being reinforced by the “winds of communism.” To be sure, Party branch secretaries were Janus-faced. As village residents they were sympathetic to the concerns of their communities, but they “were accountable primarily to leaders higher up in the chain. With their salaries

---

12 Guo and Bernstein, “The Impact of Elections on the Village Structure of Power: The Relations between the Village Committees and the Party Branches”, p.258. We recognize this is a stark statement. For more contextualized discussion of status and power issues, see Parish and Whyte, Village and Family in Contemporary China, p.96-114.
paid by the local government, they were under pressure to heed orders from above rather than display loyalty to those below them.\(^{14}\) Village cadres oversaw the fulfillment of state grain quotas, the submission of taxes and levies, and the implementation of a wide variety of state policies. The Party’s economic and political control at the village level may not have been monolithic—various forms of political participation remained possible—but it did go largely unchallenged throughout the Maoist period.\(^{15}\)

The post-Mao decollectivization struck a major blow against the unitary authority structure in the villages. As household farming spread, village cadres lost much of their control over the distribution of goods and services in their communities.\(^{16}\) No rival organization yet existed to challenge the Party branch leadership, but their authority suffered as villagers began to view them as “unnecessary, even parasitic.”\(^{17}\) Some parts of the country were caught in a crisis of rural governance, with spates of violence between villagers and rural officials.\(^{18}\) Concerns about improving rural governance led Chinese policymakers, notably Peng Zhen, then the vice-chairman of the National People’s Congress Standing Committee, to draw on local experiments and make a provision for village self-governance in the 1982 Chinese Constitution.

\(^{18}\) Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China: State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change since the Great Leap Famine*. 
In 1987, The Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees was enacted and provided the legal basis for villagers’ committee members to be elected by village residents.

Kelliher has argued that “Fear of chaos, rather than idealism, has driven the debate” on village self-governance. Proponents of village elections claimed that elections would lead to the selection of higher-quality cadres and ease the enforcement of state policy, thus improving state-society relations. Most observers agree with Kelliher’s assessment that China’s leaders view village self-governance in instrumental terms, as a mechanism to solidify political authority in the countryside rather than as a means to advance the inherent virtue of grassroots democracy.

Yet introducing village elections (self-governance) while maintaining the Party structure has produced a dual-power structure riven by conflicts. Indeed, arguments by village election advocates foreshadowed the divergence of authority between village Party branches and villagers’ committees. They claimed, for example, that elections would facilitate revenue collection “because elected cadres are more powerful than appointed ones.” In fact, village self-governance has empowered the villagers’ committee to become “a rival authority” to Party branch leadership.

Leadership conflicts between the villagers’ committees and Party branches should not be perceived as a foregone conclusion. With congruent policy goals and clearly

---


demarcated responsibilities, it is conceivable that the relationship between the two entities would settle into a cooperative equilibrium.24 Such has not been the case, however, because of two major factors. First, the Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees (1998; trial version 1987) does not clearly demarcate the roles of villagers’ committee chairs and Party branch secretaries. It describes villagers’ committees as mass organizations for self-government and refers to the Party branch as the “leadership core” (*lingdao hexin*). Article 3 stipulates that the Party branches, “in accordance with the Constitution and laws, support the villagers’ committees and ensure that they carry out self-government activities and exercise their democratic rights directly”25. As a result of these vague stipulations, each side has invoked the Organic Law to assert its authority, pitting the two committees against each other in many communities. Mao and Chen’s survey of 500 villages in Hunan Province found that 65% of Party branch secretaries viewed the branch’s “leadership core” role as granting it ultimate authority over village affairs; on the other hand, 95% of villagers’ committee chairs claimed that Party branches lack the authority to intervene in the management of collective property.26

Second, different selection procedures for the two committees have imbued them with distinct behavioral logics “based on two different sources of authority”27.

---

24 Our data indicate that party branch secretaries and villagers’ committee chairs share authority in 26% of sample villages. These data say nothing, however, about the “cooperative” nature of these relationships, and in our fieldwork we have found that conflicts between the two committees are frequent.
26 Junji Mao and Yuanzhang Chen, “Nongcun liangwei guanxi zianzhuang ji duice: dui Hunan 500 ge cun de diaocha” [Exploring the Two-committee Relations in the Countryside: A Survey Study of 500 Villages in Hunan], *Zhongguo Dangzheng Ganbu Luntan* [Chinese Cadres Tribune](2001).
27 For more detailed discussion of the two committees’ distinct source of authority, see Guo and Bernstein, “The Impact of Elections on the Village Structure of Power: The Relations between the Village Committees and the Party Branches”, quote at p.258.
Regardless of how they are selected, Party branch secretaries belong to a Party hierarchy organized on the Leninist principle of democratic centralism. They may be voted on by Party members in the village (as we detail below) but organizationally they are directly subordinate to their superiors at the township level and tend to take their marching orders from above.\(^{28}\) Elected villagers’ committee chairs, in contrast, derive their authority from the consent of voting villagers and are therefore more likely than Party branch secretaries to heed demands from village voters. Moreover, the Organic Law (Article 4) specifies that the relationship between townships and villagers’ committees is one of “guidance” (zhidao) rather than “leadership” (lingdao). Though the Organic Law requests the villagers’ committee to help town/township government with their work, it specifically prohibits the town/township governments from interfering in matters that “lawfully fall within the scope of the villagers’ self-government”.

The preceding discussion leads us further to our analytical framework for explaining the division of authority in village governance: we see the villagers’ committee chair and the Party branch secretary as agents of two distinct principals—village residents and township officials, respectively.

Case studies by other scholars and our own fieldwork lend support to the observation that the reliance of villagers’ committees and village Party branches on two distinct sources of authority has contributed to tensions and conflicts between branch secretaries and VC chairs. Li and O’Brien report that elected villagers’ committee chairs in some places, empowered by popular “legitimacy,” openly attempt to undermine Party branch secretaries. They quote a high-level official as saying: “Challenging the Party secretary is one of the first things many village committee chairs do.”\(^{29}\) Elsewhere Li notes that elections can bring villagers and villagers’ committees together in resisting unlawful township policies.\(^{30}\)

\(^{28}\) Interview 1, Jilin Province, August, 2007.
\(^{29}\) Li and O’Brien, “The Struggle over Village Elections”, p.142.
confronted with such activism are likely to lean on the Party branch secretary for support.

Admittedly, this principal-agent framework represents an ideal type. Although the Party branches are responsible first and foremost to higher levels of the Party hierarchy, they are not deaf to villager demands. Conversely, villagers’ committees are legally obligated to assist the township/town governments, even though their political survival hinges on maintaining the support of village constituents. Nonetheless, we suggest this principal-agent framework provides a useful starting point for explaining the patterns of authority in the Chinese countryside.

This principal-agent framework also helps elucidate a recent attempt to reunify the dual-power structure in China’s villages. In 2002, the CCP Central Committee and the State Council jointly endorsed yijiantiao (“one shoulder carries”), or the practice of selecting a single individual to head both the villagers’ committee and the village Party branch. Also known as “concurrent office-holding”, the practice has been promoted as a method for streamlining grassroots governance and reducing tensions between the Party branch secretary and the VC chair.31 (We refer to this leadership form as yijiantiao to avoid any confusion between the terms “concurrent office-holding” [one individual serving in both leadership positions] and “joint leadership” [two individuals sharing leadership duties].) In places where yijiantiao holds sway, there is little question as to who serves as the village’s top leader, or yibashou. Viewing the Party branch secretary and the VC chair as the agents of distinct principals adumbrates why yijiantiao—which may seem a step backwards to some Western observers, given the Party’s increased role in village elections—would appear attractive to Chinese officials. Yijiantiao makes the village leader accountable to both township officials and village residents as he must be approved by township leaders/Party branch members (for the position of Party branch secretary) and elected by villagers (for the position of VC chair). Our framework says little about why

particular communities would adopt *yijiantiao*, as the institution is often encouraged by higher-level officials. Nonetheless, in the following empirical analysis, we attempt to identify some of the factors behind its occurrence.

**Theoretical framework and hypotheses**

The introduction and spread of elections in rural China have engendered a growing body of research upon which our study builds. Initially much of this literature tended to treat elections as dependent variables. Scholars sought to determine under what conditions elections were held and to identify what factors contributed to competitiveness. These studies variously zeroed in on the role of higher-level bureaucrats in pushing for reform, the part played by villagers in pressing for more competitive elections, and the ways in which economic variables influenced the progress of grassroots democracy. More recently, Landry et al have found that villager participation increases when some candidates for villagers’ committees can lose.

---

32 Guo and Bernstein, “The Impact of Elections on the Village Structure of Power: The Relations between the Village Committees and the Party Branches”; O’Brien and Han, “Path to Democracy? Assessing Village Elections in China”. Our interviews also confirm that, in many villages, *yijiantiao* is in fact prescribed by upper-level governments rather than chosen by villagers themselves (interview #2, Jilin Province, August, 2007; interview #32, Jiangsu Province, May, 2008).


Increasingly scholars have analyzed the presence and competitiveness of elections as independent variables linked to various positive outcomes. Existing works have identified several positive consequences of elections, including political stability, improved cadre responsiveness, increased perception of cadre trustworthiness, and enhanced feelings of political efficacy. More competitive nomination procedures have also been found to increase villager satisfaction with elections. Perhaps because they ease tensions between cadres and villagers, elections may also engender positive policy outcomes, such as “fairer” land reallocations, and curbed rent seeking. Other scholars, however, observe little impact from village self-governance.

While the above findings have informed our research, they have generally not delved into local power relations in village politics. The major exception is Oi and Rozelle’s article “Elections and Power,” which concentrates on the causal effect of economic—not political and institutional—variables on the locus of village decision-making. They argue that villagers’ committees tend to gain authority

---

37 Pastor and Tan, “The Meaning of China’s Village Elections”.  
vis-à-vis Party branches when 1) villagers have relatively few economic ties to the outside world, and 2) the local economy is primarily based on agriculture. Where these conditions exist and an “exit” option is not viable, villagers are more likely to “voice” their interest in village elections and help empower the leaders they elect.47

In this section, we lay the theoretical groundwork for, and then articulate, the hypotheses guiding our empirical analysis. Our analytical framework acknowledges the importance of villager activism as noted by Oi and Rozelle but also recognizes that the activism of both villagers and township governments may not be independent of local economic conditions. Many petitions in fact arise from economic disputes. We thus explicitly theorize and measure the two kinds of activism.

To reiterate, we view VC chairs and Party branch secretaries as the agents of distinct principals—village residents and township authorities, respectively (though we note some efforts to democratize the selection of Party branch secretaries). Provided that a single person does not occupy both offices, we perceive the division of authority between the two to vary with principal activism and perceived agent “legitimacy.” In concrete terms, we predict that each of the two gains authority vis-à-vis the other in village governance when its principal takes a more active interest in village affairs, and when the selection process for its members is more democratic. While this unified framework is our own, we draw on our fieldwork and case studies by other scholars to help establish the plausibility of our hypotheses.

Township and villager activism

Chinese analysts have emphasized how, in China’s unitary and hierarchical political system, political pressures emanating from above have shaped the behavior of county and township officials and have induced them to escalate demands on their subordinates.48 Because many of the policy-related tasks shouldered by township

48 Jingben Rong, Cong yali xing tizhi xiang minzhu he zuo tizhi de zhuanye: xianxiang liangji zhengzi tizhi gaige [The Transformation from the Pressure System
leaders (e.g. birth control, dispute resolution, land acquisition, as well as keeping villagers from making petitions that are considered destabilizing) cannot be implemented or fulfilled without the cooperation of village leaders, this “pressurized system” has caused township authorities to seek greater control over village affairs in spite of the Organic Law’s provisions for village self-governance. Generally speaking, when faced with village-level tasks, township officials prefer to seek the assistance of the village Party branch secretary rather than the popularly elected VC chair, particularly when the tasks have the potential to conflict with the perceived interests of village residents.49 Institutionally, the township Party committees enjoy a direct leadership relationship with the village Party branches and have the authority to dismiss and remove the incumbent village Party branch secretary. Due to the lack of clear stipulations for Party branch elections, township leaders can more readily intervene in the village Party branch selection process. In contrast, the villagers’ committees are organizations for self-governance, and the appointment and the removal of VC chairs are subject to the Organic Law of Villagers’ Committees, making it more difficult for township authorities to intervene, and allowing villagers to resist unpopular policies. Not surprisingly, township officials adjudicating conflicts between the Party branch secretary and the VC chair tend to favor the Party branch secretary.50 Based on the above analysis, we predict that the more township


49 Bernstein, “Village Democracy and Its Limits”; Guo and Bernstein, “The Impact of Elections on the Village Structure of Power: The Relations between the Village Committees and the Party Branches”; Li and O'Brien, “The Struggle over Village Elections”. In some villages, township authorities have solidified the superior status of the Party branch secretaries by paying party branch officials full-time salaries, while villagers’ committee members are compensated as if they were temporary employees.

50 Guo and Bernstein, “The Impact of Elections on the Village Structure of Power: The Relations between the Village Committees and the Party Branches”; Guidi Chen
authorities depend on village leaders to fulfill policy tasks, the more likely they are to intervene in support of the village Party branch secretaries.

Hypothesis 1: The more township authorities depend on village cadre cooperation for the completion of policy tasks, the more pressure they will apply to village leaders (especially the Party branch secretaries), and the more village Party branch secretaries will tend to consolidate power vis-à-vis VC chairs.

Village residents are not opposed to all policies emanating from higher levels of government, but a variety of conflicts, especially those over arbitrary fees and low-ball compensation for land requisition, have received considerable attention in the media and in the scholarly literature. Villagers engage in a broad spectrum of activities to resist the enormous pressure authorities can bring to bear. Some studies suggest that, empowered by their participation in elections, villagers now may pursue more active forms of political resistance that have reshaped grassroots politics in China. Granted, limited progress toward the rule of law and the absence of an independent judicial system presents sizeable obstacles for villagers seeking redress for their grievances. Research indicates that semi-institutionalized channels, particularly collective petitions, can provide villagers with a powerful, if sometimes costly, means for resisting perceived cadre predation.

Collective petitions can shape the configuration of authority at the village level in two ways. First, given their closer relationship with township authorities, village Party branch secretaries lacking popular mandates are more likely to bear the


52 Li, “The Empowering Effect of Village Elections in China”.

53 O'Brien and Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China*. 
brunt of mass dissatisfaction with unpopular government policies. In practice, a high proportion of villagers’ collective petitions complain of malfeasance by village Party branch secretaries. Among the most common complaints are lack of transparency in village finance, misappropriation of collective property, and manipulation of village elections. Pressure created by the petitions can put the village Party branch secretaries on the defensive and cause them to give more room to elected villagers’ committees.\(^{54}\)

Second, even when a Party branch secretary is not the object of a collective petition, his status as village leader nonetheless suffers, especially in the eyes of township leaders, and politically savvy VC chairs are known to take advantage of such dynamics. Our fieldwork in Jilin Province indicates that VC chairs are loath to deal with land disputes and other contentious situations in villages where Party branch secretaries have concentrated power; instead, they leave the trouble to the branch secretaries.\(^{55}\) When the disputes lead to collective petitions, the branch secretaries often find it expedient to cede some power to villagers’ committee chairs to help mitigate tensions.

Therefore, where villagers are more active in defending their interests, particularly where they are inclined to make collective petitions, we expect authority to flow in the direction of VC chairs. This prediction is in line with Oi and Rozelle’s argument that more active political participation on the part of villagers tends to empower elected officials. However, unlike these authors, we expect to find that such participation has an effect on village authority relations independent of a village’s socioeconomic conditions.

---


\(^{55}\) Interview #14, Jilin Province, September, 2007.
Hypothesis 2: The greater the level of village activism, as measured by collective petitions, the more power in the village will tend to be dispersed, or will flow toward villagers’ committee chairs.

Perceived legitimacy of villagers’ committees and Party branches

Generally speaking, Party branch secretaries were the undisputed village leaders in 1987 when the Organic Law first provided for village elections. As noted earlier, however, the introduction of competitive elections has resulted in a bifurcation of village authority. Some elected village leaders have claimed themselves more legitimate leaders than Party branch secretaries and have consequently demanded more decision-making power. Clearly, elections have empowered VC chairs to compete for village leadership.

Elections have not only empowered elected leaders, but have also increased ordinary villagers’ civic consciousness and their willingness to participate in politics. As a result, they may become more active in pursuing self-governance as advocated by the national law, and more willing to fight for genuine power. Yet all these impacts presuppose that elections themselves are sufficiently meaningful, at least from a procedural perspective. It is worth noting that the quality of elections varies greatly across both villages and election years. There exist wide differences in registration rules, voter turnout, candidate nomination, number of candidates, ballot secrecy, and the use of proxies and “roving ballot boxes.” We also find wide variation

---


in the electoral practices of our sample villages. Poorly organized, fraudulent elections are unlikely to help elected villagers’ committees consolidate power.

While it is well documented that elections have opened up opportunities for villagers to challenge the Party Secretaries’ domination in village affairs, it is an empirical question whether more representative electoral procedures enhance the authority of villagers’ committees and, as a result, improve their “exercise of power”.\(^{58}\) Hence we posit:

Hypothesis 3: The more representative election methods for villagers’ committees are, the more power will tend to flow toward villagers’ committees (and chairs).

Much as the introduction of elections for villagers’ committees endowed VC chairs with electoral legitimacy, making the selection methods for Party branches more democratic would potentially help to remedy the democratic deficit of the Party branch secretaries. Chinese observers of village politics suggest that intra-Party democratic reform may provide a potential solution for conflicts that have arisen in grassroots governance by empowering Party branch secretaries.\(^{59}\) It is not clear whether tensions between Party branch secretaries and VC chairs would ease if both were chosen more democratically. However, it is likely that in villages where Party members directly elect the Party branch secretary, or where the villagers approve a list of potential candidates for the village Party branch committee (the so-called “two-ballot system”), the Party branch secretary would gain popular legitimacy; he might thus be able to more easily consolidate his authority over the VC chair. In his

---


detailed treatment of the “two-ballot system,” Li contends that “a strong showing in a vote of confidence can help legitimize [Party branch secretaries’] authority and pre-empt challenges from the VC chair, who is often their main political rival.”⁶⁰ Our fieldwork also reveals that Party branch secretaries benefit from more representative selection methods. Officials in two villages reported that appointed Party branch secretaries don’t have as much “prestige” (weixin) as those directly selected by village Party members.⁶¹ Our final hypothesis thus relates to how intra-Party democratic reforms may empower Party branch secretaries in the struggle for power in the villages.

Hypothesis 4: The more representative selection methods are for Party branch secretaries, the more power will tend to flow toward Party branch secretaries.

One might wonder whether township Party committees have lost their influence over village Party branches with the democratization of village Party branch secretary s/election; such a finding would have implications for our analytical framework, which sees village Party branches (and secretaries) as agents of township Party committees. It is reasonable to ask, in other words, whether village Party branch secretaries have become the agents of village Party members who increasingly participate in their selection.

We acknowledge that the greater participation of village Party members in the selection of Party branch secretaries has an impact on the behavior of the secretaries and that secretaries are likely to become more responsive to the concerns of Party members and village residents in general. Yet, regardless of how they are selected, village Party branch secretaries are still members of a vast Leninist hierarchy operating on the tenets of “democratic centralism.” Indeed, the relationship between village Party

⁶¹ Interview #8 and #14, Jilin Province, September, 2007
branches and township Party committees remains one of “direct subordination.”62 Township authorities can remove village Party branch secretaries whom they perceive to be disobedient, even those elected by village Party members.63 Villagers’ committees, on the other hand, “are not subject to top-down ‘leadership relations’ (lingdao guanxi)”64. That the two committees have a different relationship with township authorities is clear from township authorities’ continued preference to work with Party branch secretaries rather than VC chairs, many of who are not Party members.65 In view of these considerations, we believe that, while the logics outlined above may weaken somewhat with the advent of intra-Party democratization, they remain valid. Where the village Party branch secretary and the VC chair are two persons, the secretary is generally more responsive to township officials compared with the VC chair and less responsive to the concerns of village residents than the latter.

Data and method of analysis

In the rest of this article we utilize data from a nationwide survey to explore the factors influencing the division of authority between the villagers’ committee and the Party branch and to empirically test the above hypotheses. To mitigate the problems of generalizability from surveys conducted in particular regions of the country, we rely on a nationwide sample survey conducted in 2005.66 Excluding non-responding

---

63 Interview #1, Jilin Province, August, 2007.
66 The survey sample was selected using the following procedure. First, the country was divided into six major geographical regions, and from each region one province was randomly selected: Fujian, Hebei, Jiangsu, Jilin, Shaanxi, and Sichuan were the sample provinces. Second, the counties in each sample province were divided into five equally sized groups by the level of development (per capita industrial output). One county from each group was chosen randomly, resulting in a sample of thirty counties. Next, the townships in each sample country were separated into two groups according to per capita income and one township was drawn from each group to produce a total
townships and villages, the final sample consisted of 58 townships and 116 villages. Due to the incidence of non-responding villages and missing responses on particular survey items, the number of observations in our data analysis ranges from 108 to 116 villages. Top township leaders were also asked to complete a separate survey (more on this later).

While we focus on statistical analyses of these quantitative data in this study, we also draw on our own fieldwork in formulating our hypotheses and in addressing various issues related to causation. From January 2007 to May 2008, follow-up interviews were conducted with leaders and residents of 46 sample villages. We visited each sample province (except for Sichuan) and averaged three interviewees per village. We sought not only to clarify ambiguities that had arisen in the earlier survey process, but also to add substantive qualitative detail to our quantitative data through structured but open-ended interviews. In all, we interviewed 18 VC chairs, 15 Party branch secretaries, 3 concurrent office-holders (yijiantiao), 33 other village leaders, 12 former cadres, 2 religious figures, and 43 ordinary villagers.

The configuration of village power: Branch secretaries vs. committee chairs

Table 1 provides a tally of the division of authority in the sample villages. This snapshot of the “exercise of power” will be the dependent variable in our regression analysis. In determining the configuration of power in sample villages, we consider two factors, the authority to allocate collective financial resources, and the responsibility for
day-to-day administrative work. In nearly half (50%) of the 115 responding villages, the Party branch secretary played the primary leadership role. In contrast, VC chairs led in only 6% of the sample villages. Authority was shared between the two in 26% of the sample while yijiantiao prevailed in the remaining 18%.

67 We code the dependent variable based on responses to the following question: “In your village, how are public affairs tasks divided between the two committees?” The possible responses were:
1) All tasks are completed together;
2) The Party branch secretary controls the purse while the VC chair is responsible for administrative work;
3) The villagers’ committee makes key decisions and the Party branch plays a supporting role;
4) The Party branch makes key decisions and the villagers’ committee is responsible for implementation;
5) One individual is both VC chair and Party branch secretary (yijiantiao);
6) The villagers’ committee controls the purse while the Party branch is responsible for administrative work.

We code responses 2 and 4 as Party branch leadership. Responses 3 and 6 are coded as villagers’ committee leadership, which we combine with response 1, or joint leadership in our analysis below. Response 5 represents yijiantiao.

It may not be immediately clear why we code responses 2 and 6 as Party branch and villagers’ committee leadership, respectively; one may wonder why control over the purse strings implies greater power than “administrative work.” However, we justify this categorization on both theoretical and empirical grounds. First, from a broad theoretical perspective, political scientists have viewed the control of scarce resources as a primary method of political influence since the dawn of the discipline (e.g., Lasswell 1936). Day-to-day administrative tasks are more often the responsibility of the influenced than the influential. Second, research on Chinese villages has shown that routine administrative tasks have been the responsibility of subordinate leaders. Chan et al (1984) write of Chen Village during the Maoist period: “[The brigade] management committee handled daily administrative affairs and oversaw village-wide projects…But the seven-man party branch committee was more important” (27). Response 2 may therefore accord fairly well with the Party-led unitary authority structure that previously predominated in the countryside (interview #13, Jilin province, September, 2007).
### Table 1: Village Division of Authority

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division of Authority</th>
<th>Number and Proportion of Sample Villages</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Jiangsu</th>
<th>Sichuan</th>
<th>Shaanxi</th>
<th>Jilin</th>
<th>Hebei</th>
<th>Fujian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party Branch Leadership</td>
<td>57 (50%) 9 (42%) 11 (55%) 9 (56%) 14 (66%) 7 (37%) 7 (35%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Villagers’ Committee Leadership</td>
<td>7 (6%) 0 (0%) 2 (10%) 0 (0%) 2 (10%) 1 (5%) 2 (10%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Leadership</td>
<td>30 (26%) 2 (11%) 5 (25%) 7 (44%) 2 (10%) 5 (26%) 9 (45%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yijiantiao</td>
<td>21 (18%) 8 (47%) 2 (10%) 0 (0%) 3 (14%) 6 (32%) 2 (10%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number in Sample</td>
<td>115 19 20 16 21 19 20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results show that few VC chairs have displaced the Party branch secretaries as top village leaders. Yet they do suggest a more variegated landscape of authority: the Party branches no longer hold a monopoly and power-sharing is fairly common in each of the sample provinces. Importantly, Party branch leadership occurs in a majority of villages in all three interior provinces in the sample (Jilin, Shaanxi and Sichuan) but none of the three coastal provinces (Fujian, Hebei and Jiangsu). Jiangsu Province stands out for the high percentage (47%) of villages with *yijiantiao*.

**Current state of Party branch secretary s/elections**

In our theoretical framework, the selection method for Party branch secretaries is an important independent variable for analyzing the configuration of village power. In the current literature on grassroots politics, information on the selection of Party branch secretaries has largely been anecdotal. Here our survey data offer a systematic portrayal of the current state of Party branch selection methods, which, in the absence of strict stipulations, are more diverse in form than those used for electing VC members and chairs. They can roughly be sorted into two categories: *competitive elections* and *non-direct-election methods*.

**Competitive elections (cha’e zhixuan)** for village Party branch secretaries take two primary forms, neither of which is as “competitive” as the elections for VC chairs. The electorate in question is limited to Party members in the village. In the first form,
village Party members directly vote on candidates they have nominated. In the second, village Party members vote on the Party branch committee members first and then elect the Party branch secretary from the slate of elected branch members.

Non-Direct election methods include the direct appointment of Party branch secretaries by the township Party committee; the selection and appointment of Party branch secretaries by the township leadership from among elected Party branch committee members; the nomination (by the township) of a sole candidate for the approval of village Party members; and the election of secretaries by Party branch committee members, who are directly elected by Party members at first. These methods except for the last type have traditionally allowed township leaders to get directly or indirectly involved in choosing Party branch secretaries. In the case of the last type, the township is not necessarily involved in choosing the Party branch committee membership, and in many cases the election of the branch committee membership is competitive. Our fieldwork revealed that in villages where the first-stage election of Party branch committee members was competitive, interviewees often perceived this process to be fair and transparent. Therefore, even some of the indirect methods for choosing the village Party branch secretary can be fairly democratic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Secretary Selection Method</th>
<th>Proportion of Sample Villages (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competitive Direct Elections (with more candidates than posts)</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in which:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party members elect from nominated candidates for secretary</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher-level committee nominates</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party members nominate</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party members and villager representatives nominate</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nomination of branch members first, Party members then elect branch committee members, and then elect secretary from among committee members</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher-level Party committee nominates</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

68 Interview #113 and #114, Fujian province, April, 2008; interview #16, Jilin province, September, 2007.
Table 2 shows the diversity of nomination and selection processes for village Party branch committee members and secretaries. Note especially the variety of nomination processes for candidates in direct and competitive elections for village Party branch secretaries. It is evident that the selection of the village Party branch secretaries in China has largely moved away from direct appointment by the township. In 2004, the last round of Party branch secretary selection at the time of our survey, higher-level township Party committees directly appointed branch secretaries in 12% of the sample villages. In contrast, in more than half of the sample villages (54%), village Party members voted in competitive elections for the Party branch secretary. In another 26 percent of the villages, competitively s/elected Party branch committee members were empowered to choose one of their own as the branch secretary. In an indication of continuing democratization in the countryside, the percentage of villages in which Party members directly voted in competitive elections for the Party branch secretary rose from 14 to 21 percent between 2001 and 2004.

To facilitate our data analysis, we categorize the s/election of Party branch secretaries into two groups based on whether township Party committees explicitly

---

69 The results from an earlier round of survey, conducted in 2001, were similar. Because the changes between the two surveys were minor (except as noted below about direct nominations), we have chosen not to include the earlier results.

70 The figure for 2001 comes from a previous survey round.
interfered in the nomination and election of village Party branch secretaries.\textsuperscript{71} Our field
interviews indicate that villagers tend to view township-appointed Party branch
secretaries as less “legitimate” than those selected by village Party members.\textsuperscript{72} As
shown in Table 3, there is substantial variation in township interference across the
provinces. In Fujian and Jilin, only 5 percent of the sample villages reported
“interference,” but the percentages in the two western provinces (Shaanxi and Sichuan)
as well as collectivist Jiangsu were much higher. Altogether 25 percent of the villages
experienced such interference.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of Selecting Branch Secretary</th>
<th>Number and Proportion of Sample Villages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interference present</td>
<td>Total: 29 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jiangsu: 6 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sichuan: 8 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shaanxi: 6 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jilin: 1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hebei: 7 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fujian: 1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interference absent</td>
<td>Total: 87 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jiangsu: 13 (68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sichuan: 12 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shaanxi: 10 (62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jilin: 20 (95%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hebei: 13 (65%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fujian: 19 (95%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of villages</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Econometric model specification}

Our dependent variable is the division of authority in the village. We code as 0
those villages in which the Party branch assumes the primary leadership role (“Party
branch leadership” hereafter). We code as 1 those villages in which villagers’
committees either assume this role or share leadership responsibilities with Party
branches (“villagers’ committee leadership” hereafter). We combine these categories
because both represent a shift away from the traditional status quo of Party branch

\textsuperscript{71} We admit township Party committees may have more subtle ways of influencing
the s/election process for village Party secretaries but believe our emphasis on explicit
interference is adequate for the purposes of this study.

\textsuperscript{72} Interview \#6, Jilin province, August, 2007; interview \#14, Jilin province,
dominance. Villages exhibiting *yijiantiao*, where a single individual occupies the offices of villagers’ committee chairman and Party branch secretary, are coded as 2.

Because our dependent variable is a categorical variable taking on more than two values, and because there is no intuitive way to “order” these values, we estimate the factors contributing to the division of authority using a multinomial logit regression model. The model takes a particular value of the dependent variable as the comparison category—in this case, 0, representing Party branch leadership. Using this category as a baseline, the model estimates separate relative risk ratios for the variable’s other categories, 1 (villagers’ committee leadership) and 2 (*yijiantiao*). For each of these latter values, 1 and 2, the beta coefficient $\beta$ represents the change in the odds of being in the category in question as opposed to the baseline category with a one-unit increase in the independent variable. In regards to category 1, for example, a positive coefficient on our measure of villager activism (described below) would indicate that increasing villager activism increases the likelihood of observing villagers’ committee leadership, as opposed to Party branch leadership.

We identify four key independent variables to test our four main hypotheses. Our measure of the variable *township dependence on villages* is a composite indicator of the degree to which township authorities depend on village leaders for the completion of five key government tasks (related to economic growth, revenue, family planning, social order, and welfare).\(^73\) Township leaders were asked how much they needed the cooperation of village leaders in the completion of these tasks (they could report needing, sometimes needing, or not needing). Our indicator, which we refer to as *township dependence on villages*, is a composite score of these responses.\(^74\)

Our second hypothesis deals with collective petitions. We use the number of participants in the village’s largest collective petition over a three-year period as a

---

\(^73\) This list is a summary of the choices selected by township officials in our survey.

\(^74\) We assign weights of 1, 0.5 and 0, respectively, to the three choices for each task and then create a weighted average of the responses for the five tasks. We then multiplied the resulting proportion to obtain a percentage—our measure of the pressure applied by townships to village leaders.
proxy for the strength of villager activism. Our fieldwork indicates that collective petitions involving only a few people are relatively common in our sample villages. Since such petitions often meet resistance from local officials, we view villages with large-scale collective petitions as exhibiting stronger collective activism. Our second explanatory variable is thus maximum number of village collective petition participants. We predict that larger-scale collective petitions will increase the likelihood of villagers’ committee leadership.

Our third hypothesis posits a relationship between the perceived “legitimacy” of villagers’ committee members and their likelihood of acquiring a primary leadership role in the village. Our third explanatory variable is therefore a measure of the democratic quality of village elections. We would ideally like to measure the extent to which township governments interfere in local elections, but our current data include no such indicators. Instead, we use the presence or absence of “open sea nominations” (haixuan timing) as a proxy measure for the democratic quality of villagers’ committee elections. Villages with this type of nomination process allow any person or group in the village to nominate a candidate for VC chair. Kennedy has found that open sea nominations, which increase the uncertainty of the electoral process, tend to increase villager satisfaction with village elections. We use a binary variable to indicate whether the sample village adopted open sea nomination in the latest villagers’ committee election. We predict that the presence of this process confers greater mandate on the VC chair and thus is positively associated with the incidence of villagers’ committee and joint leadership.

Our fourth hypothesis predicts that Party branch secretaries selected in a more representative manner will be able to more easily consolidate authority over villagers’ committee chairs. Despite the various forms Party branch secretary elections can take, we believe that the foremost determinant of the procedural integrity of such elections is the existence or absence of interference by upper level authorities. As described

---

75 Kennedy, “The Face of "Grassroots Democracy" in Rural China - Real versus Cosmetic Elections”.
earlier, township leaders can play a major role in selecting the village Party branch secretary by nominating candidates, appointing the secretary from village Party committee members, or even dispatching township cadres to take up the Party branch secretary post. Blatant interference tends to generate villager discontent with the village Party branch elections and with the appointee.\textsuperscript{76} In contrast, villagers tend to view Party branch secretaries as more “legitimate” when township officials refrain from interfering in the process of their selection.\textsuperscript{77} We construct a dummy variable, \textit{Party branch selection method}, which takes on the value of 0 in the absence of township interference and the value 1 in the presence of such interference, to capture the dynamic described here.

It is reasonable to expect that the personal characteristics of village leaders are important determinants of the division of authority between Party branch secretaries and VC chairs. Case studies indicate that if an elected VC chair has a relatively strong personality, rich life experience, or a long history of public service, and is thus recognized as a “capable individual” (\textit{nengren}), he has a good chance of displacing the Party branch secretary as the top village leader. Conversely, if the Party branch secretary possesses more of these qualities than the VC chair, he stands a greater chance of being in charge of village affairs than would otherwise be the case. For obvious reasons, we can only obtain a limited set of personal characteristics.\textsuperscript{78} In our analysis, we control for differences in age, levels of education, and migrant work experience of the VC chairs and Party branch secretaries. We also control for township government experience; those who have served at the township level may enjoy closer personal ties with higher-level cadres and be more resourceful. Specifically, for age and education, 

\textsuperscript{76}Interview #14, Jilin province, September, 2007; interview #25, Jiangsu province, May, 2008.
\textsuperscript{77}Interview #6, Jilin province, August, 2007.
\textsuperscript{78}A seminal account of rural power struggle, albeit in a Maoist context, can be found in Chan et al’s \textit{Chen Village}. The authors identify a variety of personal characteristics that contribute to the perceived leadership abilities of the village’s top two leaders: level of education, work experience, agricultural acumen, articulateness, memory, physical stamina, temper, and even height. Clearly, not all of these characteristics are easily measurable via survey responses.
we code the observation as 1 if the VC chair is more senior in age/more educated than
the Party branch secretary, as -1 if the Party branch secretary is more senior in
age/more educated, and as 0 if the two have exactly the same age/education attainment.
For migrant work and township government experience, we code the observation as 1
if the village’s VC chair had migrant/township experience while the Party branch
secretary did not, as -1 if the secretary has such experience while the VC chair didn’t.
We code the observations as 0 if the two had equal experience. We expect that
between the two, the one who is senior in age, better educated and has more
experience as a migrant worker or township functionary is more likely to be the top
leader.

We also control for a number of factors representing the socioeconomic
characteristics of sample villages. As mentioned earlier, Oi and Rozelle found that, in
relatively developed villages, authority tends to flow to Party branch secretaries;
village heads, on the other hand, are more likely to consolidate authority is
less-developed villages.79 We control for the level of economic development by
including the estimated per capita income level of village residents. We also control for
village population size.

The preceding descriptive analysis reveals significant province-level variation in
the division of authority between the Party branch secretary and VC chair and in the
selection methods for village Party branch secretaries. Provincial governments and
Party committees are likely to influence the configuration of authority in the villages
under their jurisdiction through provincial policies. Our model includes provincial
dummy variables to control for unobserved province-related factors. Descriptive
statistics for the main variables used in our analyses appear in Table 4.80

Villages”
80 Astute readers will no doubt wonder whether we have adequately controlled for the
possibility of an endogenous relationship between our variables of interest. We
address these concerns in the appendix. While we cannot rule out the possibility of
endogeneity or reverse causation, we are confident that we offer a plausible
explanation for the village-level division of authority.
Table 4: Descriptive Statistics for Primary Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Num. of Obs.</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Division of authority</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Township dependence on village cadres</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party branch selection method</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Sea Nomination</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>People</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max # of collective petition participants</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>People</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average income</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>Yuan</td>
<td>2881</td>
<td>1550</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>6596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>People</td>
<td>1592</td>
<td>979</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>4975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal characteristic: age</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.046</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal characteristic: education level</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>-0.083</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal characteristic: official experience</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal characteristic: migrant worker experience</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results and discussion

Table 5 presents the regression results, using Party branch leadership as the baseline category of the dependent variable. Sensitive to the possibility that some province-specific factors may influence our results, but also to the desirability of maximizing degrees of freedom, we report our results in Table 5 both without (columns 1 and 2) and with (columns 3 and 4) dummy variables controlling for fixed effects at the provincial level. In this section, we consider only the effects of our independent variables on the likelihood that villagers’ committees will gain authority vis-à-vis Party branches (columns 1 and 3). Our discussion of *yijiantiao* (columns 2 and 4), which largely falls outside of our theoretical framework, is presented further below. Table 5: Factors Influencing the Division of Village Authority (Party branch leadership as base outcome)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>VC or joint leadership</th>
<th>Yijiantiao</th>
<th>VC or joint leadership</th>
<th>Yijiantiao</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Township dependence on villages</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0-100)</td>
<td>(2.18)**</td>
<td>(2.02)**</td>
<td>(2.54)**</td>
<td>(1.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party branch selection method</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>-0.51</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>-1.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(interference=1, no interference=0)</td>
<td>(2.02)**</td>
<td>(0.63)</td>
<td>(2.22)**</td>
<td>(1.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max number of collective petition</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participants (# of people)</td>
<td>(2.05)**</td>
<td>(1.24)</td>
<td>(1.74)*</td>
<td>(1.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open sea nomination</td>
<td>-0.42</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(present=1, not present=0)</td>
<td>(0.74)</td>
<td>(2.19)**</td>
<td>(0.19)</td>
<td>(1.85)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average income (thousandyuan)</td>
<td>-0.42</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.92)*</td>
<td>(0.58)</td>
<td>(0.69)</td>
<td>(0.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total population (thousand people)</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.41)</td>
<td>(0.29)</td>
<td>(0.49)</td>
<td>(0.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal characteristic: age</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.86)*</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
<td>(1.60)</td>
<td>(0.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal characteristic: education level</td>
<td>-0.82</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>-0.78</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.03)**</td>
<td>(0.67)</td>
<td>(1.96)**</td>
<td>(0.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal characteristic: official experience</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.85)*</td>
<td>(0.8)</td>
<td>(1.44)</td>
<td>(0.65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal characteristic: migrant worker</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience</td>
<td>(2.09)**</td>
<td>(0.35)</td>
<td>(2.09)**</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.58)</td>
<td>(0.33)</td>
<td>(0.56)</td>
<td>(0.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Note: *, **, and *** represent significance levels of 10%, 5% and 1%, respectively; 2. Z statistics are reported in parentheses.

The main results, presented in columns 1 and 3, support three of our four hypotheses. As our framework predicts, principal activism and perceived agent legitimacy (at least with respect to the selection of Party branch secretaries) have a statistically significant effect on the division of authority in China’s villages. Where township authorities depend on and exert pressure on village leaders, the Party branch gains in influence relative to the villagers’ committee. Villagers’ committees tend to
acquire power, or to share power with Party branches, in villages where residents exhibit higher levels of activism as measured by their participation in collective petitions. Where Party branch elections are freer of township interference and thus more democratic, the Party branch also acquires more clout relative to the villagers’ committee. We find scant evidence, however, that “open sea nominations” affect the village-level division of power. Let us elaborate.

Township authorities can exert influence on village leaders in a variety of ways to support Party branch secretaries in order to secure compliance. Our regression analysis reveals that “township dependence” has a negative effect on the chances of VC chairs assuming primary leadership. This indicates that Party branch secretaries are more likely to maintain their predominant positions in villages where township authorities are more dependent on village leaders for the implementation of policy measures. This finding is significant at the 5% level regardless of whether we include province dummy variables.

Villager activism also appears to influence the division of authority in the villages. The positive sign on the collective petition coefficient shows that, when controlling for other variables, VC chairs are more likely to assume leadership roles in villages with larger-scale collective petitions. The impact is statistically significant at the 5% level (10% in the presence of provincial dummy variables). Thus, collective petitions by rural residents significantly shape the “exercise of power” in Chinese villages.

As we mentioned earlier, some scholars have posited that elections confer legitimacy on, and thus empower, elected officials. Our data reveal a significant finding in the case of Party branch secretary elections. The positive sign on the Party branch secretary selection dummy variable shows that township interference in their selection undermines Party branch secretaries, allowing VC chairs to gain power. From another perspective, it appears that freer elections for village Party branch secretaries would

---

81 Because there were large differences in the size of collected petitions, we also ran a regression excluding possible outliers to ensure the robustness of our conclusions. The results indicate that our findings are very robust.
tend to help them consolidate power. These results are significant at the 5% level with or without province dummy variables.

Yet we do not find that “open sea nominations” for VC chairs are statistically significant in our analyses. On the surface, this finding is somewhat surprising and seems to contravene the generally held view that village elections empower villagers’ committees (and their chairs). However, we are hesitant to make such an inference here and believe instead that our result is inconclusive because the variable “open sea nomination” represents at best an imperfect indicator of the quality of village elections.\(^{82}\) Judging from our finding regarding township interference in Party branch selections, what legitimates village leaders in the eyes of village residents is the perception that they are relatively independent from township authorities—that their selection is not determined by what has been called “the most hated level of government.”\(^{83}\) As Bernstein has noted, “villagers want leaders who can defend their interests against the demands of higher authorities, especially those of townships.”\(^{84}\)

Seen from this perspective, it seems plausible that, as was the case with the selection of Party branch secretaries, VC chairs also gain authority in places where their elections are free of township government interference. The presence or absence of “open sea nomination” does not measure this type of independence; elections can still be subject to substantial influence from township governments even when nomination procedures are relatively open. Thus, further research into the configuration of village power calls for greater attention to the role played by township authorities in village elections.

Among the variables measuring the personal characteristics of village leaders, differences in education level appear to have no statistically significant effect on the division of authority. In contrast, real world experiences such as previous stints in public service or as a migrant laborer appear to have a significant impact. VC chairs are

\(^{82}\) Given our suspicion, we ran the regression without the sea election variable to ensure that it was not biasing our results. Our findings for the other key variables remained virtually the same.


\(^{84}\) Bernstein, “Village Democracy and Its Limits”.

34
more likely to become the top village leaders if they possess more of these types of experience than the Party branch secretaries. Age also matters. Older VC chairs appear to be able to better gain authority vis-à-vis younger Party branch secretaries, but this effect disappears with the addition of province dummy variables. In line with Oi and Rozelle’s claim that village Party branches are more likely to consolidate authority in more highly developed villages, we find that village per capita income is negatively related to the incidence of VC chair leadership. This association may be explained by province-level factors, however, as it becomes statistically insignificant when province dummies are included.

The above analysis is based on the statistical significance of the estimated coefficients. To evaluate the substantive magnitude of such effects for multinomial logit regression, we calculate the predicted probabilities of various outcomes of the dependent variable at different values of the independent variable of interest. For example, when evaluating the impact of township dependence on the division of village authority, we first set all the other independent variables at their mean, and then calculate the predicted probability of VC leadership (or joint leadership) and of yijiantiao, respectively, based on varying value of township dependence. We thus obtain a straightforward understanding how much change in the dependent variable is associated with a certain amount of change in the independent variable.
Figure 1: Predicted Authority Patterns Based on Different Levels of Township Dependence

Figure 2: Predicted Authority Patterns Based on Different Petition Scales
In Figures 1 and 2, we have plotted the predicted probabilities of various village authority patterns with respect to two of our main independent variables, township dependence on village leaders and the number of petition participants, respectively. Overall, these graphs suggest that the estimated coefficients in our model are substantively significant. Figure 1, for example, shows that when our measure of township dependence on villages increases from 40% to 100%, the likelihood of VC leadership drops dramatically, from above 50 percent to less than 20 percent. Similarly, Figure 2 reflects the powerful relationship between villagers’ collective petitions and the division of village authority. As the scale of collective petition increases from single digits to 200 people, the predicted probability of VC leadership rises from 20 percent to 80 percent. Finally, our analysis reveals that township interference in village Party branch secretary selection also has a substantive impact on the configuration of village power. Since the township interference variable is binary and takes the values of 0 and 1 only, we calculate the predicted probability for the two values only and find that, when the Party branch selection process is free of township interference and thus more democratic, the likelihood of Party branch domination in village governance increases by about 20 percent.

What can we make of yijiantiao (concurrent office-holding)?

Our theoretical framework has little to say about the incidence of yijiantiao, or the practice of a single individual occupying the positions of VC chair and Party branch secretary. In such cases, village leaders are Janus-faced, negotiating their roles as agents of both village residents and township Party committees. Our theoretical framework helps explain why local authorities would promote yijiantiao—i.e., to make village cadres accountable to both township governments and village residents and thereby internalize the tensions between the Party branch secretary and the VC chair. However, it does little to explain the adoption of this institution in any particular village. In practice, higher-level authorities, notably in Jiangsu province,
have actively encouraged the adoption of *yijiantiao* in villages; their commitment to the institution has subsequently been embraced by county and township officials. In consequence, the village-level variables included in our analysis may not be able to capture the promotion of *yijiantiao* by township/county/provincial authorities, though this concern is somewhat mitigated by the inclusion of provincial dummy variables in our regression.

As we report above, the practice of *yijiantiao* is found in 18% of our sample villages; we would thus be remiss if we failed to identify some of the factors behind the incidence of this phenomenon. The second and fourth columns of table 5 present the influence of our independent variables on the relative odds of *yijiantiao* versus party leadership, without and with provincial dummy variables respectively. Township dependence on villages constitutes one important factor that reduces the incidence of *yijiantiao* (in the absence of province dummies). This finding may suggest that when township authorities need village cadres to help them accomplish policy tasks from above, they prefer working with powerful village Party secretaries rather than those who serve as VC and Party heads simultaneously. This result can be well explained using the theoretical framework we proposed above. No matter how *yijiantiao* is operationalized in practice, the village leader must be subject to villagers’ (or villager representatives’) approval in order to win VC leadership. Therefore, compared with Party branch secretaries, concurrent office-holders boast more electoral legitimacy but are also more accountable to villagers’ demands, making them less pliable to township demands. Township governments that are highly dependent on assistance from village leaders may thus be less willing to promote *yijiantiao*.

---

85 *Yijiantiao* has become more widespread in the years since our survey. According to some estimates, as many as 60-70% of villages are currently characterized by this leadership form. Zhao Shukai, *Nongmin de zhengzhi* [Peasant Politics] (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2011). The causes and effects of concurrent office-holding should provide a fruitful vein for future research.
Another independent variable that achieves statistical significance is “open sea” nomination. Whereas we are skeptical about using this variable as the indicator of election quality, the result here suggests that more competitive VC elections are associated with a higher likelihood of *yijiantiao*. One interpretation of this result is that winners of VC elections who are Party members, and have gone through the more competitive “open sea” nomination process, enjoy greater electoral legitimacy and are more likely to succeed in also becoming Party branch secretary.

**Conclusion**

A quiet but profound transformation of “the exercise of power” is occurring in China’s villages. Township authorities no longer appoint the top leaders in most Chinese villages. Elected leaders increasingly exercise real authority, whether as powerful village committee chairman or as concurrent office-holders. Furthermore, increasing numbers of Party branch secretaries are subject to more representative Party-member elections. Whereas the picture of national politics in China has been one of resilient authoritarianism, the findings and our ongoing fieldwork on local political experimentation reinforce the pictures of dynamic grassroots political reform that other studies have offered.86

Our analyses shed new light on the question: who governs, and why? Descriptively, the survey data reveal a variegated landscape in the configuration of village power in China. As of the survey time, Party branch secretaries occupy the pinnacle of village authority in 50% of sample villages. VC chairs dominate or share power with the Party branch secretaries in 32% of sample villages. We also provide what is to our knowledge the first systematic description of the forms of village Party

---

branch secretary selection. It is worth nothing that the methods used for the selection of
the Party branch secretaries have become more representative (for Party members).
Generally villagers as a whole still do not have the opportunity to vote on Party branch
secretaries (except when the secretaries also run for the position of VC chair), but there
has been substantial movement away from the old method of direct appointment by
township Party committees.

We also provide an analysis of the division of authority between the village Party
branch secretary and the VC chair by viewing the two actors as the agents of
higher-level Party committees and villagers, respectively. Two major findings emerge
from the empirical examination. First, the Party branch secretary or the VC chair gains
authority vis-à-vis the other when its principal exhibits a higher level of activism. We
find that village collective petitions—an indicator of villager activism—are positively
associated with the empowerment of VC chairs. Meanwhile, township dependence on
village leaders appears to lead to the consolidation of authority by the village Party
branch secretaries. Second, we find that reduced township interference in the selection
of the village Party branch secretary and thus greater village freedom in conducting the
s/election appear to help Party branches to consolidate their authority. However, while
it is widely believed that village elections have empowered villagers’ committees, we
do not find evidence that open sea nominations are positively correlated with villagers’
committee or joint leadership. On reflection we believe such a finding may be a result
of the fact that the presence of “open sea elections” is an inadequate proxy measure for
village-level democracy; future measures of village election quality should perhaps
focus on the presence or absence of township interference in the electoral process for
villagers’ committee chairs.

Finally, we note that recent tax and fee reforms, especially the abolition of the state
agricultural tax, and the introduction of social policy measures to improve the welfare
of rural residents have substantially altered the relationship between township
authorities and village leaders. Since the central government abolished the agricultural
tax in 2006, township governments have become less dependent on village cadres and
now instead are bearers of various subsidies and benefits to offer to rural residents. As a result, recent fieldwork and regional surveys reveal, local authorities have received a very substantial boost to their popularity among rural residents.\textsuperscript{87} At the same time, village leaders increasingly turn to township authorities for a share of the benefits and subsidies, and it is a fascinating question how this national turn away from urban bias is affecting the configuration of power in China’s villages.

Appendix: A note regarding causation

The central argument of this article is that principal activism and perceived agent legitimacy are key factors accounting for the configuration of village power, particularly the division of authority between the Party branch secretary and the villagers’ committee chair. Of course, it is fair to question whether we have adequately controlled for the possibility of reverse causation, a common challenge for this type of research. It seems plausible, to note but one example, that an increase in the influence of relatively independent villagers’ committees might induce township authorities to interfere in the selection of Party branch secretaries in order to enhance their capacity to obtain policy compliance. One could argue, then, that we have not effectively identified the relationship between township interference in Party branch secretory selection and the village-level division of authority.

We conclude that while we cannot completely dismiss the possibility of endogeneity, we are reasonably assured that we offer plausible explanations for the authority structures governing China’s villages and that some of the alternative explanations would complement what we have to offer. The possibility of an endogenous relationship seems easiest to overcome in regard to our township dependence variable. Since our survey asks township officials to assess the extent to which their work needs cooperation from villages within their jurisdictions, and not about the relationship between the township and any specific village, the dependence variable should not be inversely affected by the division of authority in a specific sample village. Rather, it mainly reflects the policy tasks township authorities receive from upper levels of the administrative hierarchy. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that more dependent townships would be more likely to intervene on the behalf of Party branch secretaries in order to promote policies and initiatives the township authorities’ desire or must carry out. There seems little reason to prefer the converse explanation—that the dominance of the Party branch over the villagers’ committee at the village level would increase or decrease the dependence of township officials on village leaders.
A more challenging issue for our analytical framework is the direction of causation between the village-level division of authority and township interference in the electoral procedures of both Party branch and villagers’ committee elections. We argue that relatively free and fair electoral processes enhance the legitimacy of the elected leader, which in turn increases his or her power vis-à-vis the other. However, it may be difficult to dismiss other possible causal mechanisms. For example, to maximize their control over villages, township authorities may be inclined to intervene in VC elections in villages where the VC chair dominates. Similarly, it is also possible that Party domination induces township authorities to intervene in Party branch secretary selection. Or alternatively, the division of authority may share common determinants with either VC or Party branch secretary selection, leading to a spurious correlation between the dependent and independent variables.

We believe that we can alleviate concerns about these competing causal mechanisms for the following reasons. First of all, the empirical results presented below can help us rule out some of these competing mechanisms. For example, if township authorities choose to intervene in the election of power-holders, we would find a negative rather than the hypothesized positive relationship between electoral representativeness and power holding. Moreover, the variables in our regression analysis are lagged in such a way that inverse causality is less likely. In all the villages surveyed, the s/election of both Party and VC leaders took place in 2004. The village-level division of authority, however, was measured when the survey was administered, in 2005. Finally, the adoption of the “sea-election” candidate nomination method in VC elections is more subject to the stipulation of county or provincial governments than the discretion of township authorities. For example, 18 out of 21 sample villages in Jilin, the first province that promoted “sea-election”, adopt the nomination method, while the proportion in Fujian province is 0. If township authorities have little leeway to ignore upper-level directives, it would be reasonable for us to believe that this variable is exogenous.
We also acknowledge two potential avenues for an endogenous relationship to exist between collective petitions and the village-level division of authority. First, villager petitions can cover a wide range of issues from unfair compensation for land to electoral fraud. Early rounds of elections, in particular, have led to charges of manipulation and vote buying. Petitions reporting electoral fraud may be more common in villages where elected VC chairs have real governing authority. Villagers in communities with more consequential elections may be less willing to see these elections stolen. Second, VC chairs who occupy or share the primary leadership role may actually be more willing to lead collective petitions against either Party branches or township governments. Lianjiang Li has observed instances in which elections empowered villagers to press village officials “to confront the township if the latter made unlawful decisions.” It seems possible that villagers may be more willing to seek the assistance of authoritative VC chairs; VC chairs, in turn, may be able to organize larger-scale collective petitions.

As in the case of township interference in Party branch selection processes, we cope with the problem of endogeneity partly by measuring the data in such a way as to somewhat mitigate concerns of reverse causation. Our dependent variable measures the division of authority when the survey was administered in 2005. Our indicator of villager activism, however, measures the maximum number of participants in collective petitions in the three years (2002-2004) prior to the survey. Our measurement of the dependent variable (the division of authority) was taken in 2005. Evidence we gathered in our fieldwork also lends support for our hypothesized causal direction. Villagers of two sample villages participated in collective petitions to protest the low compensation they received for farmland taken over by the county government. The petitions put considerable pressure on village leaders, who were caught between upper level governments and fellow villagers. Under such

circumstances, Party branch secretaries enlisted the help of the VC chairs to defuse the tense situation, thereby giving VC chairs considerable influence.

References


