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Power Play: How Grassroots Democracy has Affected Rural Chinese and the Chinese Communist Party

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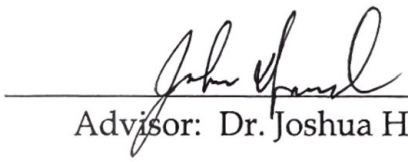

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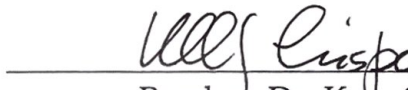

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Introduction

Authoritarian regimes that allow political competition at the lowest level of local government do not do so in order to organize their own downfall but because they seek to enhance the legitimacy of the Party and, in turn, extend the duration of their regime.[1]

In the autumn of 1987 China's National People's Congress (NPC) made an unprecedented decision to institute grassroots self-government in China's 900,000 villages with the passage of the trial version of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees. China's government intertwines the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese state to the extent that many casual observers of the nation might not be able to distinguish between the two. The Party's control reaches into almost every section of Chinese life, and while vastly different than the one Mao Zedong left, the Party still demands absolute control. The creation of grassroots democracy, then, seems illogical. Upon closer examination, however, the implementation of village elections proves to be a calculated risk undertaken by the Party to maintain its power and control over the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Democracy watchers worldwide have long called for the PRC to open itself to political reforms in a manner similar to the economic reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping. Many Chinese and Westerners alike have praised grassroots democracy as a crucial step in China's democratization, but the CCP certainly did not promote elections based on the idea of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They had their own motives and expected certain results. Officials in

[1] Pierre Landry, *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China : The Communist Party's Control of Local Elites in the Post-Mao Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 221.

Beijing wanted to extend Party reach to the lowest level of social organization and legitimize CCP policies at the same time. This thesis will show how this goal was accomplished, and additionally, it will address how village elections have affected rural residents, the Party and government, and the relationship between the two groups.

Much has been written about the implementation of grassroots democracy and the reasons for the reforms. As reasons for village elections and the method by which they came about provide valuable insight into the nature of grassroots democracy, it is vital to understand the history of the process to better assess where villager elections are today and how they has impacted villagers lives and the Party. History provides context by which results can be compared. Therefore, this thesis will briefly examine how and why village elections began.

Another important aspect that will provide context for this thesis is a discussion of the democratic nature of these elections in rural China. This thesis will not make a case for or against grassroots democracy and will hopefully remain impartial while presenting facts and conclusions. Even so, there is significant value in examining the democratic nature of elections in the Chinese countryside. Determining whether elections are free and fair—or to what extent they are—will allow for a clearer understanding of the consequences of grassroots reforms. This thesis will use village committees (VCs) selection processes, voting methods, the competitiveness of elections, and villagers' perceptions of the election process in order to judge the extent to which village

elections are free and fair. Throughout this discussion and the thesis as a whole it is important not to approach the subject of democracy with any preconceived ideas. Chinese leaders have long claimed to be working toward democracy, but they generally do not mean Western style democracy with multiple parties vying for control of the country through highly competitive elections. Thoughts regarding what Chinese democracy should resemble or preferences for American or European democracy must not prejudice the analysis of grassroots democracy, and this paper attempts to avoid that error.

Once proper context has been given, the focus will shift to the effects of village elections. Chinese officials began these grassroots reforms with themselves in mind, but the elections have had a definite effect on many aspects of villagers' lives. This makes sense considering Chinese villagers have been continually under strong state control for centuries, but within the last three decades almost 98 percent of them—nearly three quarters of China's total population—have gained a voice in their own affairs.[2] The results of village elections cover a wide array of issues—political, social, and economic. While many commentators have discussed the relationship between economic development and democracy, this thesis will highlight the inconclusive nature of such research, so this discussion will focus most heavily on political and social effects. Nevertheless, many consequences will be revealed and explored,

[2] Xinsong Wang, "Democracy with Chinese Characteristics: A New Look at Village Elections in China." *China Elections and Governance Review* (Issue 1, Feb. 2009), 8.

particularly villagers increased political awareness and ability to select competent leaders.

This thesis will then examine what effects the CCP has felt as a result of grassroots democracy. Many—including some within the Party—wonder whether village elections will result in the demise of the CCP in rural regions, or, to second Pierre Landry's quote, the Party has succeeded in solidifying its position among villagers. This, in fact, was the Party's express intent when it allowed the passage of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees. This thesis will analyze indicators including numbers of party membership on VCs, effectiveness of official policy implementation, and Party recruitment practices to understand how the state and Party have been affected by village self-government. Ultimately, this thesis will show that the Party has achieved its initial goals only to create new stressors that could have detrimental effects in the future.

The possibility of village elections creating a movement for elections at higher levels of government is a specific effect of grassroots democracy that will be considered. Therefore, the last section of this paper will look at the issue of vertical growth, which is the spread of direct elections upwards from village level to township, county, city, provincial, or national levels. It will be important to see whether these higher levels are experimenting with direct elections of their own. Furthermore, this thesis will discuss possible reasons why vertical grow might occur and explore what various officials have said regarding the issue.

Grassroots democracy has altered the way of life in the Chinese countryside for both villagers and officials. The Organic Law was controversial when passed and remains so today. Some Chinese officials view the law's consequences as too drastic, while many democracy advocates believe the new measures fail to go far enough. To shed light on this debate, this thesis will provide an up to date examination of the effects of village elections and how they might influence future political reform in China's rural areas, particularly in the expansion of direct selection procedures beyond village committee elections.

Chapter 1: History of Grassroots Democracy

After Deng Xiaoping came to power in the late 1970s, one of the most stunning developments in Chinese politics occurred not in Beijing or another major urban area but in the Chinese countryside. Village elections in rural China represent a major shift in the manner by which the villages are administered. Gone are the days of communes and work teams where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was the lone controlling voice. Today most villagers across the People's Republic of China (PRC) can cast their ballots in order to decide who has that voice. China is by no means a democracy—most levels of government remain authoritarian organizations where the Party and the state are intimately intertwined. However, the establishment of democratic practices at the grassroots level still reveals a radical transformation in the way the state conducts business at the most basic level. These changes, while momentous, did not take place overnight. Indeed, the democratization of rural China has gone through three distinct phases: the spontaneous rise and experimentation with elections after decollectivization starting in 1980, the trial implementation of village elections after the passage of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees in 1987, and the full-fledged attempt to start competitive elections throughout the PRC following the modification and permanent adoption of the Law in 1998.

The Village Committees (VCs) are fairly simple organizations, in that they represent the most basic form of societal organization. Various forms of election are used throughout the country as discussed later, but regardless of the selection method, the end result is a three to seven member committee that will serve a term of three years.[3] This committee is not designed to make policies for the village; instead, it bears responsibility for carrying out policies issued from above. In other words, a VC carries out the administrative duties such as maintaining irrigation systems, building and repairing roads and bridges, operating schools and health clinics, mediating disputes, protecting social order, collecting taxes, ensuring grain quotas are met, and enforcing birth control.[4] These tasks rarely advance careers and often prove difficult to implement, and most township leaders were more than willing to give them over the VCs. Township officials routinely relied on force and coercion to ensure compliance with many policies, but officials chosen by the people possessed a level of legitimacy that enabled them to accomplish their duties with greater ease.[5] This ability to run the administrative duties of the state effectively remains the central purpose of the VCs.

The chief impetus behind the emergence of grassroots democracy in China stemmed from the reforms implemented by Deng Xiaoping. One of the main points of these reforms was the abolition of the commune system in the Chinese

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[3] Tony Saich, *Governance and Politics of China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2001), 179.
[4] Suzanne Ogden, *Inklings of Democracy in China* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2002),186-187.
[5] Ogden, 187-188.

countryside. This measure benefited villagers who saw their average income increase five-fold in the twelve years following 1978.[6] While rural residents reaped the benefits of managing their own farms, their villages began to face serious administrative problems as a result of the power vacuum left by the absence of the communes. The communes had been the primary governmental structure in the countryside since 1958, and among other political and economic responsibilities, they were in charge of all administrative duties.[7] Subsequently, local cadres received authority to handle these matters such as collecting taxes, enforcing the "one-child" policy, and ensuring grain quotas were met.[8] The unpopularity of these measures combined with the diminished authority of local cadres after the disbandment of the communes, made it increasingly difficult for state policies to be carried out.[9] With the erosion of Party and state authority, basic social order unraveled. As provincial, county, township, and local officials began to demand extra fees and more taxes—both to maintain the bureaucracy and pad their pockets—villagers not only refused to comply but in some cases even turned violent. Linda Jakobson reports that in 1991 "nationwide, 8,200 township and county officials were injured or killed [and] 560 county-level offices ransacked" due to villager resistance against this type of corruption.[10] Dr.

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[6] Linda Jakobson, "Local Governance: Village and Township Direct Elections." *Governance in China,* Ed. Jude Howell, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 100.
[7] Emerson M Niou, "Village Elections: Roots of Democratization in China." *How Asia Votes* Ed. John Hsieh and David Newman. (New York: Chatham House, 2002), 20.
[8] Jakobson, 100.
[9] Pierre Landry, *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China : The Communist Party's Control of Local Elites in the Post-Mao Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 226.
[10] Jakobson, 100.

Liu from the Carter Center's China Project simply yet accurately described the post-commune countryside by saying it "slid into anarchy, instability, and chaos,"[11] a less than ideal situation for people attempting to secure their new found degree of prosperity.

With the combination of economic danger and collapse of social welfare and order, villagers took it upon themselves to act by establishing their own form of local government. The first two village elections took place during late 1980 and early 1981 in two counties of the southern Chinese province of Guanxi.[12] Remarkably, these elections occurred spontaneously. There was no outside group or international aid organization pressuring local governments to free the people and grant them an inalienable right. There were no street protests or rallies. Indeed, Suzanne Ogden says, "Idealism about 'democratization' was not a major motivation for elections;" the peasants' real goal was "to address the leadership vacuum and social instability, as well as to prevent government officials from taking away their newly won economic rights."[13] These rural farmers knew the best way to ensure their own self-interests was to have social order implemented by people of their choosing. What has now become a national practice originated because two villages wanted to help themselves through self-governance.

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[11] Yawei Liu, *Roundtable on Village Elections in China, Congressional-Executive Commission on China* China Village Election Project, The Carter Center. (8 July 2002).
[12] Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Accommodating "Democracy" in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China." *Elections and Democracy in Greater China* Ed. Larry Diamond and Ramon H. Myers. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 101.
[13] Ogden, 184.

Even though the villagers started the grassroots democratization of China, such an experiment would quickly have failed without the support of upper levels of government. Astonishingly, as the news of the village elections worked its way up from the county government to the central government in Beijing, the elections received support from each governmental level.[14] The acceptance by higher authorities of this practice now seems to be as wise as it was surprising. The lack of social order not only threatened villagers' economic and physical security, but it also undermined the state's ability to implement and follow through on policy and challenged the legitimacy of the CCP. Once Deng began purging Party members after the Cultural Revolution, the Party faced low membership numbers and a general inability to recruit in rural areas, and members routinely neglected official responsibilities in order to engage in innovative endeavors.[15] Many of the local Party branches were in disarray with only a quarter being characterized as "good" by the Organization Department of the CCP and the other seventy five percent ranging from mediocre to "paralyzed."[16] Social order was also a major concern for the government, especially considering the disturbing reports of rural unrest and violence. Many Chinese leaders saw village elections as a viable means to curb this unrest.[17]

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[14] O'Brien and Li 2001, 102-103.
[15] Ogden, 183.
[16] Minxin Pei, "China's Evolution Toward Soft Authoritarianism." *What If China Doesn't Democratize? : Implications for War and Peace* Ed. Edward Friedman and Barrett L. McCormick. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 87.
[17] Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "The Struggle over Village Elections." *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms,* Ed. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar (New York: Harvard University Press, 1999), 132.

Linda Jakobson clearly expresses the government's rationale for embracing village elections:

> From the point of view of the central government, trustworthy and competent officials were vital at the local level, not only to ensure the success of economic reforms, but also to collect grain and taxes and to supervise birth control. But village leaders were increasingly either unwilling or unable to fulfill these obligations. Grassroots political reform was introduced 'to cope with the crises of both legitimacy and governability in the countryside.[18]

Similar to the motivation of the peasants, government officials saw these elections as a way to ensure their power at the lowest level. As long as villagers selected honest and qualified officials, both the people's and the government's needs would be satisfied. Theorizing about the effects of democratization is one thing, but actually staking a claim on grassroots reform is something else entirely. As Suzanne Ogden points out, the success of the original, unauthorized elections almost certainly served as the greatest selling point for the CCP and state officials in Beijing.[19]

The principal support from within the central government came from Peng Zhen, who was serving as vice-chairman for the National People's Congress Standing Committee at the time. When the reports of the Guanxi elections reached Beijing, it was Peng who initially saw the value of the new VCs. He quickly ordered an official review of the process by the Ministry of Civil

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[18] Jakobson, 101.
[19] Ogden, 185.

Affairs (MoCA) to ascertain the effectiveness of grassroots democratization, and he simultaneously encouraged other provinces within the PRC to begin implementing VCs.[20] In 1982, Peng and other reform-minded leaders in the CCP succeeded in amending the national constitution to recognize elected VCs as a legitimate form of local self-organization—a highly significant act that institutionalized the practice of villagers electing their own officials and was a clear signal of governmental support.[21] Peng, who had previous experience with this type of election, was convinced of its usefulness. Without such high-level support, these grassroots reforms most likely would have failed to take root.

Peng's enthusiasm for the grassroots political reforms stemmed from his experiences in the Communist wartime base of the Jin-Cha-Ji Border Region before the 1949 Revolution, when the CCP had experimented with elections.. In 1941 he had stated that elections were "the right instrument for tightening the Party's grip in areas where its dominance was still uncertain," because mass participation would actually rally the peasants to the Party even as other candidates would be allowed to run.[22] Peng must surely have remembered the success of his prior experience and believed the current situation could be similarly resolved. Because of his efforts to promote VCs, grassroots elections quickly spread, particularly in provinces that had led the way in abolishing the

[20] O'Brien and Li 2001, 103.
[21] Pei, 87.
[22] O'Brien and Li 2001, 104-105.

communes such as Anhui, Sichuan, Shandong, Hebei, Gansu, Hebei, Jiangsu, Jilin, Beijing (a provincial level city), and Fujian.[23]

The amendment to the Chinese Constitution that passed in 1982 did not resolve the matter of village elections, and the next five years were filled with a great deal of controversy. While Peng Zhen and other reformers championed the VCs, the central government did not require them to be established. Furthermore, there were elements of the leadership who believed that grassroots democracy granted too much authority to parties not directly responsible to higher levels of control.[24] Many leaders at various levels of government recognized the need for reform in rural China, but did not see village elections as the best approach. Township leaders and local cadres viewed VCs as a direct threat to their own power, often refusing to allow elections or tightly controlled them when they did occur. Some in the central government still believed brigades, a subunit of the old communes, could most effectively serve the Party and state in rural areas.[25] Despite these obstacles, VCs were established throughout the country. At this time, though, rules and standards for elections were not established at the national level. The task of regulating the elections fell to MoCA, and by 1987 they had a draft law ready to be presented to the National People's Congress (NPC).[26]

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[23] O'Brien and Li 2001, 103.
[24] Jakobson, 101.
[25] O'Brien and Li 2001, 107.
[26] O'Brien and Li 2001, 109.

Even with the success elections enjoyed in its first few years, getting the law passed proved to be quite difficult. As Peng and the other reformers continued to point out how VCs could curb rural unrest and legitimize party rule,[27] opponents argued that elections would cause villages to drift away from state control by allowing them to choose leaders that could potentially defy their superiors.[28] With the issue at an impasse, help finally arrived in the form of Bo Yibo, a senior Party leader who, like Peng, had reformist tendencies. Like many of Deng Xiaoping's closest advisors, Bo understood that the greatest threat to the CCP came from chaos and instability and agreed that direct election of VCs minimized the risk to the Party.[29] With Bo's influence combined with Peng's, the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees was approved on a temporary basis by the NPC in November of 1987 and went into effect in early 1988. Now elections were not only officially recognized, they were officially required.

With the core of village autonomy delineated in the Organic Law, the task of establishing VCs began. Even though the law now had the imprimatur of the NPC, this remained no easy task. One of the earliest setbacks came as a result of the student movement and Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. It was at this time that the Organization Department of the CCP voiced its opposition to implementation, saying the law could become a "peaceful evolution" away from Party rule. Once again, Peng Zhen and Bo Yibo saved the grassroots reforms by

[27] O'Brien and Li 1999, 133.
[28] O'Brien and Li 2001, 109.
[29] O'Brien and Li 1999, 133-134.

convincing the head of the department that village elections could only help the Party and the state.[30]

Another major problem facing village elections was the apathy of county and township governments. Part of the reason these levels of government ignored the new election law is that carrying it out could do little to promote their careers. Some officials focused more on "hard targets" like family planning (i.e. quantitative results that played significant roles in the promotion process), and simply pushed village elections off to the side or completely out of sight.[31] If they were not gaining anything personally by complying with a given law, these officials felt their time and effort could be better employed in a duty earning them the most favor with their superiors. Party and government officials were also wary of implementing the law because it would force them to relinquish at least some, if not a great deal, of their influence and control.[32]

Even when elections were implemented, some higher officials maintained a degree of control in village affairs. In certain areas elections were held but suffrage was limited to Party members and administrative officials; other elections were held on an "equal-sum" basis, where the number of candidates equaled the number of positions, and candidates were frequently nominated by state or CCP officials.[33] Thus the Party or township officials could determine who would be on the VC. In the decade following the NPC's acceptance of the

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[30] Niou, 21.
[31] O'Brien and Li 1999, 136.
[32] Ogden, 197.
[33] Landry, 228-229.

draft law, progress was slow. While VCs appeared in a vast majority of Chinese villages, many of these had either not been elected or were elected in a less than fair manner. Official statistics in 1998 revealed that 40 percent of villages needed to improve their election procedure, but other analysts from the same time claim that only 10 percent of elections were conducted in a "good" manner.[34] Despite local opposition, by 1997 25 of 31 provinces had outlined measures for implementing the grassroots reforms.[35] This is a clear sign of upper level adherence to the law and reveals that progress would continue even in the face of local opposition.

The largest vote of confidence for the law came in 1998 when the NPC passed the revised Organic Law of Villagers' Committees. Liu Yawei, a prominent scholar of Chinese village elections and director of the Carter Center's China Program, says that with the passage of the revised law, the implementation of grassroots democratization began in earnest.[36] By approving the law on a permanent basis, the central government simultaneously showed its approval of the progress made to that point and its commitment to fully implementing village elections. The 1998 revision of the law had several elements that have vastly improved it. Unlike the original law, the revision makes specific mention of the CCP's role in villages. Article 3 of the new law

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[34] Saich, 179.
[35] Robert A. Pastor and Quingshan Tan, "The Meaning of China's Village Elections." *Elections and Democracy in Greater China,* Ed. Larry Diamond and Ramon H. Myers. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 127.
[36] Liu, (8 July 2002).

clearly states the Party shall "play a core role in leadership" in rural areas, but the article also dictates that local CCP branches must not only allow but also support villagers' right to self-government.[37] This served the dual purpose of appeasing those who still had reservations that village elections would marginalize the Party and of assuring that the Party would not inhibit the election process. The second major revision lies in Article 14. This article specifies that peasants should directly nominate the candidates for VC and, perhaps more importantly, the number of candidates must exceed the number of available positions. [38] These measures have drastically increased the competitiveness of village elections, and they have also enhanced the rural people's ability to choose their leaders.

Under a system where both nominees and winners are chosen by the people, the villagers have more power. Thus, VCs have become more sensitive to the needs of the people. Liu Yawei summarizes this by saying, "[The revised law] recognized procedures that guaranteed electoral openness, fairness and competitiveness. For the first time, all administrative villages in China, totaling about 730,000, have to conduct direct elections every three years." [39] Theoretically this is true, but problems like reluctant township officials still remain, though at increasingly lower numbers. Wu Jiao claims that vote rigging occurs in one to three percent of village elections. This low number indicates that

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[37] Landry, 232-233.
[38] Landry, 233.
[39] Liu, (8 July 2002).

elections are indeed becoming fairer and freer. Furthermore, all 31 provincial level governments have introduced grassroots democracy with a total of 611,234 VCs and over 2.4 million committee members nationwide.[40] These numbers represent a huge amount of progress from the two committees that were spontaneously formed in the winter of 1980/1981. Wu also reports that MoCA has drafted further revisions to the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees in order to achieve more fairness and openness in village elections.[41] Further revisions continue to point to the government's dedication to grassroots democracy and likely will lead the PRC into a new stage of village elections.

[40] Jiao Wu. "Law aims to ensure fair grassroots elections." *China Elections and Governance* 4 Aug. 2008. 27 Oct. 2008 <http://en.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?newsid=18763>.
[41] Ibid.

Chapter 2: Freedom and Fairness of Village Elections

Many western observers scoff at the notion that rural peasants in China are actually choosing their own leaders and claim instead that the CCP has "sought to re-establish control over village affairs by party secretaries rather then democratically elected village chiefs."[42] It seems unlikely to them that the reforms, started in 1987 and solidified in 1998, are anything more than a ploy to better relations with Europe and the United States. According to this view, it is more logical that the Chinese Communist Party is directing these elections and therefore controlling the outcomes. Furthermore, villagers are the least educated group in the PRC and are frequently regarded as backward.[43] As such, many feel they can be easily manipulated. It is impressive that village elections have been conducted in all 31 provinces of China and over 600,000 village committees (VCs) have been established, but what value do these elections have if they are not implemented in a democratic way?[44] Questions frequently arise regarding the trustworthiness of grassroots elections, so it is important to examine to what extent village elections are carried out in a manner faithful to the Organic Law in terms of freedom and fairness.

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[42] "Where are They Now?" *The Economist* 3 Jun. 2004. 12 Feb. 2009. <http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_NSPPRVV>.
[43] Yawei Liu, *Roundtable on Village Elections in China, Congressional-Executive Commission on China* China Village Election Project, The Carter Center. (8 July 2002).
[44] Jiao Wu, "Law aims to ensure fair grassroots elections." *China Elections and Governance* 4 Aug. 2008. 27 Oct. 2008 <http://en.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?newsid=18763>.

In this regard, it is necessary first to establish what exactly constitutes a free and fair election. According to Emerson Niou, democratic elections have three key elements. The first is that the election must be direct and competitive.[45] For an election to be direct, the results of the vote tally lead to the actual results—meaning it is not a mere opinion poll. To fulfill the competitive aspect, more candidates must appear on the ballot than there are positions to be filled. Ideally, there would be more than one candidate for each specific position. This prevents some authority, be it the Party or a village or township leader, from creating a slate that will undoubtedly be selected. Robert Pastor and Qingshan Tan add to this definition of competitive elections by saying, "'Free' means that barriers to entry for parties and candidates are low; candidates are free to campaign; and people vote in private."[46] The second element of a free and fair election calls for a primary election or a nominated vote method.[47] This allows the villagers to choose the candidates they wish to appear on the ballot and is one of the most important parts of democratic elections since it ensures villagers the freedom to select their own leaders. The last key to a truly democratic vote comes with the election being "implemented faithfully."[48] Such elections are free from practices such as vote rigging, voter intimidation, vote buying, ballot-box stuffing, and any other practice that would violate the integrity of the vote. This element calls not

[45] Emerson M. Niou, "Village Elections: Roots of Democratization in China." *How Asia Votes*, Ed. John Hsieh and David Newman (New York: Chatham House, 2002), 26.
[46] Robert A. Pastor and Quingshan Tan, "The Meaning of China's Village Elections." *Elections and Democracy in Greater China,* Ed. Larry Diamond and Ramon H. Myers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 141-142.
[47] Niou, 26.
[48] Ibid.

just for the absence of these practices but also the absence of any appearance of impropriety. If voters feel their franchise has been infringed, they will begin to lose faith in the process. Without trust, the elections lose their value as tools of self-government.

China has made varying degrees of progress in each of these three elements. China has made significant strides in the area of direct and competitive elections since grassroots democracy was accepted as official policy. A 1997 survey in 478 villages in seven provinces showed that only 45 percent of village committees (VCs) were elected.[49] These numbers reflect a severe deficiency in the directness of the selection process for VCs, even though the authors quickly point out that results are not necessarily indicative of the nation or the provinces themselves. It is worthwhile to note, however, that information and statistics from China tend to come from areas where things are going rather well, and as a result estimates tend to be on the high end of the spectrum. It can therefore be assumed that the nationwide trend was lower than the stated 45 percent. More recently, the Carter Center in cooperation with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MoCA) in China conducted a nationwide survey of nearly 3,500 villagers in 2005 that showed that "98 percent of villages in China had conducted at least one election."[50] This provides a better idea of how widespread direct

[49] Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Accommodating "Democracy" in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China." *Elections and Democracy in Greater China,* Ed. Larry Diamond and Ramon H. Myers. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 122.
[50] Xinsong Wang, "Democracy with Chinese Characteristics: A New Look at Village Elections in China." *China Elections and Governance Review* (Issue 1, Feb. 2009), 8.

elections have become in the PRC because, as opposed to the previous survey, this offers a nationwide view. The survey suggests that great progress has been made, and direct elections now occur in the overwhelming majority of villages.

That peasants are going to the polls does not mean they are doing so in a competitive fashion, however. The Organic Law of Villagers' Committees clearly calls for competitive elections by requiring more candidates than the number of offices.[51] Grassroots democracy certainly began to become more competitive because of this measure. As Suzanne Ogden notes, before the passage of the permanent Organic Law of Villagers' Committees in 1998, candidates effectively had to be approved by the Party.[52] This practice clearly violates the freedom of candidates to enter elections and resulted in basically non-competitive elections, but such behavior has now been banned. Even if the CCP does not screen those desiring to be placed on local ballots, there are other ways to minimize the competitiveness of elections. Jonathan Unger points out, "Rather than allowing genuine direct multi-candidate elections to select the village leaders, the residents are provided with a list of six or seven candidates from among whom five are to be selected to serve as the village leaders."[53] This technique satisfies the letter of the law, but it drastically reduces the level of choice and competitiveness in village elections. Consequently, many provinces have mandated that there be multiple candidates for each office. According to Bruce

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[51] Suzanne Ogden, *Inklings of Democracy in China* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2002), 188.
[52] Ogden, 206.
[53] Jonathan Unger, *The Transformation of Rural China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 219.

Gilley at the turn of the century, only half of the VCs were selected through multiple candidate elections.[54] The Carter Center and MoCA 2005 survey, though, reveals that 69 percent of elections met the Organic Law's requirement for multiple candidates for VC chair.[55] The difference in these data reveals the significant progress made in a five year time period. Still, there remains much work to be done in creating competitive elections throughout all 31 provinces since one third of all elections held in China remain not even nominally competitive.

One hopeful sign comes from the burgeoning practice of open campaigning.[56] Although campaigning for positions on VCs is still a relatively new phenomenon, it is rapidly gaining popularity. Fujian province has consistently set the standard for many aspects of village elections. It was one of the first provinces to implement grassroots elections, and it has also led the way in increasing the competitive nature of these elections. As early as 2000, Fujian mandated that all elections within the province have more candidates than required and that all those running for VC chair give speeches.[57] Such pioneering practices significantly increase the democratic nature of village elections; even so, the practices needs to be standardized and a pro-campaigning environment must be further developed. As more villages add multiple

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[54] Bruce Gilley, *China's Democratic Future How it ill Happen and Where it will Lead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 91.
[55] Wang, 8.
[56] Liedong Yu, "Campaigning: A must in village elections." *China Elections and Governance* 3 Jul. 2007. 12 Feb. 2009. <http://en.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?newsid=6860>.
[57] *Carter Center Report on China's Elections*. 7 Aug. 2000. 2 Feb 2009. <http://cartercenter.org/documents/540.html>

candidates to their ballots and as candidates begin to publicly voice their opinions, village elections will become increasingly competitive.

Closely related to competitiveness is the element of free and fair elections that calls for a primary or nominated voting procedure. This measure also serves to make the selection process for VCs more democratic and ensures that candidates are "screened" or approved by some manner of impartial group before their name appears on the final ballot. This approval can come in a number of different ways. Emerson Niou notes that the primary may be conducted by the villagers as a whole or by the village council, a group larger than the VC that is normally comprised of village elders or representatives from every few households.[58] This alludes to the wide range of ways the second element for free and fair elections can be accomplished, and most nominating or primary procedures serve this purpose well. As Jens Kolhammar points out, the important thing is "that candidates should be nominated by villagers instead of by the government."[59] The Organic Law itself calls for this to take place by stating in Article 14, "The villagers who have the right to elect in the village shall nominate candidates directly."[60]

Although the government's inclusion of this article in the law is reassuring to those seeking true democracy in rural China, some of the evidence

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[58] Niou, 26.
[59] Jens Kolhammar, "History and Analysis of the Chinese Organic Law of the Villagers Committees." *Elections and Governance Review* (Issue 1, Feb. 2009), 18..
[60] *Organic Law of Villagers' Committees of the People's Republic of China,* 10 Nov. 2008. <http://english.northeast.cn/system/2008/11/27/000091081.shtml>

coming out of the countryside appears less comforting. The 2005 Carter Center and MoCA survey reported that only 35 percent of villagers said they could freely nominate candidates.[61] Kevin O'Brien's research gives more disheartening results from the seven provinces in which he gathered data which showed that only 17 percent of elections had been conducted with primaries.[62] Furthermore, despite laws forbidding such actions, some groups frequently prevent opposition groups from appearing on the ballot.[63] Such underhanded practices demonstrate resistance to the Organic Law and serve as a hindrance to democratic elections. To ensure free and fair elections, the central and provincial governments must institute nominating and primary procedure rather than merely call for their implementation because, as Suzanne Ogden highlights, "The right to *nominate* candidates is, of course, critical for truly democratic elections" [emphasis added].[64] Therefore, it is vitally important to expand this right to all village elections if democracy is the true aim of the Organic Law.

Some progress has been made in regards to deciding who makes it onto the final ballot for VCs. Foremost among the measures that promote nomination of candidates is the part of the Organic Law that forbids CCP interference in the process to select candidates for VCs.[65] This measure eliminates one of the largest obstacles to open nominations, even though many villagers still look to the Party

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[61] Wang, 8.
[62] O'Brien, 122.
[63] Unger, 219.
[64] Ogden, 194.
[65] Ogden, 195.

for guidance during the nominating process. Another sign that nominations are becoming more prevalent comes from the fact that there are at least six different methods for selecting candidates: party nomination, joint nomination by five to ten people, village small group nomination, Village Representative Assembly nomination, *haixuan* or individual nomination, and self-nomination.[66] With the exception of Party nomination, these are all fairly democratic methods for selecting candidates, and all produce multiple candidates for VCs. Some even produce so many that a run-off election must be held before the final vote is cast and VC is elected. Of particular interest is the individual nominating process that is referred to as a *haixuan* election. Many scholars including Pastor, Ogden, Niou, and O'Brien view the *haixuan* method as a positive step in village elections. Simply described, a vote of this nature consists of villagers receiving blank ballots on which they write the names of candidates, and the result of these nominations decide who will appear on the final ballot.[67] The nominated pool may have to be further reduced by a selection process or a primary vote, but either way, *haixuan* elections drastically increase the level of control villagers have on who ultimately represents them on their VC. The technique has grown in popularity and is used in many provinces.[68] By implementing this system or

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[66] Pastor and Tan, 131.
[67] Ogden, 195.
[68] Ruifang Yue and Zhen Lai, "Chinese official admits bribery increasing at grassroots elections." *China Elections and Governance* 4 Aug. 2008. 27 Oct. 2008 <http://en.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?newsid=18767>.

one similar to it, villages ensure peasants' right to self-government and create freer and fairer elections.

The last key element of a free and fair election revolves around whether or not the villagers believe the election was carried out faithfully. As stated earlier, this aspect relies upon the voters perspective as much as it does on the actual process because participants in an election must trust that election if it is to have any validity. There are several indicators of a faithfully administered election, one of which is the use of secret ballots. Secret ballots protect the sanctity of voting by preventing outside factors from influencing voters' decisions. If people know that their vote is public knowledge, they are far more likely to succumb to pressure to vote for certain candidates: whether due to power, family lineage, money, or various other reasons, but a private vote allows villagers to select candidates they feel would best serve their interests. The importance of a secret and individual vote cannot be overstated. Indeed, Pastor believes that unless this practice is fully accepted "democracy has little chance to flower in China."[69] Despite its importance, the MoCA/Carter Center report says, "The secret ballot booth, another requirement in the Organic Law, was only used in 40% of villages."[70] In some villages, elections are decided with a simple hand vote rather than casting secret ballots.[71] Perhaps even more telling about the state of grassroots democracy is the fact that even when voting booths are

[69] Pastor and Tan, 143.
[70] Wang, 8.
[71] Yijiang Ding, *Chinese Democracy after Tiananmen* (New York: University of British Columbia Press, 2001), 87.

present, some peasants still vote in public or through group discussion—a sign of community-oriented values prevailing over democratic ideals.[72] This type of behavior does not mean that elections were not implemented faithfully per se, however. Indeed, it may just highlight a difference between "Western democracy" and "democracy with Chinese characteristics." After all, it is the option of a private vote that is important; though, walking into a room where fellow villagers are discussing votes does present a strong form of social pressure to comply with that manner of voting.

Another vital part of faithfully executing an election involves how ballots are handled. Once a villager casts a ballot, that ballot must be submitted to the authorities, kept until polls close, taken to a tallying center, and finally counted. The manner in which these events occur can greatly affect the sanctity of a vote. In the Chinese countryside, many practices exist that potentially violate the spirit of free and fair elections. Dr. Yawei Liu says that the practices of voting by proxy and roving ballot boxes will prove to be "great problems and logistical nightmares that could lead to potential political violence and instability."[73] In a separate report, the Carter Center identifies proxy voting and roving ballot boxes as hindrances to secret voting and highlights their abolishment as essential to producing democratic elections.[74] Proxy voting is simply a process that allows one person to vote for another. In some cases this is allowed due to disability,

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[72] Ogden, 200.
[73] Liu, 8 July 2002.
[74] *Carter Center's Suggestions Regarding the Revision of the PRC National Procedures on Villager Committee Elections* Beijing, China. Aug. 2000.

but in other cases, fathers are allowed to vote for voting-age children or wives. Similarly, roving ballot boxes are used as moving polling stations that can go from house to house. While this can be very helpful to less mobile voters, it also presents ample opportunity for ballot box stuffing by limiting the amount of observation available.

These types of practices undermine the idea of one person, one vote and thereby endanger the credibility of elections. The potential credibility issues have led Dr. Liu to warn of social unrest, and he even quotes one Chinese scholar as saying, "If one wants to take that right [to vote] away (from peasants), the situation will be rather explosive."[75] As previously mentioned, voters easily perceive when vote rigging can occur, and in such situations tend to lose motivation to participate or become upset over their loss of franchise. While the MoCA claims that vote rigging only happens in one to three percent of elections, roving ballot boxes and proxy voting are by no means rare occurrences.[76] While progress has been made in limiting their use, these two practices must be eliminated for truly democratic elections to take place.

Despite these shortcomings, many positive indicators also exist regarding ballot security and vote sanctity. One area where significant progress has taken place is tallying votes. The Carter Center and MoCA report found that 70

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[75] Liu, 8 July 2002.
[76] Jiao Wu, "Law aims to ensure fair grassroots elections." *China Elections and Governance* 4 Aug. 2008. 27 Oct. 2008 <http://en.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?newsid=18763>.

percent of villages counted the votes publicly rather than behind closed doors.[77] By making the process more transparent, village leaders have upheld the value of grassroots elections and showed they can be trusted to carry out the will of the people. Additionally, the central government in Beijing is taking steps to further eliminate vote rigging at the grassroots level. Article 15 of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees highlights the illegality of many tactics, such as ballot forging, bribing and "other illegitimate means," and even mandates that such election results be considered invalid.[78] The MoCA's proposed revisions to the Organic Law offer a clearer definition of vote rigging and outline penalties for those who perpetrate such actions.[79] That the Chinese government recognizes the problem speaks to its commitment to free and fair elections. A recent admission of growing bribery furthers this idea. Wang Jinhua, a MoCA official, admitted in the fall of 2008 that vote buying was on the rise in grassroots elections and the practice was happening in one to three percent of villages.[80] In a country known for reporting the good and hiding the shortcomings, this acknowledgement has significant weight and further demonstrates the government's dedication to the success of grassroots democracy.

Now that the major aspects of free and fair elections have been discussed, it can be concluded an ever larger portion of grassroots self-governments actually are democratic to a certain extent. Emerson Niou used survey data

[77] Wang, 8.
[78] *Organic Law*, 10 Nov 2008.
[79] Wu, 4 Aug. 2008.
[80] Yue, 4 Aug. 2008.

collected in 1998 from over 3,500 villagers in 27 provinces that relates to the three key elements to rate the quality of elections throughout the PRC. If a surveyed village had elections that were direct and competitive; used a nomination or primary method of selections; and were implemented faithfully then he assigned a value of 4 (Best). A value of 3 was assigned to villages where villagers felt the election was only carried out satisfactorily, and if the election was not implemented faithfully, or if no primary or nominating method was used a value of 2 was given. If no direct election was held, then a value of 1 (worst) was given to that village. The results of his survey are displayed in Table 2.1.[81]

Overall Implementation Quality of Village Elections

Implementation Quality	1 (Worst)	2	3	4 (Best)
Number	826	1079	575	1099
Percentage	23.08	30.35	16.07	30.71

The data show that a majority of elections were of poor quality or just did not happen at all. However, as earlier highlighted, a great deal of progress has been made toward promoting free and fair elections. While these data from 1998 show that 23 percent of villages had yet to hold direct elections for VCs, the MoCA and Carter Center study reveal that that number has dropped to two percent by 2005.[82] That same study also states that 69 percent of elections involved multiple candidates, 40 percent had secret ballots, 39 percent of villagers could freely nominate candidates, and 70 percent of results were tallied

[81] Niou, 26.
[82] Wang, 8.

in public.[83] These data attest to a significantly higher proportion of villages falling in the "good" or "best" range of Niou's scale, while only 2 percent receive a "worst" rating. The progress made from 1998 to 2005 certainly encourages proponents of grassroots democracy, but they would readily point out the work remaining to be done.

Village elections in China are far from perfect examples of democratic excellence. Township and county officials still select candidates; as do Party leaders—mostly on political basis.[84] Deletion of candidates from ballots and coercive techniques are used to influence the outcome of elections.[85] These types of occurrences arise from lingering fears that officials from outside the establishment will disrupt the status quo; despite evidence to the contrary. These are obvious obstacles in the path of grassroots self-government, but other potentially greater challenges also remain. Suzanne Ogden highlights the fact that illiteracy and lack of democratic knowledge have severely hindered officials' ability to carry out free and fair elections.[86] Because of the sometimes backward and ignorant ways of many Chinese peasants, opportunities abound for parties such as powerful clans or wealthy individuals to take advantage of villagers and drive elections one way or another. Dr. Liu of the Carter Center also stresses the importance of voter education if elections are to have an effective and lasting

[83] Wang, 8.
[84] Unger, 219.
[85] Ding, 87.
[86] Ogden, 199-200.

impact on the Chinese countryside.[87] Despite these challenges, grassroots democracy is steadily—though sometimes slowly—taking root with villagers. Village elections today are considerably more democratic than when the permanent Organic Law was passed in 1998, and all signs point to continued expansion of free and fair elections.

[87] Liu, 8 July 2002.

Chapter 3: Grassroots Democracy's Effects on Chinese Villagers

Village elections began in rural China nearly three decades ago in the midst of decollectivization and were first officially sanctioned by the government in Beijing twenty years ago. The last decade has witnessed rapid growth in grassroots self-government practices and the development of increasingly democratic elections. These events have not taken place in a vacuum, and as a result have had significant consequences for the estimated 900 million people living in the Chinese countryside. Village elections are revolutionary in that peasants have never experienced anything like this before, and their implementation is a sharp departure from communal living under an authoritarian government. Despite the imperfect and uneven development of grassroots democracy throughout rural China, discernable trends exist regarding the positive and negative effects elections have had on villagers.

The most obvious effect village elections have had on rural peasants is the reason grassroots democracy initially began: stability in village administration. As mentioned earlier, once the communal farms disbanded, villages began to experience a significant absence of power, and in some cases complete chaos appeared just over the horizon.[88] This was due in part to the villagers' nearly complete distrust of their appointed cadre who was generally an outsider, often

[88] Yawei Liu, *Roundtable on Village Elections in China, Congressional-Executive Commission on China* China Village Election Project, The Carter Center. (8 July 2002).

temporarily assigned the post, and also the cadre's unfair and unjust practices. This situation did not benefit rural residents in the least and actually jeopardized their newly won economic freedoms. In the wake of economic decentralization, power hungry village officials began to flex their political muscles and behaved in a mafia-like manner by demanding extra taxes and fees while resorting to force to ensure the enactment of state policies and their own authority.[89] After the implementation of grassroots self-government, however, instances like this have become less frequent because elections have tied village cadre's interests to those of the everyday citizen. Kevin O'Brien and Lianjiang Li discuss the increase in cadre accountability and quote a VC official who said:

> We village cadres depend on the "ground line" (*dixian*) [that is, villagers' votes], those at higher levels depend on the "antenna" (*tianxian*) [that is, appointment by higher levels]. If we wish to be cadres, we must win the masses' support. Unless the masses raise their hands, we can't be cadres.[90]

The fact that cadres now depend on villagers has a great deal of meaning to those in the Chinese countryside. For the first time in China's long history, peasants have a say in how their own affairs are conducted. Chinese villagers now have a stake in the political process as a result of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees. The members of a VC are accountable to the villagers and need their vote, a fact that in turn causes VCs to be more responsive to the needs of the

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[89] Linda Jakobson, "Local Governance: Village and Township Direct Elections." *Governance in China*, Ed. Jude Howell (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 100.
[90] Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "The Struggle over Village Elections." *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms,* Ed. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar (New York: Harvard University Press, 1999), 140.

people they represent and serve. As Tony Saich points out, it is this dual existence of accountability and responsiveness that truly benefits peasants.[91] By creating this type of link between official and villager, the Law has generally promoted stability in rural areas because a village official must now heed villagers' needs and desires—a scene quite different from the turbulent days following decollectivization but preceding the start of village elections when those in the countryside had to resort to violence or demonstration to effect change.

Exceptions to this trend can be found, particularly where peasants' rights have been infringed upon or completely ignored. Indeed, official sources in the PRC reveal an increase of 50 percent in "public order disturbances" from 2003 to 2005.[92] These cases, however, mostly revolve around situations beyond the control of VCs or situations that could easily have been remedied through elections. The 2006 *CRS Report to Congress* cites several impetuses for unrest such as violation of property rights, declining social services, increased taxes and fees, and corruption.[93] While they can do little to alter the situation in townships, village elections can significantly reduce incompetent officials that conduct unfair practices. This is one the most valuable aspects grassroots democracy. Similarly, O'Brien and Li highlight grassroots democracy's ability to curb official

[91] Tony Saich, *Governance and Politics of China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 177.
[92] Thomas Lum, "Social Unrest in China." *CRS Report for Congress* (Congressional Research Service, 8 May, 2006), 1.
[93] Lum, 2.

corruption.[94] When villagers gained the power to vote leaders in and out of office, corruption became a political liability, and when officials do not rid themselves of the problem, villagers often remove the problem themselves. Having honest members of the VC is of obvious benefit to all peasants.

Trust in village officials is another interesting result of democratic elections in China's countryside. This pattern reveals itself in a number of ways, but one of the most interesting presents itself when villagers' reactions to state policies are examined. Contrary to what might seem logical and what many opponents of the Organic Law claimed when it first passed, village elections have helped smooth the implementation process for many official policies.[95] These policies are sometimes quite unpopular with the general population and can range from population control to tax collection to grain procurement.[96] Electing officials has not made policies like these more popular, but elections have improved compliance. Whereas in the past villagers had to endure violent or coercive tactics from appointed cadres trying to implement state policy, now villagers can elect effective administrators who have a legitimate claim to power and will not need to resort to such underhanded techniques. By holding elections, peasants gain two important qualities in their village official: effectiveness and fairness. Villagers seem quite aware that unpopular policies will be enacted regardless of their wishes. O'Brien and Li show how this attitude

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[94] Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 54.
[95] O'Brien and Li 1999, 140.
[96] Suzanne Ogden, *Inklings of Democracy in China* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2002), 186-187.

affects elections by observing, "To win popular support, challengers may pledge fairer policy implementation, but few pander to villagers by vowing to defy all demands from above."[97] Even though they do not rid themselves of unwanted policies, villagers can at least rid themselves of unpopular ways of implementation. Additionally, they can choose effective leaders who will implement not only the official state policy but also new initiatives to benefit the village as a whole. Ogden points out, "Cadres who are ineffective in carrying out unpopular policies will no doubt be equally ineffective in carrying out policies *popular* with villagers, so it would be rational for villagers to elect effective officials."[98] This rationality ensures that villagers' needs are met in the best manner possible.

The selection of more highly motivated local leaders is another political effect to come about for rural residents as a result of village elections in rural China. When township or town officials were in charge of administrative duties on the village level, these officials often saw no benefit to their own careers by carrying them out and therefore lacked motivation to see them through.[99] With elected VCs, however, efficiently completing tasks like maintaining bridges and roads, mediating disputes, and providing education and healthcare now can garner official political capital that will help when it comes time for villagers to return to the polls every three years. When candidates fail to live up to promises,

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[97] O'Brien and Li 1999, 141.
[98] Ogden, 207.
[99] Ogden, 186.

they are often removed. Thus, grassroots democracy has given the peasants more motivated local leaders. This is also evident in the positive action many members of VCs will take to improve the community. Kevin O'Brien notes that when campaigning for a position on the VC, "Candidates invariably promise 'to do good things for fellow villagers,'"[100] with regards to land distribution, road creation or repair, or education improvements. Robert Pastor and Qingshan Tan, while observing campaigning in Hebei and Jilin provinces, witness how "candidates promised to build a new road; improve and expand community enterprise in order to reduce taxes; invite outside, including foreign, investors or advisors to provide capital or high-yielding seed."[101] This is a specific example of a common practice. In order to be re-elected, officials must deliver positive results to villagers, and as a result, peasants' situations can greatly improve when effective officials are chosen.

While the political effects tend to be positive, the economic results from the spread of grassroots democracy and the democratic effects resulting from economic growth provide a much grayer picture for rural Chinese. Two widely held theories assert that democracy breeds economic development, and that places with stronger economies will more readily accept democratic reforms like those in the Organic Law for Villagers' Committees. These theories sound quite logical, but the evidence does not support these claims when discussing the

[100] O'Brien and Li 1999, 141.
[101] Robert A. Pastor and Quingshan Tan, "The Meaning of China's Village Elections." *Elections and Democracy in Greater China,* Ed. Larry Diamond and Ramon H. Myers. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 132.

Chinese countryside. Dr. Yawei Liu of the Carter Center cites "the lack of linkage between the growth of village wealth and the institutionalization of village democracy" as a main argument for opponents of grassroots reform.[102] When this lack of correlation is combined with the ever widening income gap between urban and rural residents, villagers develop feelings of victimization because, despite the promising nature of grassroots democracy, they have not experienced China's economic boom the way city-dwellers have.

Village elections not only fail to produce economic success, there is also evidence that where the economy performs well democracy tends to develop slower. According to Tianjian Shi "economic development is not linearly correlated with political reform...Rapid economic development may even delay the process of political development. Rather than simply freeing people from political control, economic development in some places may help to consolidate the power of incumbent leaders."[103] There are several reasons for this pattern. The first is that when things are going well, villagers may see little need for change and settle for the status quo regarding village leadership. In many situations, wealthier villages can afford to do more for their inhabitants in terms of social needs, therefore winning their support regardless of how village leaders are selected. Additionally, township leaders tend to look the other way when

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[102] Yawei Liu, "Are Village Elections Leading to Democracy?" *China Elections and Governance Review* (Issue 1, Feb. 2009), 2.

[103] Tianjian Shi, "Economic Development and Village Elections in Rural Chian." *China and Democracy Reconsidering the Prospects for a Democratic China,* Ed. Suisheng Zhao (New York: Routledge, 2000.), 247.

villages prosper and not demand compliance with the law. Shi is also quick to say, however, that his findings should not imply that economic development is bad for grassroots democracy; instead, political reform may just take longer to be realized.[104] Irrespective of the long-term effects, the picture regarding the economic effects of grassroots democracy remains fuzzy. It is impossible to say that village elections have produced positive economic results for peasants such as increased income or the attraction of new industry, and contrarily, economic success has a tendency to retard political progress because villagers might overlook unfair elections or lack of elections if their economic situation is high enough.

In addition to the political and economic consequences caused by the implementation of grassroots democracy in rural China, significant social consequences have occurred. Dr. Liu alluded to this when he said, "[Grassroots democracy] has cultivated a new value system, a much-needed sense of political ownership and rights awareness among the Chinese peasants that do not have any leverage in bargaining with the heavy-handed government."[105] The Chinese people have never experienced anything like village self-government in their entire history. For the first time they are experimenting with ideas that Westerns have been developing since the signing of the *Magna Carta.* Instead of

[104] Ibid.
[105] Liu, 8 Jul 2002.

unquestioning obedience, peasants now have a place at the bargaining table and are ever more willing to take their seat.

O'Brien and Li credit village elections with the rise of what they call "rightful resistance."[106] Rightful resistance takes places when villagers stand up for their lawful rights. The authors emphasize how quickly some peasants have learned the value of self-government and adopted a strong will to protect their new found resource. In their book *Rightful Resistance in Rural China,* O'Brien and Li describe several situations where villages have appealed to upper levels of government to ensure their right to a fair election. In one example, peasants from a poor village in Hebei had asked the township authorities to replace the village cadre, but these requests were rebuffed on several occasions. After acquiring a copy of the Organic Law, however, the villagers once again went to the township government while simultaneously seeking the support of county officials. Facing such pressure resulted in the township's acquiescence to elections and the selection of a new leader chosen by the people.[107] This highlights the peasants' new ability to take part in the political process. That role is no longer relegated to riots or demonstrations, but now can take the form of perfectly legal appeals.

Even beyond the realm of voting, citizens are beginning to hold a broader understanding of the law. Dr. Liu also highlights the fact that grassroots

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[106] Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Accommodating "Democracy" in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China." *Elections and Democracy in Greater China,* Ed. Larry Diamond and Ramon H. Myers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 118.
[107] O'Brien and Li 2006, 55-56.

democracy "calls citizens' attention to the serious problem of the Chinese political system, i.e. the justice of the systemic design and the injustice of procedures."[108] With this knowledge they become more concerned with and more involved in the government. Consequently all types of people are now seeking positions on VC—not just party members or wealthy villagers. For example, Liao Huaixin ran for VC in Jiangxi province's Longtan village in 2003.[109] Although he was not a party member or even a village elder, he not only ran but campaigned vigorously in his quest for a VC position. Similarly, villagers do not merely vote in elections, many stay involved and keep track of VC affairs. *China Daily* makes this point in an article discussing farmers' increased involvement in elections.[110] Participation is an excellent indicator of the progress of democratic reform, and *China Daily* leads one to believe that participation is extremely high and participants are motivated. Gao Qiong, a small farmer running for VC, echoes this sentiment by say, "My relatives, my friends, and whoever I know, all want to make the election work this time to get a village committee that truly works for the interests of all people."[111] Such enthusiasm on the part of villagers would signify great progress in introducing the social aspects of democracy and rule of law in China.

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[108] Liu 2009, 4.
[109] Liedong Yu, "Campaigning: A must in village elections." *China Elections and Governance* 3 Jul. 2007. 12 Feb. 2009. <http://en.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?newsid=6860>.
[110] Jiao Wu, "Farmers speak through the ballot box." *China Daily* [Beijing, China] 27 Aug. 2008.
[111] Ibid.

China Daily's outlook, however, might be a little optimistic. The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators ranks China in the 25th-50th percentile in "Rule of Law" and the bottom ten percentile in "Voice and Accountability".[112] This does not speak well for the democratic progress made in the PRC, but it must be considered that grassroots reforms have taken place only at the lowest level of governmental organization. (Actually, villages are not even considered a governmental level.) Overall turnout for village elections gives a better understanding of the level of participation by rural Chinese. The Carter Center and MoCA report of 2005 shows that turnout averaged 63 percent nationally, but that number is skewed due to the large number of migrant workers unable to vote.[113] This proportion suggests a fairly involved population, which is remarkable considering the short span of time villagers have been exposed to democratic ideals and practices.

The Organic Law for Villagers' Committees was like a rock thrown into a pond. Like any rock would, the Organic Law has had definite consequences and effects on the people living in rural China. Obviously they have gained a voice of their own and what Dr. Liu describes as "a safety valve to hundreds of millions of Chinese peasants."[114] This allows their frustrations to be calmly expressed and addressed in a local context to a greater extent than any other

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[112] "Worldwide Governance Indicators, 1996-2007: China." *Governance Matters 2008,* The World Bank. <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/sc_chart.asp>.
[113] Xinsong Wang, "Democracy with Chinese Characteristics: A New Look at Village Elections in China." *China Elections and Governance Review* (Issue 1, Feb. 2009), 8.
[114] Liu, 8 Aug 2002.

system would allow. The dramatic rise in rural unrest could be seen in opposition to this idea, but in actuality, it proves that villagers are embracing their newly found political voice, especially where they still lack such direct methods as elections or where that right is denied. Furthermore, villagers have been able to gain valuable services and new community projects as a result of direct elections. While economic effects are not as pronounced as some hoped, real progress has been made in people's understanding of democracy and law. These effects will ultimately prove beneficial both to the peasants and the PRC as a whole.

Chapter 4: Grassroots Democracy's Effects on the Chinese Government and Communist Party

Without any doubt, village elections have greatly impacted residents in rural China, attracting a great deal of attention from democracy watchers and international observers. For the central government, however, the larger issue remains how grassroots democracy has affected the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the state bureaucracy. As stated earlier, one of the chief motives for implementing self-government in the Chinese countryside was the stabilization of villages after decollectivization—much more than any high-minded idea about inalienable rights. By the early 1980s, the Party needed a method to calm increasingly turbulent farmers while simultaneously reestablishing their hold on authority, which had slipped significantly since decollectivization, and many officials like Peng Zhen and Bo Yibo believed direct election of village leaders could effectively fulfill that task. Much like the effects villagers have felt, the Party and state have encountered both positive and negative results due to the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees, and three decades after the first elections took place, the Party has legitimized itself through grassroots democracy while attaining better policy implementation and improved interaction with regards to Party/state and villagers relations.

One of the most immediate reactions to the Organic Law was an internal Party backlash that had numerous causes and has manifested itself in several ways. The CCP began as a Marxist-Leninist organization, and while it has moved away from those beginnings with its increasingly market oriented economy, it still very much aims to maintain unilateral control.[115] This, of course, means that it is inherently cautious when dealing with anything that might threaten its control, and it is no wonder the backlash problem had its roots in the debate over the passage of the law itself when conservatives within the CCP opposed any potential decrease in Party influence. Tony Saich points out that such reforms lead to diminished power and are therefore "strongly resisted."[116] This sentiment caused much debate when the proposal first came before the National People's Congress (NPC) in 1987 and led to the inclusion of a clause in the revised law passed in 1998 that emphasizes the Party's leadership role even though the original Organic Law does not mention the CCP at all.[117] The new stipulation is found in Article 3 of the permanent law and states the CCP in the countryside must "[play] its role as a leading nucleus."[118] The inclusion of this article reveals a few things. First, some within the CCP still fear that village elections will erode the Party's power and needed reassuring before agreeing to fully enact grassroots reforms. Indeed, Liu Yawei of the Carter Center cites

[115] Jonathan Unger, *The Transformation of Rural China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 220.
[116] Tony Saich, *Governance and Politics of China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2001), 97.
[117] Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Accommodating "Democracy" in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China." *Elections and Democracy in Greater China,* Ed. Larry Diamond and Ramon H. Myers. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 124.
[118] *Organic Law of Villagers' Committees of the People's Republic of China* 10 Nov. 2008. <http://english.northeast.cn/system/2008/11/27/000091081.shtml>.

"undermining the Party's leadership in the rural areas" as one of the chief political arguments used by critics against the law.[119] Article 3 aims to curb this potentially damaging argument. This section of the Organic Law also signifies the Party's intention to maintain firm control even at the lowest level of social organization in China. This has been a worry from the beginning of the reform process; one even Peng Zhen himself expressed.[120] Though the inclusion of this assertion is significant, it is important to remember that it is one article out of 30 in a law dedicated to making village elections permanent throughout the entire PRC.

Article 3 has caused various effects in the way villagers and Party officials interact in rural China. The behavior of some elected officials has caused considerable worry among party members. Kevin O'Brien states that in some locations democratically elected VC members have tried to "undermine the village party secretary."[121] Obviously, party members do not respond favorably to these encroachments. Wang Xinsong with the Carter Center states, "As a result of fighting between VC and VPB over power, many villages are plunged in paralyzed governance conditions."[122] Still, or perhaps as a result, there are numerous examples of Party branches wielding considerable influence,

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[119] Yawei Liu, *Roundtable on Village Elections in China, Congressional-Executive Commission on China* China Village Election Project, (The Carter Center. July 2002).
[120] Saich, 178.
[121] Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "The Struggle over Village Elections." *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms,* Ed. Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar. (New York: Harvard University Press, 1999), 142.
[122] Xinsong Wang, "Democracy with Chinese Characteristics: A New Look at Village Elections in China." *China Elections and Governance Review* (Issue 1, Feb. 2009), 11.

sometimes using illegal tactics. Saich says that instances of the Party affecting village affairs are not rare. As an example he recounts a story of four elected VC members being arrested because they had defeated the Party's preferred candidates.[123] Suzanne Ogden also gives an example of party members in one village from Pudong district in Shanghai holding "discussion groups" that "focused on who was 'qualified' to be a candidate and greatly influenced villagers' (votes)." [124] These two examples, illegal and legal respectively, demonstrate how the Party has striven to ensure its leadership role. Other techniques employed to combat erosion of power involve denying the right to hold elections or limiting their competitiveness, but these cases are decreasing as free and fair elections are implemented nationwide. Furthermore, Robert Pastor and Qingshan Tan observe that Party influence remains more or less even with interference from other groups such as clans or wealthy elites.[125] This fact means that Party branch attempts at maintaining power are no more common than others trying to gain power and therefore might not be as widespread as some would believe.

This is not to say that the Party is being completely marginalized in rural China. Actually, it remains the most powerful entity in the countryside. A 2005 joint survey of nearly 3,500 rural residents nationwide conducted by the Carter

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[123] Saich, 181.
[124] Suzanne Ogden, *Inklings of Democracy in China* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2002), 197.
[125] Robert A. Pastor and Qingshan Tan, "The Meaning of China's Village Elections." *Elections and Democracy in Greater China,* Ed. Larry Diamond and Ramon H. Myers, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 145.

Center and the MoCA shows that nearly 60 percent of villagers feel the Village Party Secretary holds the most influential position in the village while only 12 percent felt the VC chair had the most power.[126] This survey fails to consider situations where the Party Secretary and VC Chair are the same person even though this is fairly common practice occurring in nearly a quarter of all villages.[127] While certainly an interesting trend, the data still shows that even when democratic elections are held, the CCP continues to occupy an extremely important position at the grassroots level of society.

Despite these widespread concerns about diminished CCP influence, the CCP and PRC have experienced many positive consequences of the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees. One main result is the prevention of social unrest in the villages. Instability and "chaos" (*luan*) have long been one of the greatest fears of Chinese officials, but since the implementation of grassroots democracy this worry has consistently been eased. Dr. Liu credits village elections as providing "a safety valve to hundreds of millions of Chinese peasants" and thereby calming a potentially dangerous storm in China's farmland.[128] Even where unrest presents itself, peasants tend to direct frustrations toward township officials who are unaccountable to villagers.[129] Additionally, the Congressional Research Service cites local elections as a way to "address the causes of social

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[126] Wang, 11.
[127] Wang, 12.
[128] Liu, July 2002.
[129] Jamie Horsley, "Village elections: training ground for democratization." *China Elections and Governance* 4 Nov. 2006. 23 Jan. 2009. <http://en.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?newsid=3425>.

unrest" and thereby stem the growing the trend of "public disturbance."[130] Village elections are definitely relieving pressure on the PRC, while creating new pressure in the places where similar rights are absent.

The fact that the countryside has not descended into complete anarchy alone qualifies the experiment with village self-government as a success in the eyes of Beijing. The Organic Law has fulfilled its primary objective and will in all likelihood continue to pacify the rural masses. Pastor and Tan provide an example of this principle in action when describing two villages' reactions to a highway tax by saying, "Peasants in Renshou, where there were no village elections, resisted the tax levy violently, whereas peasants in Pengshan, where village elections were implemented, approved the tax, and the highway was built."[131] In this case village elections not only maintained peaceful circumstances but also produced positive results for villagers and the government in that the new highway was built.

As the highway tax example demonstrates, Chinese officials have garnered other benefits from village elections. One major positive effect the Organic Law has had is that many official policies are now more easily implemented. When the law first passed the NPC some officials claimed that self-government at the grassroots level would severely limit the effectiveness of

[130] Thomas Lum, "Social Unrest in China." *CRS Report for Congress* (Congressional Research Service, 8 May, 2006), 15.
[131] Pastor, 147.

state policies.[132] Ten years of full implementation, however, have proved that statement false and in some cases the opposite has actually occurred. The direct election of VCs has actually shown itself to be quite useful in solving problems such as family-planning implementation, corruption, resource allocation, and petty disputes. Saich says, "The establishment of the villagers' committees are then credited with clearing up these problems and with enforcing effectively state policy in the villages." [133] Grassroots democracy has increased the effectiveness of state policy by providing stability while also enhancing the state's position in rural areas. Better implementation is no mere accident either. O'Brien and Li point out, "To the surprise of many township officials, village cadres who identify with villagers are generally scrupulous about carrying out township-assigned tasks. Closer relations with villagers...can actually smooth policy implementation."[134] Because directly elected VCs have been popularly chosen and come to office with the blessing of those they represent, previously difficult tasks such as family planning and quota collection become comparatively simple. Additionally, elections bring fresh voices and new opinions on implementation to the table further enhancing elected VCs' ability to carry out official policies.

This positive situation for the Party and the state is helped by the villagers' view of who should be elected. Generally, voters think rationally when

[132] Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 60.
[133] Saich, 180.
[134] O'Brien and Li 1999, 140.

they cast a ballot. Most villagers relish the opportunity to show corrupt or under-performing cadre to the door, but they also tend to elect candidates that support state policies and are otherwise "pro-state."[135] The logic behind this action is that if candidates are elected that will carry out lawful policies, village elections will continue. Therefore, it seems villagers know the limits of whom they can choose to run village affairs. This generally assures that the government will be satisfied with those selected to the VC. As a result of who is elected and their relationship to the villagers, the Party has also legitimized itself in the countryside and now has a mandate to rule. Dr. Liu of the Carter Center believes "villager self-government is conducive to the firming of the Party's legitimacy and likeability in the countryside."[136] After the end of communal farming, the Party lost its main source of control in villages. By allowing the election of village cadres the CCP has legitimized itself to the people by showing they are willing to change for the villagers benefit. Consequentially, villagers trust the Party and state more, and the election of pro-state officials and the increase implementation of policies is evidence of that.

An intriguing new manner by which the Party deals with internal affairs at the lowest level of organization is another important impact of grassroots democracy. The recent rise in popularity of the two-ballot system to elect village party branch (VPB) secretaries and members relates closely to direct elections of

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[135] O'Brien and Li 1999, 143.
[136] Yawei Liu, "Are Village Elections Leading to Democracy?" *China Elections and Governance Review* (Issue 1, Feb. 2009), 4.

VCs.[137] This method for selecting local party leaders calls for two rounds of voting while the traditional method only uses a single vote. In the first round, all registered voters in a village can cast a ballot, but only CCP members can vote in the second round. Obviously party members still make the final decision on who will be the chief party members in the village. The first vote, however, remains very important. Ogden says, "Although the Party insists that this is not a 'primary' but a 'vote of confidence' by the villagers, the Party is supposed to be bound to nominate as the official candidate whoever received the most votes on the first ballot."[138] This measure grants villagers unprecedented influence on the Party. It simultaneously allows villagers to express disapproval of a Party leader and potentially have that official removed while allowing the Party to maintain final control in the process. Rural Chinese in one Shanxi village were instrumental in bringing about this system.[139]

Villages have come a long way in thirty years: from not having the most basic elections to demanding a voice in Party affairs. This shows significant growth in democratic knowledge and awareness. The system began as a method for easing tensions between VCs and VPBs, and even though the two-ballot system has legitimized VPB members, it has done little to improve the relationship between the two organizations due to continued struggles between

[137] Liu, July 2002.
[138] Ogden, 204.
[139] Ogden, 204.

the two organizations for various village responsibilities.[140] Regardless, legitimizing Party officials in the eyes of the typical villager is an important step forward and eases the implementation of party policy. Another way villagers exercise control over VPB comes when a VPB member runs for VC and is not elected, typically resulting in his/her removal from the VPB.[141] Through this type of indirect influence, villagers can further determine how the Party conducts its business on a grassroots level. Despite a small loss in control, the positive effects for the Party are also evident. Besides making VPB members more legitimate local leaders, the two-ballot system and practices with similar results will generally produce more effective Party leadership, facilitating policy implementation with increased support from the village.

The two-ballot system has not significantly reduced quibbling between VCs and VPBs, but one technique that has drastically lowered tensions is electing the same person to serve on both.[142] The particular person can be the chair of both organizations, a member of one and chair of the other, or merely a member on both. The 2005 MoCA and Carter Center survey of nearly 3,500 peasants in 27 provinces found that 24 percent of villages have the same person serving as head of both VC and VPB.[143] This provides continuity between the two groups and can lead to increased effectiveness. Indeed, this helps explain the high number of party members serving on VCs. According to an early 1990s survey of several

[140] Wang, 12.
[141] Ogden, 204.
[142] Wang, 12
[143] Ibid

provinces cited by Minxin Pei, only 30 percent of VC chairs are not party members.[144] Numbers released by the MoCA from 1998 give a similar picture with number of party members of VCs resting around 80 percent.[145] More recent numbers, however, are not as high as previous data showed. The 2004 data from the MoCA yields a nationwide average of 46 percent of VC members also being members of the Party.[146] Still, this is a remarkably high number considering that only 5 percent of Chinese belong to the CCP.

Several explanations for the high number of party members on VCs exist. One is vote-rigging or other means of influencing the elections, but as established earlier, those instances appear infrequently. Another possibility is that villagers believe party members will best serve their needs. Ogden says that the qualities villagers want in a leader are "competence, honesty, an ability to make the village economy grow, and an ability to defend village interests against pressures from above."[147] If party members meet these standards, they stand a good chance of winning elections. Furthermore, party members tend to be the more motivated, better educated, better-off, and better connected people in villages—factors which all contribute to a candidates electability.

Additionally, residents in rural areas know their limits in self-government, and so when a candidate runs that will satisfy the village's needs and the Party's

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[144] Minxin Pei, "China's Evolution Toward Soft Authoritarianism." *What If China Doesn't Democratize? : Implications for War and Peace,* Ed. Edward Friedman and Barrett L. McCormick (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 89.
[145] Pastor and Tan, 140.
[146] Pierre Landry, *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China : The Communist Party's Control of Local Elites in the Post-Mao Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 237.
[147] Ogden, 206.

desire, it make that candidate a logical choice. This situation, therefore, benefits both the CCP and the village. It is possible to see the proportional decrease of party members on VCs from 1998 to 2004 as a sign that the Party is losing the public's trust and that the Party's influence will also be diminished, but it is important to point out that it is equally likely that increased political awareness due to village elections has enlarged the candidate pool. Additionally, a noticeable drop in VC responsiveness to state policies has not been observed.

CCP recruitment of VC members is the last explanation for high numbers of party membership on VCs. Saich highlights early reformers' claims that village elections would help the Party by revealing talented individuals with a degree of popular support who could then be recruited.[148] Their recruitment served the role of further enhancing the Party's ability to enact policy. The practice of recruiting elected VC members is the flipside of the two-ballot system as both prove party members' legitimacy. The Party's recruitment of these villagers does not come as that great of a surprise because, as Pastor and Tan discuss, the CCP has long sought to attract the most enterprising villagers.[149] A person like a VC member who seeks the approval of the entire village and wants to contribute to village affairs certainly fits the description of "enterprising."

Recruiting and testing talent on VCs has been extremely beneficial to the Party, but Pierre Landry's research offers troubling news for this system.

[148] Saich, 96.
[149] Pastor and Tan, 146.

Although his studies have shown promotion of VC members to VPBs to be fairly common before 2000, once elections became more competitive as a result of revisions to the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees, the Party has slowed its recruitment and promotion rate based on village election results.[150] As uncertainty about election results increases, the Party's ability to recruit from this pool of rural residents diminishes, thereby diminishing Party influence.

Party members make up roughly half of VCs throughout the PRC; the numbers, however, vary greatly from province to province. Party members occupy 77 percent of VC position in outlying areas of Shanghai, but that high is contrasted by the 30 percent in Tibet.[151] There is one interesting trend that has emerged in these numbers. According to Emerson Niou's study on freedom and fairness of village self-government, Shanghai, Hainan, and Anhui provinces are three of the bottom four provinces in terms of democratic elections.[152] These three provinces also have the highest percentage of party members on VCs.[153] Other low performers in Niou's democracy index such as Guangxi, Hunan, and Hubei also have relatively high proportions. Compare this to fairly democratic provinces like Sichuan, Guizhou, and Fujian that have lower percentages.[154] While this is not conclusive, it points to a trend in which freer elections result in lower CCP influence. Even if the pattern is present, it should be noted that party

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[150] Landry, 255.
[151] Landry, 236.
[152] Emerson M. Niou, "Village Elections: Roots of Democratization in China." *How Asia Votes,* Ed. John Hsieh and David Newman (New York: Chatham House, 2002), 28.
[153] Landry, 237.
[154] Ibid

members still comprise about 40 percent of VCs in Guizhou, a province with competitive election practices. This proportion is still quite high compared to the percentage of CCP members in these rural areas. Even so, party officials cannot be comforted when faced with these numbers and the possibility of losing power as grassroots democracy spreads.

Grassroots self-government was presented as a solution for the CCP in the face of disintegrating rural power. Chaos has been largely avoided relating to village administration. At the same time, state policies have not been held up or opposed by VCs. Village elections have done much to legitimize the Party in the Chinese countryside and have provided a valuable way for new leaders to emerge, even leading to new methods of VPB selection. However, there are questions as to what the future will hold for the Party in rural China, especially in light of troubling statistics regarding Party influence and increasingly democratic village elections.

Chapter 5: Vertical Growth—The Spread of Direct Elections to Higher Levels of Administration

The previous two sections of this thesis have examined the effects the Organic Law of Villagers' Committees have had on the state bureaucracy and CCP as well as rural Chinese, but one important consequence has yet to be explored, namely, the extent to which democratic principles have penetrated or could penetrate other levels of governmental organization. Vertical growth of direct elections concerns township, county, or higher levels of administration adopting elections as the means of selecting leadership units. It is a bottom-up implementation of democratic reform, but it does not necessarily refer to a democratic movement or initiative by Chinese peasants. Indeed, amidst his championing of village elections, Peng Zhen expressed his hope to see vertical growth by saying, "Once people can administer well the affairs of a village, they will gradually know how to administer affairs of a town and then a county, and in this way, they will promote their ability to participate in state affairs through step-by-step training."[155] Direct involvement in higher levels of bureaucracy has already occurred, and regardless of whether the state initiates it or the people push for it, vertical growth is one of the most important ways village elections

[155] Peng Zhen. "Direct Democracy at the Grassroots Level through Mass Autonomy." *Anthology of Peng Zhen* (Beijing: People's Press, 1991).

have and will affect villagers, the Party/state, and their relationship with one another.

Up to this point, only sporadic experimentation with direct elections at the township level has occurred. The first such experiment occurred in the Sichuan township of Buyun at the end of December 1998 when the residents in that township directly chose the new village head.[156] This election serves as the first example of vertical growth of direct selection of leadership and is remarkable for the competitive and open nature of the process. Any Buyun resident older than 25 could declare themselves a candidate as long as they had endorsements from 30 other residents, and out of a nominated pool of 15 candidates, a selection committee chose two final candidates with a third being selected by the Party.[157] After this process, the candidates participated in events resembling "an American election campaign with candidates and their entourages traveling from place to place."[158] That comparison is striking considering the continual dismissal by CCP officials of a Western-style democratic system. On the last day of 1998, over 6,000 residents cast their ballots and elected a new township leader with just over 50 percent of the vote.[159] The small margin of victory is an excellent indicator of a highly competitive election, which is noteworthy because this election was held only ten years after the Organic Law was first passed and

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[156] Tony Saich, *Governance and Politics of China* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2001), 181.
[157] Linda Jakobson. "Local Governance: Village and Township Direct Elections." *Governance in China,* Ed. Jude Howell (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 109.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid.

many villages were still having problems. With this bold step, Buyun began the process of vertical growth that may well prove the most important effect of implementing village elections.

Buyun is not alone in its efforts to spread the practice of direct elections to upper levels of government as a flurry of similar experiments were conducted in 1999 and many more since. The second trial of township elections took place just four months after Buyun's vote in the Shenzhen township of Dapeng. This election differed from Buyun's in several aspects, most notably it was not a direct election of a village head. Instead, the residents of Dapeng were able to cast a preliminary vote of preference, after which the local People's Congress decided the final outcome.[160] Zhouli township in Shanxi province also held a vote of confidence in early 1999.[161] While clearly lacking such common democratic features as direct election and competition, even votes of confidence such as these incorporate the will of peasants unlike anything previously experienced at the township level because a low vote total in the primary would certainly hurt any candidate's chances at winning in the People's Congress or even automatically disqualify that person.

In addition to these preliminary votes and votes of confidence, direct elections are also still appearing around the PRC. In 2004, Honghe county in

[160] Saich, 184.
[161] Jakobson, 110.

Yunnan conducted direct elections for seven township heads simultaneously.[162] This was the first time an experiment of this scale had taken place.[163] Like the Buyun elections, any resident meeting fairly basic qualifications was eligible to run and a joint committee consisting of Party officials, village leaders, and local People's Congress members selected two final candidates who then campaigned throughout the township.[164] These elections are an amazing sign that progress is being made and vertical growth continues to blossom. Another indication that elections are taking root at higher levels of administration is Buyun's second round of elections in late 2001.[165] The first direct election proved viable and productive enough to justify another election when the township head's term expired.

These instances of elections at the township level show growing interest in democratic principles and practices, and democracy watchers in particular are excited by their occurrence, but not all people, particularly government officials, share such enthusiasm. It is therefore useful to examine the state's response to such elections. Dr. Liu of the Carter Center's China Program believes that the elections of late 1998 and early 1999 were a direct result of the praise of village elections by upper level CCP members at the 15th CCP National Congress in

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[162] Claire Bai, "Direct Election of Township Magistrates in Honghe, Yunnan." *China Elections and Governance* 18 Nov. 2004. 4 Dec. 2008. <http://en.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?newsid=5884>.
[163] Feng Jianhua, "Experimenting with democracy." *China Elections and Governance* 25 Mar. 2008. 27 Oct. 2008 <http://en.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?newsid=16564>.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Yawei Liu, *Roundtable on Village Elections in China, Congressional-Executive Commission on China* China Village Election Project, The Carter Center. July 2002.

1998.[166] Despite their positive attitude toward grassroots democracy, Chinese officials did not embrace township elections with the same zeal. Indeed, these earliest experiments with township head elections were all deemed unsuitable to be implemented or simply unconstitutional.[167] The Chinese constitution requires all township heads to be chosen by local People's Congresses, so the Buyun elections and other direct election are therefore illegal. Beijing was caught off guard and a media blackout concerning Buyun was quickly ordered.[168] The Party wanted to control the situation as much as possible because, even though Peng's desire had been to see the upward spread of democracy, the CCP had no intention of implementing such reforms in 1998. Interestingly, though, the government did not throw out the results of Buyun's vote and allowed the winner to remain—largely due to divided feelings among CCP leaders.[169] This represents at least tacit approval or acceptance of the process and certainly signified to other townships that experimentation would be tolerated. Thus, vertical growth remained a distinct possibility.

Since it is clear that they initially reacted with mixed feelings, it is valuable to examine how the Party and bureaucracy currently stand on the issue of vertical growth of a democratic selection process to higher levels of government. Their current feelings mirror their initial reaction fairly well. There are certainly

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[166] Yawei Liu, "Are Village Elections Leading to Democracy?" *China Elections and Governance Review* (Issue 1, Feb. 2009), 3.
[167] Liu 2002.
[168] Saich, 184
[169] Jakobson, 110.

positive signs that the Party is willing to move forward. One of the most significant of these signs came in 2005 when Premier Wen Jiabao repeated Peng Zhen's famous statement that after village affairs were successfully managed, people would be able to control the affairs of a township.[170] By recalling the remarks of the pioneer of grassroots democracy, Wen signaled a continuation of Peng's reformist idea and gave hope to China watchers wanting to see substantial change in the PRC's political system. Peng's statement—and therefore Wen's repeating of it—is a definite "if/then" statement: only after peasants have fully mastered the most basic form of self-government can they hope to gain input at higher levels.

Chinese officials, however, do not feel this is the time to implement widespread township head elections. Wen Jiabao, for instance, has clearly stated that, "The conditions are not yet ripe for conducting direct elections for the higher levels of government," while adding that such reforms must only happen slowly.[171] Wen's attitude is reflected in other articles appearing in the state-owned paper *China Daily* directed at foreign audiences. One article that applauds village elections and quotes Winston Churchill and Greek philosophers regarding the advantages of democracy is also quick to point out that elections at higher level of administration would be premature.[172] Such official viewpoints make the likelihood of serious vertical growth in the near future highly unlikely

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[170] Liu 2009, 1.
[171] "Wen: We are Firm on IPR Protection." *China Daily* [Beijing, China] 7 Sep. 2006.
[172] Dalin Fu, "Slow but steady road to grassroots democracy." *China Elections and Governance* 22 July 2008. 27 Oct. 2008 <http://en.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?newsid=18572>.

and signal the Party's reluctance to relinquish the large amount of power it wields through township governments. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences believes that widespread township elections remain a decade or more away even though experimentation continues.[173] The long wait is partially due to lingering doubts about democratic reforms and partially because officials in Beijing want to choose the right system when the time eventually comes to elect township heads—that is, they want to keep their distance until the process is worked out on a more local level.

The implementation of township elections or even elections at higher level is not a forgone conclusion, but vertical growth appears to be a likely result of grassroots democracy, especially when certain factors are considered. When forecasting the likelihood of democratic elections in upper levels of government, recalling the circumstances that brought about grassroots reforms serves as a good starting point. Chinese officials accepted village elections because of unrest after decollectivization and their fear that chaos in the countryside would be a perpetual bane to CCP rule. More specifically, lack of control on the part of local cadres threatened the Party's rule, and as a result, officials embraced elections as a saving grace. Therefore, it is likely that similar circumstances at the township level would produce a parallel response, or—to put it another way—once township heads begin to lose control or legitimacy, higher level officials will begin to warm to vertical growth of elections. As Jonathan Unger points out, "If

[173] Jakobson, 111.

the process of electing officials at the lower [village] level proves successful in restoring farmers' goodwill, why not attempt elections for rural township leaders?"[174]

Indeed, much goodwill already needs restoring. Some look at rural riots as a sign that village elections are not a cure-all for rural unrest, and they are correct. At the same time, though, this sentiment distracts people from the main cause of trouble in the countryside. Thomas Lum's research reveals that the root causes of much of rural unrest come when elections are not implemented faithfully or when the grievances rest beyond the control of VCs.[175] Jamie Horsley in *China Business Review* highlights the fact that the main cause for peasant protest and riots revolves around "corruption, charging of excessive and illegal fees, and other abuses of power by township and higher-level government officials."[176] This is similar to the situation in the early 1980s when village elections first began to appear. If township official continue such behavior, support and trust for them will wane, and some action must be taken to ensure stability and maintain Party dominance. Kevin O'Brien agrees and feels that such situations in the countryside could lead to peasant violence or pressure

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[174] Jonathan Unger, *The Transformation of Rural China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 222.
[175] Thomas Lum, "Social Unrest in China." *CRS Report for Congress* (Congressional Research Service, 8 May, 2006), 1.
[176] Jamie Horsley, "Village elections: training ground for democratization." *China Elections and Governance* 4 Nov. 2006. 23 Jan. 2009. <http://en.chinaelections.org/newsinfo.asp?newsid=3425>.

from the rural residents for political reform.[177] Either way, township elections become increasing appealing and likely under such conditions.

Implementing township elections would have dramatic consequences. Township leaders hold much greater power than village cadres, and surrendering control over who serves in this position would be a significant sacrifice for the Party. Unlike VC chairs, township leaders control large budgets and are responsible for a wide range of policies.[178] Direct elections would therefore grant township residents power and input previously reserved for the CCP and local People's Congress. It is also quite possible that township elections would set off a chain reaction in vertical growth. Linda Jakobson notes in the same way that village elections have led to the two-ballot system for electing Village Party Branch secretaries, township head elections would lead to non-Party member input into township Party secretary selection—possibly even direct election of that position.[179] Party secretaries hold even great power and responsibility than the township heads, and direct elections consequentially threaten even greater Party authority.

The snowball would likely continue to grow as county or higher level elections are demanded due to the population's increased political and democratic awareness. Furthermore, the more common elections become and the higher the stakes involved in each vote, the more people become inclined to

[177] Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 126.
[178] Horsley, 4 Nov 2006.
[179] Jakobson, 112.

join together in common interests. While parties other than the CCP are forbidden, such interest groups would serve a very similar purpose and pose just as large a threat to the Party. For this reason CCP officials are hesitant to move forward with vertical growth, but their fear might be unwarranted. As Jakobson indicates, many officials worried the Party would be voted out at the village level, but that has not occurred because Party members often represent the best candidate.[180] A similar response would be logical at higher levels—at least for the interim period.

Vertical growth of direct elections has already begun on a small scale in several parts of China. Many different techniques have been tried, the officials have responded in various and cautious ways. Based on these responses and official statements, township elections or elections at even higher levels of government seem extremely likely; though a definite time table does not exist. Additionally, if social or political conditions were to deteriorate, the Party would probably act more swiftly to implement direct elections of some kind. Just as village elections have dramatically changed the village political and social patterns in rural China, vertical growth would have major effects on the Party and the Chinese people.

[180] Jakobson, 113.

Conclusion

The implementation of grassroots democracy in the Chinese countryside represents one of the most important and impactful changes that accompanied Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening up policies. The past three decades have witnessed amazing shifts in the political lives of rural peasants as they have embraced their ability to select their own village leadership. This ability has led to new social interactions, increased political awareness, and more cadre accountability. In addition to affecting the rural residents, the Organic Law of Villagers' Elections has had both positive effects such as increased legitimacy and implementation of policy and negative consequences such as potential loss of power in the future for the Chinese Communist Party.

The history of grassroots self-government serves as a vital tool for understanding this phenomenon. Village elections originally started as random occurrences because villagers wanted to protect their rising prosperity in the wake of decollectivization. The early 1980s witnessed the end of communal agriculture, and as brigades disbanded, the party lost its most vital link to the peasant population. Furthermore, rural Chinese grew increasingly distrustful of cadres that were brought in from other regions and imposed extra taxes and fees while not properly caring for villages. Some villagers responded with violence, but the two villages in Guangxi province that first began electing village leaders

provided an alterative method for securing peace and stability in the countryside. Many CCP leaders, particularly Peng Zhen, recognized the value of grassroots democracy and started championing the movement. Of course, many critics expressed fear that elections would end the Party's ability to enact policy and control villages, but by 1987 the Organic Law had passed the National People's Congress due to its perceived ability to provide credible leaders who would carry out state policy. Since the initial passage of the law, implementation has made slow but steady progress throughout the nation, and it has continued to receive the support for officials in Beijing. Indeed, support has only grown as it has become increasingly apparent that elected Village Committees (VCs) remain fairly loyal to the Party and its policies.

One of the most important historical aspects of village elections to understand is the motive for their adoption—both on the part of villagers and officials. For both parties concerned, one chief consideration was the ineffectiveness of rural cadre after decollectivization. Villagers were exploited rather than served, and cadre routinely ignored or could not enforce policy initiatives. This led to instability: something peasants and Party members alike wanted to avoid. The peasants had worked hard to begin amassing personal wealth once they gained the ability to independently farm and certainly did not want to see social order break down in light of this. At the same time, party members realized their inability to reach the lowest level of social organization after the communes were dissolved. If the lines of communication and

governance were not restored, the villagers who compose roughly three quarters of the population would slip slowly away from the party. As a result, both sides embraced elections as a solution for their respective problems. For the peasants, the decision fell to economics—preserve what you have through effective leadership that is accountable to the people. The Party saw the choice as a way to remind villagers that the CCP was on their side while simultaneously allowing them to smoothly implement policy.

After three decades, grassroots democracy has made significant strides toward being implemented in a truly democratic manner. The first way to judge the implementation is to look at how widespread village elections have become. With 98 percent of villages conducting at least one election, progress in this area is most impressive, but sheer numbers only tell part of the story. The extent to which elections are free and fair is equally important and provides more insight into the effects of grassroots democracy. Encouraging numbers exist showing growth in the competitive nature of elections. Whereas in the past many ballots contained only enough candidates for the number of positions available, the updated version of the Organic Law requires more candidates than the number of positions, and villages are beginning to comply with this regulation. Indeed, some ballots now contain multiple candidates for each position on the VC. The introduction of direct nominating procedures represents another important step in the democratization of village self-governance. Previously, the Party had to approve or in some cases was allowed to select the candidates for VCs, but that

practice was banned after the 1998 reforms of the law were passed. The *haixuan* elections and other methods like it that allow villagers the opportunity to first nominate and then select the members of VCs show that truly competitive elections are possible while not significantly limiting the government's ability to implement policy.

Faithful implementation of elections along with competitiveness and open nomination/primary elections comprise the fundamental parts of free and fair elections. It is vitally important that voters trust the institution of elections; otherwise villagers will cease to participate and the problems that led to elections in the first place will begin to resurface. Important to establishing faithfulness are the practices of secret ballots and how ballots are handled once cast. Currently fewer than half of all ballots are cast secretly due in part to the communal nature of the countryside that has been established over the past two and half millennia but also due to officials' unwillingness to accept new guidelines for fear of losing power. Other troubling practices that impede faithful implementation of elections include proxy voting and roving ballot boxes. These practices provide opportunities for ballot box stuffing or other means of tampering with results, and their abandonment is elemental to the continued success of village elections. One positive indicator in this area, however, is that over two thirds of villages publicly count ballots, thereby eliminating a great deal of possible distrust. In the same vein, the Party and bureaucracy continue to show support for freer and fairer election by passing legislation with new

requirements for competitive and free elections—including recent efforts to curb the rising trend of vote buying. As more competitive ballots continue to appear, more open selection processes are adopted, and suspicious practices are discarded, grassroots democracy will continue to become increasingly free and fair.

The real importance of village elections, however, centers on the effects they have had on the Party and the people. For the first time, Chinese villagers have gained the power to select their own leaders. The importance of this advancement in democracy cannot be overstated. When elections are held fairly and competitively, which they increasingly are, villagers now hold the authority to remove ineffective or oppressive leaders and elect VCs that respond to villagers and not higher levels of government or the CCP. This has led VCs to increase their focus on issues that matter to peasants: from road construction to education reform and dispute mediation. Because these were of little political importance before elections, appointed cadres routinely ignored these functions. In addition to raising the level of responsiveness from village leaders, grassroots elections have also provided a safety valve that previously did not exist. As opposed to resorting to violence or political demonstration, villagers now have the opportunity to replace cadre through a pre-arranged system—though only at the lowest level of social organization. Additionally, such situations are less common because VC members now depend on rural residents to remain in power. Similarly, another important result of self-government has been elevated

trust in officials. Cadres now come from the people and are chosen by the villagers, allowing officials to more easily implement policies that tend to be unpopular such as the one child policy or collection of grain quota. Whereas in the past appointed cadres might have to resort to harsh tactic to force peasants to comply, cadres in the countryside today have a better relationship with the people and can therefore more smoothly carry out these policies.

While these effects appear quite positive, the economic effects of the new elections prove far less sanguine. Despite the notion that democratic freedom leads to economic success, no observable correlation exists between implementation of village elections and economic growth. Furthermore, economic prosperity tends to retard the progress of grassroots democracy because villagers are content with their situation and township leaders see no need to stop a good thing to merely comply with the Organic Law.

Another dramatic consequence of village self-government is the villagers' rapid acquisition of political awareness and democratic understanding. While Western culture can trace its democratic legacy back thousands of years to the Greeks or at least several hundred years to the signing of the *Magna Carta*, those in the Chinese countryside have at most thirty years experience with self-rule, and they have made remarkable progress in that short time. Villagers are embracing their rights and taking an active role in politics for the first time—and Party members are not the only ones. All kinds of rural residents are seeking election to VCs. Voter turnout has been recorded at about two thirds, but that

number is lower than actual turnout because it fails to account for the large floating population. As villages continue to hold new rounds of elections and the process becomes increasingly free and fair, these consequences will only expand, resulting in better served people who are less likely to act out violently toward the government. The increased political awareness will help create more democratic elections, but could also create pressure on higher levels of government to embrace reforms in leadership selection or rule of law.

The impact of village elections felt by the Party and state bureaucracy is perhaps of even greater significance than the effects on the rural population because the CCP has the most to gain and lose in this endeavor. The Party implemented grassroots democracy in an attempt to quell growing social unrest and reestablish its presence in the Chinese countryside. To a great extent that goal has been achieved. At the level of implementation—that is, the village level—social unrest has decreased where elections are faithfully carried out. With the advent of village elections, the Party witnessed marked improvement in the ability of village leaders to implement policy. At the same time, reports of elected cadres rejecting state initiatives are rare since VCs seem to understand the Party can only be pushed so much before they push back. Therefore, the Party has gained a friend in VCs. This fact is aided by the large numbers of CCP members elected to VCs. Additionally, elections have provided an excellent opportunity for the Party to recruit fresh talent that is well respected in the local community.

As elections become freer and fairer, however, the recruitment rate tends to slow, and there is some evidence that more competitive and open elections produce fewer CCP members on VCs. While this might seem to represent bad news for the Party, that is not necessarily the case so long as the VCs remain responsive to CCP officials, which has been the case thus far. Still, Party members make up a large proportion of VCs. This high rate is not surprising when one considers that Party members are often the best educated and best equipped to handle village problems and duties. The most unexpected consequence of village self-government, though, is the effect it has had on the Party's internal business, specifically the two-ballot system. The method of choosing Village Party Branch (VPB) leaders requires that candidates pass a vote of confidence from the entire village before the Party members make the final selection. This came about for two basic reasons. First, villagers gained democratic experience and knowledge from VC elections and wanted to apply it to Party leadership as well since they maintain a high degree of control in village affairs. Second, the Party wanted to improve relations with VCs. While the second goal has been met to a lesser extent, villagers are now able to successfully remove corrupt or incompetent Party leaders.

One specific result of village elections stands out from the rest: vertical growth of elections to higher levels of governance. While there has been limited experimentation to this point with township elections, many townships have tried some manner of election for township head. Some of these have been direct

election like those held in Buyun, while other have been more of a vote of confidence before the township People's Congress make the final selection. In either case, these elections, like the two-ballot system for VPB selection, are the result of increased political awareness and a growing desire for input by the people. This is not surprising, but the Party's reaction to the experimentation in vertical growth is. While Party officials have said repeatedly that elections above the village level will happen, they have done little to encourage vertical growth. At the same time, though, they have not nullified the results of the elections even after trying to quiet the initial occurrences, signifying at least mixed support from within the upper levels of the Party.

The implications of vertical growth are tremendous, and that has played a role in the reluctance of the Party to move ahead with township or county level elections. Once the central government moves for vertical growth, change will occur at an even faster rate than after village elections began. Township governments have substantially more power and responsibility than their village counterparts, and the Party would be sacrificing much more control since it is currently tasked with the nomination of township leaders. Also, once township elections began, a development similar to the two-ballot system would likely appear, resulting in the further diminishment of Party power. This series of events would happen much sooner than in the villages because peasants have already learned the basics of self-government, and the move to county level elections would follow quickly after township elections. With increased levels of

political activity, people will logically begin to group together in common interests, if not in parties then in unions or organizations. Such a development would be unthinkable to the Party and is one of the reasons they are not yet pushing for vertical growth. Another reason is that village elections have yet to be fully and faithfully implemented. It will take the completion of village election implementation or an event that threatens stability at the township level for officials in Beijing to begin seriously considering elections at higher levels of administration.

Grassroots democracy first came about nearly thirty year ago, and in that time much has happened. Village elections are held in almost every village throughout the country with the vast majority of rural residents taking part, and today's elections are increasingly free and fair. The villagers have gained substantial input in village affairs and can now rid themselves of inept leadership. Similarly, the Party and state bureaucracy have experienced a significant advancement in their ability to implement policy at a grassroots level and have also acquired a valuable recruiting tool. Grassroots democracy certainly solidified the stability of the countryside and allowed the Party increase its presence there as well. The future, however, might hold vastly different results as political awareness continues to rise and vertical growth approaches. The Party first and foremost is a party of survival, and it will take drastic steps to ensure its continued control over the PRC. Grassroots democracy, though, might

just prove to be a crack in the dam—relieving some pressure now, only to release the reservoir later.

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