

Supply and Support for Grassroots Political Reform in Rural China

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Abstract Evidence suggests that the quality of grassroots political reform varies throughout rural China from fair elections to electoral manipulation. This reflects an uneven *supply* of reforms. However, top-down implementation is not a complete measure of success when it comes to the introduction of grassroots reform. Rural folks are good judges of institutional qualities, such as procedural fairness. It is their attitudes that are associated with the *support* for democracy. This is called the supply and support model. I modify and apply this model to rural China, and show that support for democratic institutions and ideals can develop within an authoritarian regime such as the People's Republic of China.

Keywords Village Elections · Rural China · Democratic Institutions

Introduction

While the Chinese Communist Party has no intention to democratize the country, the stated goal of the central leadership is to establish grassroots political reform in rural China. The question is whether full implementation of these reforms is occurring at the village level. The evidence suggests that the quality of village democracy varies throughout rural China from fair elections and transparent public finances to electoral manipulation and corrupt accounting. This reflects an uneven *supply* of democratic reforms. How does the uneven supply of grassroots political reform influence villagers support for democratic practices? The supply side is the actual laws, and the implementation of these laws down to the village level. This is associated with the political capacity of the central government to enforce political

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reforms from the top down. Villagers may display direct support (or lack of support) for leaders and political reforms, but support distinction is also an important measure. That is villagers make a conceptual distinction between their support for individual leaders and support for local institutions. Thus, beyond elections and voting, villagers must observe how these institutions shape the behavior of elected leaders. Villagers may not be satisfied with the elected leaders or specific outcomes, such as the state of the local economy, but they can support fair elections and an impartial decision-making processes. In fact, this distinction between leadership and institutional processes is the hallmark of legal and democratic development [4, 57, 13, 41, Ch. 1]. I argue that the success of grassroots democracy in rural China requires the full enforcement of new laws as well as citizen support of the local democratic process.

Evidence from two unique village surveys (2000 and 2004) demonstrate that demand follows supply and that rural residents can support local institutions, such as local elections and local leader decisions, while displaying disapproval for the individual leader. Indeed, villagers' attitudes towards elected leaders and local institutions are similar to attitudes found in larger democratizing societies. Still, within the sample there is an uneven level of support across villages. In communities where higher authorities manipulate local elections, and the election outcome is predetermined, villagers display a lack of support towards the "elected leaders" and the election process. This is because villagers perceive little difference between the local leaders and the law. The variation in support is due to uneven supply of grassroots democracy.

While this paper discusses the implications for political reform in rural China, it is important to point out that this study does not provide a representative sample of rural China. Rather, I argue that if I can observe a clear variation between supply and support for grassroots democracy within a 18 village sample in one province over time, then it is possible to assume that uneven implementation of political reforms exists across rural China.

This paper proceeds as follows. The first section introduces the general supply and support model for grassroots democracy. Although this model was developed to explain democratization in post-Communist countries in Eastern Europe, I show that it applies to rural China. The second section modifies the supply and support model for the rural China case. Villager support for democracy can be intrinsic or instrumental. Moreover, there are two kinds of intrinsic support: specific and general. The first kind of intrinsic support reflects a narrow conception of democracy, and it is based on the evaluation of actual institutional processes such as the last village election. The second type of intrinsic support is based on a broader concept of democracy and the general *idea* that elections are better than appointments. This study will test two hypotheses related to intrinsic support. The materialist hypothesis is associated with the first type of intrinsic support, while the Churchill hypothesis connected with the second type. In the third section, I demonstrate that when the election laws are fully enforced villagers make a clear distinction between the procedures and outcomes. However, when the elections are manipulated (i.e. no supply), the lines between the leaders and the laws remain blurred. The final section presents concluding remarks and implications of the model.

Supply of and Support for Grassroots Democracy in Rural China

Scholars developed the supply and demand model of political reforms to explain the democratization process in post-Communist societies and later applied the theory to new democratic regimes in developing countries [5, 20, 28].¹ During the national transition period, there was competition between maintaining the undemocratic institutions of the old Leninist single-party governments and establishing new democratic rules under the multi-party system. The outcome of this competition reflects supply and demand. According to Rose et al. [41], elites can supply different types of political reforms, undemocratic as well as democratic, while public opinion can be in agreement or divided over the type of government institutions. The term demand reflects citizen attitudes and popular support for political institutions. Thus, I use the term support rather than demand. In addition, limitations on the supply suggest citizens in post-Communist states receive less than ideal democratic institutions. Yet, “for people who have lived all their political lives in a Communist regime, a ‘second-best’ democracy can look very attractive.”² Thus, supply and support (demand) concept of democratization has great explanatory power for democratic transitions at the national level.

The supply and support model can also be modified to examine the development of grassroots democracy within an authoritarian regime. Rather than comparing countries and democratic transitions at the national level, the model can be useful in comparing local governing bodies and the implementation of political reforms within an authoritarian regime. The supply and support model incorporates both the top-down and bottom-up explanations for the success or failure of local democratic reforms.

In the China case, there is no supply of democratic reforms, such as elections and directly accountable leaders at the national level. But the central leadership has enacted laws that allow villagers to nominate and directly elect candidates for village leader and committee members. These elections are significant because village leaders are responsible for local land management decisions and conflict resolution.

Beyond national laws, the success of grassroots democracy also requires citizens who support democracy, and this is a feature that can be measured by popular support for local democratic processes. However, support may embody either intrinsic or instrumental concepts. For example, intrinsic support suggests a general commitment to democracy “for better or worse”.³ In addition, it reflects attitudes based on procedural fairness for specific procedures rather than outcomes. For instance, even if the local economy takes a turn for the worst, support for local democratic institutions remains. By contrast, instrumental support is conditional and less stable. Citizen evaluations of local democracy are contingent on material benefits and the local economic situation. In this case, attitudes reflect opinions towards outcomes rather than procedures.

Support distinction is a key factor in the success or failure of political reform. Do villagers have a clear conceptual division between elected leaders, local economy

¹ Rose et al., p. 20.

² Rose et al., p. 4

³ Bratton and Mattes, p. 448

and the laws? If the economic performance of elected leaders is the basis of villagers' support for local democratic procedures, then support for grassroots democracy is instrumental. The implication is that national and local leaders should continue to focus on improving economic conditions particularly in the countryside. This path follows the same policy prescription from the 1980s whereby Communist leadership under Deng Xiaoping emphasized economic over political reforms.

Indeed, scholars have suggested that support for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rests on the continued economic growth and satisfaction with personal economic conditions [38, 46, 50, 51, Ch 5]. While economic reforms have created social dislocation and income inequality since the 1980s, these reforms have also raised the standard of living for the vast majority of citizens. As both Pei and Tsai correctly point out, economic development and increased personal income have *not* resulted in greater demands for democratization from the urban middleclass [58, Ch 1].⁴ Currently, China lacks a large contingent of dissatisfied urban middleclass citizens pressuring the national government for change. In fact, the survey work of Chen and Tang show that urban residents display a level of support for the central party-government at least in the short term [8, Ch 2, 47, Ch 1]. Without a supply of democratic reforms at the national level and continued economic growth, popular support for the CCP may continue to remain unchallenged.

However, if villagers display support for the democratic procedures independent of the economic conditions, then this would reveal intrinsic support for village democratic institutions. The implication is that economic reforms are not enough to sustain support for local leaders and institutions. Given the increasing gap in income and economic opportunities between rural and urban as well as within rural communities, intrinsic support, independent of the local economy, may contribute to social stability. Poorer rural residents may be more willing to endure the unequal opportunities if they have a greater say in local governance. In fact, this may be the intent of the central leadership. The introduction of village elections and grassroots democracy are meant to stabilize the rural areas rather than democratize China [34, p. 465]. The unintended consequence of grassroots democracy in the Chinese countryside may be stronger rural demand for political rather than strictly economic reforms.

Supply and Support Model

The flow chart in Fig. 1 presents the supply and support model. At the national level, the central party-government leadership introduces the grassroots political reforms and the associated laws. Yet, the introduction of new regulations is not enough to establish the rule *of* law. Rather, it is elite decisions at the sub-national level especially top leaders in thousands of counties, towns and townships that determine how the laws apply. I argue that when the laws are fully implemented we can identify support distinctions. However, when the laws are *not* fully enforced support distinction is not evident. This reflects a *uniform* lack of support for the elected

⁴ Pei, p. 86.

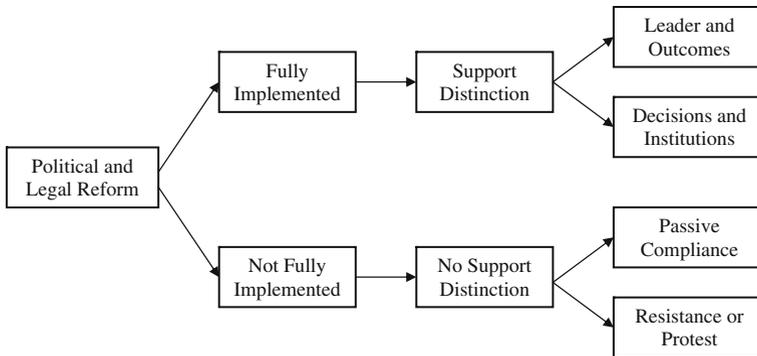


Fig. 1 Supply and support model

leaders, institutional process and the local economy. As a result, villagers have two choices: passive compliance or resistance.

When personal relationships with local leaders are more important than regulations, and the rule of law is weak, villagers may be compliant without support for the local leaders or the decision making process. According to a study on *Elections without Choice*, Rose suggests that in communities “where elections do not determine who governs, a citizen dissatisfied with government can at best hope to remain in isolation, subject only to personal and extra-governmental authorities [59].” Given this general definition, compliance can take several forms. Villagers may deal the appointed leaders and lack of control over village cadres by ignoring village politics and focusing on the family economic situation. For example, in wealthy villages near urban centers, some villagers confessed that they are too busy making money outside the village to care about the village leadership.⁵ Even if the village cadres collect arbitrary fees and mismanage local resources, many prosperous villagers do not seem to care because their income and interests are outside the village. At the other extreme, in poor remote villages, there are very few public resources to distribute. If there is no arable land or village industry, then there may be little conflict over the division of public resources. Moreover, in some of these poorer villages, over half the adult males have temporarily migrated out of the village for work only to return for a few days a year during the New Year celebrations. Thus, a source of compliance is based on apathy towards village politics focusing on family or household income and material benefits.

Another form of compliance is also rooted in material benefits for the whole village rather than individual families. The appointed village leadership and greater interference from the township government (i.e. lack of autonomy) may be welcome if it provides efficient public services for most community members. While the process can be unfair with uneven distribution of public resources, as long as the welfare of all residents continues to increase, then villagers may comply with the appointed leadership. Moreover, villagers may even display a uniform level of support for the appointed leadership and the local economy. According to a 2004 interview I conducted with village leaders and town officials, in a county that did not fully implement the

⁵ Author’s Interview

grassroots political reforms, the villagers are happy with the improved roads and irrigation systems, and they have little interest in the election process and the management of village finances. Nevertheless, there is still *no support distinction* between the laws and the leadership.

Finally, there may be passive compliance because of weak formal institutions. This is similar to “empty shells” villages whereby the appointed leadership has few political or economic resources [32, p. 33–59]. Support for the village leaders is absent. Informal organizations, such as lineage groups and temple associations, can fill the power vacuum within the village [48]. In the absence of formal institutions, well-organized lineage groups can capture the weak institutions and lineage leaders may govern the village as they see fit.

The second choice villagers face when the laws are not fully enforced is resistance. Since the 1990s, researchers and journalists have closely followed the reports of rural unrest in China [27, 31, p. A08, 43]. The reports suggest a continuing rise in rural resistance. For example, in July 2005, the Minister of Public Security Zhou Yongkang said that incidences of social disturbances, such as riots and demonstrations, had risen from 58,000 in 2003 to 74,000 in 2004. By the end of 2005, the number of reported social disturbances increased another 6.6 percent to 87,000 incidences. Many of these disturbances occurred in the countryside in response to abusive local cadres and corrupt local government practices. In addition, about 3 million rural residents in 2004 took part in illegal or legal protests against local cadres.⁶ These numbers present a picture of protest and discontent towards local cadres that may jeopardize support for the national party-government. Yet, the population of China in 2004 was 1.3 billion and over 50% or 700 million people live in the countryside. Thus, only 0.4% of the rural population is participating in individual or collective actions against local governments. What about the other 99.6% of the rural population?

Recent studies about rural unrest detail the process villagers go through before starting an unlawful demonstration or protest [11, 35, Ch. 4]. The majority of cases involve mid-level authorities at the county level or above who ignored national laws. Villagers, who recently learned about the laws and their legal rights, begin their fight at the village level and attempt to enforce the law. Every unsuccessful attempt pushes the resistors to seek higher authorities. In addition, Michelson demonstrates that most disputes are resolved at the village level [60]. Thus, if rural unrest is due to a lack of official commitment to the new laws and discontent for local leaders and institutions, then the absence of rural protest may reflect growing support in local democratic institutions and leader’s decisions or passive compliance.

Supply Side: Regulations and Relationships

One of the key elements of grassroots political reform is the Organic Law of Villager Committees. The National People’s Congress enacted the Organic Law in 1998. On paper, the law is an important step toward providing rural residents the opportunity to monitor local leaders. Besides allowing villagers to nominate and elect local

⁶ Lum, p.2; Ni, p. A08

leaders as well as recall elected leaders, the Organic Law states that cadres must publicize the collection and use of local revenues and stresses transparency in reallocation of village resources, such as land and public investments. Although direct elections where citizens nominate and select candidates only exist at the village level, this is an important top-down political development.

There is a tremendous amount of literature on the Organic Law and village elections in China.⁷ Despite the wide range of studies, there is no consensus on the effectiveness of the Organic Law and central government attempts to implement grassroots political reform. Indeed, from village case studies to multi-province surveys, the research displays a wide range of results. This variation reflects the uneven supply of grassroots political reform and the rule *of* law in rural China. The uneven supply is associated with the political will and capacity of the central government to enforce political reforms from the top-down. In China, some reforms are carried out down to the lowest administrative levels while others are not. The main obstacle for the central party-government is whether mid-level officials at the municipal and county levels comply with the new laws. For instance, the uneven implementation of the village election law throughout the country is well documented. In some villages, the elections have an open nomination process and election results are not predetermined [2, 16, 19, 37]. While in other villages, higher authorities manipulate local elections and all the participants including the voters know the outcome before hand [6, 17, 22].

The 2000 and 2004 survey of 34 villages reflects the same type of variation in the literature.⁸ The quality of village elections and implementation of the Organic Law differ in two ways: the nomination process and the transparency in leader decision making in areas such as land management and village investments. Moreover, the quality of grassroots political reform tends to vary by *county* rather than municipality, township or village. In some counties, the village election process is considered “fair” with a villager nomination process and even cases of recall elections for unpopular leaders. While in other counties the election and nomination process is completely controlled by the township government and village party branch.

The data suggest that it is the personal decisions of higher authorities (rule *by* law) at the county level that establishes rule *of* law at the village level. This is because county party secretaries have the last word in decisions that affect the political development within their respective jurisdictions. While the reasons township officials do not implement village elections are evident (officials do not want to lose their authority to appoint and directly influence village leaders), it is not readily apparent why county party secretaries would be willing to carry out grassroots political reforms. Interviews with county party secretaries suggest that some leading party officials decide on the full implementation of the Organic Law in order to maintain social stability in their counties. There is a direct connection between cadre evaluation and promotion by higher authorities and ensuring social stability within the county. Party secretaries at the town level and above are transferred or promoted

⁷ For a good overview of the key publications on the Organic Law and grassroots political reform see Alpermann [1].

⁸ For information about the 2000 and 2004 surveys, see Appendix 1.

every three to five years. This is called the Cadre Exchange system [33, 15]. If the county party secretary cannot maintain social stability then they will lose their opportunity for promotion or worse. Any kind of unrest, such as villager protests against unfair taxes and fees or demonstrations against corrupt “elected” village officials, may threaten the position of the county party secretary.

There are several ways to preserve rural stability within a county including greater use of police and security forces to monitor villagers and suppress social disturbances. However, providing villagers with the opportunity to freely elect and remove local leaders can also contribute to social stability. During my interviews in 2000 and 2004, several county party secretaries believed that competitive village elections and open nominations can increase social stability by allowing villagers to directly monitor and sanction the village committee members and the elected leader. Moreover, villagers may be more willing to comply with unpopular policies, such as family planning, from someone they elected rather than an appointed leader or one selected by the township government. Therefore, full implementation of the Organic Law can also be in the interest of the county leadership. This also means tying the promotion of town officials to the village election law. Thus, it is the personal decision of a county party secretary that ensures the development of grassroots political reform and rule of law at the village level.

In addition to the election procedures, the Organic Law requires elected leaders to manage land in a fair and transparent manner. While there are many local leadership decisions that are vital to villagers, those that deal with land may be among the most important. Arable land is one of the most scarce public resources, and it is an important factor in the rural economy’s most pervasive economic activity, farming. It also provides many social welfare services to farm households such as subsistence insurance [3, p. 67–97, 24]. Indeed, the leader’s decisions on how land is to be used and distributed can directly influence villagers’ income and source of social security [42]. As a result, villagers hold strong opinions about their leader’s decisions regarding the distribution of land.

Land is collectively owned, and villagers lease land from the village committee for a set number of years (up to 30-year contacts). Nevertheless, land is frequently reallocated among village households or leased to small enterprises. One explanation is that demographic changes, such as births, deaths and marriage, drive reallocation decisions [23]. Some village leaders may also use their power over land management decisions to extract benefits during the periodic reallocations of land [21]. Despite the various reasons for redistribution of collective land, villagers prefer a fair allocation of land. Nevertheless, empirical studies show that land management decisions are heterogeneous and vary not only between counties and townships, but also among villages.⁹

Support for Grassroots Democracy: Materialist and Churchill Hypothesis

Support reflects villagers’ attitudes towards specific individuals and institutions, and it is measured through opinion surveys and in-depth interviews. Another key

⁹ Brandt et al., p. 69.

variable is support distinction (or lack of distinction) between the leaders and the institutional process. According to the democratization literature, the most stable type of support for democracy is intrinsic.¹⁰ The source of this support is an individual appreciation for the *fairness* of the institutional and decision-making process. A body of research emphasizes the importance of procedural fairness and public evaluation of local political institutions [12, Ch 1, 18, 25, 49]. Perceived fairness is a result of repeated interactions between elected leaders and villagers. This support is also independent of the villager's personal opinion of the elected leader, their income or the community's economic condition.

Alternatively, support may be instrumental based on material benefits. This form of support is conditional and rooted in the ability of village leadership to improve the local economy. In the event of an economic downturn, this support can be easily withdrawn.¹¹ Thus, what is the nature of support for grassroots political reforms in the rural China sample?

In order to address this question, I examine two hypotheses. The first is the materialist hypothesis that reflects instrumental or intrinsic support, and the second is the Churchill hypothesis that reflects general support for the democratic institution as a whole rather than a specific process. The materialist hypothesis within the Marxist framework suggests that economic conditions have a greater influence on citizens' attitudes than political factors.¹² According to Marx, an individual's attitudes and ideas are an outgrowth of their economic environment. Following the idea of economic determinism, a number of democratization theorists also suggest that the durability of new democracies depend mostly on their economic performance rather than institutional structures [39, 40]. Communist China is an interesting case to test Marx's primacy of economic conditions over institutional procedures. The alternative is support for institutional procedures independent of economic conditions.

The two key variables that represent the procedural (supply) measures are villagers' perceptions of the fairness for the last election and the last land reallocation decision. The measures that reflect outcomes are villagers' satisfaction with the elected leader and the current economic condition of the village. The expected relationship for the materialist hypothesis (instrumental support) is no support distinction between procedural and outcome variables. However, clear support distinction between procedural and outcome variables reflect intrinsic support specific (actual) institutions.

The Churchill hypothesis states that democracy is *not* the ideal form of government, but rather it is better than all other alternatives. Moreover, elected leaders are far from perfect. Yet, to gain popular support, democratic reforms do not have to be ideal. Citizens can support new reforms as a "second-best alternative" to less democratic methods of governing.¹³ In rural China, the introduction of

¹⁰ Easton [14], p. 445; Bratton and Mattes, p. 448.

¹¹ Easton [14], p. 442.

¹² For the Marxist interpretation materialist attitudes see Evans and Kelley [52]; The materialist (and post-materialist) hypothesis is also associated with Inglehart. His definition is similar, but follows the hierarchy of human goals (Maslow). See Inglehart [53].

¹³ Rose et al., p. 4.

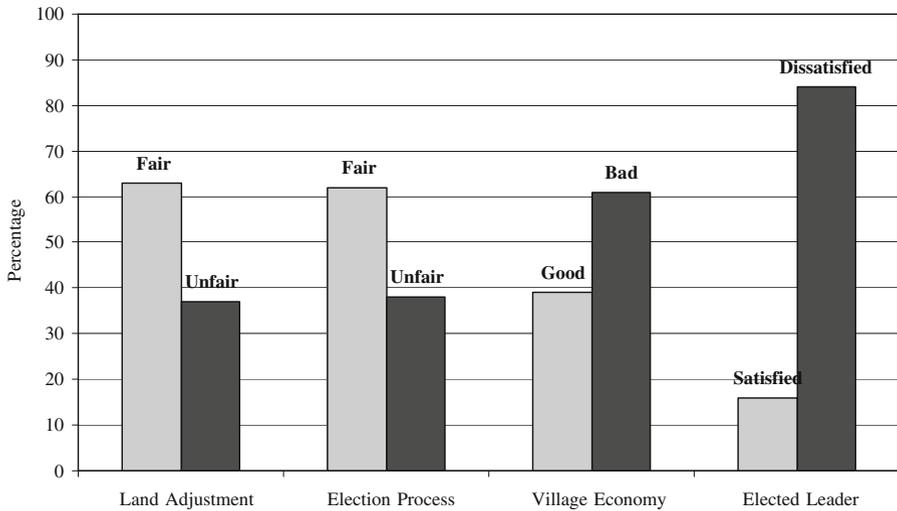
grassroots political reforms especially village elections does not bring an end to local corruption and mismanagement of village resources. Nevertheless, elected leaders are better than appointed ones because they are more accountable to villagers. Political conflict still exists and problems regarding fair distribution of village resources do not disappear, but villagers can replace or recall their elected leaders. Moreover, the village party secretary is an appointed leader who is also an important political force within the village. The data from the 2000 and 2004 surveys suggest that the relationship between the elected leader and the appointed party secretary can vary in three ways where the (1) party secretary is more dominant than the elected leader, (2) the political influence is balanced between the two or (3) the elected leader is more influential than the party secretary. Even with a dominant party secretary, it is still better to have at least one elected village leader rather than having both prominent political figures appointed.¹⁴

All things being equal, villagers prefer the *idea* that elections are better than appointments for village leaders because elected leaders are expected to be more accountable to their constituents. The difference between the Churchill and the materialist hypothesis is that the materialist hypothesis tests the difference between instrumental and intrinsic support based on actual village processes and specific outcomes, such as the last election and the village economy, while the Churchill hypothesis tests support for elections in general rather than the last election. Thus, the Churchill hypothesis suggests that villagers support for the idea that elections are better than appointments is independent of the actual election process (full or partial implementation of the Organic Law) and villager's perceptions of the local economy or the last election.

In the 2000 six county sample, only 35% or 12 out of 34 villages had open elections with villager nominated candidates, and a relatively transparent public finances and decision-making process.¹⁵ The other villages had party branch and township government nominations as well as 6 villages with appointed leaders (i.e. no elections at all). In 2004, the survey included three out of the original six counties, and 65% or 11 out of 17 villages had an open election process. Indeed, the quality of elections improved for most villages between 2000 and 2004 such that none of the leaders were appointed. The evidence from both surveys suggests that, in villages with full implementation of the Organic Law, there is a clear support distinction, and that this support is intrinsic by nature. The bar graph in Fig. 2 shows that villager attitudes reflect a clear "U" shaped relationship between the fairness of the election process and the evaluation of the village economy. In the 2004 sample of

¹⁴ Villagers elect the village committee members and the leader (he/she is also the chair of the village committee). Thus, the village can have two governing *bodies* one appointed party branch headed by the party secretary and the popularly elected village committee and chairperson. The Churchill hypotheses proposes that villagers would rather have two governing bodies (one popularly elected and one appointed), than two appointed bodies.

¹⁵ Identifying the type and quality of the village election process is a difficult endeavor. In the both surveys, we interviewed the village party secretary, the leader, accountant and nine villagers as well as town and county officials. In several villages, all three village cadres and most of the villages provided completely different institutional explanations for the same election. In fact, two villages were dropped from the analysis in the 2000 survey (from 36 to 34) and one in 2004 (from 18 to 17) because it was impossible to clearly identify the election type.



Source: Author's survey (2004 Shaanxi, 11 villages, n = 99)

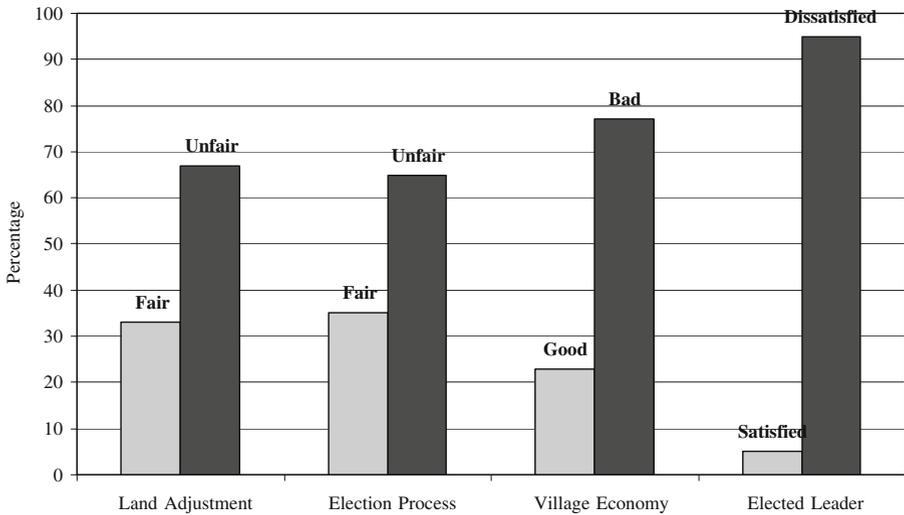
Fig. 2 “U” shaped support: respondent attitudes in villages with fully implemented Organic Law

villages with a supply of grassroots political reform (the Organic Law [36]), there is a high level of dissatisfaction with the local economy, despite the strong support for the election process.

In villages with only partial implementation of the Organic Law, villager attitudes display a *uniform* lack of support. That is, complete dissatisfaction for the election process and the local economy (see Fig. 3).¹⁶ In these villages, villagers tend to see no difference between the institutional process and the individual decisions of village cadres. The appointed village party secretaries dominate village political affairs and they play a significant role in the nomination of the village leader and committee members. In fact, many villagers admit that elections are pre-determined, and their vote only confirms the choices made by the village party secretary and town officials. Despite the high level of dissatisfaction, villagers seem to be passively compliant in these villages. During interviews in 2004, villagers were informally asked if they felt there was anything they could do to improve the quality of the village elections and the village leadership. The most frequently response was “there is nothing we can do about it” (*meibanfa*). This reflects a low level of political involvement and participation. In fact, in these villages, mass assemblies only occur for village “elections” and even this event is hard to get full participation. One village leader, who admitted that he was pre-selected by the township party secretary and concurrently serving as a village party branch member, said that many villagers do not care about the elections, and cadres needed incentives such as small gifts (free pens or t-shirts) to increase villager attendance at mass assemblies.¹⁷

¹⁶ For an English translation of the survey questions see Appendix 2.

¹⁷ Author Interview (June, 2004).



Source: Author's survey (2004 Shaanxi, 6 villages, n = 54)

Fig. 3 Uniform villager support (disapproval): respondent attitudes in villages *without* fully implemented Organic Law

Estimates for the coefficients in Table 1, Model 1 suggest that views of the local economy do not have a significant influence on villager perceptions of the village election process. Moreover, household income and years of education have little effect on villagers' opinion on the fairness of election procedures (see Table 1, Model 1). Given the data results, it is possible to reject the materialist hypothesis. Rather than the local economy, support for grassroots political reform, that is, support for the village election process, depends on the quality of the elections and the repeated observations. In addition, the levels of support are highest in the villages that that experienced a change in the election process from lower to higher quality elections. For example, within the sample, two villages in one county experienced an improvement in the quality of election from village party secretary nomination in the 1999 elections to the more open villager nomination in 2002. The level of support in these villages for the elections also improved from just over 50% of respondents believing the process was fair in 2000 to over 70% in 2004. In fact, the quality of elections in this particular county evolved over a period of three election cycles from township nominated candidates in 1996, to village party secretary in 1999 and villager nominations in 2002 elections. This change in the supply had a positive influence in the support for grassroots political reform. In the same way, reduced supply can have a negative influence on support. For example, in a different county within the same sample, the level of support had actually decreased over time in several villages. Villages in one township experienced a reduction in the quality of elections from 2000 to 2004. In 2000, village party secretaries controlled the nomination process, and 45% of the respondents reported that the elections were fair (27% said, "do not know"). In 2004, the nomination process changed and the township officials selected the candidates, and support for

Table 1 The influence of perceived village economic conditions on villagers' attitudes towards the fairness of election process, elected leader and fairness of land adjustments

	Model 1 ^a Election	Model 2 ^b Leader	Model 3 ^a Land
Variables	Coefficient (z-score)		
Perception of village economy (good or bad)	0.15 (1.25)	-0.77** (2.50)	-0.21 (0.86)
Family Income	-0.01 (0.24)	0.01 (0.43)	0.01 (0.77)
Years of Education	0.07 (1.68)	-0.11 (1.22)	0.05 (0.72)
Election Process (Villager Nomination)	0.87** (2.39)	-	0.34* (2.12)
Perception of Election Process (fairness)	-	-0.17 (0.26)	-
Perception of Elected Leader	-	-	-0.10 (0.16)
Household Land Holdings	-	-	-0.03 (0.63)
N	153	153	153

^aThe Ologit (ordered logit for categorical dependent variable) model using the fairness of the election process and last land adjustment

^bThe Logit model whether village leader represents villager interest: yes = 1, no = 0

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

the election system decreased further. As a result, over 70% of the respondents reported an unfair process.

Besides the elections and village economy, villagers hold strong opinions towards the elected leaders and the leader's decisions regarding the distribution of public resources. Can villagers be completely dissatisfied with the elected leader and at the same time display support the leader's decisions? Recall that if the rule *of* law applies and villagers believe that leaders are making decisions based on a set of rules or accepted procedures, then villagers can support the process but not the person. However, if rule *by* law applies then the villagers may make no distinction between the procedures and the leader. That is, personal choices and relationships influence the decisions rather than accepted rules.

Villager opinion towards the local leadership is quite low across all villages. No matter how the leader is selected, either fair or unfair election process, villagers display a uniform level of disapproval for the village leadership. In the 2004 survey, villagers are asked whether local, mid-level and national offices represent their interests (see Appendix 2). Only 12% of the whole sample reported that elected villager leaders represent their interests. Even in villages with the most open election process and transparent village finances, the vast majority of villagers held disdain for their elected leaders. Thus, the introduction of local elections does not seem to increase villager support for the elected local leadership (see Table 1, Model 2). Family income and years of education also do not have an influence on villagers' attitude towards the elected leader. The most significant influence on villagers' opinion of the elected leader is their view of the village economy. Over 60% of the villagers believe that their village economy is bad, and they tend to blame the elected leader for this outcome. Moreover, it is villagers' perception of

the village economy rather than the actual wealth of the community. Even in relatively well-off villages, residents tend to have a low opinion of the village economy and the elected leaders.

Blaming the elected leaders for the “bad” economy is common in most democratic or democratizing societies.¹⁸ Even though local and national economic conditions are complex and leaders have limited influence on the development of the economy, there is a general expectation that the elected leader can improve the economic situation. Indeed, villagers tend to nominate and elect local business people and entrepreneurs as candidates in hopes that he will bring more economic development to the village. This can raise expectations even before the leader takes office. The leaders also feel the pressure. One businessman, who was an elected leader, admitted that he worked so hard to improve local agriculture and access to markets that his own business suffered. Despite all his efforts and sacrifice, he said there was a general belief that he was not doing enough to enhance village wealth. He decided that it was not worth it to run for a second term and he dropped out of the last election.¹⁹

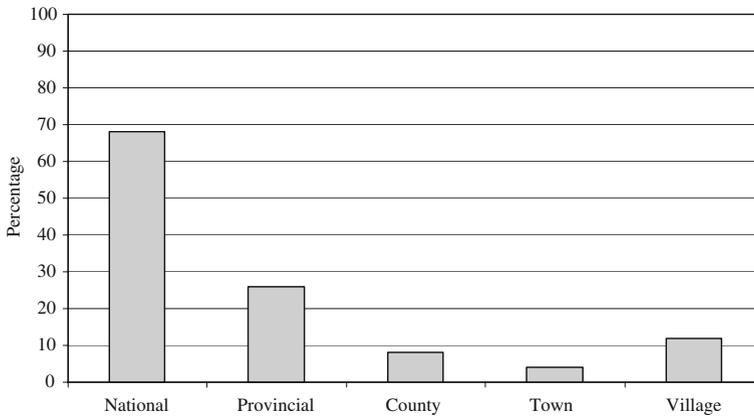
However, on the other side of the spectrum, villagers believe that the national economy is “good” and display strong support for the national leadership. Over 80% of the villagers reported that the national economy was “good”. While villager opinions of the local economy are derived from personal experience and community discussions, major media outlets shape citizens’ view of the national economy. In most democratic societies, free press reports tend to reflect pessimistic views of national economic conditions [30, Ch. 1]. Yet, in single party authoritarian regimes where the central government has control over the national media, reports on the national economy tend to be more optimistic. Indeed, the continuous stream of positive reports on national economic growth may also contribute to the negative perception of the local economy. Villagers watch reports about the construction of beautiful new city skylines and workers in brand new factories on the nightly news then look out their own window to see limited economic growth and few opportunities. The blame for the bad local economic conditions falls on the local authorities rather than the national leadership.

In fact, public support for the central leadership and national party-government is quite high [9, 10, 26, p. 228–258, 45, 50]. Most surveys examining public opinion towards the CCP conducted since the early 1990s show that over 70% of respondents support the central government and the Party. No matter how the survey questions are phrased, the results are the same. The survey sample in this study reflects the same level of popular support for the national party-government (see Fig. 4).

Nevertheless, the high level of support for the central leadership is surprising given the large number of high profile cases of corruption at the local and provincial levels. Indeed, since the late 1990s, the central leadership highlights corruption trials in the national media to demonstrate the periodic crackdowns on the misdeeds of sub-national party-government officials. Yet, reports of local corruption and mismanagement of public resources have not eroded popular support for the national party-government. A number of researchers have found that this is especially true in the rural areas where

¹⁸ Easton [14], p. 439; Rose et al., p. 178; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, p. 12; Muller and Jukam [29]

¹⁹ Interview June 2004



Source: Author's survey (2004 Shaanxi, 17 villages, n = 153)

Fig. 4 Villager Support for the national, provincial, county, town and village leadership

villagers perceive the central leadership as protecting citizen interests against abusive local officials.²⁰ The results from the 2000 and 2004 surveys reflect similar findings that villagers view local officials as shady characters who manipulate institutional procedures for their own benefit at villagers' expense. Consequently, they display little support for village leaders and township officials.

While the elections are important, they only occur once every three years. The key to successful political reform and maintaining villager support as well as social stability is a transparent decision-making process. According to the Organic Law, elected leaders are required to manage land in a fair and transparent manner. The 2004 survey data suggest that the fairness of the land adjustment decisions varies according to how well the Organic Law is implemented in the village or county (see Figs. 2 and 3). Other factors, such as household income, the level of education and even villagers' negative perception of the village economy, have little independent influence on villagers' positive support for the leaders land adjustment decision (see Table 1, Model 3). While economists studying China suggest that leaders may sacrifice an efficient distribution of land in favor of a more equitable arrangement, this study shows that it is the *openly elected leaders* who provide the most fair reallocation decisions. Despite their complete disapproval for the elected leaders, villagers nevertheless support a fair decision making process. The bar graph in Fig. 2 displays the "U" shaped support distinction predicted in the Supply and Support Model. In villages with partial implementation of the Organic Law (i.e. limited supply), there is no support distinction. Figure 3 shows a uniform lack of support for leaders' decisions, the institutional process, the local economy and the village leader.

Thus, in the sample, villagers' opinions reflect intrinsic support for specific democratic procedures. This suggests that the elections do not necessarily improve the relations between the elected cadres and villagers. Rather, the full implementation

²⁰ Li, p. 299; O'Brien and Li, p. 1; Bernstein and Xiaobo [7].

(supply) of the Organic Law increases villager support for the institutional procedures and decision-making process.

The Churchill hypothesis proposes that, although grassroots democracy does not resolve all conflicts, villagers believe it is better to have popularly elected villager leader rather than appointed ones. In the 2004 survey, villagers were directly asked this question (see Appendix 2). Over 70% of the villager respondents believe in the idea that the elections are important and better than appointments (see Fig. 5). Even in villages with the worst election process (i.e. township government nominations), over 70% still believe elections are important. In these villages, villager expectations for fair elections are greater than the supply. According to villager interviews, the elections with town government appointed candidates are nothing more than “old wine in a new bottle” (*xinping zhuang jiujiu*).²¹ Moreover, they have little support for the election process, the village leader or the land adjustment decisions (see Fig. 3). Nevertheless, Fig. 5 suggests that even if villagers are passive and fail to resist unfair elections, they still feel strongly about the need for fair elections and the idea that elections are better than appointments.

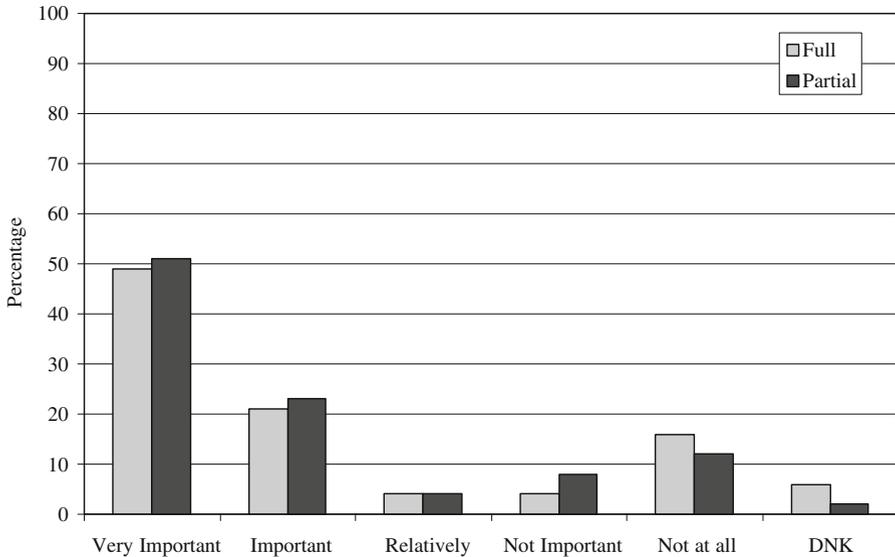
Beyond villager evaluation of the last election process and the land allocation decision and the rejection of the materialist hypotheses, the Churchill hypothesis confirms previous studies on political reform and the notion of citizenship in rural China. Shi suggests that even partial implementation of the Organic Law can influence villager attitudes towards importance of elections in general [44]. Figure 5 show that the vast majority of villagers believe that elections are better than appointments irrespective of their perceptions of the local economy and even the fairness of the last election. In addition, while only few villagers can identify and recite the Organic Law, it is possible that most villagers associate the promotion of village elections (over appointments) with central party-government policies. This would explain the high level of support for the national leadership. In fact O’Brien, Li and Schubert all show how villagers’ perception that the central leadership is attempting to provide them with opportunity to monitor local leaders and establish fair local procedures can legitimize the central party-government.²² That is, the introduction of local democratic institutions can legitimize democratic practices *as well as* the authoritarian leadership.

Conclusion

Contrary to democratization theorists and journalists, the supply of and support for grassroots democracy can exist within a single party authoritarian system. Moreover, the data suggest that villager support is intrinsic rather than instrumental. That is, beyond concerns for the local economy, villagers value a fair institutional and legal process. The irony is that the materialist explanation does not fit this sample of villagers from Communist China. More broadly, by taking China into account, the modified supply and support (demand) model demonstrates that the supply of these

²¹ Kennedy, p. 480

²² Li, p. 250; O’Brien [54]; Shubert [55]



Source: Author's survey (2004 Shaanxi, 17 villages, n = 153)

Fig. 5 The importance of the election system compared to appointments by implementation (full or partial) of the Organic Law

grassroots political reforms may contribute to the development of local democratic institutions and ideals *before* political reforms begin at the national level. This may represent the “front-end” of the democratization process.

However, the data also show that there continues to be a problem with the supply side of local reforms and the rule of law. The drawback with the introduction of grassroots political reform is that it raises villager expectations. While it can be a socially stabilizing mechanism in the short term, uneven implementation can also be a source of long term future discontent.

The implication for the central leadership is that maintaining social stability in rural China may depend more on institutional rather than solely economic development. The economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s raised the incomes of almost all Chinese citizens and, although there is a growing income gap between rural and urban residents, the central leadership has so far maintained social stability. Even the increasing reports of rural unrest over the last decade have not threatened the position of national leadership. Although this current level of social stability may be due to a combination of political and economic reforms, it seems that intrinsic support for grassroots democracy also plays a role. It is clear that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) *can* supply local democratic institutions, but the enduring question is *will* the CCP expand and improve the supply of grassroots political reform.

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Appendix 1

(2000 and 2004 Surveys)

The 2000 data used in this analysis comes from a survey of thirty-four villages conducted in Shaanxi province between October–November 2000. The survey is a random multi-stage sample of thirty-four villages in six counties. Six counties were randomly chosen based on their level of development using G. W. Skinner's core-periphery map of Northwest China [56]. Within each county two townships were randomly selected. At the township level, three villages were randomly chosen. Within each village nine households were selected from the household registration list (*huji*) supplied by the village accountant. The household registration list provided the official name of the head-of-the-household (HH). In addition to the nine villager respondents, the village leader, party secretary and accountant were also interviewed. Twelve graduate students from Northwest University, Xian were trained to conduct the survey. In addition to the survey, the author conducted eight village case studies in three different townships. In-depth interviews were conducted with villagers, village leaders and township and county officials.

The June 2004 survey is a sample of villages in three of the six counties sampled in 2000. Although the same villages are sampled, we do not use the same households or individuals. This is repeated-cross-sectional data because we are collecting new information from statistically similar individuals in the same villages. The questionnaires are also the same, but we added ten new questions. In addition, the 2004 survey had formal interviews with the one of the township leading cadres in each township. The same method was also used to survey villagers and cadres in 2004, twelve graduate students from Northwest University, Xian were trained to conduct the survey and in-depth interviews.

Appendix 2

(Survey Questions)

28.) In some villages, farmers believe that the last land adjustment was unfair, while in other villages farmers believed the last land adjustment was fair. In your opinion, do you think the last land adjustment was fair or unfair? How would you rank the fairness of the last land adjustment where 1 is unfair and 5 is fair?

Unfair					Fair	
1	2	3	4	5	8 (DNK)	

93.) In some villages, farmers believe that electing the village leader is very important as apposed to having an appointed leader, while in other villages farmers believe the village elections do not matter. In your opinion, do you think the elections are important or not? How would you rank the importance of elections where 1 is not at all important and 5 is very important?

Not Important At All					Very Important	
1	2	3	4	5	8 (DNK)	

108.) Thinking about local and national leaders, who do you believe is looking out for your best interest?

- (1) village small group leader _____
- (2) village leader _____
- (3) village party secretary _____
- (4) township leaders _____
- (5) county leaders _____
- (6) provincial leaders _____
- (7) national leaders _____

Footnote: Each of the seven categories are treated as dichotomous variables (0,1).

110.) Thinking of the last village election, where do you place it on this scale of one to five where ONE means that the last election was very unfair and FIVE means that the last election very fair?

Unfair					Fair	
1	2	3	4	5	8 (DNK)	

113.) What do you think of the state of the economy these days in your village? Would you say that the state of the economy is very good, good, neither good not bad, or very bad?

5. very good	4. good	3. neither	2. bad	1. very bad	8. does not know
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