

# Have village elections democratized rural china? essay sample

[Countries](#), [China](#)



In order to fully evaluate whether or not village elections have fully democratized rural China, I will begin by looking at why they were initially set up. I will then look at any problems that have occurred whilst implementing village elections, in order to finally conclude whether they have resulted in a democratized rural China.

Village elections have evolved from the now defunct commune system, under the commune system only very indirect participation from the village communities was permitted. At this point the villages were being run by dirt emperors who employed thugs to extort money from farmers. Village elections were thought of at that point in order to put them back under party and state control.

The Organic Law of Villagers' Committees was passed by China's National People's Congress in 1987 and it was this law that was to begin the process of village elections. The law arrived out of a need to establish a more accountable, responsive structure that would relate to village level and ultimately its aim was to result in a more democratic rural China. One of the main problems with this law was that although it meant that there was a clearer legal basis in place for elections in the villages, the law did not however make village elections compulsory. Another problem with the Organic Law was vagueness of it; election procedures were not made clear and were interpreted ambiguously. Most importantly the law did not state that voting in village elections was to be conducted by secret ballot.

The Organic Law was intended to cover all rural villages, this meant that even the smallest of villages with populations of less than a hundred, would

also enter in to the democratic election process. It was to set up as a system of governance that would be established through elected villagers' committees. Once these committees had been set-up the villagers would then be able to voice their opinions on issues affecting them.

Critics of the Chinese government have suggested that the introduction of the Organic Law by the Chinese government was actually just an effort to eradicate their poor image with regards to human rights issues.

In 1998 the Chinese government decided to revise the Organic Law in the hope of making it more democratic. They made four main changes to the law. Firstly the law stated that elections must be conducted by only the people of the village, secondly, that the number of candidates standing for election must be greater than the number of offices available, thirdly, that elections must be conducted using secret ballot and finally that the winning candidate must receive over 50% of the vote in order to win.

In order to assess whether or not rural China has become democratized through village elections, it is vital to review the electoral process in place. Villagers in rural China now directly nominate and vote for members on the committees, they are also involved in practical administrative issues and candidates standing for election to committees are under no obligation to be members of the Chinese Communist Party and they do not have to be approved by the party before standing.

It can be argued that in many ways village elections have helped democratize villages. In theory many of the procedures for standing for

election and indeed for voting in elections seem democratic. Under the law, all adult registered villagers over the age of 18 have the rights to vote and to stand for office.

Villagers who are able to vote tend to try and vote against corrupt, incompetent candidates, this is what you would expect and can be seen as a good indicator of democracy - the right to vote for who ever you want.

Villagers do have rights and they do seem to have some power also, in some instances it has been the villagers who have decided to hold an election by demanding this from the township officials. They have been able to do this by giving the township officials ultimatums, they either hold an election or the villagers will refuse to abide by the family planning social policy or the grain procurement policy.

The fact that the villagers are able to yield an element of power over the township officials may suggest a more democratic country than is true.

In fact it is difficult to even know exactly how many people are voting in village elections. The figures released from the government claim that at least 80% of villagers vote, this is in stark contrast with some journalists who estimate only 10% of villagers vote. Any independent studies indicate that at best the percentage voting is 17.

Although candidates for election do not have to be approved by the CCP it is unlikely that a candidate who is standing for election and who openly opposes the state will get elected.

Corruption and intimidation are things that must be looked at when looking at Chinese politics and village elections are no different. Apparently the CCP have no involvement in the selection of candidates. However there is evidence to the contrary in the village of Liubu in Hebei. In this example during the run up to the election party officials disconnected a public address system. By doing this they were able to prevent a potential candidate from talking to the villagers and revealing the amount of debt that the village was in. This candidate was then offered a handheld microphone but the government authorities confiscated this from the speaker.

Another example of the unfairness surrounding the village elections is that some township officials actively try to prevent elections. They do this unless the present candidate (village cadre) is likely to be re-elected or unless there has been a total breakdown of law and order within the village.

In townships the opposition to free voting can be great, this is mainly due to the fact that the village committees elected democratically result in a loss of power to them.

Although in 1998 the Organic Law was changed and the elections have become more fair and open, the CCP still have a village branch which is not elected and this still seems to be at the centre of the village. It also makes you question how important and influential the village committees will ever be because in the end the CCP still has overall control.

On the other hand villagers' committees, in some circumstances, where successfully implemented, have improved local leaders' accountability to

village residents without generally reducing their responsiveness to the state.

Village-level elections have also resulted in demands to restructure relations between villagers' committees and village Communist Party branches.

Where a party branch enjoys little support, villagers have begun to dispute its right to nominate individuals to run in villagers' committee elections. This restructuring is not recognized at the national level, but it has been put into practical effect in some villages: in one Shanxi county, all villagers can now vote in party primaries, and party members who do not win over half the votes are barred from standing for membership in the local party branch.

Even though grassroots democratic reform in China is occurring only at the village level and not spreading to township leadership elections, it is changing the relationship between village and township officials. Villagers' committees have limited autonomy from the township officials directly above them. Elected village officials are more willing to confront township officials and their policies in the name of their constituents' lawful interests. An elected committee member in Hebei, for example, proudly said he would resist township meddling in the management of a village orchard because "this is the masses' business and it falls within the scope of villagers' autonomy."

Firstly the government should insure that the date for village elections in counties are coordinated, by doing this it would not only be a possible way to

reduce costs but also a chance to educate the electorate on how and why they should vote at elections.

It is important that villagers feel that their vote is secret and confidential, a way of ensuring this would be to allow villagers to vote in individual booths or separate rooms, this would increase the number of villagers voting honestly and without fearing intimidation.

Another way to improve democracy within villages is to focus on the electoral process being used and also to ensure that local officials are all following the same guidelines and are fully trained.

One of the main problems with village elections seems to stem from the fact that they work extremely well in some villages and terribly in others. In some villages elections are held using secret balloting, primaries and open nomination for village committee posts. In other villages townships and counties have moved to stop farmers from exercising their right to choose village leaders.

These are all ways that the village elections in China could be improved, if these ideas are implemented then it is likely that some time in the future we will be able to say that village elections have truly democratized China.

It can be argued that China's political system is not and never will be democratic but that the introduction of village elections helps people living in rural areas to have an input into the way in which their villages are run in a more democratic way.