

## Village Democracy and Its Limits

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### Summary

This article examines democratic elections and governance in rural China – a mixed bag of results. On the one hand, village elections have become a normal feature of grass-roots political life. Rural people expect to be able to elect their leaders and to replace them in the next round of elections, or in between, if they turn out to be corrupt or abusive. This constitutes a truly significant step forward in China's quest for a more accountable political system. On the other hand, however, there is a good deal of evidence that this outcome applies only to a subset of villages. In other places, power holders, such as the townships and the village party branches, hold sway to a greater or lesser extent. In terms of governance, the goal of financial transparency, a matter of great concern to ordinary villagers, is often not fully attained. Most importantly, village democracy functions within an authoritarian environment which greatly limits its impact.

In recent years, China has not made much progress toward democratization. If anything, the country's new leaders, installed three years ago, seem determined to maintain tight authoritarian rule while they seek to tackle the country's enormous social problems. In their view, democracy understood as competitive elections is something for which the country is not ready and will not be ready for another generation or two. For those who hope for eventual democratization, China's competitive village elections represent the major positive indicator that even if full-scale democracy is not in prospect in the foreseeable future, small steps in that direction can be taken. This makes an assessment of village democracy a significant task. But at the same time, given the deep reluctance of China's rulers to take even the most obvious next steps, e.g., to expand direct, competitive elections to the next higher administrative level, namely that of the towns and townships, it behooves the analyst to refrain from treating village democracy in teleological terms, i.e. to view it as a harbinger of future democratizing changes. After all, many years have elapsed since the passage of the trial Law on the Organization of Village Committees in November 1987 – the final version was adopted in 1998 – and except for experimental direct township elections, no significant further expansion of rural democracy has taken place.

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