Urban elections in the People’s Republic

From the 1990s onward, residents’ committees were established in China’s urban areas to ensure social and political control. Until the late 1990s, these committees consisted primarily of elderly women with little education. More recently, economic reform, social change and increased mobility have altered the structure of urban residential areas – the closure of state enterprises, the end of lifelong employment and social welfare, and an increasing floating population have necessitated new organizational structures.

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do residential areas based on affili-ation to state-owned economic or administrative work units (dangweiyuan) are now disintegrating. The decline of previously privileged groups (e.g. urban skilled workers), the rise of new elites (private entrepreneurs, professionals, new migrants) and a service-orienting population mean many neighbour-hoods today are divided into areas inhabited by groups of different status – members of still existing or former dan-ter, members of the local political and economic elite who have purchased new flats, migrants from rural areas or other cities, and others.

With the decline of the dassen, increased unemployment, urban poverty, and the erosion of family structures and public order, traditional residents’ committees could no longer maintain order and security. Thus, at the end of the 1990s, residential areas were merged and reor-ganized into larger ‘neighbourhood communities’ (shequ) headed by ‘neigh-bourhood residents’ committees’. The population of these neighborhoods ranges from 9,000 to 16,000.

In contrast to indirect elections, direct elections allow people a greater degree of political opportunity to participate in the selection of candidates and to discuss their pro-grammes. This increases the possibil-i-ty for the articulation of common inter-ests and for the nomination of candidates who will act in the interests of the residents.

The call for ‘democratic elections’ may encourage people to put forward demands and to establish shared inter-ests. Moreover, achieving even minor demands (such as the improvement or maintenance of housing conditions) reinforces residents’ sense of empow-erment, and thus fosters willingness to participate and a sense of community.

Most informant felt elections would be viewed positively if those elected had a stronger sense of account-ability because they were elected, if people who did not represent the interests of the residents would not be re-elected, and if residents were able to put forward suggestions and voice their opinions. Elections are a sign of political relax-ation, and can provide information on dissatisfaction among residents. Addi tionally, they encourage the removal of incompetent and unpopular officials, thus acting as a corrective power. They are thus a stimulus for officials to act in the interest of voters. In this way they contribute to regime legitimacy and sta-bility. Moreover, elections contain the symbolic message that the authorities are responsible to the Party and that participation will be confined to institutional-ized channels.

In electoral theory, elections are seen as opportunities for citizens to influence political leaders. Elections generate sup-port for a political regime. Theories of democracy show a correlation between election turnout and regime legitimacy; fair and regular elections create a sense of trust and empowerment and therefore of regime legitimacy. That is why the Chi nese leadership strives to learn from elec-toral processes: it intends to increase the state’s capacity for governance.

Elections in shequ

Chinese law states that residents’ com-mittee members must be elected. Since 1995 elections in urban neighbour-hoods have been of two types. A minor-ity of shequ have direct elections, with all residents voting; in the majority, including those we studied, elections are indirect, via residents’ delegates. Vacant positions on residents’ committees are advertised and applicants are invited to register for the nomination examination which covers legal regulations, the organization of neighbourhoods, and questions of general political and social concern. The Street Office draws up the list of candidates and assigns leadership roles on the residents’ committee, ensuring that candidates are qualified and trustworthy. Committee members are subject to re-election after three years: if they do a bad job, they will not be re-elected.

In recent years the qualification require-ments of candidates have been raised. In Shenyang and Chongqing a college or university degree is required, and the maximum age for candidates is 45 for leaders and 50 for ordinary members. Only Shenheen has no age restriction, considering upper-middle school educa-tion sufficient qualification. As the qualification requirements are higher than the prestige and salaries associated with these positions, there is a short-age of younger, qualified candidates.

The shequ we studied had only indirect elections, and many informants declared that they knew little or nothing about them. Opinions on the signifi-cance of residents’ committee elections were divided, with fewer than half the interviewees expressing unreserved approval. This does not reflect a genera-l indifference towards voting, since a clear majority declared that elections to the district People’s Congresses were important. Many felt that the residents’ committee had nothing to do with their everyday life. It was widely believed (particularly in Shenyang) that candi-dates were nominated by the Street Office and that elections were merely a rubber stamp.

Many voters thought that candidates should introduce themselves personal-ly and explain their programmes. While previously this was not a requirement, it is now stipulated in election regula-tions and demands by the Party. In most cases elections are run fairly and are monitored by higher authorities. This seriousness, the increasing will of volun-teers to participate in nominating candi-dates and secret ballots have an impact on voter awareness. For instance, many residents knew that in Shenyang’s Tiexi district residents’ committee had been removed by residents when it failed to resolve their housing problems. They were aware that such a procedure could apply in their own neighbour-hoods too.

In Shenyang a number of informants argued that paramount leaders were more important to the development of a neighbourhood than elections. This argument derives from traditional politi-cal culture in its notion that unelected officials who operate according to the ‘principle of justice’ will be more respected than elected ones who do not, and reflects long experience of paternal-ism. It also reflects the fact that the residents’ committee is identified with the govern-ment. As individuals can have no influence on the state, they are reduced to hoping that their leaders will be qualified persons who will act in the interest of the people – hence the vital importance of a ‘benevolent leader’ at the top.

Direct or indirect?

Current voting procedures continue for-mer practices: the residents’ committee selects the candidates, the residents select a group of hand-picked people votes – procedures that result in low voter inter-est. While many residents prefer direct elec-tions, they support indirect voting, believing conditions for direct elections do not yet exist. Supporters of direct elections argue they would better repre-sent the opinions of voters. Many people would understand the work of residents’ committees and thus more people would participate; direct elections would make more explicit their responsibility to voters.

Those who argued against direct elec-tions, particularly officials, said they were too expensive. Chinese social scientists have calculated direct elections in a single shequ in Beijing would cost about 100,000 yuan in publication expenses, administration costs, remu-neration and gifts for polling assistants, etc. In Chongqing alone, a city with 1,105 shequ in 2005, this would total 135 million yuan. Neither cities nor neighbour-hoods can raise such amounts. Officials also fear they will be blamed for low turnouts; they see little benefit flowing from the extra work and costs. The vot-ers interviewed saw things rather dif-ferently, with supporters of general and direct elections predicting high turnouts.

Residents are unhappy with indirect elections. Moreover, indirect elections are detrimental to the prestige of elec-tions and of residents’ committees. As residents have little influence on the selection of candidates, their interest in voting is low. Furthermore, they have the impression that the authorities are not interested in genuine voter participa-tion. Currently, the central government plans to popularize direct elections throughout the country. But there is strong resistance among urban authori-ties, who fear they will lose control over voters and candidates, reinforcing con-