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Excerpt

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Introduction

Long after the third wave of democratization that began in the mid-1970s, autocracies abound: by a recent count (Svolik 2012), autocratic regimes are in place in nearly 40 percent of countries. The modal variant now is electoral authoritarianism, in which opposition parties regularly compete against a ruling party in elections that are organized to prevent alternation of power.¹ Even in far more repressive military, monarchical, and single-party autocracies, however, rulers have opened the political playing field to more players through nominally democratic institutions, such as elections and congresses. China, the most powerful autocracy, is no exception.

This book investigates the new representation unfolding in Chinese local congresses that, since 1980, are popularly elected in elections featuring legally mandated contestation, secret ballots, and voter nomination of candidates.² Chinese congresses disappeared in 1966, with the radical attack on all institutions except the army in the Cultural Revolution engineered by Mao. In the late 1970s, after twelve chaotic years, the congresses were reinstated and renewed. Elections and congresses are not defining features of Chinese autocracy today—far from it. Even so, although rulers in Beijing regularly proclaim their rejection of liberal democratic values, post-Mao political reform includes nominally democratic institutions, such as elections and congresses. I show in this book that the priorities and problems of ordinary Chinese at the grassroots significantly influence both who gets elected to township and county congresses and what the congresses do after they are elected. I argue that these outcomes are the result of rules—or, more precisely old and new institutionalized

¹ In addition to “electoral authoritarianism” (Diamond 2002; Schedler 2002), other labels for such hybrid regimes include “competitive authoritarianism” (Levitsky and Way 2002) and “dominant-party authoritarianism” (Magaloni 2006).

² Here and throughout, congresses refer to 人民代表大会, literally: “people’s congresses.”

arrangements. Presumably, Chinese autocrats, at the top of a single-party political hierarchy modeled on Leninist principles, have not organized themselves to undermine the foundations of their Communist Party state. Do arrangements that motivate the powerful to respond to ordinary citizens strengthen autocracy? If so, how? In answering these questions, I rethink the Chinese model of “authoritarian resilience” (Nathan 2003, 2006), a touchstone or foil in much scholarship on Chinese politics, and contribute to a growing literature on the comparative politics of authoritarianism.

I. Key Findings

From what we know, nominally democratic institutions are a good wager for autocrats: elections in autocracies are associated not with democratic transition (Brownlee 2007) but with regime longevity (Geddes 1999), and congresses are associated with growth (Gandhi 2008). Exactly *how* is the subject of a sizeable literature³—but one prominent view points to the informational utility of such institutions (Geddes 2006; Magaloni 2006; Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008; Malesky and Schuler 2008; Simpser 2013).⁴ Details of the mechanisms as they operate in China are quite different from elsewhere, but this is basically the perspective adopted here.

Chinese local congresses are large, mostly amateur bodies that operate in an institutional context of executive-led governance. Their policymaking role is small: typically, they ratify decisions already worked out by local congress standing committees, led by local Communist Party committees and governments. This book presents local congressional representation in China not as policy representation but as an institutionalized flow of local knowledge, from ordinary citizens at the grassroots to the powerful in executive offices, to which the powerful normally respond. Key to my argument, elaborated in the next section, are the influences of the Communist Party’s personnel management system introduced in the 1950s and electoral arrangements introduced in the 1979 Electoral Law. Together, these two institutions structure local congressional representation in China: they motivate ordinary Chinese to convey information, congresses to transmit information, and local governments and party committees to heed information. I argue that, by design and in practice, representation in Chinese local congresses taps local knowledge for local party and government agents, thereby bolstering the rule of autocrats in Beijing.

³ For good reviews and discussions, see Gandhi and Lust-Okar (2009), Magaloni and Kricheli (2010), and Svolik (2012).

⁴ Also common in the literature is the view of elections and congresses as institutions of elite co-optation. See Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003), Lust-Okar (2005), Magaloni (2006, 2008), Blyaydes (2008), and Boix and Svolik (2013). I argue in Chapter 1 that this view is not a very good fit for the Chinese case.

In making my claims, I rely greatly on qualitative evidence from 65 loosely structured interviews and analysis of data from original probability sample surveys of 5,130 local congressmen and women and 983 of their constituents across three provinces: Anhui, Hunan, and Zhejiang.⁵ Because the institutional connection with constituents is most direct at lower levels, this book focuses mostly on township and county congresses, leveraging evidence about representation in municipal congresses for comparative perspective.⁶ As in the past, voters elect congresses at and above the municipal level only indirectly: tier by tier, county congresses elect municipal congresses, municipal congresses elect provincial congresses, and provincial congresses elect the National People's Congress (NPC). After 1979, however, Chinese voters elect both township and county congresses directly in popular elections that feature legally mandated contestation and secret ballots. Ordinary citizens also share selectorate power with the Communist Party, with voters and local party committees separately choosing nominees for seats in congresses.⁷ Selection arrangements facilitate electoral manipulation, however: despite formal rules about broad consultation and primary elections, party-led election committees are effectively veto players, deciding which nominees appear as candidates on the ballot.

Even with party veto power in candidate selection, I show, in Chapter 2, that voter nominees and party nominees are significantly different types. In particular, borrowing from the literature on political selection, I show that voters nominate “good types”—individuals with qualities that suggest they will reliably represent the community. For example, “good types” have long resided in the districts they represent, which makes them familiar to constituents and familiar with local concerns. Whether or not they share constituent views about local problems, they are at least spatially implicated in them. They may also be more susceptible to informal community influences. In this and other ways, they differ from party nominees, whose qualities reflect officially valued competence and (presumed) loyalty. Because all township and county delegates in

⁵ The provincial cases are described in further detail later. Details about the interviews and surveys are given in Appendix A.

⁶ In China, unlike in the United States, municipalities encompass counties. Here and elsewhere in this book, townships, counties, and municipalities normally include all localities with these administrative ranks. An exception is the reference to townships: it includes townships (乡) and towns (镇) but excludes the 7,194 urban neighborhoods (街道), which do not elect congresses. Counties include rural counties (县), urban districts (市区), and county-level cities (县级市). Municipalities are cities with districts (设区的市) or district-level cities (地级市); they contain (county-level) urban districts within them. There are also a few dozen districts (地区) with municipal rank. Municipalities numbered 332 at the beginning of 2012. Townships numbered 33,272 (excluding urban neighborhoods), and counties numbered 2,853 (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2013, 1).

⁷ I use the term “selectorate” here in the usual way, following the literature on candidate selection: that is, a selectorate comprises the individuals who select candidates to stand for electoral office. See Hazan and Rahat (2010). This is different from the usage in Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2003).

my sample have survived the entire candidate selection process, including party vetting, a finding of significant differences between voter and party nominees is at the same time a finding about what party-led election committees do with the information conveyed in voter nominations. That voter nominees differ from party nominees in ways predictable by a political selection perspective implies that the committees do not simply exercise their power as veto players to block “good types” from appearing on the ballot. Ballots (and congresses) include party nominees, but they also include substantial numbers of the “good types” that ordinary citizens evidently prefer. In sum, local party-led election committees are responsive to local knowledge that identifies particular sorts of individuals as more reliable representatives of the community. Candidate selection is by no means free of manipulation or censorship of voter choices; my description of the process suggests there is plenty of this. My point here, however, draws attention to other behavioral and institutional conclusions too: namely, that the preferences of ordinary Chinese diverge from the preferences of official players (e.g., local party committees) but that voter nomination offers an opportunity, which enough ordinary citizens take, to nominate and elect, based on what they know, some individuals who they think can be counted on to represent them.

I also show, in Chapter 3, that local congresses, which once only mechanically stood in for the Chinese mass public, through demographic and politically symbolic representation, now work to provide substantive representation. In the terminology of Hannah Pitkin’s (1967) classic study, most individuals elected to Chinese township and county congresses talk and act in a way that reflects a “mandate view” of themselves as “delegates” representing their geographic constituents, not Burkean trustees or Leninist party agents—and I refer to them as delegates throughout this book. Delegates reject the Maoist-era role of state agent, merely “transmitting downward” (下达) the official policies of the party-state. Instead, they view their most important responsibility as responsiveness to constituents, not through policy representation (which is closed to most of them) but by solving practical problems. The activity of representation mainly takes the form of geographic parochialism, with township and county delegates providing constituency service and advocating with local governments to supply local public goods, in an extralegislative version of Chinese pork barrel politics. Moreover, among delegates, “good types” turn out to be especially good bets for ordinary constituents seeking action on individual or local problems. Scale and institutional arrangements both matter in representation, however: delegates who talk and act as delegates are proportionately more common in township congresses than in county congresses and least common of all in municipal congresses.

In sum, as presented in this book, representation in Chinese local congresses occurs in response to upward flows of local knowledge from the grassroots: candidate selection taps local knowledge about individuals for local Communist Party committees, which consider voter nominations in shaping congress

composition; then, after the election, advocacy by local congress delegates taps knowledge about local priorities and problems for local governments, which respond (selectively) with local public goods provision. This is a stylized description of some of the key empirical findings elaborated in the following chapters. It is not a theoretical argument. *Why* does congressional representation take this form? In particular, why, in this autocracy, does local knowledge matter for the relevant official players—local party committees, local governments, and local congresses? The next section presents my argument, which addresses these questions.

II. Representation as An Institution

Reviewing the literature on representation, G. Bingham Powell (2004) links democratic representation with responsiveness to ordinary citizens. To focus solely on a correspondence between what citizens want and what policymakers do misses the point, however. He clarifies:

Simple correspondence between what citizens want and what policy makers do is not enough. A benevolent dictatorship is not a representative democracy. The latter depends not only on correspondence or responsiveness but also on institutionalized arrangements that reliably create such representation (Powell 2004, 273–74).

China is not a representative democracy but a single-party autocracy. Exactly how autocrats in Beijing (or anywhere) can “reliably” commit to any arrangement is by no means obvious, an issue I take up in the next section. Nonetheless, the definition is a useful benchmark and reminder that representation normally requires some structure of incentives to animate and assure it as a regular practice.

I argue that representation in Chinese local congresses is an institutionalized flow of local knowledge structured by the Communist Party personnel management system and new electoral arrangements. Briefly, post-1979 electoral arrangements structure opportunities for ordinary Chinese and their congress delegates to provide local knowledge to local party committees and local governments—and, indirectly, to signal to autocrats in Beijing something about local party and government responsiveness. Yet, if local party committees and governments respond to local knowledge, it is because the personnel system makes party leaders in Beijing ultimately their principals and because their specific responsiveness matters to these principals.

The Influence of New Electoral Arrangements

Consider first the influence of new electoral arrangements. As described in Chapter 3, most congress delegates fluently speak a language that suggests an agency relationship, with ordinary voters as principals. In qualitative interviews, they routinely and frequently use the new terms “voting district” (选区), “constituency” (选民), and “constituent interests” (选民的利益). Popularly

elected township and county delegates in particular have a sense of a geographic constituency to which they are accountable. Their language invokes the classic agency perspective of modern political economy, which focuses on the moral hazard problem, analyzing elections as accountability mechanisms.⁸ In this “liberal ideal” (Riker 1982), elections make politicians accountable because they are sanctioning (and therefore constraining) mechanisms: because they fear losing elections tomorrow, politicians do not shirk their obligations to voters today (Key 1966; Mayhew 1974; Fiorina 1981; Ferejohn 1986; Buchanan 1989; Manion 1997).

Even in liberal democracies, however, monitoring politicians is difficult; sanctioning their bad performance in office often ineffective (see Przeworski, Stokes, and Manion 1999). Autocracies are notoriously much worse at solving the voter’s moral hazard problem in some agency relationship with elected officials. For one thing, the vote in autocratic elections cannot credibly threaten to “throw the bums out.” Indeed, the failure is inherent and fundamental: helping to solve the voter’s monitoring problem is highly costly for autocrats because it begins to unravel the basic infrastructure of the system. Even in electoral authoritarian regimes, elections are managed so as to keep autocrats in power. Where the dominant party shares some congressional power, it nonetheless wields the most power and controls the most resources. Moreover, in most electoral authoritarian regimes, elected congresses do not make policy, so governance outcomes cannot be reliably associated with parties other than the dominant party. Nor, in such regimes, can voters look to a critical free press to help them monitor incumbents. In China, a single-party autocracy, these features pose even more serious challenges for any notion of ordinary Chinese voters as principals. Not only is organized opposition prohibited, but monitoring regime incumbents is also more difficult: not least of all, voters cannot rely on party labels as a shortcut to bundle information about politicians.

For these reasons, I put aside the classic agency perspective of elections and argue that new electoral arrangements structure opportunities for local congressional representation as “a matter of selection, not a matter of incentives” (Besley 2005, 49). In a world of inadequate accountability design, selecting “good types,” who can be counted on to act a certain way in office because of particular qualities, is crucial. If ordinary citizens can distinguish “good types,” with information about personal character, for example, then classic accountability through electoral sanctions may not even be needed to produce the governance outcomes they want. As described earlier, if voter nominees and

⁸ In principal–agent relationships, the moral hazard problem arises because of information asymmetry. The principal cannot monitor the agent well because the agent has more information about her or his actions and intentions. Unless the interests of principal and agent are aligned, the agent has both incentive and opportunity to act in her or his own interests and against the principal’s interests. On classic agency theory, see especially Jensen and Meckling (1976). On contributions of political science to agency theory, see Miller (2005).

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party nominees in my sample are in fact different types, then this implies that party-led election committees do not simply use their veto power in candidate selection to stack ballots (and congresses) with candidates who are egregiously unacceptable to voters. To understand why requires unraveling backward from election day. I argue in Chapter 2 that electoral contestation and secret ballots, both mandated in the 1979 Electoral Law, create the possibility of two undesirable outcomes for local authorities: failed elections and election of write-in candidates.

First, an election can fail, requiring a costly new round of elections. For an election to be valid, votes must be cast by a majority of the electorate. Mobilized voting may not be enough to avoid electoral failure, however, because winning requires winning a majority (not plurality) of votes cast. Second, candidates on the ballot may lose to write-in candidates. Voters can also spoil their ballots, denying wins to candidates on the ballot and producing failed elections. To be sure, both electoral failure and election of write-in candidates are rare events: in 2001 and 2006, for example, 1 to 2 percent of township and county elections failed; in 2001, 0.4 percent of delegates elected to township congresses were write-in candidates (Shi, Guo, and Liu 2009, 61, 199–200, 520). Even so, because electoral arrangements allow these events actually to occur, I argue that election committees look prospectively toward elections and select candidates to minimize their likelihood by taking voter nominations into account.

Candidate selection arrangements affect congress composition, creating space for “good types” to be elected as delegates. After the election, the activity of local congressional representation is not policy representation: congresses meet too infrequently and briefly for that. Rather, as I show in Chapter 3, representation most typically takes the form of delegate advocacy with local governments on behalf of geographic constituents for classic local public goods. The substance of this interaction reflects how delegates understand local priorities and problems. I find that infrastructure (especially roads) is a common request. Political scientists normally refer to these specifically targeted, highly distributive benefits as “pork” (Ferejohn 1974; Mayhew 1974; Shepsle and Weingast 1981, 1984; Weingast and Marshall 1988; Lancaster 1986; Fiorina 1989; Evans 2011). Chinese local congresses have no independent authority whatsoever to earmark allocations, decide on formulas for distribution of pork across localities, or otherwise deliver materially on any solutions to local problems. Only local governments, the object of delegate advocacy and special pleading, have the decision-making power actually to deliver pork.

I argue that delegate advocacy and special pleading constitute valuable information for local governments, giving them the opportunity to use responsive governance to preempt much rowdier versions of interest articulation. Mass petitions, protests, strikes, and riots are now normal facts of political life in China, routine ways to express popular discontent with local officials and local circumstances (O’Brien and Li 2006; Lee 2007; Lianjiang Li 2008, 2013; O’Brien 2008; Li, Liu, and O’Brien 2012). Chinese official figures, which

unhelpfully aggregate incidents of different scales and seriousness but probably underreport such incidents overall, report that the frequency of “collective public security incidents” rose from about 8,700 in the early 1990s to about 87,000 in 2005; scholars estimate the number of such incidents in 2010 at somewhere between 180,000 and 230,000 (Göbel and Ong 2012). Excessively unresponsive local governments have cause for concern.

Why do local congress delegates engage in efforts such as pork barrel advocacy on behalf of constituents? One part of the answer, implicit in the earlier discussion, has to do with selection arrangements: populating amateur congresses with enough “good types” deflects the moral hazard problem by solving the adverse selection problem. Additionally and nontrivially, for winners of electoral and electoral contests, the narrative of electoral legitimacy and representation is a flattering one. The status it bestows on them is a unique “ego rent” and, at the same time, an obligation to work to deliver to constituents.⁹ To be sure, the new narrative is the official narrative. It is what Chinese official rhetoric says local congress delegates do and why they do it. This does not make it a sham. Indeed, especially for Communist Party nominees who look more like “governing types” than “good types,” in a party-monopolized system of career advancement, the official story is a part of the incentive structure supporting representation.

To reprise, notwithstanding the language that popularly elected delegates comfortably use, I do not argue that a credible mechanism links them to their constituents in an agency relationship or links either constituents or delegates in an agency relationship with local party or government executives. Instead, I argue, new electoral arrangements structure opportunities for ordinary citizens and their elected congress delegates to provide local knowledge to local party committees and governments. The arrangements do not constrain powerful local executives to heed this knowledge, but extravagant failures to do so produce readily observable outcomes. Surely, some local party committees truly prefer inclusiveness in candidate selection, and some local governments truly prefer stability in society and responsiveness in governance—but I do not assume this. Instead, I turn to the Communist Party personnel management system to explain why signals of serious failure must matter, that is, what constrains local party committees and local governments to take local knowledge into account in shaping congress composition and doling out local public goods.

The Constraint of the Communist Party Personnel Management System

For the various reasons argued earlier, Chinese voters cannot be considered principals of local politicians. If this perspective applies to their relationship

⁹ The concept of “ego rent” originates with Rogoff (1990). It refers to the intrinsic psychological reward (i.e., great honor) of holding office. See also note 29 and Chapter 3.

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with congress delegates, it applies even more aptly to their relationship with local party and government executives. Instead, the Communist Party personnel management system, borrowed from the Soviets in the 1950s, makes top party leaders the principals of local party committees and governments. Because autocrats in Beijing ultimately control political career advancement in China, local party and government agents work to signal their compliance with the expressed preferences of the party center. Specifically, I argue, local party committees and governments heed the local knowledge that ordinary citizens and congress delegates provide because it helps them avoid outcomes that signal failure, by standards set in Beijing and communicated downward to the localities. I begin in this section by describing the party personnel system and then turn to the relevant preferences of the Communist Party center and their expression in instructions about congress composition and targets for work performance.

Through its nomenklatura system, the party manages the appointment, promotion, transfer, demotion, and exit of public officials of even moderate importance, including formally elected politicians.¹⁰ This excludes most congress delegates (who are amateurs, not paid public officials) but includes local party and government executives, managers of state-owned enterprises, and presidents of public universities, for example. The system reflects Leninist organizational doctrine. It is the linchpin of central party power today in an economically decentralized China. The party center directly manages about 4,200 officials itself (Landry 2008, 50); it delegates the management of about 40 million others (Ang 2012) to Communist Party committees below. Tier by tier, party committees manage all officials one level down: for example, municipal party committees manage county leaders in their respective municipalities, and county party committees manage township leaders in their respective counties. Since the formal elaboration of the system in 1995,¹¹ tier by tier, at least annually, party committees and their powerful organization departments evaluate officials under their jurisdiction. Leaders at the party center in Beijing control the careers of Chinese officials by setting the standards for advancement, which change to reflect changing policy priorities. At the lowest level of the state, where our field and survey research is most extensive, township officials know the standards by which they are formally evaluated and regard the party committees and organization departments one level up as crucial to them in getting along and ahead; moreover, personnel decisions are in fact generally consistent with the standards set out in formal rules (Landry 2008). This

¹⁰ There is now a significant literature on the Chinese nomenklatura system. A fairly good introduction is available from a few sources, including Manion (1985), Burns (1989, 1994), Lam and Chan (1996), Chan (2004), and Landry (2008). For the target responsibility system in particular, see later discussion.

¹¹ The key document is one issued by the Communist Party of China Central Committee on February 9, 1995 and slightly revised on July 9, 2002.

hierarchically organized party authority over personnel is what links autocrats in Beijing in a principal–agent relationship with local party and government executives below.

In evaluating local officials for leadership offices, organization departments must (and evidently do) now canvass a large number of official and unofficial players, including ordinary citizens (Edin 2003; Thørgensen 2008). Most important in recent decades, however, is the target responsibility system (目标责任制): how officials measure up to quantified standards formally set out in performance contracts, with a distribution of points that reflects Beijing’s priorities for specified work accomplishments (Whiting 2000; Edin 2003; Tsui and Wang 2004; Landry 2008; Zuo 2014). Officials are personally responsible for meeting targets. Bonuses and promotion are directly linked to work performance, measured by accomplishment of contracted responsibilities. Responsibilities are bundled, according to Beijing’s priorities, into hard targets, soft targets, and imperative targets. Despite a bias in point allocation toward economic targets, social stability has been an imperative target (一票否决) since the late 1980s: this means that not only do high numbers of citizen petitions lower the performance scores of local party and government executives (O’Brien and Li 1995), but significant social unrest nullifies performance achievements on all other dimensions.¹²

Congress elections and congress composition are not the most important standards by which local party committees are assessed, but compliance failures on either dimension suggest an overweening workstyle, at least.¹³ Party leaders in Beijing have given local party committees the tools to manage (even manipulate) congress elections, but they also have clear preferences about electoral process and outcomes. As described in Chapter 5, the preferences of Beijing and local authorities are aligned in opposition to the rising ideological, legitimacy, and organizational challenges of “independent candidates,” who actively seek office, independently of the Communist Party. At the same time, as described in Chapter 2, the party center also prefers both a more inclusive electoral process and a less elitist congress composition. Directives instruct party committees (somehow) to produce congresses that reflect a few strict demographic quotas (for women and nonparty members, for example), without violating legally mandated electoral contestation and secret ballots. Local party committees have their own preferences, too—in particular, for like-minded members of congress standing committees to facilitate coordination in local governance. Some party committees flout instructions and produce ballots and congresses with very high numbers of officials. This can provoke voter protest. It surely deprives congresses of “good types” with local knowledge

¹² Family planning is another well-established imperative target. In recent years, environmental protection and work safety have been newly upgraded to imperative target status (Zuo 2014).

¹³ At worst, they suggest outright corruption—although, from what we know, corruption in Chinese local congresses usually takes on a different form. See later discussion.