

# Urban elections in the People's Republic

From the 1950s 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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Old residential areas based on affiliation to state-owned economic or administrative work units (*danwei*) are now disintegrating. The decline of previously privileged groups (e.g. urban skilled workers), the rise of new elites (private entrepreneurs, professionals, new middle classes) and a growing floating population mean many neighbourhoods today are divided into areas inhabited by groups of different status – members of still existing or former *danweis*, 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 *danwei*, 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 reorganized into larger 'neighbourhood communities' (*shequ*) headed by 'neighbourhood residents' committees'. The population of these neighbourhoods ranges from 3,000 to 16,000.

The 1989 Organizational Law of Urban Residents' Committees outlines their two major tasks: to support the government in preserving social stability, and to provide inhabitants with services and social security benefits. Currently, their responsibilities include many previously assumed by the state: birth control, social welfare, job creation, improving hygiene, running leisure facilities, cultivating social discipline, and increasing resident participation. The Party leadership sees *shequs* as the basic units for creating a 'harmonious society', the new social goal announced in September 2004.

## Elections in shequs

Chinese law states that residents' committee members must be elected. Since 1999 elections in urban neighbourhoods have been of two types. A minority of *shequs* 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 requirements for 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 Shenzhen has no age restriction, considering upper middle school education sufficient qualification. As the qualification requirements are higher than the prestige and salaries associated with these positions, there is a shortage of younger, qualified candidates.

The *shequs* we studied had only indirect elections, and many informants declared that they knew little or nothing about them. Opinions on the significance of residents' committee elections were divided, with fewer than half the interviewees expressing unreserved approval. This does not reflect a general 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 lives. It was widely believed (particularly in Shenzhen) that candidates were nominated by the Street Office and that elections were merely a rubber stamp.

Many voters thought that candidates should introduce themselves personally and explain their programmes. While previously this was not a requirement, it is now stipulated in election regulations and demanded by voters. In most cases elections are run fairly and are monitored by higher authorities. This seriousness, the increasing will of voters to participate in nominating candidates and secret ballots have an impact on voter awareness. For instance, many residents knew that in Shenyang's Tiexi district a residents' committee had been removed by residents when it failed to resolve the crucial issue of water supply. They were aware that such a procedure could apply in their own neighbourhoods 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 political 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 paternalism. It also reflects the fact that the residents' committee is identified with the government. 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 former practices: the residents' committee selects, the Street Office monitors, and a group of hand-picked people votes – procedures that result in low voter interest. While many would prefer direct elections, they support indirect voting, believing conditions for direct elections do not yet exist. Supporters of direct

elections argue they would better represent the opinions of voters. More 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 elections, 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, remuneration and gifts for polling assistants, etc. In Chongqing alone, a city with 1951 *shequs* in 2003, this would total 195 million yuan. Neither cities nor neighbourhoods 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 voters interviewed saw things rather differently, 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 elections 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 participation. Currently, the central government plans to popularize direct elections throughout the country. But there is strong resistance among urban authorities, who fear they will lose control over voters and candidates, reinforcing con-



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licts between the population and local authorities.

Residents' committee elections are a new, developing phenomenon. As they continue, voters will identify with the process and become more involved. This will increase citizens' demand for information and participation, and candidates will find themselves conducting more substantial campaigns to be elected or re-elected. The introduction of direct elections would therefore support the development of trust and legitimacy.

## The power of elections

Increasing participation is a crucial element of political modernization. Even if *shequ* elections are still a delegated form of voting we should not deny their participatory character. Admittedly, the party-state selects the candidates and – in the case of indirect elections – determines the composition of the electoral bodies. But even delegated political participation (such as the right to vote), the requirement that elections follow the regulations, and the possibility of voting out poorly performing officials may be internalized and eventually lead to more autonomous patterns of participation. Furthermore, delegated elections create opportunities for electors, for example, to make specific requirements of candi-

dates or to demand an account of their work. It is therefore too simple to argue that elections are merely a way of legitimizing authoritarian structures or monitoring people, despite their ambiguous character.

In contrast to indirect elections, direct elections allow people a greater degree of participation. Voters have an opportunity to participate in the selection of candidates and to discuss their programmes. This increases the possibility for the articulation of common interests and for the nomination of candidates who will act in the interests of the residents in negotiations with the Street Office or the district government. The call for 'democratic elections' may encourage people to put forward demands and to establish shared interests. Moreover, achieving even minor demands (such as the improvement or maintenance of housing conditions) reinforces residents' sense of empowerment, and thus fosters willingness to participate and a sense of community.

Most informants felt that elections would be viewed positively: if those elected had a stronger sense of accountability 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 relaxation, and can provide information on dissatisfaction among residents. Additionally, they encourage the removal of incompetent and unpopular officials, thus acting as a corrective to power. They are thus a stimulus for officials to act in the interest of voters. In this way they contribute to regime legitimacy and stability. Moreover, elections contain the symbolic message that there is no alternative to the rule of the Party and that participation will be confined to institutionalized channels.

In electoral theory, elections are seen as opportunities for citizens to influence political leaders. Elections generate support 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 Chinese leadership strives to learn from electoral processes: it intends to increase the state's capacity for governance. ◀

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This article is based on the preliminary findings of the research project *Participation, elections and social stability in rural and urban areas in China* conducted by Gunter Schubert (University of Tuebingen), focusing on rural areas, and the author, focusing on urban sites. The project is funded by the German Research Community (DFG). Three surveys were conducted in urban areas, based on interviews with residents and officials: in Shenyang in spring 2003, in Chongqing in summer 2003, and in Shenzhen in spring 2004. The project examines the political awareness of urban citizens and officials in terms of participation, elections and trust.