

Public participation in democracy, local accountability and happiness: Evidence from rural China

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Direct nomination of local leaders by Chinese villagers boosts accountability and happiness



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What is it about?

This study examines how an important reform of local governance—village democracy—in the world's most populous areas has affected the happiness of residents in rural China. We find that introducing elections per se has no significant impact. In comparison, direct nomination of local leaders by villagers, which is a form of competitive election involving a high degree of public participation in political decision making, leads to higher levels of happiness. Further mechanism analyses show that direct nomination improves the local accountability of elected leaders by boosting the quality and effort of village heads and their governance performance by lowering the tax burden of villagers and vitalizing local public services.

Why is it important?

Our results highlight the importance of public participation in democracy and the underlying role of local accountability in affecting the subjective well-beings of citizens. Although China's rural elections have been implemented for nearly 30 years, no systematic work seems to examine their impact on the happiness of villagers, excepting the one by Chen et al. (2014) that relies on limited data from several central and western provinces. In this regard, the current study is among the first to conduct this analysis by employing nationwide representative samples of rural China and exploring the underlying mechanisms. In particular, our study contributes to the literature in three aspects.

First, we speak to the literature regarding the impact of democratic participation on citizens' happiness. Our unique contribution shows that the form of democratic participation is an important factor in understanding the nexus between democracy and happiness.

Second, we identify local accountability as a mechanism through which village elections help breed happiness.

Third, we use the instrumental variable method as an attempt of causal inference to address the potential endogeneity issue that exists in the democracy-happiness relationship because of reverse causality and omitted variable bias.

Perspectives



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This study reflects the interactions between political science (elections), public administration (local governance and local accountability), public finance (taxation and public goods provision), political economy, and behavioral economics (happiness). I have gained a lot during the long writing and revision process from discussing with various researchers in the above fields/disciplines. I believe more cross-field and interdisciplinary dialogues can benefit the academia and society.

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