

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 Svobik (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), Blydes (2008), and Boix and Svobik (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; Manin 1997).

Even in liberal democracies, however, monitoring politicians is difficult; sanctioning their bad performance in office often ineffective (see Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin 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).

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 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 selectoral 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.

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.

about local problems to help governments preempt social unrest.¹⁴ Electoral shocks (failed elections, election of write-in candidates) and lopsidedly elitist congresses are easily measurable (and routinely measured) signals of compliance failures. These “fire alarms” (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984), I argue, alert autocrats in Beijing to local party committee failure to heed information from ordinary citizens in the candidate selection process.

Congresses with enough “good types” are valuable to local governments. Delegate advocacy and special pleading constitute information about local problems that, if allowed to fester, may explode. As described earlier, local governments can no longer take social stability for granted. Governments pay attention to local congress delegates, I argue, because they know social stability is one of the highest priorities of autocrats in Beijing. Scholars studying the Chinese personnel system tend to focus on the bundle of economic goals, which have long dominated the allocation of points in the target responsibility system.¹⁵ The party center also clearly asserts its preference for other goals, however. As discussed earlier, social stability is a strong preference, powerfully communicated as one of only several imperative targets.

In sum, in the Communist Party personnel management system, autocrats in Beijing have the formal authority and institutional resources to incentivize party and government agents to pay attention to their preferences. This, I argue, is what fundamentally constrains local party committees and local governments to take local knowledge of ordinary citizens and congress delegates into account in their work.

At the same time, for ordinary Chinese, the salient story of local congressional representation is *not* that party committees or governments are incentivized to pay attention to local knowledge that they or their congress delegates provide. In addition to highlighting new findings, as I have done, it is worth drawing attention here to the empirical support I find for the conventional wisdom of local congressional irrelevance. I show in Chapter 4 that high proportions of Chinese villagers say they did not vote in the most recent congress election, and fairly high proportions cannot name their local delegates. This

¹⁴ In addition to the party center’s well-established preference for social stability, congresses saturated with government officials cannot monitor local governments, a role much scrutinized in the new secondary literature on Chinese local congresses. See the later discussion of the literature.

¹⁵ This is so even for the most recent excellent addition to the literature by Landry, Lü, and Duan (2015), which distinguishes across provincial, municipal, and county officials. For officials on the Central Committee and in provincial offices, Victor Shih, Christopher Adolph, and Mingxing Liu (2012) present findings that dispute the vaunted importance of basic economic targets such as local gross domestic product (GDP) and GDP growth in contributing to career advancement. Instead, their analysis highlights the importance of biographical connections. As noted earlier, however, field and survey research indicates this describes neither the beliefs of officials nor the actual application of standards at lower levels (Landry 2008). Nor does Adolph (March 1, 2013) argue that the findings in Shih et al. (2012) necessarily apply to lower levels.

contrasts markedly with their perspective on village committees, which were introduced a full decade *after* reinstatement of congresses.

To be sure, local congressional representation does not require that the putative principals (ordinary citizens) believe in their own influence as long as other relevant players are flattered or constrained to represent their interests. This line of argument seems to gloss over the broader context of autocratic politics in China, however. What are “institutionalized arrangements” when autocrats rule? When (if at all), in such settings, do rules matter—and why? These more fundamental theoretical questions seem to be assumed away by the argument here about representation in Chinese local congresses as an *institutionalized* flow of information from ordinary citizens to the powerful, to which the powerful normally respond. To answer them requires shifting the focus from agents to principals. I turn to this in the next section.

III. Nominally Democratic Institutions in Autocracies

To reprise, local party committees and governments are constrained by the Communist Party personnel management system to play by the new electoral rules, designed in Beijing, that structure opportunities for ordinary Chinese citizens and congress delegates to provide local knowledge. In this story, the nomenklatura system is the incentive structure that “reliably” animates local executive responsiveness; it is the Chinese autocratic version of the “institutionalized arrangements” that Powell (2004), quoted in the previous section, requires of representation. Are autocrats in Beijing themselves committed to the persistence of the new rules? It makes sense to think so: in principle, when local agents heed local knowledge to play by the new rules, it yields social stability and congressional inclusion—which Chinese rulers certainly value instrumentally (if not intrinsically) for its presumed contribution to regime longevity. Yet, as I describe in Chapters 1 and 5, the rules were changed several times after 1979, especially in response to the challenge of “excessive democracy” (过度民主) that independent candidates posed as early as 1980 and as recently as 2012. This raises an issue about institutions that seems fundamental in autocratic politics. As I theorize in this section, the standard institutional story of incentive design to make commitments credible is insufficient for autocrats: autocrats cannot really “tie their hands” with so-called self-enforcing rules.

Why Credible Commitment is Difficult for Autocrats

Rules underpinning nominally democratic institutions such as the popularly elected congresses studied in this book pose risks for autocrats by creating space for unpredicted and (for them) unwelcome grassroots democratization. When do these sorts of rules matter? John Carey (2000) uses the term “parchment institutions” to refer to rules of political contestation that are codified in written documents such as laws, regulations, or constitutions. Even when such rules formally reconfigure political power, they may not be consequential because

nothing about rules per se constrains the players identified in them to be rule abiding. When it addresses this question, the literature usually endogenizes institutions by focusing on incentive design: that is, in the absence of third-party enforcement, rulers who devolve power to other players and whose survival is thereby threatened must design arrangements that plainly keep them (and other players) rule abiding even in the event of imaginable future circumstances in which it pays them to renege.¹⁶ Institutions in this perspective are self-enforcing, enforced by arrangements designed to constrain relevant players. The perspective places the problem of credible commitment at the core of institutional design.

From this perspective, rules underpinning nominally democratic institutions matter when they constrain players, especially powerful players, to be rule abiding and when relevant players believe they are so constrained. This is the usual sense in which political scientists in the rational choice tradition define an institution as a relatively stable pattern of actions sustained by a structure of incentives and associated beliefs. Incentives that “tie the hands” of powerful players are key to the definition of institutions in rational choice accounts: they give credibility to rules.¹⁷ Here, however, I theorize that the context of autocracy presents an additional burden for institutional design generally and for the successful creation of nominally democratic institutions in particular.

Historically (within living memory for many), autocrats do not observe rules. Autocrats create rules for the less powerful to coordinate expectations on structures and processes that constrain the ruled, not the ruler. Autocrats often enforce coordination with blunt force. Autocrats also change rules to reflect their changing preferences and circumstances, which can make rules appear arbitrary to other players. For three intrinsically related reasons, this context presents an obstacle when autocrats set out to build nominally democratic institutions.

First, when autocrats devolve power with rules that ostensibly prevent them from renegeing, they do so in a broader context that remains autocratic. They introduce nominally democratic institutions to reconfigure, not end, authoritarian politics. For example, under electoral authoritarianism, autocrats create rules that open up elections and assemblies to rivals, but this occurs in a polity in which limits are clearly set out to preserve the regime. A single party remains the dominant political force—and rulers are uncertain about the relationship between particular rules and regime persistence. Absent third-party enforcement in this essentially institutionless environment, how can other players

¹⁶ For example, in one such arrangement, institutionalized ruling parties guarantee deals to share power with rivals over the long term (Magaloni 2008; Gehlbach and Keefer 2011). In another such arrangement (Boix and Svolik 2013), rulers and empowered opposition parties can each punish deviation by the other.

¹⁷ See, for example, Shepsle and Weingast (1984), North and Weingast (1989), Root (1989), Ferejohn (1991), Calvert (1995), Weimer (1997), and Bates et al. (1998).

believe that any particular rule will persist? Instead, beliefs of other players will likely comprehend the strategic goals in devolving power through nominally democratic institutions in something like the following way: autocrats will probably renege by abrogating the rule when outcomes appear to them to threaten (rather than strengthen) their survival in power (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). When rules in general lack inherent credibility, any particular rule lacks the heft we associate in established liberal democracies with being part of some bundle of rules, such as law or administrative regulation.

Second, beliefs can be sticky in any context, which simply means that a change in the incentive structure may not immediately be accompanied by a corresponding change in beliefs. Against the historical background of autocracy, however, sticky beliefs play a more distinctive role when autocrats introduce rules with incentives that appear to constrain them. The stickiness of beliefs in this context is not about some particular pattern of actions but about the more general relevance of rules for autocrats. The problem is not simply to create (or change) a particular institution by introducing a new incentive structure around which beliefs may eventually cohere. Rather, the problem is to create any institution, which is an entirely different enterprise. It sets a higher threshold for credibility.

These two implications have to do with the difficult problem of credible commitment for autocrats who set out to build any institution from rules. A third implication has particularly to do with nominally democratic institutions, such as popularly elected congresses, which often already have a history. The new literature on authoritarianism distinguishes nominally democratic institutions from the plainly sham elections and puppet congresses that are an integral part of the history of modern authoritarianism. This infrastructural history in politically closed regimes (especially communist regimes) creates priors, adding to the difficult general problem of credible commitment a specific problem of mistrust of rules that devolve power to transform old structures and processes into institutions that constrain. Autocrats can make rules but they cannot, by themselves, make institutions. Even very powerful autocrats cannot select the expectations that relevant players bring to situations that the rules encompass; at best, they can use their substantial resources to attempt to shape these beliefs.

Theoretical Implication: The Importance of Reputation

By implication, autocrats cannot simply design an incentive structure that ostensibly binds them and others not to renege. I theorize that, to be successful, they must also build a *reputation* for themselves as rule-abiding players. I add reputation to the standard theoretical account to reflect the fundamental weakness of rules for autocrats, which still effectively (indeed, crucially) defines most autocracies—certainly contemporary China.

A generalized account goes something like this. I theorize that autocrats introduce rules with self-enforcing features, establishing an incentive structure for nominally democratic institutions. Subsequently, they face ongoing choices

to renege or observe these rules. Reneging takes one of two forms: autocrats change the rules or break the rules; with either action, they violate the credibility of the rules. When autocrats renege, they undermine coordination (of beliefs) of other players on the rules. When autocrats do not renege, they build a reputation as rule-abiding players. Over time, this reputation affects the beliefs of other relevant players, creating an institution with its own stickiness. To be sure, there is an important asymmetry to the effect of these choices. When autocrats renege, it is highly salient to other players; by contrast, ongoing choices to observe the rules may go long unnoticed as non-events. Autocrats must routinely choose whether to improve on the rules after their initial introduction, but even tinkering that does not obviously constitute clear renegeing can disturb the rule's persistence and may damage a reputation as rule-abiding autocrats. When autocrats renege more aggressively, with demonstrations of force, they may shore up their immediate position by coordinating expectations of other players on the boundaries of permissible action, but they also frustrate the emergence of an institution.

Methodological Implication: Beliefs of Relevant Players

In the account outlined earlier, beliefs are not simply derivative of existing incentives. Instead, shared understandings lag in the form of historical legacies that reproduce certain responses or suggest focal points to guide selection of particular actions.¹⁸ This is always so, of course—but it takes on central importance when autocrats introduce nominally democratic institutions. It has a methodological implication. To truly endogenize institutions in such cases requires more than the exercise of drawing inferences that associate incentives contained in rules with actions by players who are ostensibly constrained by these incentives. It requires a direct investigation of the shared beliefs (or coordinated expectations) that make the structure of incentives robust to external disturbances. When new, nominally democratic rules matter, they take on a life of their own, a life that may have been inspired by the design of autocrats but that has developed as a product not only of the structure of incentives but also of the beliefs that attach themselves to particular bundles of rules as autocrats abide by them relatively consistently over time.

This perspective on institutions and institution building sets a more demanding standard by which to assess representation in Chinese local congresses than that proposed in Powell's (2004) review of representative democracies.

¹⁸ This distinguishes the “state dependence” of most rational choice institutional accounts (where incentives in the rule's status quo drive actions) from the path (or “phat”) dependence of historical institutionalism (where previous history is also relevant). A process is “state dependent” if the outcome in any period depends only on the state of the process at that time; that is, the history determines the state, and the state in turn determines the distribution over outcomes. In most historical institutionalist accounts of path dependence, the order of previous events matters; by contrast, “phat” dependence refers to a situation in which the history of previous outcomes matters but not their order. See Page (2006).

The theoretical point here is that the context of autocratic politics seems to require it.

IV. Conventional Wisdom

A popular Chinese expression has long disparaged congress delegates: they assemble merely to *shake hands* ceremoniously, *clap hands* at speeches by government leaders, and *raise hands* to ratify executive decisions (握手拍手举手). Similarly, for many decades, scholars easily dismissed Chinese congresses as “rubber stamps.” In recent years, however, a new conventional wisdom has emerged in the congress scholarship, one in which congresses are real players in Chinese politics. Congress delegates veto government reports, quiz and dismiss officials, and reject Communist Party nominees selected for leadership. The liveliest congresses are found not at the center of power in Beijing but in the localities below.¹⁹ This section puts my study of representation in Chinese local congresses in the context of some of the new literature by China experts writing about Chinese local congresses.²⁰

As Kevin O’Brien notes in a review, the big story in the new literature is “inside the state”—that is, it has “less to do with responsiveness and changing state-society relations and more to do with state-building” (O’Brien 2009, 131). Most of the new literature focuses not on the relationship between congresses and ordinary Chinese but instead on the institutional empowerment of the congresses vis-à-vis other state players. The most important work is by Ming Xia (1997, 2000, 2008) and Young Nam Cho (2002, 2003a, 2006, 2009).²¹ They find increased assertiveness expressed mainly in congressional oversight (监督) of the government, courts, and procuratorates. Cho (2002) argues that local congresses abandoned a strategy of cooperation with other institutions by the mid-1990s and became increasingly confrontational. Xia (2000, 2008) argues that confrontation with other institutions strengthened the local congresses. In previous work (Manion 2008), I document the assertiveness of local congresses vis-à-vis local party committees in the selection of government leaders.²² Overall, these studies find that Chinese local congresses have become important

¹⁹ Even the NPC, however, can no longer be characterized as a “rubber stamp.” See especially O’Brien (1990), Dowdle (1997), and Tanner (1999).

²⁰ My focus in this section is on the English-language literature, not the new empirical work by Chinese congress scholars (many of whom I interviewed) on which I draw throughout the book. Quite apart from the literature reviewed in this section, China experts have empirically studied local elections and independent candidates. Both of these topics are directly relevant to the investigation of representation in this book. I discuss these studies in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively.

²¹ For a dissenting view, see O’Brien (1994a, 1994b). O’Brien’s studies are probably too early to observe the change.

²² A new study by Almén (2013), however, finds the oversight role of local congresses diminished in recent years because of a conscious effort at the party center.

players, especially compared with the “rubber stamps” of previous decades. Nowhere in the studies, however, is an argument that congresses have become more important players than local party committees or governments. The new congress scholarship does not dispute that Chinese local governance is still strongly executive-led governance. This perspective is also consistent with key arguments in this book.

In other ways, too, the new literature on local congressional empowerment is relevant to the study of representation this book takes up—and vice versa. First, for routine governance, the most powerful congress delegates are the 7 to 8 percent of professional politicians who sit on congress standing committees. As I show in Chapter 2, these delegates are overwhelmingly not “good types” but party-nominated “governing types.” Any story of congressional institutional empowerment must take this “selectoral connection” seriously: it is local congress standing committees that mainly exercise oversight; these committees, whatever their new institutional powers, are the products of party committee preferences. Second, as theorized in the previous section, the legacy of weak congresses influences the view of congresses from the outside. Specifically, for constituents, low expectations of representation are undoubtedly shaped by a history of unimportant congresses. To the degree that the congresses are newly empowered vis-à-vis other state institutions, expectations of representation are likely to grow, to take into account the new status of congresses. This seems especially likely when (and where) local congresses exhibit their institutional power in salient ways—such as the rejection of party nominees for executive office. Finally and not least of all, as I show in Chapter 3, township and county delegates do not see themselves as powerless. Their perspective seems to derive partly from their formal powers (of which they are keenly aware) to elect and recall government leaders and bureaucrats and partly from their sense of unique institutional legitimacy as winners of popular elections featuring mandated contestation and secret ballots. Well founded or not, this self-important view of congresses from the inside is crucial, I argue, in making representation in Chinese local congresses work.

In contrast to the literature reviewed earlier, this book is primarily concerned with the relationship between congresses and ordinary citizens. Three studies in the new literature on Chinese local congresses are building blocks for this book. Kevin O’Brien (1994a), in the earliest study, based on 39 interviews, most with congress delegates or congress leaders or congress officials, aims to see what delegates see. He focuses on role perceptions and finds the dominant role is the “regime agent”—the delegate who works on behalf of the state to transmit and explain the official position, however unpopular, to ordinary citizens. At the same time, some delegates also talk and act in ways that suggest to him the role of “imperial remonstrator”:

They are quasi-insiders who seek attention and transmit information that may help rectify administration. Like upright officials in imperial China, they assert a right to

recognize injustices and mistakes, and to confront leaders . . . They possess information, rather than a mandate, and the leadership has no obligation to respond if the information is judged incorrect or the solution is deemed too costly (O'Brien 1994a, 368–69).

O'Brien eschews the terminology of representation. In any case, he concludes that remonstrations are a secondary role at best.²³ This book suggests otherwise. More recently, Cho (2003b, 2009, 83–112) analyzes some 600 cases of delegate activity described in Chinese congress journals for the 1999 to 2001 period and concludes that active delegates see themselves as neither regime agents nor imperial remonstrators. Instead, the most important delegate activities are to oversee governments and reflect upward (反映) to governments various public demands affecting the lives of ordinary Chinese. Specifically, on the latter point, local congress delegates:

. . . reflect various demands affecting people's daily life. Repairing roads and bridges, improving public facilities (e.g., public toilets, street lamps, and water supplies), alleviating environmental pollution, providing better educational and medical services, and preserving public order are the most frequently reflected issues in both urban and rural areas (Cho 2009, 95).

Cho argues that party leaders in Beijing emphasize the role of reflecting public demands “not only because it provides the regime with a trustworthy channel to understand social problems, but also because it enhances social integrity by alleviating public dissatisfaction before an explosion” (Cho 2009, 95). This book echoes Cho's findings and argument. Cho also argues that O'Brien's findings are now descriptively inaccurate because delegate characteristics, political-legal conditions, and public expectations have changed since the early 1990s. In particular, passage of the 1992 Law on Congress Delegates clarified congress powers and boosted delegate status. Similar to O'Brien, however, Cho eschews the language of representation. Indeed, he concludes that, despite congressional empowerment, representation by local congress delegates remains a marginal role. Most recently, Tomoki Kamo and Hiroki Takeuchi (2013) analyze proposals submitted by Yangzhou Municipal Congress delegates (in Jiangsu province) in the 1998 to 2002 period. This is a remarkable study that attaches demographic information and voting district characteristics to each of 416 municipal delegates representing seven districts. Yangzhou is the only municipality that discloses enough data on its congress website to conduct such an analysis. As I do in this book, Kamo and Takeuchi (2013, 57) explicitly characterize the activity they analyze as representation, concluding that the delegates “represent the interests of the constituency of their electoral districts,” sometimes in opposition to local Communist Party committees.

Without strictly comparable evidence for earlier periods, it is impossible to know whether a view of delegate activity as representation reflects an

²³ Judging from interviews cited, nineteen delegates talk in ways that suggest to O'Brien the role of imperial remonstrators.

empirically new or just a newly observed relationship between congresses and constituents. Certainly, as I describe in Chapter 3, Chinese congress scholars identify a new delegate consciousness of representation; moreover, delegates I interviewed explicitly link their sense of representation to new electoral rules—but this was presumably evident already in the 1990s. My guess is that it matters that most delegates interviewed and surveyed for this book are popularly elected township and county congress delegates—rather than the NPC, provincial, and municipal congress delegates that dominate most of the studies reviewed here.²⁴

Corruption in Local Congresses

A few years ago, Chinese authorities revealed a spectacular case of vote buying in Hengyang Municipal Congress. The transactions occurred in December 2012, after the ninth round of county congress elections since 1979, at the first meeting of municipal delegates for the congress term. Municipal delegates met to elect provincial delegates to represent their municipality in the Hunan Provincial Congress, one level up.²⁵ Of 93 candidates on the ballot for 76 provincial congress seats, 56 offered cash or gifts to municipal delegates in exchange for votes; bribes averaged more than US\$30,000 per delegate—and 98 percent of the 527 delegates at the meeting accepted a bribe (Meng 2013).²⁶ The value of a provincial congress seat to each of the fifty-six candidates, reflected in the average bribe price offered in this case, is a whopping US\$325,000. The magnitude of the Hengyang case stunned Chinese congress scholars I consulted, as it did me. It calls for some consideration here.

Common to the new literature on Chinese local congresses is the absence of an examination of corruption. Nor do I focus on corruption in this book, although I surely know that corruption is widespread in China (Manion 2004, 2014a). This seems at odds with stories like the one just recounted and more generally with any presumption that corruption is integral to how Chinese congress delegates gain and use office. Cases of electoral fraud reported in

²⁴ Among O'Brien's interview subjects, more than half sit in the NPC or a provincial congress; the only township delegate interviewed sits concurrently in a county congress, a provincial congress, and the NPC. The Kamo and Takeuchi study is a case study of municipal congress delegates. Cho conducted his interviews in Shanghai, Guangdong, and Tianjin, which he acknowledges as highly unrepresentative localities. Nonetheless, his study is not unrepresentative of delegates at lower levels. His survey of congress journals includes activities of popularly elected delegates, for example. Also, he surveyed the activities of congress delegates in counties and urban districts of Tianjin; although Tianjin is a provincial-level (not municipal) congress, its county and district congress delegates are popularly elected.

²⁵ Recall: only township and county congresses are popularly elected. County congresses elect municipal congresses, municipal congresses elect provincial congresses, and provincial congresses elect the NPC. I note here that Hengyang is *not* one of the municipalities where we conducted our surveys in Hunan.

²⁶ All but two congress delegates attended the meeting. In addition to delegates, 68 officials of various sorts accepted bribes.

the media point to a perception (at least) that congress seats have private value for some delegates. In a political economy where local governments still control access to many important scarce resources (access to land and credit, for example), congress seats presumably advantage private entrepreneurs in networking with bureaucrats. Moreover, although the law does not exempt delegates from the criminal process, no delegate in a county congress or higher can be arrested or tried for a crime without permission of the congress standing committee.²⁷

Of course, we have no fix on the scope or seriousness of corruption in Chinese local congresses, but it does not figure much in accounts of forms of corruption in China in the past few decades.²⁸ This suggests that buying and selling votes for congress seats are not (or not yet at least) regular occurrences. Indeed, everything in the scholarly empirical literature suggests that the normal value of a seat as an amateur in a Chinese local congress, to the degree that it has value for delegates, as yet consists mostly of the “ego rent” that delegate status confers—not substantial public or private powers.²⁹

V. Sources and Methods

In addition to published Chinese-language materials, such as party and government documents and an exciting new empirical literature by Chinese congress scholars,³⁰ I rely in this book on interview evidence from qualitative field research and analysis of data from original probability sample surveys. Appendix A provides details. Here, I summarize key points and discuss the provinces surveyed.

I conducted sixty-five loosely structured interviews across five provinces. Most interviews were with congress officials or ordinary congress delegates, sampled opportunistically. Interview numbers used throughout the book refer to these interviews.³¹ I quote liberally from interviews to illustrate descriptive

²⁷ See article 30 of the 1992 Law on Congress Delegates, article 32 in the most recent revised version passed on October 28, 2010.

²⁸ On the 1990s, see Gong (1997) and Manion (2004). On more recent years, up through 2012, see Wedeman (2012) and Manion (2014a).

²⁹ An “ego rent” is perfectly consistent with the notion that the congress seat enhances the reputation of delegates. This may confer material advantage. For example, Rory Truex (2014) finds that a seat in the NPC is associated with increased profit margins for firms of business executives who are also NPC delegates, but this is because of reputational boost and not policy influence.

³⁰ Here, I refer especially to work by Cai Dingjian, Pu Xingzu, Li Fan, Shi Weimin, and He Junzhi. I consulted with each of these scholars during this project.

³¹ Table A.1 in Appendix A associates each number with an interview subject identified by level (where relevant), type of institution, and position in the workplace. By “interview,” I refer to a meeting arranged to talk about local congress matters, in which I asked questions and openly took notes. I do not include the many discussions and conversations in China in which these conditions were absent, although these certainly illuminated many issues for me.

and inferential findings. Although my observations from qualitative field research add up to only a small number of players and places, they played an important role in helping me formulate descriptive and causal conjectures. They also suggested specific content and language for the survey instrument.

Only surveying a large enough number of delegates in local congresses sampled probabilistically allows me to apply inferential statistics to estimate relationships of interest. Accordingly, I partnered with the Research Center on Contemporary China at Peking University for unique surveys of congress delegates in Anhui, Hunan, and Zhejiang provinces. We successfully surveyed 5,130 delegates in probability-proportionate-to-size localities selected below the province: 1,232 delegates in township congresses, 3,008 delegates in county congresses, and 890 delegates in municipal congresses. We also surveyed a simple random sample of 983 ordinary constituents in a probabilistically sampled subset of our surveyed townships.

I expected representation to be most observable in the popularly elected township and county congresses. Based on past survey experience, I also expected more variation across counties than across townships within counties. Counties have powerful, fully developed governance structures as well as boundaries (and identities) that date roughly back to imperial times. Townships have weaker governance structures and have undergone major boundary changes since their restoration in the late 1970s.³² Differences in scale are also important. Average size masks huge variation within categories, of course, but a county is typically an order of magnitude bigger than a township—with a population of about 474,000 compared with 33,000, on average.³³ A municipality is yet an order of magnitude bigger: on average, 4.07 million people. I least expected to observe anything resembling representation in municipal congresses, with their delegates distanced from constituents by both scale and indirect electoral institutions.

In constructing the questionnaires, I worked with my Chinese colleagues to avoid offering delegates “politically correct” response choices that constitute easy opportunities to dissemble.³⁴ In addition, I conducted a reliability check on delegate self-reports, based on responses to a question about constituent contacting asked of delegates and constituents in a subsample of surveyed townships.³⁵ Township delegates and their constituents roughly agree on

³² For example, mergers reduced the number of townships from 91,590 in 1985 (Pu 2006, 14) to 34,271 at the end of 2007 (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2008, 1), after which size and boundaries more or less stabilized.

³³ These figures simply divide the 2012 year-end population figure by number of administrative units at the same point in time, including urban neighborhoods in the township count as this makes the most sense here (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2013, 1). Range within categories can be large: for example, counties range in population from under 10,000 to more than two million.

³⁴ On issues involved in obtaining reliable survey data in China, see Manion (1994, 2010), Shi (1996), Tang (2003, 2005), Landry and Shen (2005), and Tsai (2010).

³⁵ See Appendix B.

frequency of contacts. This suggests that delegate self-reports about behaviors are reasonably reliable, even if (as I conclude in Chapter 3) delegates have an exaggerated view of their own importance.³⁶ It also implies that the gap I describe (in Chapter 4) on local congressional representation is no simple artifact of delegate exaggeration of what delegates do. Rather, it reflects different perspectives about the salience of what they do.

The three provinces in which we conducted our surveys are in south-central China. Landlocked Anhui abuts coastal southern Zhejiang; Hunan is farther inland and farther south. They are a purposive sample, selected from a sampling frame reflecting variation on economic dimensions especially. Anhui is in the poorest third of Chinese provinces; Hunan is at the low end of the middle third; Zhejiang is an economic reform winner. At the time we conducted our surveys, GDP per capita for Anhui and Hunan were US\$1,889 and US\$2,332, respectively. By contrast, Zhejiang's per capita GDP was US\$5,712, the fourth highest in the country.³⁷ This does not guarantee that localities below the province vary in wealth, but it does make it more likely.³⁸

It is now not too difficult to conduct high-quality nationally representative sample surveys of the Chinese mass public (see Manion 2010), but systematic surveys of congress delegates are difficult, as I describe in Appendix A. One crucial selection principle for the three provinces surveyed was feasibility of implementation. As a result, the provinces are a purposive (not probabilistic) sample—but also not selected with strict attention to the design logic of case study research (see Gerring 2007). How do they measure up *ex post* to standards of case selection?

To answer this question, I situate the provinces in the population of all thirty-one Chinese provinces along the main dimension of interest in this book, namely, local congressional representation. As changes in rules motivate my research question, I focus initially on how relevant features of rules distinguish the three provinces from one another (if at all) and where this situates them among all provinces. As I describe in Chapter 1, the NPC revised the electoral law five times after 1979. The 2004 version reinstated primary elections (removed in 1986) as a more transparent means to select candidates in congress elections; it also permitted meetings with voters in which

³⁶ I find numerous examples of what appears to me to reflect delegate frankness of response. For example, although congress delegates are generally supposed to report back to their constituents after congress meetings, fewer than half of delegates surveyed respond that they do this. See Chapter 3.

³⁷ Figures are from the 2012 CNKI Statistical Yearbooks Database for the 2007 population regularly residing (常驻) in the provinces. I use a 2007 conversion rate of 1 Chinese yuan to 0.148 US dollars.

³⁸ Local wealth looms large in some explanations of variation in village-level democratization (e.g., Shi 1999), so it seemed prudent to us to take wealth into account as best we could in selecting provinces. Below the province, localities are selected with probability proportionate to population size only.

candidates introduced themselves and answered questions. I compared language on these two relatively progressive legal changes in electoral law with language in provincial electoral measures as of 2009.³⁹ In addition, as I describe in Chapter 2, nominees for seats in township and county congresses originate from two sources: ordinary voters and the Communist Party (or its affiliates). Provinces vary in relative shares of voter and party nominees. I computed percentages of voter nominees among all nominees for congresses in the 2001 to 2002 township elections (for which we have complete data), treating higher percentages of voter nominees as higher voter involvement, mobilized (or not) for electoral participation.⁴⁰ These three features, by which I attempt to capture the progressiveness of formal procedures that can shape congressional representation, prove more helpful in situating Anhui, Hunan, and Zhejiang among all provinces than in distinguishing across the three cases. On some imagined regression line estimated to facilitate case selection with no constraints on survey implementation, the provinces are highly typical cases. Neither Anhui nor Zhejiang is situated at provincial extremes; Zhejiang is somewhat more progressive and Anhui somewhat less progressive. Hunan is between the two, closer to Zhejiang than to Anhui.

I also asked three top Chinese congress scholars to name provincial frontrunners and laggards in congressional reform and then to evaluate Anhui, Hunan, and Zhejiang relative to one another on this dimension. In their expert (and independent) opinions, Zhejiang emerged as a reformist province; they placed Anhui and Hunan significantly behind Zhejiang but not in the handful of provinces at the very bottom.

In sum, the surveyed provinces seem not to be the vanguard of congressional reform (as is Guangdong, for example), but nor are they notable laggards (as is Tibet, for example). Ex post, for purposes of gaining insight into local congressional representation, I can consider them as roughly “typical cases” (Gerring 2007, 91–97), that is, at neither extreme of the relevant continuum. Of course, the main unit of analysis in this book is the individual delegate, analytically clustered (in mixed-effects hierarchical models, for example) in his or her respective local congress below the province. Presumably, these clusters also reflect relevant provincial differences. In principle, as long as the analysis is not contaminated by provincial peculiarities on the relationship of theoretical interest, it is reasonable to generalize from my analytical findings (Manson 1994). It is impossible to know how unspecified provincial idiosyncrasies influence theorized relationships, however. Moreover, some descriptive (not analytical) findings are of considerable interest. For these reasons, I also check (and report, as I find them) relevant significant differences across the three provinces.

³⁹ I accessed provincial electoral measures on websites of provincial congresses.

⁴⁰ I computed percentages of voter nominees among all nominees in the 2001 to 2002 township congress elections from figures in Shi, Guo, and Liu (2009, 154–55).

VI. Preview

The chapters ahead are organized in the following way. Chapter 1 describes the institutional design of Chinese congresses, drawing mostly on archival evidence. Chapters 2 and 3 draw mostly on interviews and surveys with congress delegates to investigate, respectively, the selection (and election) of delegates and what delegates do once elected. Chapter 4 shifts the focus to the view from constituents, drawing mostly on surveys with ordinary Chinese in a subset of surveyed townships. Chapter 5 turns from the study of the “normal politics” of representation in Chinese local congresses to the campaigns of independent candidates, especially in the most recent round of elections, drawing in part on an original dataset compiled from online campaigns. The book’s conclusion considers the implications of my findings, argument, and theoretical perspective for our understanding of Chinese politics as a politics of “authoritarian resilience,” the conceptual framework introduced by Andrew Nathan (2003), important still to the way we think about the Chinese state.