A large obstacle to crafting policy that will further standardize Chinese village elections is the lack of accurate and objective methods for evaluating the election process. To address this problem, in July 1998 the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) chose nine pilot counties from Hunan, Jilin, and Fujian Provinces in which to establish the Villager Committee Election Computer Information System. The project was successfully finished in January 1999. The computer information system was then implemented in 40 counties of Hunan Province in 1999. The system operated as follows: After villager committee elections, villagers filled out two forms provided by the MCA: “The Villager Committee Election Process” and “The Villager Committee Election Results.” These forms were collected in each township, sent to the county civil affairs office, and entered into the computer information system. Finally, the data were transmitted by phone lines to the province-level Civil Affairs Bureau and the MCA Statistics Center for analysis. Through this process, election data from 15,454 villages were collected during the 1999 villager committee elections in Hunan Province. This article will briefly analyze the election results using the collected data.

I. Background

The computer information system, with its modern information technology, was set up to replace the traditional method of manually gathering data so that election statistics could be produced rapidly and accurately. The information technology generates a general survey instead of a sampling survey. Therefore, the survey forms the tables did not include questions about village social and economic conditions. Due to limitations in the computer software, we are unable to analyze the correlation between election results and socioeconomic variables. Instead, we are only able to analyze election procedures.

40 counties were randomly selected from the 122 county-level administrative units in Hunan Province. The 40 participating counties are diverse in terms of their economic situation. Some are typical agricultural regions, such as Rucheng County and Dongkou County. Some are relatively developed city suburbs, such as the Ziyang district in the city of Yiyang and the suburbs of the city of Hengyang. A total of 15,454 villager committees were involved in the survey, an average of 386 villages per county.

The total population of the 40 participating counties is 20,596,142. The most populous area is Xiangxiang, a city with population 1,846,484. The least populous area is the Daxiang district, with population 19,368, in the city of Shaoyang. The total number of registered voters in these 40 counties is 11,878,760, representing 57.67% of all residents. The number of voters that actually cast votes is 11,157,272, representing 93.93% of registered voters. The city of Shaoshan has the highest voting rate, at 97.77%. Longshan County has the lowest voting rate, at 80.42%.
Although gender and age surely influence voting behavior and should be taken into account, such data could not be collected by a general survey such as this.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Number of Registered Voters</th>
<th>Number of Voters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20,596,142</td>
<td>11,878,760</td>
<td>11,157,272</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

II. Election Preparation

Election preparation includes the forming county/township election guidance groups, formulating implementation schemes for the elections, surveying villagers’ willingness, auditing village finances, and forming villager election committees (VEC). The latter has the most influence over elections. During the initial implementation of the Organic Law on Villager Committees, most villager election committees were nominated by the township government or village party branch. For example, Article 18 of the “Ningxia Hui Nationality Autonomous Region Measures for the Election of Villager Committees,” issued on December 3, 1997, stipulates that “Members of villager election committees shall be nominated by town/township governments and discussed at villager representative assemblies.” As a result, villager election committees are mostly composed of village party branch members or former villager committee members. Often, former villager committee members preside over the elections, even though they have also been nominated as final candidates. This phenomenon is detrimental not only to the fairness of elections but also to voter enthusiasm for the elections. In many cases, villagers have complained to higher authorities, resulting in failed elections. Therefore, the revised Organic Law on Villager Committees places strict limitations on the formation of VECs, stipulating that VECs may only be elected at Village Assemblies (VAs) or Villager Small Group (VSG) Assemblies. In addition, some provinces have stipulated that VECs may also be elected at Villager Representative Assemblies (VRAs).

The question asked by the computer system was: “Are Villager Election Committee members nominated and/or appointed by the town/township government?” Of the 15,454 villages surveyed, only 24 villages (or 0.16%) indicated that VEC members were nominated or appointed by the town/township government. More detail is not available.
from the collected data. For example, we have no way of knowing whether VEC members were elected by the Villager Assembly or Villager Small Groups. The above data show that in Hunan Province, VECs were not generally nominated or appointed town/township governments. This finding is corroborated by a recent survey of 120 villages in 40 counties of Hunan Province, which showed that 0.7% of VECs were nominated or appointed by town/township governments.¹

Other data gathered by the computer information system indicate that 89,070 VEC members were elected in 15,454 villages, an average of 5.7 members per village. Of 89,070 VEC members, 48,748 (or 54.72%) were Party members. Of 15,454 VEC chairs, 14,146 (or 91.5%) were Party branch secretaries; 670 (or 4.3%) were former villager committee chairs; and 638 (or 4.2%) were villagers. By law, the following people are qualified to serve as VEC members: the Party branch secretary, villager committee members who will not compete in the coming election, and all villagers. If a Party member and/or Party branch secretary is elected based on merit to the VEC, they will be able to ensure that Party policies are followed during the elections. The above data show that the majority of VEC members are Party members, and over 90% of the VEC chairs are Party branch secretaries, which indicates that the Communist Party is very prestigious among rural voters. However, it is unrealistic to exclude the possibility that in some villages the local Party branch controlled the election of the VEC chair. In addition, the above data show that VEC members do not overlap much with Party branch members, as almost half of VEC members are not Party members.

III. Election Procedures

One measure by which we can evaluate the standardization of elections is to see if election procedures conform to the law. The Organic Law on Villager Committee Elections and various provincial Measures for the Election of Villager Committees set forth several main election procedures, including: voter registration, nomination of preliminary candidates, determination of final candidates, voting, secret ballot marking, public ballot counting, and announcement of election results.

1. Nomination of Candidates

The nomination of candidates for villager committees was first controlled, then limited, and finally made open over the past ten years. In the initial period of village elections, candidates were nominated by the town/township government, village Party branch, or outgoing villager committee. Later, candidates were nominated at villager representative assemblies. The new Organic Law on Villager Committee Elections dictates that candidates must be directly nominated by villagers with the right to vote, making nominations by either the town/township government or Party branch illegal. Direct

¹ In the summer of 1999, the Ministry of Civil Affairs Department of Basic-Level Governance and Community Construction in conjunction with the Hunan Province Civil Affairs Bureau arranged for 120 students on vacation from the Changsha Civil Affairs School to survey villages following villager committee elections, resulting in 355 valid surveys.
nomination has taken various forms, including: self-recommendation, joint nomination by voters, and nomination by villager small groups. See table below:

### Methods of Nominating Preliminary Candidates (Unit: %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual nomination (one person, one vote)</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-recommendation</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election by villager small group</td>
<td>26.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election by villager representative assembly</td>
<td>16.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint nomination by villagers</td>
<td>12.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank ballots</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Individual nomination, self-recommendation, nomination by villager small groups, joint nomination by villagers, represent 83.53% of total nominations. Nominations by villager representative assemblies represent 16.33% of total nominations. Nomination by town/township governments and Party branches have completely ceased. That individual nominations have reached 45.1% of all nominations indicates that the *haixuan* or “sea election” method has come to predominate over other methods of nominating candidates.

2. Determination of Final Candidates

Methods for determining final candidates are classified by the “computer information system” into five categories: determination by the local Party branch, by primary elections held at the Villager Representative Assembly (VRA), by primary elections held at the Villager Assembly (VA), by the number of nominations each candidate received, and other methods. According to the data collected, 67.67% of persons surveyed indicated that final candidates were determined by VRA primaries; 27.24% indicated that final candidates were determined by the number of nominations; 4.42% indicated that final candidates were determined by VA primaries, and 0.12% indicated that other methods were used. 0.55% did not provide a response.

Generally speaking, if the preliminary candidates were determined through individual nomination, then final candidates should have been determined by the number of nominations each candidate received. But the Hunan experience reveals some exceptions. According to the data on nomination methods above, we would expect roughly 45% of persons surveyed to indicate that candidates were determined by the number of nominations received. But the actual percentage was 27.24%. There are two possible explanations. The first is that voters did not understand the question clearly. The second possibility is that candidates determined by the number of nominations were then brought to the VA or VRA for a final decision. Nevertheless, the determination of final candidates by local Party branches or upper level government bodies has ceased.

3. Voting Methods

The computer information system was not designed to study elections carried out through election meetings or voting stations. Rather, the system focuses on elections carried out using mobile ballot boxes and in-trust votes. These two methods, considered distinctively Chinese, were successful in mobilizing voters during the early years of village elections.
However, these methods have also made village elections unfair to a certain extent. Therefore, the government has placed limits on the use of mobile ballot boxes and in-trust votes. According to the *Hebei Province Measures for the Election of Villager Committees*, mobile ballot boxes are illegal, whereas according to the *Fujian Province Measures for the Election of Villager Committees*, in-trust votes are illegal. The data collected by the computer information system indicate that 14,213 villages permitted the use of in-trust votes, representing 91.97% of all villages surveyed. 10,663 villages permitted the use of mobile ballot boxes, representing 69% of the total. It follows that 8.03% of surveyed villages prohibited the use of in-trust votes and that 31% prohibited the use of mobile ballot boxes. Although Hunan province has attempted to restrict these methods, there remains much room for improvement. Another set of data collected by the system indicates that among 11,157,572 ballots from 15,454 villages, 824,410 were in-trust votes, representing 7.39% of all ballots. 2,259,953 ballots were cast using mobile ballot boxes, representing 20.26% of all ballots. If we put aside the 31% of villages in which mobile ballot boxes are prohibited, then approximately 29.33% of voters in 69% of villages surveyed cast their votes using mobile ballot boxes, an indisputably high percentage. Hunan province should work harder to limit the use of mobile method boxes, even in mountainous areas.

4. **Use of Secret Ballot Booths**

With the reform and opening up of China’s economy, rural residents have increasingly migrated to urban areas. Although communication among villagers has been reduced by the emergence of private household production, nevertheless, since villagers must still share large quantities of resources, the Chinese village fundamentally remains a “society of acquaintances” (*shuren shehui*). This, combined with the lingering influence of “face culture” (*mianzi wenhua*), make it necessary that voters have privacy while voting, so that they can freely vote according to their beliefs. Thus, the establishment of secret ballot booths has been well-received by villagers. The use of secret ballot booths is stipulated by the newly passed Organic Law on Villager Committees and has been reiterated in provincial measures for the election of villager committees. According to the collected election data, 58.19% of villages surveyed utilized secret ballot booths. However, the question asked by the survey was poorly designed: villagers were asked to select the voting method they used during the election from four choices: “raise hands,” “mark in secret ballot booths,” “mark at election meetings,” and “other.” The response data were, respectively: 0%, 58.19%, 32.19%, and 9.45%. 0.17% did not answer. In reality, there are two valid methods of casting votes. One is at election meetings, the other is at voting stations. But secret ballot booths should be set up in either case. Therefore, “mark in secret ballot booths” and “mark at election meetings” overlapped, creating confusion. Nevertheless, the fact that the majority of villages have set up secret ballot booths clearly indicates their popularity.

5. **Ballot Counting and the Announcement of Election Results**

The public counting of ballots and the announcement of election results immediately afterwards are two principles set forth by the Organic Law on Villager Committees
during its initial trial years. The newly passed Organic Law also clearly affirms these principles, which Hunan Province has accordingly implemented. The collected data indicate that 15,428 villages, or 99.83% of the total 15,454, publicly counted ballots. 15,408 villages, or 99.7% of the total, announced the results at election meetings. Few of the villages that did not publicly count ballots or immediately announce the results intended to violate the Organic Law. In some cases, voters dispersed after voting; in others, ballot boxes were sealed due to controversies.

6. Invalid Ballots and Abstention Ballots

The number of invalid ballots and abstention ballots helps us evaluate voter enthusiasm for the elections as well as the validity or invalidity of the elections. The more voters participate in elections, the less likely they are to make mistakes filling out ballots, reducing the number of invalid ballots. If voters are dissatisfied with the election procedures like nomination of candidates, they are more likely to cast abstention ballots. The collected data indicate that 11,757,272 ballots were cast in 15,454 villages in 40 counties, of which 207,118 (or 1.86%) were in valid. 143,316 abstention ballots were cast, representing 1.28% of the total. Neither percentage is large, suggesting that voters are familiar with marking ballots and that election procedures are generally satisfactory to voters.

7. Competitiveness

To analyze election competitiveness, we look not at election procedures but at the percentage of ballots cast for the winning candidate. Of 15,454 villages surveyed, 7,487 (or 48.45%) winning villager committee chairs received more than two-thirds of the vote. Generally speaking, the greater the lead of the winning candidate, the less competitive the election, and vice versa. Election competitiveness might also be assessed by analyzing campaign strategies, methods of canvassing votes, and voters’ perception of election competitiveness. Unfortunately, these indicators were not included in the design of the computer information system.

IV. Analysis of Election Results

Democracy is not only a goal but also a tool. Villager committee elections have protected the democratic rights of Chinese villagers. Elections have improved the rural cadre system and guaranteed that educated, capable, and enthusiastic people are elected to villager committees. By analyzing election results, we can better evaluate the effectiveness of the elections.

59,924 village cadres were elected to a total of 15,454 villager committees, an average of 3.9 cadres per villager committee. Among all villager committee members, there were 49,269 males, or 82.2%. There were 10,655 females, or 11.8%, an average of less than one female cadre per village. 37,944 villager committee members, or 63.3%, were Party members. 15,264 (or 98.77%) of the 15,454 winning villager committee chairs were
male. Only 190 (or 1.23%) villager committee chairs were female. 11,737 villager committee chairs, or 75.95%, were Party members.

Regarding the age of villager committee members, 351 of those surveyed did not respond to this question. Of the 59,574 villager committee members who did respond, the average age was 41.13. The average age of villager committee chairs was 42.75. See table below:

**Age Distribution of Villager Committee Members**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Under 29</th>
<th>30 - 49</th>
<th>Over 50</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of people</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number of people</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4214</td>
<td>7.07</td>
<td>45935</td>
<td>77.11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in the table above, over 75% of villager committee members were between 30 and 49 years of age. Those under 29 or over 50 only account for 22.89% of all villager committee members. Thus, it may be said that villager committee members in Hunan Province are young and energetic.

Another important index of committee members’ ability is level of education. Of 59,924 winning candidates for villager committee membership, 5,806 (or 9.69%) had received primary school education, 35058 (or 58.5%) had received middle school education, and 17,902 (or 1.38%) had received high school education. 331 (or 0.55%) were illiterate or did not answer the question. See the following chart for details:

**Education Levels of Villager Committee Members**

The education level of the villager committee chair substantially influences the general education level of the village, due to the special privilege of the village chair. According to the collected data, approximately 54.15% of the 15,454 villager committee chairs received a middle school education; 30.34% received a high school education; 1.95% received an intermediate professional school education, and 13.57% received a primary school education. Over 80% of villager committee members and chairs received both middle school and high school educations.
Besides improving the rural cadre system, elections help promote the circulation of civil servants. The lack of circulation of village cadres has long been a problem. It is not unusual for a village cadre to hold his position for over ten years or even decades. It is important to bring in fresh blood to maintain the quality of the cadre system. Elections can guarantee the healthy circulation of cadres. The data indicate that 9,061 of 15,454 villager committee chairs were reelected, whereas 6,393 (or 41.37% %) were newly elected. That over two-fifths of villager committee chairs were newly elected demonstrates that the rural cadre system has been rejuvenated.

V. Conclusion

By analyzing the data collected with the “Villager Committee Election Computer Information System,” we have obtained a basic picture of the 1999 Hunan Province villager committee elections. We derive the following conclusions:

First, the degree of standardization has substantially increased but has not become widespread. According to our analysis, over half of the villages in Hunan Province have held elections according to the provincial Measures for the Election of Villager Committees. The data collected by the computer information system also reflect certain discrepancies between the reality of elections and the procedures set forth by the Measures. For example, final candidates in some villages were determined by Villager Representative Assemblies instead of by the number of nominations each candidate received. Moreover, in some villages secret ballot booths were not set up. Therefore, Hunan province should not only revise the Measures to make them more specific and more realistic, but also strive to stop activities that violate the Measures.

Second, mobile ballot boxes and in-trust votes are still widely used. Both give rise to many violations of election procedures and have consequently been limited by the Measures governing elections in every province. According to Article 21, Section 2 of the Hunan Province Measures, “Voters who cannot be present to cast votes at election locations, may entrust their votes to other voters. However, each voter may not cast more than one in-trust vote.” According Section 3, “Voters who cannot be present cast votes at election locations due to health reasons, and who do not wish to entrust their votes to other voters, may cast their votes through mobile ballot boxes, with permission from their villager election committee.” Nonetheless, as revealed by the data collected, mobile ballot boxes and in-trust votes are still widely used and require greater attention.

Third, females represent only a small fraction of villager committee members. According to Article 3, Section 3 of the Hunan Province Measures, “Each villager committee should have at least one female member.” That the Organic Law on Villager Committee Elections dictates that there be an appropriate number of females in each villager committee represents significant progress. But the collected data reveal that many villager committees do not have female members. The stipulation of more specific
procedures is necessary to ensure that villager committees have female members. Otherwise, this law will not be implemented.

Fourth, whether or not candidate qualifications are verified does not appear to influence election results. Those who advocate verification are mainly town/township leaders who wish to reduce the number of unsavory or unscrupulous candidates. Those who oppose verification claim that doing so violates voters’ democratic rights and that “the people should have the final say.” Different provinces have adopted different policies. Hunan Province does not practice verification. The election results indicate that undesirable candidates were not elected. Furthermore, the data on the age and education level of winning candidates demonstrate that voters exercised caution in casting their votes.

Fifth, the data collected by the computer information system are basically convincing. As noted previously, to verify the credibility of the system, the Ministry of Civil Affairs Department of Basic-Level Governance and Community Construction, in conjunction with the Hunan Province Civil Affairs Bureau, carried out a survey of 120 villages in Hunan Province. The results of the survey are similar to the data collected by the computer information system, demonstrating its success.