

Citizens' Responsiveness to Electoral Mobilization under Authoritarianism: Evidence from China's Grassroots Election*

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Abstract

This study examines citizens' responsiveness to electoral mobilization under authoritarianism by studying the voting behavior of migrants in China's grassroots elections. While the literature has focused on coercion and material benefits as tactics authoritarian leaders use to promote turnout, we argue that social pressure from the community and its leaders plays a crucial role in mobilizing authoritarian constituents. Employing data from the China Labor Dynamics Survey (2012), we show that migrants who share local traits, such as dialect, are more likely to be mobilized to boost turnout, because they are more responsive to local cadres' mobilization efforts and feel more connected to the community. Conversely, we find no support for an explanation rooted in channels of communication. We confirm the findings using an instrumental variable approach. Our findings imply that street-level mobilization for authoritarian elections takes advantage of various social factors, and is not necessarily implemented through coercion or clientelism.

Keywords: Voter Turnout, Authoritarian Election, Electoral Mobilization, Dialect, China

*Preliminary Draft. Please do not cite. We are grateful to Xianxiang Xu and Yuyun Liu at Sun Yat-sen University and Mengyu Liu at The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology for sharing the data with us.

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Introduction

Why do citizens participate in authoritarian elections, often without coercion, when their voting choices do not affect the electoral outcome? How do authoritarian leaders achieve sufficient voter turnout to legitimize the representativeness of elected candidates in state-controlled elections? The literature on authoritarian voter turnout has focused primarily on two phenomena. One perspective suggests that authoritarian regimes rely on physical interventions, such as coercion and fraud, to achieve sufficient electoral margins against opposition candidates (Hafner-Burton et al. 2014; Beatriz 2010). A separate group of studies focuses on clientelistic exchanges of material benefits for votes, which are thought to be crucial informal mechanisms for achieving electoral success; this literature argues that citizens in authoritarian regimes participate in elections precisely to gain material benefits through political patronage networks (Lust 2009; Hicken 2011). In this paper, we propose an alternative explanation for authoritarian election turnout, based on social pressure. In short, citizens who share the voting community’s predominant culture are more likely to voluntarily respond to electoral mobilization efforts by the incumbent.

To test our argument, we exploit the local dialect proficiency of domestic migrants within China as a proxy for cultural assimilation to a local community. Using China’s grassroots elections as a case, we explore how local dialect proficiency affects citizens’ responsiveness to locally rooted cadres’ electoral mobilization tactics. We focus on the migrant population for several reasons. First, grassroots elections in China, particularly village elections, are held among relatively homogeneous groups of voters. The pool of migrants brings crucial diversity to this otherwise homogeneous voter pool and enables researchers to examine new factors that may contribute to voting behavior. Through exploiting migrants’ differential proficiency in local dialects, we argue that those migrants who have closer cultural bonds with the community and with mobilizers are more likely to be responsive to mobilization pressures and thus more likely to participate in voting. Second, given widespread migration to cities in China for educational and economic reasons, engaging migrants in grassroots

elections has become a critical issue for local Chinese governments to achieve the intended regime stability. In general, the living standards of migrants tend to be lower and the social protections they receive are often weaker. Further, while migrants have provided cheap labor that has supported China’s economic success, they also create burdens for local Chinese bureaucracy in terms of needing basic public goods, services and social welfare. In order to maintain social stability and obtain support from migrants in this context, the Chinese government has expanded migrants’ legal rights to vote in their settled communities. Some communities even allow migrants to run as candidates.¹ However, while migrants enjoy equal political rights in many places, they typically show less interest in grassroots elections, for various reasons. They tend to be more recently settled and to feel less attached to the community. They may intend to move out in the near future. They may also face additional difficulties in electoral participation due to a lack of information or deficiencies in communication. As a result, local cadres in migrant-receiving areas typically canvass migrant residents to vote, as those eligible voters may otherwise have few incentives to participate voluntarily in elections.²

Our empirical analysis relies on data from the China Labor Dynamics Survey (CLDS), a nationally representative survey conducted in 2012. The CLDS focuses primarily on Chinese citizens’ voting behaviors, along with respondents’ Chinese language skills. We incorporate the linguistic information, including respondents’ ability to speak the dialect spoken in their settled counties, along with individual-level characteristics and community-level characteristics. We also employ an instrument variable (IV) approach. Using the linguistic distance between the respondent’s native dialect and the dialect of the settled location as an IV, we find causal evidence that local dialect proficiency boosts migrants’ participation in grassroots elections by increasing their responsiveness to electoral mobilization efforts.

¹Some places allowed migrants to be elected as committee members before 2012, when the Chinese government amended the law to specify that migrants have the right to vote in their residential city, such as Dong Xuefa in Beijing (2004), Sun Haiyan in Jiangsu (2003), and Wang Yongquan in Zhejiang.

²According to our interviews in various provinces, local cadres mentioned that migrants have become an important group to mobilize in their residential communities, creating for the cadres a new political task (Personal interviews, GDSD0001, GSTS0003).

We also examine three distinct mechanisms through which the cultural proximity of migrants may affect their voting propensity: a communication medium, social connectedness or pressure, and electoral mobilization. Local dialects dominate daily conversations and interactions in China’s local communities. For that reason, those dialects are likely to be used extensively in electoral processes conducted by locally-rooted cadres.³ Without speaking the local dialect fluently, migrants may face substantial communications challenges in accessing critical information related to elections, which may hinder their propensity to vote. To analyze the communication challenge as a mechanism, we include migrants’ Mandarin proficiency in our models, to evaluate how an alternative communication tool mitigates the challenge. We find that Mandarin proficiency is not significantly correlated with migrants’ voting behaviors, indicating that the communication challenge is not the main reason why local dialect proficiency affects voter turnout in grassroots elections.

Alternatively, we explore whether migrants’ local dialect proficiency enhances their feeling of connectedness to their settled community or to other residents there.⁴ A stronger sense of connectedness may raise migrants’ willingness to participate in local communities’ public affairs, including elections. Relatedly, we examine the possibility that speaking the local dialect leads migrants to respond more readily to the local cadre’s mobilization efforts. Local cadres who mobilize voters are also local residents, to whom dialect-speaking migrants may feel more connected. This may encourage those migrants to be more responsive to such mobilization and to participate in voting. Our results support these two hypotheses. We find

³Personal interviews, SHSJ0002, GDSD0011, FJXM0005. To mobilize residents to vote, local cadres would use vernacular to spread the information about elections face-to-face and via broadcast. In addition to door-to-door canvassing, the township government produced vernacular Allegro and broadcasted it in all of the villages and urban neighborhoods within the township. It was reported that local cadres would produce vernacular songs or sitcoms for voter mobilization. See: <https://zj.zjol.com.cn/news.html?id=585514> (accessed on August 16, 2019), <https://www.dehua.net/news/show-362145.shtml> (accessed on August 16, 2019), <http://news.cnnb.com.cn/system/2017/04/17/008624578.shtml> (accessed on August 16, 2019).

⁴Personal interview ZJTZ0005. Elected migrant committee members reported feeling that speaking the local dialects helped them in important ways to integrate into their residential communities and win support from the local residents, see http://dg.southcn.com/content/2016-01/14/content_140729088.htm (accessed on August 16, 2019) and <http://news.12371.cn/2017/08/10/ARTI1502332365333676.shtml> (accessed on August 16, 2019).

that migrants who are proficient in the local dialect feel closer to the community and their neighbors. We also find them more likely to participate in elections voluntarily. Moreover, dialect-speaking migrants are more likely to respond that they turned out to vote because they were mobilized by local cadres.

Our study advances the literature in several ways. First, it deepens our understanding of electoral mobilization and voter turnout in authoritarian regimes. The literature on authoritarian elections generally agrees that elections are adopted to prolong the authoritarian regime’s rule and to bolster legitimacy (Gandhi & Lust-Okar 2009), though the benefits could be offset by the cost of repression, electoral fraud, and clientilistic distribution, all of which are frequently used by authoritarian incumbents to ensure electoral victory (Little 2015; Simpser 2013). A challenge to this literature, however, is the fact that many contemporary authoritarian leaders seem to mobilize large numbers of citizens to vote for them without excessive use of coercion, evident electoral fraud or explicit monetary exchanges. Our study offers an alternative explanation for why citizens cast votes in state-controlled elections where the regime’s victory is a foregone conclusion. We argue that linguistic similarity – often treated as a key factor for identity formation in ethnic politics studies, or as social capital in studies of democratic participation – can contribute to authoritarian mobilization by enhancing citizen’s responsiveness.

This study also speaks to the literature on migration and electoral participation. This literature has focused on how the linguistic barrier affects international immigrants’ voting behaviors (Parkin & Zlotnick 2011; Hopkins 2011; De La Garza & Yang 2015) and how multi-language mobilization affects different groups in discernable ways (Abrajano & Panagopoulos 2011). Using the linguistic diversity in China and its strict household registration (*hukou*) system, we study how domestic migrants’ linguistic proficiency alters their voting behavior in authoritarian grassroots elections. In addition to the theoretical contribution, we draw our evidence from China’s grassroots elections, which constitute the only form of popular, direct elections in China, the largest authoritarian country in the world. Furthermore, while

over 20 percent of the population is classified as migrant under the current *hukou* system, researchers rarely study how grassroots elections accommodate this critical subset of the population for social stability. To the best of our knowledge, this study represents the first attempt to systematically analyze migrant voters' voting behavior and responsiveness to electoral mobilization efforts in grassroots elections.

Electoral Mobilization and Citizens' Responsiveness under Authoritarianism

In the past few decades, nominally democratic institutional reform has become a trend in authoritarian countries (Morse 2012). As a result, scholars frequently study why autocrats hold elections which are not as fair or free as the ones held by their democratic counterparts (Gandhi & Lust-Okar 2009; Lust 2009; Morse 2012; Simpser 2013; Little 2015; Rozenas 2016; Schedler 2013; Beatriz 2010; Sjoberg 2014). Yet, voter participation in authoritarian elections represents an enduring puzzle in political science: why do voters turn out in an election in which their votes are unlikely to alter the results? Why do they vote for the incumbent leader or her party even in the absence of pervasive coercion?

The literature has focused on the clientelistic connection between the ruling group and voters that relies on an exchange of material rewards for votes. These studies argue that citizens' voting behaviors are driven primarily by the material benefits provided by the authoritarian incumbent (Gandhi & Lust-Okar 2009; Gans-Morse et al. 2014; Lust-Okar 2006; Nathan 2016; De La & Ana 2013; Schady 2000; Manacorda et al. 2011; Calvo & Murillo 2004). Although clientelistic exchanges of goods in return for electoral support also exists in democracies (Kitschelt & Wilkinson 2007; De La & Ana 2013), it is considered one of the most powerful tools for authoritarian leaders to generate support, because the discretion to distribute economic resources tends to be more concentrated in the political leadership in autocratic countries (Gervasoni 2010; Greene 2010). For example, Frye et al. (2014)

present individual-level evidence demonstrating that authoritarian leaders exploit preexisting clientelist networks of patrons – specifically, employers – to mobilize voters in elections. They assume a weak capacity of political parties to engage in grassroots mobilization, which is opposite the capacity of single-party authoritarian regimes like China. Other scholars broaden the scope of “materialistic exchange” beyond clientelism. Authoritarian leaders can gain support from citizen beneficiaries by strategically transferring material benefits to the targeted group of citizens through anti-poverty programs (Schady 2000; Manacorda et al. 2011), conditional cash transfers (De La & Ana 2013; Layton & Smith 2015), and industrial policy (Hong & Park 2016). In addition, De Miguel et al. (2015) shows that better economic performance driven by government policy can help authoritarian regimes to boost turnout.

While the literature on clientelism and broader material benefits clearly suggests that citizens’ responsiveness to authoritarian mobilization efforts is based on a rational calculation of material benefits, left unaddressed are the potential non-material factors that may also motivate citizens. In this study, we focus on political incentives that arise from “social pressure,” thus addressing citizens’ psychological needs in the societies to which they belong (Achen & Bartels 2017; Ashworth et al. 2018). Authoritarian leaders’ power does not rely solely on the distribution of economic resources; perhaps a more critical source of their power is the state apparatus and public organizations, and the social networks of their members. Given the extensiveness of these networks, the influence of government may stem not only from physical repression or explicit coercion, but also from explicit and implicit social pressures from the street-level cadres, superiors and neighbors whom residents face on daily bases and with whom they are expected to cooperate. This social pressure mechanism is less deterministic but also less risky to the authoritarian regime politically and economically, compared to repression and coercion. A crucial premise underpinning this mechanism is that the voters should be able to feel a strong sense of belonging, since, unlike coercion, social pressure emerges from the individual’s connectedness to the community or its members. We claim that China’s grassroots elections represent an electoral setting in which the

size of precincts is small enough for local cadres to effectively exploit the sense of social connectedness. To our best knowledge, this study is the first attempt to examine the role of social connectedness and pressure in an authoritarian context.

This argument is not new to the democratic elections literature. Recent studies have relied on experiments to understand what motivates voters to participate in voting in democratic settings (Gerber et al. 2008; Gerber & Rogers 2009; Panagopoulos et al. 2014). These studies often suggest that voting in democracies is affected by social pressures such as civic duty (Green & Gerber 2010) and identity expression (Valenzuela & Michelson 2016). We show in this study that a similar mechanism also exists in authoritarian elections. Local cadres mobilize voters using tactics based on implicit social norms and pressures, which lead many residents to vote in response to party cadres' appeals. Furthermore, we highlight the usefulness of this "social pressure" mechanism in the authoritarian setting, where the incumbent regards turnout as an important measure of legitimacy even as the election results *per se* are less of a concern.

Our study takes advantage of the diversity within the Chinese language as the key contextual factor determining the emotional connectedness of migrants to their communities and the effectiveness of local cadres' election canvassing. The literature on language politics has shown that language diversity plays a crucial role in local politics, especially under authoritarianism. Several studies investigate how authoritarian leaders handle minority language recognition issues (A. H. Liu 2011, 2015; A. H. Liu et al. 2016; A. H. Liu & Ricks 2012). Marquardt (2016) shows that minority language proficiency enhanced minority citizens' probability of participating in identity-based conflict efforts during the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Our paper highlights an alternative possibility: that local language skills strengthen authoritarian regimes' rule by enhancing citizens' responsiveness to authoritarian mobilization.

Finally, this research speaks to other studies that examine Chinese grassroots elections. Studies on Chinese grassroots elections tend to place emphasis on the competitiveness of

the electoral process to explain citizens' electoral behaviors in state-controlled elections (Landry et al. 2010; Manion 2016). Shi (1999) argues, for example, that citizens in China prefer to participate in competitive elections where they can punish corrupt officials. Our study focuses on several points less frequently examined in the existing literature. First, we investigate the participation of migrant residents, who now represent a critical share of voters in many communities. We also highlight the existence of effective mobilization by grassroots cadres, which largely determines not just the pool of candidates but also the level of turnout in local elections.

Grassroots Elections and Voter Mobilization in China

In China, the lowest administrative level governed directly by the state is the township-level administrative division, including rural townships (*xiang*), towns (*zhen*), and urban sub-districts (*jiedao*). Township-level units are divided into rural villages (*cun*) and urban neighborhoods (*shequ*), which are governed by elected villagers' committees and residents' committees. They are considered grassroots-level semi-governmental organs because they have substantive power to mediate civil disputes, implement policies and tasks assigned by upper-level governments, and provide public goods and services. In addition, the villagers' committees take charge of the (re)distribution of village land and the management of village collective enterprises. Owing to these additional functions, villagers' committees are considered more powerful than residents' committees.

Villagers' committees are composed of three to seven members, while residents' committees consist of five to nine members. Both are headed by a director. The CCP introduced direct elections for village committee directors and members in 1987, and passed the Organic Law on Villagers' Self-governance in 1998 to stipulate the principles of democracy, competitiveness, and fairness for those elections. Specifically, the law codifies the rights of eligible voters to nominate candidates and to run for office. The number of candidates should ex-

ceed the number of posts. Vote counting should be done in public, after which the results should be declared immediately. In contrast to village committee elections, the law does not mandate direct elections for residents' committees, and the principles of democracy, competitiveness, and fairness are not codified for those elections. Although some regions adopt direct and competitive elections in parallel with village committee elections, direct elections are less prevalent for residents' committees.

Grassroots elections are not new to China under the CCP's rule. Just as elections took place in the former Soviet Union and North Korea, ceremonial elections were frequently held in Mao's China to oversee citizens' loyalty and to propagate the regime's ideology (Chen 2000; Townsend 1967). Current grassroots elections differ from those under the Mao regime, however, in many ways. In particular, the mobilization tactics used by local governments differ starkly. During Mao's period, the state relied heavily on coercive mobilization to achieve high or even perfect turnout (Townsend 1967). Citizens were forced to participate in elections because their absence would be seen as dissatisfaction with the regime and a lack of ideological conviction, and would thus incur punishment by the party organization. In contrast, the post-Mao reform replaces coercive mobilization with more voluntary voting in the new grassroots elections (Shi 1999).

It is nevertheless important for the Chinese regime to achieve high turnout to maximize the regime-stabilizing effect of elections. Scholars have noted the particular importance of high turnout in authoritarian elections as a signal of the incumbent's political strength, and thus as a tool to deter challenges from the opposition (Frye et al. 2014; Saikkonen 2017; Magaloni 2006; Schedler 2006; De Miguel et al. 2015; i Coma 2016). Moreover, since the local election policies were adopted by the CPP in China, the success of grassroots elections has been important not just to grassroots-level governments, but also to the central government. Without a large share of voters turning out, the political agenda of the communist party granting self-governance to democratically elected community committees would go unfulfilled. How, then, does the Chinese government ensure adequate voter turnout in grass-

roots elections, in the context of China’s rapid development and increasing voter mobility? A lack of coercion should not suggest that there is no mobilization during elections. Unlike the dogmatic coercion that took place in Mao’s era, however, mobilization in China today often depends much more on personal, face-to-face appeals by local cadres, who frequently rely on social norms and pressure to persuade the voters. Many observers and scholars have highlighted the door-to-door canvassing efforts of indigenous cadres (Gui et al. 2006; Xiong 2008; C. Liu 2010; B. Read 2012; Woodman 2016). In many cases, higher level governments at the township or above set target turnout rates to maximize electoral mobilization,⁵ and grassroots cadres canvass door-to-door and face-to-face on the street as part of their political tasks.

Some qualitative studies illustrate the details of how voters are mobilized in grassroots elections in China (Gui et al. 2006; C. Liu 2010; Song 2010). Preceding an election, the locally rooted committee cadres employ numerous tactics such as banners, billboards, and slogans to inform residents of the election. To ensure a high registration rate, the committee cadres and other mobilized activists conduct door-to-door canvassing to persuade residents to register and go to the polls. Moreover, they use roving ballot boxes to collect the votes of citizens who do not show up to the polls. Collecting proxy votes is also a common practice in residents’ committee elections. Taken together, the Chinese state is able to achieve high turnout in grassroots committee elections even though few residents are interested in the state-controlled process. According to our data, the general turnout rate is 61.24 percent ⁶

The principal form of encouragement that committee cadres and activists use for mobilization is the implicit cultural norm in Chinese society, called *renqing* (feeling obliged because of (potential) personal connection) or *mianzi* (showing respect by showing face) (B. L. Read 2009; Song 2010; Jin 2010; Zhu 2010; G. Wang 2014). The personal approach to individual voters is effective because it exerts social pressure, pushing voters to respond to the electoral mobilization. Often, residents feel that voting in response to a local cadre’s

⁵Personal interview, HNSY0005.

⁶See Table A2 in the Appendix.

solicitation is an informal obligation, even though they would not face any punishment if they did not. As Gui et al. (2006, p. 16) notes, citizens vote just to “give face to the committee cadres to help them fulfill their tasks” (i.e. achieving high turnout) when they face a local cadre’s appeal. The mobilization process is similar in rural villages,⁷ though it is often even more effective because villages are relatively small-sized and residents tend to share kinship, making them feel more connected to local cadres (Song 2010; Su et al. 2011; G. Wang 2014). We expect that, due to the local cadres’ personalized tactics that rely heavily on non-coercive social norms (*renqing* or *mianzi*), citizens with stronger social bonds to locally rooted cadres will feel more pressure to respond to their mobilization efforts and thus will be more likely to participate in the elections. Our expectation is in keeping with prior research on how social pressure boosts turnout in democracies, as voters feel compelled to comply with the social norm (Gerber et al. 2008).

To exploit variation in social bonds, we use the suffrage of migrants in their settled communities’ self-governing local elections. Using migrants’ differential degrees of social and psychological links to the settled community, measured by their dialect skill, we analyze how social norms and community bonds contribute to citizens’ responsiveness to the authoritarian regime’s voting mobilization efforts. Migrants’ suffrage allows us to explore electoral mobilization in China’s grassroots elections because wide variation exists among migrants regarding their connectedness to local culture. Furthermore, from the indigenous cadre’s perspective, mobilizing migrants is becoming a more and more important task as the number of migrants increases steadily and as they constitute a substantial share of the local population in many localities. Although significant variation exists, it is increasingly the case that in many communities, without persuading the migrant population, the cadres cannot achieve the desired turnout rate.

What is more, migrants have fewer incentives to participate voluntarily in grassroots

⁷The official websites of the Shanghai and Hubei governments describe the process of mobilization in the Villagers’ Committee and Residents’ Committee elections. See: http://zg.cnxiantao.com/djxx/zzjs/201801/t20180104_266499.htm (accessed on August 16, 2019). and http://chat.sh.gov.cn/Chatting/template/sh_red/words.aspx?ChatId=279 (accessed on August 16, 2019)

elections in the community to which they moved, given the current household registration system (*hukou*). Adopted for the authoritarian state to manage internal population mobility, the system stipulates that migrants – that is, residents who do not hold that place’s *hukou* – can only enjoy limited access to public goods and services including education, health care and another social welfare benefits. Their political rights in their settled district are also limited, and this includes voting rights in grassroots elections. However, despite the inconveniences related to the *hukou* system, drastically increasing numbers of rural residents have moved to urban districts for economic reasons since the reform, now representing about 20% of China’s total population.⁸ This shift has also created new threats to the regime’s stability (Wallace 2014). In 2010, the Chinese government revised the Organic Law on Villagers’ Self-governance to grant migrants the right to vote in their settled village.⁹ In addition, a regulation passed by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2011 specifies the rights of migrants to run as candidates and to vote in the residents’ committee elections.¹⁰ While migrants now face fewer institutional barriers to participate in grassroots elections, they still face social and cultural barriers. One such barrier is the linguistic one, which crucially affects social communication and thus electoral participation. The local dialect is often the primary or even dominant colloquial language in many communities. Furthermore, electoral mobilization is conducted by locally-rooted cadres, who typically use the local dialect for daily conversations with residents. Lacking dialect skills can thus significantly limit a migrant’s interest in elections and thus her responsiveness to the solicitation to turn out.

⁸The number of internal migrants reached 236 million in 2012, and migrant residents outnumber local residents in many places, according to the Chinese National Health and Family Planning Commission’s *Report on China’s Migrant Population Development* (2013) (National Health and Family Planning Commission (China) 2013). This pressure has also enhanced migrant calls for equal rights. For example, a male migrant resident in Shenzhen who was refused the right by his local residents’ committee to register as a voter in his settled community in 2005 initiated legal proceedings against the residents’ committee. See: <http://news.sohu.com/20050616/n225960387.shtml> (accessed on August 16, 2019).

⁹See Appendix A1.

¹⁰See Appendix A3.

Data and Specification

This study employs data from the China Labor Dynamics Survey (CLDS) conducted in 2012, a nationally representative survey of 16,253 residents in 2,282 counties across 29 provinces in China, excluding Tibet and Hainan. As our hypotheses focus on the electoral participation of migrants, we rely on the sample of migrant workers (1,254 observations), defined as those whose household registration status (*hukou*) does not correspond to the residential cities where they have lived for over six months.¹¹ The 1,254 migrant respondents to CLDS 2012 are distributed across all 29 provinces included in the survey. The dataset includes their demographic information and community-level characteristics. In addition, we create a detailed linguistic background for each respondent, including their native dialect, i.e., the dialect spoken by their hukou county’s people, and their destination city’s linguistic diversity. The linguistic information is drawn from the *Dictionary of Han Dialects* and the *Language Atlas of China*, available in the Appendix A5.

The dependent variable, voting behavior, indicates whether the respondent participated in the previous election for the residents’ committee or villagers’ committee. The voting participation question from the CLDS 2012 reads: “In the previous election, how did you participate?”, and the response options include “I voted by proxy”, “I voted because the committee cadres requested that I vote”, “I voted voluntarily”, and “I did not vote”. For the baseline model, we aggregate the former three responses and code the outcome as 1 to indicate having voted, with the last response option coded as 0. Additionally, to further understand respondents’ responsiveness to the Party cadres’ electoral mobilization efforts, we construct a new variable, *mobilized vote*, which is coded as 1 if the respondent voted because the committee cadres requested that she vote and 0 if she did not vote. We also construct a *voluntarily vote* variable in the same way. Table A1 and Table A2 show that about 39%

¹¹This strategy excludes temporary populations such as transient workers and temporal employees who frequently move following seasonal necessity or construction trends. Chinese local governments also manage these two groups separately. E.g., http://www.bjstats.gov.cn/tjzd/zswd/201708/t20170825_381073.html (accessed on August 16, 2019).

of migrant respondents did not have applicable responses to this question, possibly due to the strict *hukou* policy in grassroots voting or age requirements. Among those who could vote, 16.38% of migrant respondents participated in the grassroots elections held in their destination cities.¹²

Our key independent variable is local dialect proficiency. In the survey, the response options range from 1 (not proficient) to 5 (fully proficient at professional working level), so the higher the score is, the more fluently the migrant respondent speaks the local dialect. We also add control variables that may affect the respondent’s dialect proficiency or electoral behavior. Individual-level control variables include age, gender, Communist Party membership, and *hukou* type (urban or rural). In terms of community-level variables, we include the local migrant density,¹³ the respondent’s perception of the relationship among residents, the respondent’s perception of the relationship between cadres and residents, the frequency of information dissemination from the committee, the type of candidate nomination, whether the election is a direct election, and whether the community the respondent lives in was governed by a villagers’ committee or a residents’ committee.¹⁴

Finally, we include prefecture-level variables accounting for linguistic diversity¹⁵ and migrant flow. The linguistic diversity variable measures the probability that two randomly-selected persons speak different dialects in the same prefecture. The migrant flow variable measures the size of the population that the prefecture received or sent.¹⁶ The Descriptive statistics of all the variables can be found in Table A4.

We acknowledge the existence of heterogeneity in the institutional barriers that migrants

¹²The statistics are similar to data from another nationally representative survey, the China General Society Survey (CGSS) 2013 survey, see Appendix Table A1.

¹³The migrant density is calculated by dividing the migrant population by the local population in the community. The data are drawn from CLDS 2012 Survey.

¹⁴It could be the case that a villagers’ committee governs an urban area after the urbanization of a previously rural community (Y. P. Wang et al. 2009; Zheng et al. 2009).

¹⁵The linguistic diversity variable is generated by the following equation: $LinguisticDiversity_{jk} = 1 - \sum_{j=1}^n p_{jk}^2$, where n stands for the number of dialects in prefecture k . P_{jk} stands for the population ratio of dialect j users in prefecture k .

¹⁶We take the standard deviation from the mean.

face in terms of voting rights. Based on our fieldwork, the most important determinant shaping the implementation of migrants' suffrage across localities is whether or not their residential places are migrant-receiving or migrant sending. Migrant-receiving prefectures are more likely to implement the central government's migrant suffrage policy, relative to migrant-sending prefectures. Further, migrant-dense communities within prefectures face stronger pressure from the upper-level government to engage migrants in the local elections. Thus, we include prefecture-level migrant flow and community-level migrant density as control variables.

For the baseline analysis, we estimate the following *probit* model:

$$Pr(Vote_{icp} = 1) = Pr(\beta Proficiency_{icp} + X_{icp}\delta + W_c\zeta + \gamma_p + \alpha + \epsilon_{icp} > 0) \quad (1)$$

Here $Vote_{icp}$ is a dummy variable equal to one when respondent i in community c in province p voted in the last grassroots election, i.e., the villagers' committee election in rural areas and the residents' committee election in urban areas. $Proficiency_{icp}$ indicates the respondent's local dialect proficiency. The vector X_{icp} includes age, gender, communist party membership, and *hukou* type. The vector W_c captures the village/neighborhood-level variables: migrant density, relationship between cadres and residents, relationship among residents, the frequency of committee information dissemination, candidate nomination, direct election, community type, linguistic diversity, and migrant flow. We also include province fixed effects to address province-specific characteristics that may be correlated with our key variables. ϵ_{icp} is the error term. Our coefficient of interest is β .

There are several challenges to identifying the causal effect of local dialect proficiency on voting behavior in estimating equation (1). For instance, a respondent's personality could simultaneously affect her willingness to learn the local dialect and also her willingness to

participate in local affairs. Furthermore, self-evaluated local dialect proficiency could be inaccurate. If the measurement error is uncorrelated with true local dialect proficiency, this will attenuate the coefficient of interest. However, if measurement error is correlated with true proficiency (for example, if those more proficient are more likely to underreport their proficiency due to modesty), we could overestimate the impact of proficiency. Lastly, the direction of causality could be reversed: those who are more interested in participating in local elections may put more effort into learning the local dialect. In order to address these concerns, we adopt an instrumental variables approach, using linguistic distance between the dialect of a migrant respondent’s *hukou* county and the local dialect, i.e., the dialect of his/her residential county, as our instrument.¹⁷ The first stage equation describes the relationship between linguistic distance to the local dialect and local dialect proficiency ($Proficiency_{icp}$):

$$Proficiency_{icp} = \psi + \lambda LinguisticDistance_{icp} + X_{icp}\delta_1 + W_c\zeta_1 + \gamma_{1p} + \epsilon_{1icp} \quad (2)$$

We construct linguistic distance to the local dialect using the *Language Atlas of China* (Lavelly & Berman 2012), which details the distribution of Han dialects by county in China. Following Chinese linguistic convention, we categorize Han dialects into ten *dialect groups*, across which dialects are mutually unintelligible.¹⁸ For example, speakers of Mandarin dialects and Cantonese dialects cannot understand one another, because they belong to different *dialect groups*, the Mandarin super-group and the Yue group, respectively. The level below the *dialect group* is the *dialect subgroup*, which distinguishes among dialects within a dialect group that are theoretically mutually unintelligible. Under the dialect subgroups

¹⁷Our instrument is motivated by Ku & Zussman (2010), who use the linguistic distance between a country’s language and English as an instrument for the country’s English proficiency to estimate the impact of English proficiency on bilateral trade.

¹⁸The ten *dialect groups* include the Mandarin supergroup, the Min supergroup, the Jin group, the Wu group, the Gan group, the Xiang group, the Yue group, the Hakka group, the Hui group, and Residual groups. The detailed categories of Chinese dialects can be found in Appendix A5.

are *dialect clusters*, which capture the variation in dialects within a subgroup. If the dialect of a migrant respondent’s *hukou* county and the dialect of her destination county belong to the same dialect cluster, the linguistic distance is coded as 0. If the two dialects belong to the same subgroup, but not the same cluster, it is coded as 1. If they belong to the same group, but not the same subgroup, it is coded as 2. Otherwise, it is coded as 3, indicating that the two dialects belong to different dialect groups entirely.¹⁹ As a robustness check, we replace *hukou* dialect with birthplace dialect and obtain similar results.²⁰ We then use the predicted proficiency from equation (2) to estimate the second stage equation:

$$Pr(Vote_{icp} = 1) = Pr(\beta_2 \widehat{Proficiency}_{icp} + X_{icp}\delta_2 + W_c\zeta_2 + \gamma_{2p} + \alpha + \epsilon_{2icp} > 0) \quad (3)$$

Empirical Results

We begin our analysis by examining the relationship between local dialect proficiency and migrants’ turnout in grassroots elections using equation (1). The results are presented in Table 1. Model (1) employs only local dialect proficiency, after which the individual-level and community-level variables are incorporated in Models (2) and (3), respectively. Model (4) includes all control variables. Model (3) and Model (4) also include province fixed effects, as they contain location-relevant variables. Our key explanatory variable, local dialect proficiency, is estimated as positive and statistically significant (at the 99% confidence level) in all models, indicating that migrants who speak the local dialect more fluently are more likely to have voted in the grassroots election in their settled community. According to the estimate in Model (4), a one standard deviation increase in local dialect proficiency leads to a 5.5% increase in the migrant’s voting probability. Being fluent in the local dialect [5] compared to unable to speak the dialect [1] results in almost a 15% higher probability to vote.

¹⁹See Appendix A5.

²⁰See Table A5.

Turning to individual-level characteristics, we find that migrants' turnout does not vary by gender or *hukou* type (rural or urban). Only age is significantly correlated with migrants' turnout.²¹ We attribute this finding to the fact that older people are more attached to the community in which they live and that they are more sensitive about social responsibility and government mobilization. What is more, older people are more likely to be mobilized to become election-activists, canvassing residents within their communities to vote. Our finding is consistent with the general pattern found in the full sample,²² and qualitative evidence also suggests that older people are more frequently mobilized by the cadres to turn out and to be political activists (B. Read 2012). Although Communist Party membership increases the probability that respondents participate in the elections, this factor is not statistically significant. As for the village/neighborhood-level characteristics, we find that migrants are more likely to participate in grassroots elections if the community they live in is governed by a villagers' committee rather than a residents' committee.²³ The institutional characteristics of the electoral process, including whether the candidate was nominated by residents and whether direct elections are adopted in the village/neighborhood, are not statistically significant. In contrast to the effects of the institutional characteristics of elections, linguistic diversity is a significant factor shaping migrants' turnout in their destination cities' grassroots elections. Based on the results in Model (4), local linguistic diversity significantly hinders migrants' turnout in the grassroots elections: a one standard deviation increase in linguistic diversity correlates to a 4% decrease in migrants' voting probability, meaning that migrants are less likely to vote if multiple dialects are prevalent in their destination city.

²¹As Blaydes (2006) suggests, education can be an important factor in voter turnout. She argues that illiterate residents are more likely to respond to the authoritarian state's electoral mobilization efforts, using evidence from Egypt. To address this possibility, we include education in our models as a robustness check. The effects of our primary independent variable, local dialect proficiency, remain similar. The effects of education are not significantly correlated with voter turnout or with voluntarily voting. Education is a significant predictor of mobilized voting only, and again, the effects of local dialect proficiency remains significant. See Table A6 in the Appendix.

²²The results can be found in Table A7 in the Appendix.

²³To address the possibility that one type of election drives the effect, we divide our sample into urban and rural elections as a robustness check. The results are similar, which can be found in Table A8 in the Appendix.

Table 1 Dialect Proficiency and Voter Turnout (Baseline Results)

	Voter Turnout (Not Voted = 0; Voted = 1)							
	<i>probit</i> Model							
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)	
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>
Dialect Proficiency	0.195*** (0.069)	0.045*** (0.016)	0.185*** (0.071)	0.040*** (0.015)	0.201*** (0.073)	0.038*** (0.014)	0.212*** (0.072)	0.037*** (0.013)
<i>Individual-level Variables</i>								
Age			0.070* (0.040)	0.015* (0.008)			0.116** (0.048)	0.020** (0.008)
Age square			-0.001 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)			-0.001* (0.001)	-0.000* (0.000)
Male			-0.150 (0.140)	-0.033 (0.031)			-0.271* (0.162)	-0.048 (0.029)
Communist Party Membership			-0.197 (0.287)	-0.043 (0.063)			0.289 (0.323)	0.051 (0.057)
Urban <i>hukou</i>			-0.033 (0.171)	-0.007 (0.037)			-0.170 (0.205)	-0.030 (0.036)
<i>Community-level Variables</i>								
Migrant Density					0.158 (0.513)	0.030 (0.097)	0.274 (0.534)	0.048 (0.094)
Relationship among residents					-0.117 (0.215)	-0.022 (0.041)	-0.079 (0.208)	-0.014 (0.037)
Relationship between cadres and residents					-0.009 (0.215)	-0.002 (0.041)	0.013 (0.227)	0.002 (0.040)
Community Information Dissemination					-0.045 (0.114)	-0.008 (0.021)	-0.050 (0.118)	-0.009 (0.021)
Candidate nominated by residents					-0.116 (0.238)	-0.022 (0.045)	-0.063 (0.246)	-0.011 (0.043)
Direct Election					-0.073 (0.202)	-0.014 (0.038)	-0.012 (0.207)	-0.002 (0.036)
Village Election					0.636** (0.258)	0.120** (0.049)	0.927*** (0.268)	0.163*** (0.048)
Linguistic Diversity					-1.029* (0.611)	-0.194* (0.115)	-1.110* (0.606)	-0.195* (0.106)
Migrant Flow					0.051 (0.148)	0.010 (0.028)	0.095 (0.155)	0.017 (0.027)
Province FEs	No		No		Yes		Yes	
Observations	753		753		638		638	

Notes: Linguistic Diversity and Migrant Flow are at the prefecture level. Standard errors corrected for survey design effect; *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1

Even though we include a series of potential confounders in our models, along with province fixed effects that absorb the effects of unobserved omitted variables at the regional level, concerns about omitted variable bias, reverse causality, and potential measurement error may remain. To address these concerns, we adopt an instrumental variable approach using linguistic distance between the migrant’s original county and her settled county. Table 2 presents the IV-*probit* results. The results are consistent with the previous findings, confirming that local dialect proficiency significantly increases migrant turnout in grassroots elections. Compared to the marginal effect in Model (4), Table 1, the marginal effect on the instrumented local dialect proficiency variable in Model (4), Table 2 is six times as large, implying that omitted variable bias may have undermined the effect of the endogenous local dialect proficiency variable. Our instrumented results reinforce our baseline findings that age and election type (village election) are significantly correlated with migrant turnout. Neither Communist Party membership nor the institutional characteristics of the electoral process affect migrant turnout. In contrast to the coefficient in Model (4), Table 1, the coefficient on migrant density becomes significant, suggesting that migrants living in migrant-dense communities are more likely to vote. This is consistent with our findings from fieldwork. In migrant-dense communities, local cadres face stronger pressure from the upper-level governments to engage migrants in the elections. Furthermore, the turnout of migrants has become an important part of cadres’ performance evaluations.²⁴ In Table A.9, we test how migrant inflow changes the importance of local dialect in mobilizing migrants. We find that migrant density is significant and positive and that the interaction between dialect proficiency and migrant density is negative. Interestingly but intuitively, in communities with a large number of migrants, migrants are more likely to vote but local dialect proficiency does not function critically in boosting turnout.

Using linguistic distance as an instrument to capture the causal effects of local dialect proficiency on migrants’ voting behaviors requires that it be (1) highly correlated with local

²⁴More qualitative examples can be found in Appendix A1.

dialect proficiency, and (2) uncorrelated with the disturbance term. To test the first requirement, we present the coefficients of linguistic distance on dialect proficiency in the first-stage models. The estimates in all models are strongly significant, conditional on other control variables. In addition, the F-statistics are much larger than the conventional threshold of 10 across all models, suggesting that linguistic distance is a strong predictor for local dialect proficiency.²⁵

As for the second requirement, the exclusion restriction assumption could be violated if our instrument is correlated with other variables that affect migrants' voting behaviors. Considering that linguistic distance is constructed based on the migrant's native dialect and the dialect spoken in her settled county, the endogeneity of our instrument could only arise from factors shaping migrants' decisions to move to the destination counties.

One may be concerned that migrants move to a certain area because their dialect is similar to the dialect spoken in the destination area. Our instrumental variable cannot address this alternative possibility. To mitigate this concern, we conduct a subsample analysis of Guangdong Province. The decision to migrate to Guangdong is much more likely to be economic than linguistic, for several reasons. First, Guangdong's dialect, Cantonese, is linguistically independent from other dialects in China, and thus uncommunicable with Mandarin or other dialects. Second, economically, Guangdong has been one of the fastest growing provinces; it is also one of the most manufacturing-dependent provinces in China, having attracted a large number of migrant laborers since the 1978 reform. Therefore, if a migrant moved to Guangdong, it is highly likely that she did so to pursue the best economic opportunity, rather than because her original dialect is relatively close to Cantonese.

Table 3 presents the results from our subsample analysis, replicating the key models from Table 1 and Table 2. The results confirm our argument: dialect proficiency improves voter turnout among migrants in Guangdong, who likely migrated to the province for economic reasons, despite their linguistic deficiency.

²⁵As *ivprobit* does not support the F-Statistics calculation, we estimate the F-Statistics using *ivregress*.

Table 2 Dialect Proficiency and Voter Turnout (IV Analysis)

	Voter Turnout (Not Voted = 0; Voted = 1)							
	IV-probit Model							
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)	
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>
Dialect Proficiency	0.538*** (0.082)	0.144*** (0.028)	0.540*** (0.082)	0.137*** (0.028)	0.859*** (0.070)	0.232*** (0.025)	0.857*** (0.073)	0.222*** (0.030)
Social Network Size	0.029 (0.056)	0.008 (0.015)	0.039 (0.053)	0.010 (0.014)	-0.038 (0.052)	-0.010 (0.014)	-0.025 (0.051)	-0.006 (0.013)
Individual-level Variables								
Age			0.073* (0.037)	0.018** (0.009)			0.093** (0.038)	0.024*** (0.009)
Age square			-0.001 (0.000)	-0.000 (0.000)			-0.001* (0.000)	-0.000** (0.000)
Male			-0.033 (0.141)	-0.008 (0.036)			-0.173 (0.129)	-0.045 (0.033)
Communist Party Membership			-0.186 (0.291)	-0.047 (0.074)			0.149 (0.269)	0.039 (0.069)
Urban <i>hukou</i>			-0.002 (0.160)	-0.000 (0.041)			-0.133 (0.168)	-0.034 (0.043)
Community-level Variables								
Migrant Density					0.749** (0.370)	0.203** (0.102)	0.867** (0.381)	0.225** (0.102)
Relationship among residents					-0.230 (0.146)	-0.062 (0.039)	-0.205 (0.144)	-0.053 (0.037)
Relationship between cadres and residents					0.079 (0.158)	0.021 (0.043)	0.085 (0.166)	0.022 (0.043)
Community Information Dissemination					0.103 (0.081)	0.028 (0.022)	0.102 (0.084)	0.026 (0.022)
Candidate nominated by residents					0.006 (0.179)	0.002 (0.048)	0.053 (0.182)	0.014 (0.047)
Direct Election					-0.058 (0.144)	-0.016 (0.039)	-0.023 (0.151)	-0.006 (0.039)
Village Election					0.370** (0.184)	0.100** (0.048)	0.589*** (0.208)	0.153*** (0.050)
Linguistic Diversity					-0.612 (0.447)	-0.166 (0.119)	-0.697 (0.459)	-0.181 (0.115)
Migrant Flow					-0.000 (0.118)	-0.000 (0.032)	0.023 (0.121)	0.006 (0.031)
Province FEs	No		No		Yes		Yes	
Observations	753		753		638		638	
Instrument Variable (first-stage results)								
Linguistic Distance	-0.444*** (0.041)		-0.436*** (0.042)		-0.241*** (0.047)		-0.244*** (0.046)	
First-stage F-statistic	114.576		104.11		26.418		27.953	

Notes: Linguistic Diversity and Migrant Flow are at the prefecture level. One the estimates of the instrument variable, linguistic distance, is reported from the first-stage regressions. Standard errors corrected for survey design effect. *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1

Table 3 Dialect and Voter Turnout: Guangdong Province Subsample

VARIABLES	Voted vs. Not Voted			
	<i>probit</i>		<i>IV-probit</i>	
	(1)		(2)	
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>
Dialect Proficiency	0.225*	0.021*	0.612***	0.086**
	(0.127)	(0.011)	(0.124)	(0.036)
Controls	Yes		Yes	
Observations	243		243	
<i>Instrumental Variable (first-stage results)</i>				
Linguistic Distance			-0.593***	
			(0.083)	
F-Statistic			48.030	

Notes: Model (1) replicates Model (4) from Table 1, and Model (2) replicates Model (4) from Table 2. Control variables included but not show are male, age, age square, Communist Party membership, and urban *hukou*, migrant density, migrant flow (prefecture level), relationships among residents, relationships between residents and cadres, committee information dissemination frequency, candidate nomination, direct election, villagers' committee, and the network size. Standard errors corrected for survey design effect. ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1.

In conclusion, our findings for local dialect proficiency, a non-institutional factor to which the existing literature has paid little attention, plays an important role in migrants' participation in authoritarian grassroots elections in China.

Mechanism Analysis

Local Dialect as a Communication Medium

In this section, we explore the possible mechanisms through which local language proficiency affects the voting propensity of migrants in China's grassroots elections. First, we consider the possibility that local dialect proficiency facilitates the migrant's communication ability in the settled community. Not being able to speak the local dialect may hamper a migrant's participation in social activities, including political events. Grassroots elections are conducted by locally-rooted party cadres, so the local dialect is highly likely to be the predominant language used in election preparations and in the electoral process. What is

more, local dialects dominate daily communications in local communities, especially in rural villages. Without speaking local dialect, migrants may face significant communication challenges in their effort to gain critical information related to elections from local residents and cadres. Such challenges may also prevent migrants from participating in grassroots elections even if they hope to participate.

To test the mechanism of a communication challenge, we exploit mandarin proficiency, which functions as a critical substitute for local dialect. Historically, different languages/dialects prevailed in China, nominally unified by written Chinese, such that people in different linguistic regions could communicate on paper. However, the Chinese Communist Party has successfully enforced linguistic homogenization by promoting Mandarin nationwide since 1949. According to the Ministry of Education in China, 53% of Chinese citizens spoke fluent Mandarin as of 2000, a number that increased to 73% in 2015.²⁶ In this context, if a migrant is proficient in Mandarin, it would be less important for her to master the local dialect for daily communication. We should thus expect the estimate of local dialect proficiency to become insignificant or for the size of the effect to decrease once we add the respondent’s Mandarin proficiency to our regression.

Table 4 reports our results with Mandarin proficiency as an additional explanatory variable. Models (1) and (2) employ *probit* regressions, whereas Models (3) and (4) adopt the IV-*probit* regressions. The coefficients on local dialect proficiency remain significant at the 99% confidence level in all models. Moreover, compared to the previous two tables, we do not see a substantial decrease in the coefficient size. In turn, we find that Mandarin proficiency is generally negatively correlated with migrants’ propensity to vote in the grassroots election. Taken together, the results do not support a communication medium mechanism: communication issues do not appear to be the primary channel through which local dialect proficiency affects migrants’ turnout in the grassroots election studied here.

²⁶See http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/xwfbh/moe_2069/xwfbh_2017n/xwfb_2017090802/mtbd_2017090802/201709/t20170911_314098.html (accessed on August 16, 2019).

Table 4 Dialect, Mandarin, and Voter Turnout: Communication Challenge Mechanism

	Voter Turnout (Not Voted = 0; Voted = 1)							
	<i>probit</i>		<i>probit</i>		<i>IV-probit</i>		<i>IV-probit</i>	
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)	
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>
Dialect Proficiency	0.185*** (0.070)	0.039*** (0.015)	0.215*** (0.072)	0.038*** (0.013)	0.526*** (0.085)	0.130*** (0.028)	0.858*** (0.075)	0.221*** (0.030)
Mandarin Proficiency	-0.227*** (0.078)	-0.049*** (0.017)	-0.063 (0.105)	-0.011 (0.018)	-0.185** (0.072)	-0.046*** (0.018)	-0.141* (0.080)	-0.036* (0.021)
Linguistic Diversity			-1.135* (0.604)	-0.200* (0.106)			-0.761* (0.455)	-0.196* (0.113)
Network Size					0.037 (0.054)	0.009 (0.013)	-0.025 (0.051)	-0.006 (0.013)
Individual-level Variables	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
Community-level Variables	No		Yes		No		Yes	
Province Fes	No		Yes		No		Yes	
Observations	752		638		752		638	
<i>Instrument Variable (first-stage results)</i>								
Linguistic Distance					-0.438*** (0.042)		-0.247*** (0.046)	
First-stage F-statistic					105.615		29.571	

Notes: Model (1) replicates Model (2) from Table 1, Model (2) replicates Model (4) from Table 1, Model (3) replicates Model (2) from Table 2, and Model (4) replicates Model (4) from Table 2. The individual-level variables include male, age, age square, Communist Party membership, and *hukou* type. Community-level variables include migrant density, relationships among residents, relationships between residents and cadres, villagers' committee, migrant flow (prefecture level), and network size. Standard errors corrected by survey design effect. *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1.

Social Connectedness

The second potential mechanism is the social connectedness channel, whereby migrants who converse in the local dialect are more likely to vote because they feel more connected to the community or to the other residents of the community. Language is a key component of one's identity and is essential in forming bonds with others (Demichelis & Weibull 2008), and migrants' destination-language proficiency can boost their social assimilation (Bleakley & Chin 2010). By speaking the local dialect, migrants may have a strong sense of social connectedness with the settled community, care more about community affairs and be more willing to participate in the community decision making process, including community elections. Furthermore, connected migrants are more likely to seek information related to elections from local residents and party cadres. Such migrants are also likely to be more aware of local community interests, which increases the probability that they vote in order to support collective benefits.

To examine whether social connectedness is the mechanism through which local dialect proficiency affects migrants' voting probability, we regress the local dialect proficiency on various measures of social connectedness, such as the respondent's frequency of social interaction with local residents, frequency of mutual assistance with local residents, and familiarity with local residents.

The results in Table 5 suggest that social interaction is one of the channels that promotes migrants' participation in local voting. In all OLS regressions presented in the odd-numbered columns, local dialect proficiency is positively and significantly associated with the different measures of social connectedness. The instrumental variable estimates presented in the even-numbered models indicate results similar to the OLS ones, even though they are not significant. In sum, local dialect proficiency seems to encourage migrants to engage in more frequent and intimate interactions with other residents in the community, which explains why they are more likely to participate in community elections.

Table 5 The Mechanism of Social Connectedness

	Social Interaction		Mutual Assistance		Familiarity	
	OLS (1)	IV reg (2)	OLS (3)	IV reg (4)	OLS (5)	IV reg (6)
Dialect Proficiency	0.145*** (0.035)	0.144 (0.132)	0.064** (0.028)	0.090 (0.113)	0.123*** (0.030)	0.159 (0.108)
Mandarin Proficiency	-0.022 (0.058)	-0.022 (0.057)	0.027 (0.049)	0.025 (0.048)	0.019 (0.048)	0.019 (0.047)
Linguistic Diversity	0.062 (0.277)	0.063 (0.275)	0.280 (0.271)	0.270 (0.267)	0.046 (0.233)	0.031 (0.231)
Network Size	0.094** (0.037)	0.094** (0.037)	0.089*** (0.033)	0.087*** (0.034)	0.099*** (0.034)	0.096*** (0.034)
Individual-level Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Community-level Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Province FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	615	615	1,098	1,098	1,099	1,099
<i>Instrument Variable (first-stage results)</i>						
Linguistic Distance		-0.339*** (0.049)		-0.320*** (0.040)		-0.320*** (0.040)
First-stage F-statistic		48.241		65.046		65.091

Notes: The control variables include male, age, age square, Communist Party membership, urban *hukou*, migrant density, relationships among residents, relationships between residents and cadres, villagers' committee, and migrant flow (prefecture level). Standard errors corrected by survey design effect. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Party Cadres' Mobilization

As mentioned, Chinese citizens often participate in grassroots elections simply because they evaluate the personal pressure as an informal obligation, due to the cadres' mobilization efforts, even though they face no punishment if they do not turn out. In the case of migrants, we hypothesize that local dialect proficiency will boost migrants' responsiveness to cadres' mobilization tactics, because migrants who speak the local dialect fluently are more likely to be affected by the same-dialect-speaking local cadres from the same community. To test this channel, we disaggregate the turnout variable into two outcome variables: voluntary voting and mobilized voting. In Models (1) and (2) in Table 6, we test whether speaking the local dialect affects migrants' voluntary participation in voting; Models (3) and (4) examine whether migrants fluent in the local dialect are more likely to be mobilized by local cadres. The results show that being fluent in the local dialect increases the chance of both voluntary and mobilized voting. The increase in voluntary voting among migrants – who are logically considered to be least motivated to vote in community committee elections – indirectly supports our second mechanism, the social connectedness channel, in the sense that local dialect fluency leads migrants to be more interactive and participatory in community affairs and thus more likely to voluntarily participate in community elections. More interestingly, local dialect proficiency seems to make migrants more responsive to local cadres' mobilization efforts. The IV-*probit* results in Model (4), Table 6 suggest that a one standard deviation increase in local dialect proficiency leads to a 14.14% increase in turnout as an outcome of a local cadre's request. The IV regressions generate consistent outcomes with *probit* results showed in Model (3). Importantly, the effects of dialect proficiency are larger and stronger for mobilized voting than for voluntary voting.

Table 6 The Mechanism of Local Cadres' Mobilization

	Voted Voluntarily v.s. Not Voted				Mobilized Voted v.s. Not Voted			
	<i>probit</i>		IV- <i>probit</i>		<i>probit</i>		IV- <i>probit</i>	
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)	
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>Marginal Effect</i>
Dialect Proficiency	0.111 (0.097)	0.015 (0.013)	0.628*** (0.174)	0.120** (0.056)	0.237* (0.126)	0.012* (0.007)	0.783*** (0.133)	0.096** (0.048)
Mandarin Proficiency	-0.021 (0.119)	-0.003 (0.016)	-0.020 (0.105)	-0.004 (0.020)	0.181 (0.199)	0.009 (0.010)	0.062 (0.156)	0.008 (0.019)
Linguistic Diversity	-2.017*** (0.756)	-0.276*** (0.102)	-1.788** (0.718)	-0.341*** (0.113)	-0.234 (1.258)	-0.012 (0.064)	-0.394 (0.737)	-0.048 (0.092)
Individual-level Variables	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
Community-level Variables	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
Province FEs	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
Observations	515		515		427		427	
<i>Instrument Variable (first-stage results)</i>								
Linguistic Distance			-0.373*** (0.058)				-0.272*** (0.058)	
First-stage F-statistic			22.512				27.713	

Notes: The individual-level variables include male, age, age square, Communist Party membership, and urban *hukou*. Community-level variables include migrant density, relationships among residents, relationships between residents and cadres, villagers' committee, and migrant flow (prefecture level). Standard errors corrected by survey design effect. *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1.

Conclusion

This article analyzes the voting behavior of migrants in China to understand the logic of authoritarian electoral mobilization. By employing detailed information about migrants' linguistic backgrounds and turnout in a grassroots election, we investigate how citizens in authoritarian regimes respond to government agents' face-to-face mobilization efforts. Our analysis shows that those migrants who are fluent in the local dialect are more responsive to locally-rooted party cadres' voter mobilization tactics for grassroots elections because they feel more socially connected to the community and the cadres. To examine other possible channels through which migrants' dialect skills increase their turnout rate, we test the possibility that the dialect functions as a communication medium and that it enhances migrants' social connectedness to the settled community. Our results show that local dialect fluency leads migrants to perceive themselves as more connected to the settled community, which may also result in voluntary participation in a community election. The effect of this social connectedness channel is smaller, however, than the effect of mobilization.

While our study speaks closely to the existing China politics literature, it also highlights the importance of social connectedness and pressure as a key mechanism boosting authoritarian citizens' participation in elections. Our findings are critical for understanding the street-level implementation of authoritarian elections. While other studies have emphasized the prevalence of coercion, fraud and clientelism, few have focused on grassroots mobilization efforts that exploit various social norms and pressures. Speaking the same dialect as local cadres and community members, despite the existence of a national language, encourages citizens to participate in authoritarian elections where their participation does not affect the electoral outcome, while also helping local cadres to fulfill their task and the longstanding authoritarian regime to legitimize its rule at the grassroots level through ostensibly democratic means. Our study shows that street-level mobilization for authoritarian elections does not necessarily need to rely on coercion or material clientelism, but that local cadres may instead exploit various individual-level social contextual factors. It is worth noting that,

although we use migrants as the sample of analysis, our findings and theoretical implications should apply to general authoritarian voters including indigenous local voters. If the social pressure mechanism works for migrants who speak the local dialects, local populations themselves must be bound by a constant and stronger sense of social pressure within their own communities.

Our study leaves a few important questions to future research. While this research reveals one of the mechanisms through which the Chinese regime ensures citizens' political participation in its authoritarian elections, our general knowledge on grassroots elections in China is still fairly limited. At this point, most Chinese communities have held community elections for two to three decades, yet the broad effects of this limited yet ostensibly democratic process are scarcely estimated, partially because no systematic data on the election process are available at the national level. Currently, scholars who study Chinese grassroots elections depend on survey data that cover parts of the country over short periods of time, without detailed information about the election process itself. Furthermore, our study suggests new avenues for research on the political effects of Chinese migrants. So far, most migrant-related political studies have focused on their role in the labor movement or on the discrimination they face in accessing public goods. We note that, as the *hukou* system changes as part of social system reforms in response to economic development, urbanization and demographic shifts, more migrants in China are now beginning to move for long periods, or even permanently. As a result, the social and political influence of migrant populations on grassroots communities will continue to increase, which we suggest merits further study. Finally, our study calls for theoretical and empirical research on the role of social pressure in authoritarian politics more generally. Authoritarian societies tend to be more closed and self-sustained compared to democratic ones, so the power of social norms and networks in this context may differ from their well-studied role in democracies, particularly in terms of encouraging pro-incumbent behaviors.

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