PROVINCIAL LEADERS IN THE CCP POLITBURO, 1978-2008

SHENG Yumin

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Executive Summary

1. In recent years, a growing number of incumbent provincial party secretaries—the top-ranking officials (一把手) in the provinces—have become members in the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the top collective decision-making body of China's ruling party.

2. For instance, the share of Politburo membership for provincial officials rose from about 3.5 percent in 1985 to 23.5 percent in 1988. While the peak of 26.7 percent was reached in 2003, the provincial share is still holding steady at around 24 percent in 2008.

3. Due to the power and stature of Politburo members within the ruling party, it is tempting to interpret this phenomenon as a possible sign of the rising political influence of the provinces in China's national political system, at the expense of the center. But rising provincial presence at the Politburo does not necessarily imply the concomitant decline of the power of the political center and the country's national leaders.

4. Indeed, whether and exactly which provincial leaders could become Politburo members is still largely determined from above due to the predominance of the CCP national leaders within the Politburo itself and their monopoly personnel power over the provincial party/government leadership.

5. China's provincial leaders make up a relatively small share of the Politburo membership and do not pose any real threat to the political and numerical preponderance of the national leaders working at the center. On average, central leaders still took up nearly 85 percent of CCP Politburo seats each year during the post-reform period of 1978-2008. Only officials working in about a third of Chinese provinces have become CCP Politburo members.

6. Compared with other top provincial cadres, provincial leaders who are Politburo members might harbor greater incentives to comply with the policy

preferences of the CCP national leaders because of 1) their own career incentives; and 2) their more stringent monitoring by the center.

7. Thus, growing provincial representation at the Politburo of the CCP Central Committee might reflect enhanced efforts by the center to exert tight political control over provincial governments which have often been economically empowered in the age of economic reform and opening to the global market.

8. If provinces that are more economically resourceful and potentially more politically restive warrant greater central control efforts, top leaders of these very provinces should be more likely to become members of the CCP Politburo. This is indeed consistent with the relative overrepresentation at the Politburo during the period of 1978-2008 of coastal provinces which have benefited more economically and become more assertive in the era of opening to the global market.

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Provincial Politburo Presence as Central Control

1.1 In recent years, growing attention has been drawn to the large number of provincial party secretaries—the top-ranking officials (一把手) in the provinces—who are concurrently members in the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In October 2008, for example, six out of a total of twenty-five Politburo members are incumbent provincial party secretaries—Liu Qi (刘淇, party secretary of Beijing), Zhang Gaoli (张高丽, Tianjin), Yu Zhengsheng (俞正声, Shanghai), Wang Yang (汪洋, Guangdong), Bo Xilai (薄熙来, Chongqing), and Wang Lequan (王乐泉, Xinjiang).

1.2 Due to the power and stature of Politburo members within the ruling party, it has also become popular to regard this phenomenon as a possible sign of the rising political influence of the provinces at the expense of the center in China's national political system.[1] It is certainly true that during the post-1978 era, especially in the more recent years, Politburo membership shares for the provincial officials have been rising. However, this does not necessarily imply the concomitant decline of the power of the political center and the country's national leaders.

* Dr. Sheng Yumin was a visiting research fellow at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, and an assistant professor of political science at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. In preparing this brief, he has greatly benefited from the invaluable comments and suggestions from Professor John Wong, and discussions with Drs. Bo Zhiyue and You Ji.

[1] See, for instance, Joseph Fewsmith, "The Sixteenth National Party Congress: The Succession That Didn't Happen," *The China Quarterly*, no. 173 (2003); Cheng Li, "A Landslide Victory for Provincial Leaders," *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 5 (2003).

1.3 The national leaders at the CCP center still determine the very composition of the Politburo membership via their predominance within the Politburo itself and their monopoly personnel power over the provincial party/government leadership. Despite their growing presence, China's provincial leaders have only constituted a relatively small share of the entire Politburo membership and do not pose any real threat to the political and numerical preponderance of the national leaders working at the center. Compared with other top provincial cadres, Politburo members leading the provincial governments in fact might be more motivated to comply with the policy preferences of the central government because of their own career incentives and their more stringent monitoring by the center.

1.4 Thus, increasing provincial representation at the Politburo of the CCP Central Committee might be better inferred as enhanced efforts by the center to exert tight political control over economically empowered provincial governments in the age of economic reform and opening to the global market. To the extent that provinces that are more economically resourceful and potentially politically restive warrant greater central control efforts, top leaders of these provinces should be more likely to be sitting members of the CCP Politburo. [2]

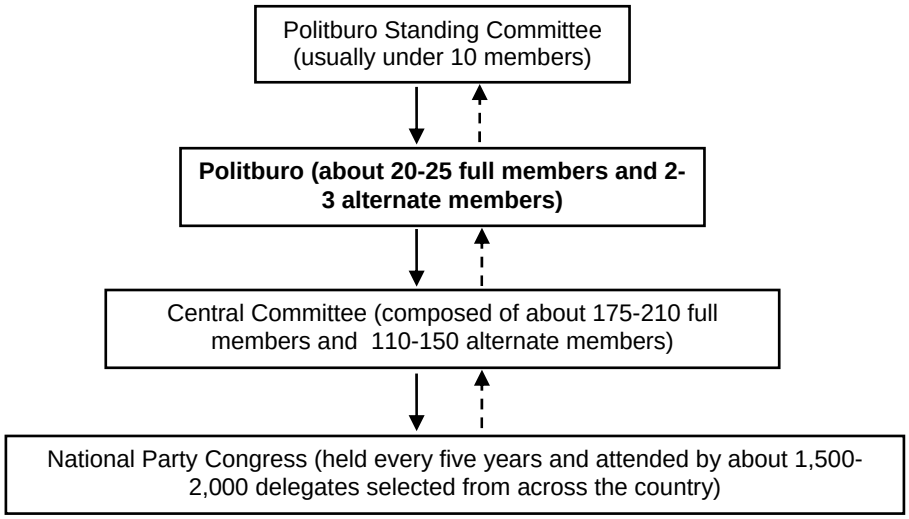
1.5 This is indeed consistent with the relative overrepresentation at the Politburo during the period of 1978-2008 of the coastal provinces which are particularly attractive targets of political control by the national leaders in China. From 1978 to 1994, the average coastal province enjoyed an annual Politburo membership share of 0.7 percent, in contrast to an average share of merely 0.12 percent for the inland provinces. During the 1995-2008 period, the average annual share for the coastal provinces rose to 1.46 percent. For the inland provinces, the share was only 0.2 percent. Clearly, more economically resourceful but potentially more politically restive provinces are more attractive targets of central political control through Politburo membership for their leading officials.

[2] The author further developed and empirically tested the argument along this line in Yumin Sheng, "Authoritarian Co-optation, the Territorial Dimension: Provincial Political Representation in Post-Mao China," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 44, no. 1 (2009).

Trends of Provincial Presence at the Politburo

2.1 As schematized in Figure 1, the Politburo is the effective collective decision-making forum of the Chinese Communist Party. It is usually composed of fewer than 30 members out of whom the supreme political office of the land, the Standing Committee of the Politburo, often with a membership of under 10, is formed. The Politburo itself is formally selected out of as well as by a new term of the CCP Central Committee chosen every five years.

FIGURE 1 THE CCP CENTRAL COMMITTEE AND POLITBURO



Source: Yumin Sheng, "Central-Provincial Relations at the CCP Central Committees: Institutions, Measurement and Empirical Trends, 1978-2002," *The China Quarterly*, no. 182 (2005), p. 341.
Note: Solid arrows refer to the actual direction of authority, dashed arrows indicate the nominal direction of authority and the fact that membership at the end of the arrow comes from the beginning of the arrow.

2.2 Due to the inconvenience of summoning all the members of the Central Committee from across the country, however, the Politburo at the party center becomes the *de facto* executive body of the CCP in charge of the country's major domestic and foreign policymaking. Not surprisingly, its members are called the "20-30 most powerful people" in Chinese politics.[3]

[3] Michel Oksenberg, "China's Political System: Challenges of the Twenty-First Century," in *The Nature of Chinese Politics: From Mao to Jiang*, ed. Jonathan Unger and Lowell Dittmer (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), pp. 193-208.

2.3 In theory, a bottom-up process seems to be dictated by the Party constitution whereby all full members of the CCP Central Committee, themselves chosen by the National Party Congress every five years, have the right to choose the members of the Politburo. Because of this constitutional right, the Central Committee is often seen as a powerful "Selectorate" in Chinese politics.[4]

2.4 In reality, however, the process is very much top-down in nature even though the exact details of choosing the Politburo members by the full members of the Central Committee are not available to the public. Above all, each outgoing Politburo often plays a dominant role in helping determine the very membership makeup in the Central Committee by recommending a list of candidates for the next term of the Central Committee to the National Party Congress.[5] It is reasonable to assume that each term of the Politburo largely determines the composition of its own successor from above in a similar vein.

2.5 The vast majority of the Politburo members (and all members of its more exclusive Standing Committee) work at the central level in the national capital. For example, in 2008 nineteen out of twenty-five Politburo members (76 percent) are officials based in the central government or CCP national party apparatus. But the post-1978 era has also witnessed the rising share of Politburo membership for top officials working at the provincial level.

2.6 When the reform and opening era first began in 1978, nearly 22 percent of the Politburo membership was already working in the provinces. But this mostly reflected the promotion into the Politburo by the reformist leadership in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution of cadres sent to work in the provinces. But this did not last long. As these officials went back to the center, the provincial share of Politburo membership quickly dropped. By 1981, none of the Politburo members was working in the provinces. The situation, however, began to change in late 1984 when Ni Zhifu (倪志福), a sitting Politburo member, became the party secretary of Tianjin.

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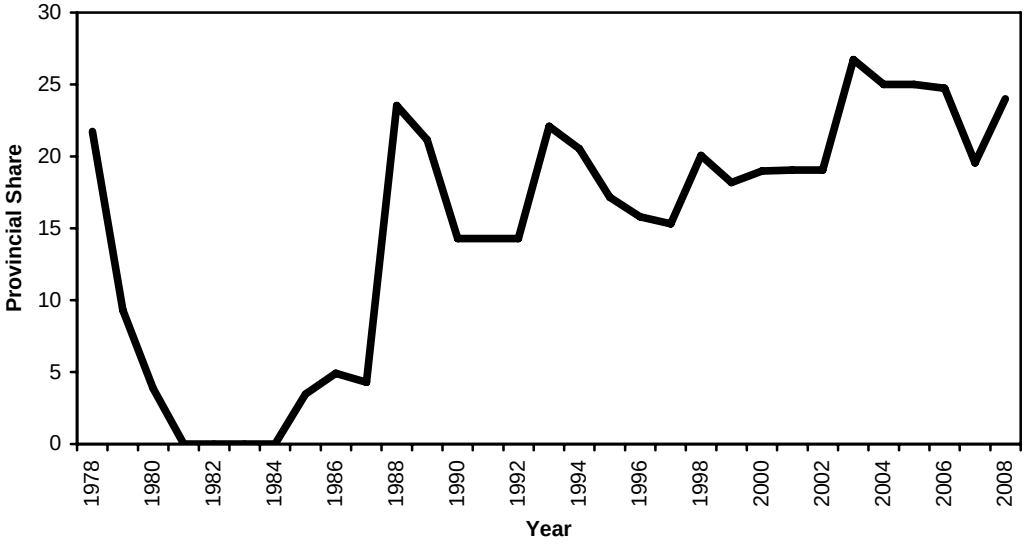
4 Susan L. Shirk, *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

5 Sheng, "Central-Provincial Relations at the CCP Central Committees."

FIGURE 2 PROVINCIAL SHARE OF POLITBURO MEMBERSHIP (%), 1978-2008



Sources: Data for 1978-2002 are from Sheng, "Central-Provincial Relations at the CCP Central Committees," p. 349; those for 2003-2008 are from http://www.xinhuanet.com.
Note: Coding of provincial share of Politburo membership follows Sheng, "Central-Provincial Relations at the CCP Central Committees," pp. 354-355. Data for year 2003 cover November 2002-October 2003; similarly, those for year 2008 data cover November 2007-October 2008.

2.7 Since then, it has become increasingly common for Politburo members to become concurrent provincial party secretaries. Figure 2 shows the share of Politburo membership for provincial officials rose quickly from about 3.5 percent in 1985 to 23.5 percent in 1988. While the peak of 26.7 percent was reached in 2003, provincial share is still holding steady at around 24 percent in 2008. The rising trends of Politburo membership for provincial officials can also be seen in the period averages coinciding with the terms of the 12^{th}-16^{th} Central Committee, respectively: 2.5 percent for 1983-1987, 17.5 percent for 1988-1992, 18.2 percent for 1993-1997, 19.1 percent for 1998-2002, and 24.2 for 2003-2007.

Nature of Provincial Presence at the Politburo

3.1 Provincial interests are often not consonant with those of the central government which is more concerned about the country's national interests as a whole. Could the growing presence of provincial officials in the ranks of the most powerful policymakers in China inordinately amplify the political

influence of the preferences and interests of the provinces at the national level? Would provincial cadres sitting in the Politburo try to push for the parochial interests of the localities they rule? Ultimately, can this weaken the grip on political power of the national political leaders in China when reform and opening to the global market have already economically empowered the provinces?

3.2 These concerns are understandable, but are not necessarily warranted for two main reasons: 1) the political predominance of the Chinese national leaders; 2) the better alignment of the incentives of the Politburo members working in the provinces with the preferences of the national leaders at the center. In fact, allowing a larger presence of officials from the provinces can be better interpreted as efforts by the national leaders to exert tighter political control over the provincial governments during the period covered here.

Political Predominance of National Leaders

3.3 It is fairly unlikely that Politburo membership for the provincial officials will pose any real menaces to the predominance of the Chinese national leaders at the center because of the political and numerical advantages the national leaders enjoy at such a collective decision-making forum. Above all, the national leaders head the central government, run the daily affairs of the ruling party, and command the military. They are always in charge of the most important national policy-making apparatus in contemporary China. Membership for the Standing Committee of the Politburo, the supreme office of the land, has been exclusively confined to national leaders working at the center.

3.4 In addition, Politburo membership for Chinese provincial officials has been relatively rare. The Chinese national leaders have always maintained overwhelming numerical predominance within the Politburo, as already noted. On average, central leaders still took up nearly 85 percent of the CCP Politburo seats each year during the post-reform period of 1978-2008. Moreover, only officials working in about a third of Chinese provinces tended

to be CCP Politburo members. Thus, provincial presence at the Politburo of the CCP Central Committee does not necessarily compromise the overall predominance enjoyed by China's national leaders.

3.5 Most importantly, the Chinese national leaders also monopolize the personnel authority over the provincial officials.[6] Ultimately, they determine whether and which of the provinces can be governed by the Politburo members. China's national leaders could affect Politburo membership for the provincial officials in two ways. First, through their control of the central apparatus of the CCP, they could simply promote an incumbent provincial official into the Politburo membership. Second, they could assign a sitting Politburo member to a top provincial post—the provincial party secretary in the provinces.

3.6 In either case, the personnel monopoly power over the top provincial offices is crucial because even provincial officials promoted into Politburo membership can only continue to work at the provincial level for as long as is desired by the national leaders. The example of Zhang Dejiang (张德江) is illustrative. Zhang became a Politburo member in November 2002 while he was still party chief of Zhejiang, but was soon transferred to Guangdong as a sitting Politburo member. In late 2007, Zhang was reassigned to the national capital, becoming vice premier in March 2008.

3.7 The real source of their offices at the provincial level thus dictates that the presence of provincial officials at the Politburo does not serve the purpose of better representing the interests and preferences of the provinces that these officials are assigned by the national leaders to govern. Without a truly competitive electoral mechanism for selecting the political leadership at the provincial level, provincial officials still owe their offices to the Chinese national leaders via the ruling CCP. Therefore, leading provincial officials in China are held accountable to their national-level superiors in Beijing, rather than to a provincial electorate below.

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[6] Melanie Manion, "The Cadre Management System, Post-Mao: The Appointment, Promotion, Transfer and Removal of Party and State Leaders," *The China Quarterly*, no. 102 (1985).

Incentive Alignment for Politburo Members in the Provinces

3.8 Politburo membership could better align the incentive structure of these provincial officials. A seat in the ruling party Politburo could signal that these individuals have now been accepted into the ranks of the national core leadership. For provincial officials who are Politburo members, their "long-term career prospects lie with" their superiors and Politburo colleagues running the central government.[7] They are more likely to internalize the latter's more "encompassing" interests in maintaining their collective national rule. This should be especially true if most of these officials posted to serve in the provinces will eventually be promoted to higher-ranking positions at the national level, in the central government or CCP national apparatus.

3.9 In the post-1978 era, provincial party secretaries who are concurrent Politburo members are indeed much more likely to be promoted to higher-ranking positions at the national level than other provincial officials. As can be seen from Table 1, during this period (up to October 2008), a majority (about 54 percent) of the Politburo members who had already completed their tenure in the provinces went on to become members of the Politburo Standing Committee, Vice Premiers, or State Councilors (the equivalent of Vice Premiers) in the central government or standing organs of the CCP at the national level. In stark contrast, very few (below 14 percent) provincial officials who were not Politburo members were similarly promoted.

[7] Yasheng Huang, *Inflation and Investment Controls in China: The Political Economy of Central-Local Relations During the Reform Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 197.

TABLE 1 PROMOTION TO CENTRAL POSITIONS FOR PROVINCIAL PARTY SECRETARIES, 1978-2008

	Politburo Members	Non-Politburo Members
a. Total	32	169
b. Already completed their provincial stints	26	144
c. Substantive promotion to the center	14	20
= c/b (%)	(53.9%)	(13.9%)
d. Ceremonial promotion to the center	6	5
= d/b (%)	(23.1%)	(3.5%)

Sources: http://www.xinhuanet.com, and Shen Xueming and Zheng Jianying, eds., *Zhonggong Diyijie Zhi Shiwujie Zhongyang Weiyuan [Members of the 1st -15th Central Committees of the Chinese Communist Party]* (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2001).

Note: A substantive promotion takes place when a provincial party secretary is promoted to a higher-ranked post in the central government or party apparatus with substantive power such as a member of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee, a vice premier, state councilor, a secretary of the CCP central secretariat (中央书记处), head or deputy head of the CCP central commission for disciplinary inspection (中央纪律检查委员会), chief or deputy chief of the CCP central politics and law committee (中央政法委). A ceremonial promotion occurs when prior to formal retirement, a provincial party secretary is promoted to become a nominal position of the national level such as a vice chair of the National People's Congress (全国人民代表大会) or of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (中国人民政治协商会议). The numbers in parentheses refer to the percentages of provincial party secretaries in each of the two categories who had already completed their tenure in the provinces.

3.10 In comparison with other provincial party secretaries, concurrent Politburo members were also much more likely to take up higher-ranking ceremonial positions at the national level before their formal retirement. Nearly a quarter of them assumed national-level honorary posts such as vice chairs of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference that nominally rank higher than the office of the provincial party secretaries. In contrast, barely four percent of the other provincial party secretaries were similarly "honorably discharged" into such national-level sinecures in Beijing after stepping down from their provincial posts.

3.11 Furthermore, compared with other provincial officials who are also appointed from above, Politburo members serving in the provinces could be better monitored by the national leaders. Their small number and the more frequent Politburo meetings might help remedy the "information asymmetry" problem for the national leaders in a principal-agent relationship with the provincial

officials.[8] In short, regional officials sitting in the Politburo should be more compliant with the policy preferences of the national leaders because they have more incentives to help maintain their own national-level rule or find it more difficult to defy the policy directives of their national superiors.

Provincial-level Variation in Politburo Representation

4.1 The logic of enhancing political control over the provincial governments through selective Politburo membership for the provincial officials suggests that only a few provinces would be ruled by sitting Politburo members. As seen in Table 2, indeed, only twelve of the thirty-one provinces were ruled by members of the CCP Politburo, at one time or another, throughout the period of 1978-2008. Thus, Politburo membership for provincial officials has been far from universal. Given the overwhelming majority of membership shares occupied by the national leaders as noted previously, indeed provincial Politburo representation has been awarded sparingly and selectively.

4.2 During this period of economic reform and opening to the world market, there has also been rising disparity among the Chinese provinces. Furthermore, the economically more resourceful provinces have become more resistant toward central fiscal and macroeconomic policies. If Politburo membership for leading provincial officials can be manipulated as a tool for exercising tighter political control by ensuring greater provincial policy compliance, these provinces should be more likely to be represented at the Politburo.

[8] Yasheng Huang, "Managing Chinese Bureaucrats: An Institutional Economics Perspective," *Political Studies* 50, no. 1 (2002), pp. 69-70.

TABLE 2 PROVINCIAL PRESENCE AT THE POLITBURO, 1978-2008

Provinces	Years of Politburo presence	Provinces	Years of Politburo presence
Anhui	---	Jilin	---
Beijing	1978, 1987-2008	**Liaoning**	---
Chongqing	2007-2008	Neimenggu	---
Fujian	---	Ningxia	---
Gansu	---	Qinghai	---
Guangdong	1978, 1992-2008	Shaanxi	---
Guangxi	---	**Shandong**	1992-1994, 1997-2002
Guizhou	---	**Shanghai**	1978-1980, 1987-1989, 1992-2008
Hainan	---	Shanxi	---
Hebei	---	Sichuan	1979-1980, 1987-1992, 2002
Heilongjiang	---	**Tianjin**	1984-1989, 1992-1993, 2002-2008
Henan	1997-1998	Tibet	---
Hubei	2002-2007	Xinjiang	2002-2008
Hunan	---	Yunnan	---
Jiangsu	2002	**Zhejiang**	2002
Jiangxi	---		

Sources: http://www.xinhuanet.com, and Sheng, "Authoritarian Co-optation, the Territorial Dimension."
Note: Entries list the calendar years in which incumbent officials from the provinces were Politburo members. Politburo members who served in the provinces do not include alternate Politburo members (for Xinjiang in 1978 and Sichuan in 1978-1979). --- indicates no provincial officials were Politburo members. The coastal provinces are in bold.

4.3 The most approximate divide between the provincial "winners and losers" in this era could roughly be defined geographically. Coastal provinces have been more exposed to the global marketplace and benefited more during the age of reform and opening than the inland provinces through attaining higher levels of wealth and faster economic growth. Indeed, there is clear evidence that these provinces are more likely to be ruled by sitting members of the CCP Politburo.[9] As seen in Table 2, in both relative and absolute terms, more (seven out of twelve) coastal provinces than inland (five out of nineteen) provinces were governed by Politburo members, for longer stretches of time during this period.

[9] This is only for illustrative purposes. For more systematic evidence linking provincial economic resourcefulness and provincial Politburo presence, see Sheng, "Authoritarian Co-optation, the Territorial Dimension".