

*Triumph of Non-Optimal Candidates: How Do the City Coordination Conferences Recruit New Members?**

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Abstract

City coordination conferences serves as mechanisms for the allocation of interests and responsibilities among diverse localities, accomplished through collaborative meetings to foster harmonious regional development. An ensuing inquiry pertains to the eligibility criteria for attendance, particularly relevant as China's regional collaboration intensifies, leading to an increasing influx of cities into one or several coordination organizations. This burgeoning participation provides a rich array of cases to scrutinize, addressing the aforementioned question. Utilizing the Yangtze River Delta economic coordination conference as a paradigm, the authors employ a methodological approach involving panel data construction and a fixed effects model, revealing three noteworthy findings. Firstly, an inverted U-shaped relationship emerges between the absorption status of candidate cities and their economic development levels, elucidating that certain non-obligatory candidate cities can outcompete their economically optimal counterparts.

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Secondly, both formal and informal relationships between cities exert a significant and positive influence on the absorption status of a candidate city, with informal relationships exhibiting a complementary effect on the level of economic development. Thirdly, factors such as market volume, and industrial capacity play pivotal roles in the expansion dynamics of coordination conferences. This study critically analyzes the expansion mechanism of city coordination conferences, contributing to an enriched understanding of regional intricacies and local government relations in China.

In China, the city coordination conference is an important mechanism to boost regional cooperation. One of the principal methods employed in coordination conferences is convening joint meetings among various localities, where consensus is reached through negotiation, actions are harmonized, and the ultimate goal of distributing interests and responsibilities is achieved. It is believed to be able to overcome many difficulties in horizontal cooperation among cities and is, therefore, widely used in governance scenarios such as coordinated economic development, watershed governance, and police cooperation. Numerous cities relentlessly endeavor to attain eligibility for participating in certain joint meetings, as acquiring this qualification signifies entry into the club of regional coordinated development, whereas the lack thereof results in exclusion. Although scholars have studied the causes, operating mechanisms, and operating effectiveness of city coordination conferences,¹ it remains unknown how city coordination conferences select new members?

The answer to the above question is not obvious. On the one hand, there is intense economic competition among regions in China's context. To enhance the comparative advantage of a region, a regional coordination conference tends to embrace more developed cities. On the other hand, there is also competition among cities within a region. To maintain comparative advantages within the region, some member cities might favor less developed candidates. In addition, the core cities in the coordination conference always have more say over member recruitment. Hence, their preference will carry more weight than ordinary members.

This study examines the expansion mechanism of the city coordination conference using the inter-city conference on the Yangtze River Delta (YRD) economic coordination as a case study. With China's rapid economic growth, numerous localities have established various regional