One Mandarin, Many Loyalties: Factional Ties and Elite Survival in Vietnam's 2025 Reform

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Abstract: *This paper explores whether factional ties shape elite career outcomes during Vietnam's 2025 administrative reform. The reform sharply reduced the number of provinces and eliminated nearly half of provincial-level leadership positions, creating a rare and high-stakes moment of elite reshuffling. Focusing on Provincial Party Secretaries, I examine whether informal factional ties to General Secretary To Lam affected officials' chances of survival (defined as promotion or retention) after the reform. Using original biographical data on 66 officials, I measure factional ties through shared hometown, educational background, and work-unit overlap. As a pilot analysis, the results show a strong association between factional ties, especially shared hometown, and promotion, while officials without such ties face a much higher risk of demotion. Local embeddedness appears to reduce demotion risk but does not increase promotion chances. While the small sample limits generalization, this pilot study suggests that informal loyalty plays an important role in elite selection during major institutional reforms in Vietnam.*

I.   Introduction

Vietnam's 2025 bureaucratic reform offers a rare opportunity to observe the inner workings of authoritarian governance in real time. Launched by General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), To Lam, the reform eliminated the district level of government, merged nearly half of the country's provinces, cut approximately 400,000 public sector jobs, and suspended local electoral procedures. While officially framed as a campaign for administrative efficiency, the scale and timing of the reform raise deeper questions about elite control and political consolidation.

Major institutional reforms of this magnitude often create moments of intense elite reshuffling. When leadership positions are reduced and local authority structures are reconfigured, central leaders gain unusual discretion over appointments and removals. In Vietnam's case, the reform placed particular emphasis on provincial leadership, where Provincial Party Secretaries serve as the most powerful political figures at the subnational level. Because these positions were centrally appointed, with To Lam playing a decisive role, the reform provides a useful setting to examine how elites are selected under authoritarian rule.

This paper asks a simple but important question: *Did factional ties to the General Secretary shape elite survival during the reform?* More specifically, were officials with informal connections to To Lam more likely to be promoted or retained, while unconnected officials faced a higher risk of demotion? Existing research suggests that loyalty often outweighs competence during periods of political restructuring, but directly testing this claim is difficult due to the opaque nature of factional politics.

As a pilot study, this paper takes a first step toward addressing this challenge. Drawing on the "three commons" approach widely used in the literature, I measure factional ties through shared hometown, shared educational background, and shared work-unit experience. I also consider local embeddedness as an alternative explanation for survival, capturing officials whose continued service in the same province may make them harder to replace.

Using original biographical data on Provincial Party Secretaries, this study evaluates whether these informal ties are systematically associated with post-reform career outcomes. The goal is not to offer definitive causal claims, but to test whether this empirical strategy is viable and informative. If successful, the approach can be scaled up to other provincial-level positions and a larger pool of officials.

II.   Brief Literature Review

1. Bureaucracy in Authoritarian Regimes

Authoritarian regimes primarily seek regime stability. This stability is achieved through a balance of three pillars: legitimation (cultivating voluntary support), repression (deterring dissent), and co-optation (buying loyalty) (Gerschewski J. , 2013). A key component of this balancing act is elite management. Without strong institutions to constrain power, internal coalition dynamics can spiral into instability, often resulting in personalist rule (Svolik, 2012). To avoid this, authoritarian leaders must carefully calibrate the distribution of authority, particularly between central and local actors. Bureaucratic institutions, elite management, and mechanisms of policy implementation are central to how regimes adapt or maintain control (Prud'homme, 1995; Meyer, Shih, & Lee, 2016; Hassan, 2020; Jiang, 2018).

Authoritarian governance hinges on a careful balance between loyalty and competence in elite appointments. Egorov and Sonin (2011) model how dictators face a fundamental trade-off: appointing highly competent officials may improve performance and helps the leaders detect the threats but increase the risk of betrayal. As a result, insecure rulers tend to favor loyalists, even if they are less capable. Other autocrats also promote administrators who are

effective yet non-threatening (Faguet, 2014; Enikolopov & Zhuravskaya, 2007; Lee & Schuler, 2020).

2. Patronage in Authoritarian Regimes

Alongside bureaucratic management, informal patronage networks are essential to governance in authoritarian regimes (Svolik, 2012; Egorov & Sonin, 2011; Beazer & Reuter, 2019). Patron-client relationship operate in parallel to formal hierarchies, along leaders to maintain control over promotions and resource flows. Chinese leaders use varied strategies (some relying on work experience, others on shared birthplace or education) to build loyal factions (Meyer, Shih, & Lee, 2016). To measure factional ties, Meyer, Shih, & Lee (2016) develop a coding scheme based on four criteria (1) shared birthplace, (2) shared educational institution and cohort, (3) overlapping work experience, and (4) prior subordinate-superior relationships, as presented as. An official is coded as tied to a patron if they meet at least one of these conditions, with greater weight assigned when multiple connections are present. The concept of the "three commons'" – common hometown, common school, and common workplace also build up the patron -client networks in Vietnam and China (Trinh, 2024; Malesky, Nguyen, & Tran, 2014; Meyer, Shih, & Lee, 2016; Jiang, 2018). Under some Kenyan leaders (Moi and Kibaki), in the other hand, officers from the president's ethnic group had better promotion chances (Hassan, 2020). Patronage serves not only to ensure loyalty but also to align local implementation with central priorities, as seen as study of Chinese provincial leaders who receive fiscal benefits and political rewards based on personal ties (Jiang, 2018).

"One Mandarin Benefits the Whole Clan" **–** this is not just a Vietnamese proverb, but the empirical reality that Do, Nguyen, and Tran (2017) uncover in their study of hometown favoritism in Vietnam. Their research reveals that when officials are promoted, they systematically channel infrastructure projects to their origin and rural communes that tights with their origin. I question whether this pattern of favoritism – rooted in informal networks like the "three commons'" continues to shape governance outcomes under Vietnam's ongoing bureaucratic reforms.

III.   Research Design

As mentioned earlier in Section 2 of my very brief literature review, the puzzle I aim to address is whether factional ties help officials gain promotion.

1. Elite Survival

By July 1ˢᵗ, 2025, the government of Vietnam reduces current 63 provinces to 34 units including 28 provinces and 6 centrally-run cities. In each province, the most powerful provincial position is **the Provincial Party Secretary**. As the head of the local Party committee, the Provincial Secretary exercises the highest political authority in the province, overseeing political direction, organizational matters, and ideological alignment. To Lam, the General Secretary and the highest-ranking position in the Communist Party, was the chief architect of this reform as well as of the subsequent appointments of Provincial Party Secretaries. A 46% reduction in provincial-level leadership positions gave To Lam considerable power to select officials, allowing him to reshape the upper ranks of the Party with greater cohesion and central discipline.

After the reform, there are three possible scenarios for Provincial Party Secretaries:

(1) **Promotion**: being appointed to a higher position at the central level

(2) **Staying**: remaining in the same position, either in the old province or in a newly merged province

(3) **Demotion**: being assigned to a lower position, disciplined, or arrested

Table 1 presents the distribution of these three scenarios. The number of officials who stayed equals the number who were demoted, while only nine officials were promoted. Understanding who survives politically is important, but understanding who does not survive is also important - although it is much more difficult. Some demoted officials were placed under investigation and arrested for corruption, while most simply disappeared quietly from the political scene.

Table 1. Three scenarios Distribution

survival	Count	Percent
stay	28	42.4
promoted	9	13.6
demoted	28	42.4
	1	1.5

Since To Lam was effectively the only actor with the authority to appoint officials to these positions - without veto power from other institutions, including the Prime Minister or even other Politburo members - this raises an important question: did he prioritize competence or loyalty when making these appointments? Because there is no available or testable data on officials' competence, I instead test the latter logic: whether loyalty, captured through factional ties to To Lam, increases officials' chances of survival during this dramatic reform.

2. Factional Ties

The main problem is that informal connections are extremely difficult to observe because they are not officially recorded, and elites often choose sides without openly announcing whose side they are on. This raises the question: how can factional ties be tested empirically? As discussed in the literature review, the most common and feasible way to measure factional ties is through the "three commons" with To Lam (the principal), including:

(1) **Same hometown**: sharing the same province, district, county, or commune with the principal. This can generate early-life connections, and Vietnamese political culture places strong value on hometown ties. Vietnam is a relatively small country, and officials from the same province are likely to know each other as they move into higher-ranking government positions.

(2) **Same college**: attending the same educational institution as the principal, either at the undergraduate or graduate level.

(3) **Same work unit**: serving in the same work unit for at least one year. This type of tie is clearer because it requires sustained interaction, collective work, and opportunities to enter someone's political circle

It is worth noting that having more "commons" does not necessarily imply greater influence within a faction. There is no reliable way to measure the *strength* or *level* of factional ties, since such ties are rarely revealed explicitly. The three-commons approach therefore captures the *opportunity* for individuals to know each other and potentially form connections. For this reason, factional ties are coded as a binary variable (tie versus no tie), rather than as a scale ranging from zero to three. Detailed coding rules for factional ties are presented in the first section of the R Markdown file.

Table 2 reports the distribution of three-commons ties among 66 officials, including both survivors and non-survivors. As shown, hometown ties dominate the overall share of

factional connections. The key question, then, is whether these ties actually matter for political survival. This question is addressed in the Results section.

Table 2. Three-commons Ties Share among 66 Officials (Survivals and Non-Survivals combined)

Type of tie	Definition	Share of officials (%)
Hometown tie	Same province	15.2
Work-unit tie	Work-unit overlap of at least 1 year	1.5
Education tie	Same educational institution	3.0
Any tie	At least one of the above	12.1

The core dataset for this project consists of biographical information on Vietnamese provincial officials. Although I initially attempted to build a web scraper to collect data from Wikipedia, a quality check revealed inconsistencies and missing information. As the National Congress approaches (January 2026), information environments become more volatile. In this period, unusual changes often occur - for example, some officials' Wikipedia pages were corrupted or temporarily inaccessible.

I therefore decided to collect the data manually through various sources: Wikipedia, National Congress official media and profiles, provincial profiles of the officials. This method proved more time-consuming but ensured greater accuracy and reliability. I carefully clean the dataset before the data analysis. I structured the data into three linked files:

(1) **List file:** Contains the list of officials and positions, each assigned a unique identifier based on their Wikipedia URL. This unique ID is used consistently across all three files.

(2) **Bio file:** Provides one entry per individual, including biographical details such as date of birth, place of birth, gender, education, and date of Party admission. Even if an official has held multiple posts, they appear only once in this file.

(3) **Jobs file:** Contains one entry per official–position combination. Each job is coded sequentially (e.g., job_01, job_02, etc.), with special coding (job_99) used for Central

Committee membership. This file captures the full career trajectory of each official and links back to the List and Bio files through the unique ID.

3. Testable Hypothesis

There is one straightforward hypothesis tested in this paper:

H1: Officials with factional ties to To Lam have a higher chance of survival (being promoted or staying) during the reform.

Another important factor to consider is **local embeddedness**, which captures officials who continued working in the same province before and after the reform. For example, if Official A served as Deputy Party Secretary in Province X before the reform and was then appointed as Party Secretary (a higher position) in the same Province X after the reform, this case is coded as *Local embeddedness = 1*. I had to be careful with this logic because survival in such cases may not be driven by factional ties, but instead by accumulated local experience that makes an official difficult to replace. This leads to the second hypothesis:

H2: Officials with local embeddedness have a higher chance of survival.

In addition, several other factors may also contribute to an official's chance of survival:

- **Age**: Higher age may imply two opposing logics—being closer to retirement (and thus a higher chance of demotion), but also having more governing experience (and thus a higher chance of promotion).

- **Gender**: Vietnam presents a challenging case, as the vast majority of provincial leaders are male. I do not expect to draw substantive interpretations from the correlation between gender and promotion.

- **Years in the Communist Party**: A longer party tenure suggests that an official has experienced more ranks and positions, which may increase the likelihood of survival or promotion.

- **Public security background**: Before becoming General Secretary, To Lam served for eight years as Minister of Public Security. This background may provide an additional channel through which officials with public security experience connect to him, even if they did not work in the same unit.

To test these two hypotheses, I compiled a set of variables summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Summaries of Key variables

Variable	Measurement	Data source
DV: Survival	Coded 1 if the official was retained or newly appointed or getting promoted to Provincial Secretary position coded 0 if the official was removed, demoted, or excluded from leadership.	Official CPV personnel announcements Provincial People's Committee websites Central Organization Commission documents State-run media (e.g., VietnamNet, VGP News) reporting leadership transitions
IV1: Faction Ties	**Faction Ties Score** – A binary measuring shared background (hometown, university, or prior workplace) with To Lam. Based on the "three common's" framework, this variable captures informal elite alignment and central patronage. *Faction ties is coded 1 if an official in which the violation occurred* *(1) is born in the same province as To Lam* *(2) has studied and graduated from at least one higher-education institution that he attended, or* *(3) has worked at the same ministerial-level unit (or an equivalent Party unit) with him for at least a year.*	Original biographical dataset

Variable	Measurement	Data source
IV2: Local Embeddedness	A binary variable coded 1 if the official worked in the same province before the reform (regardless of position), and 0 if they were appointed from a different province.	Pre-reform personnel records from provincial websites or official bulletins Biographical data, including previous positions and locations (same as above)
Control	Age of appointee: Younger officials may be seen as "next generation" leaders, while older officials may be nearing retirement or too senior for promotion. Gender: Female officials may face informal barriers to top positions in a male-dominated political system, even if qualified. Public security background: To Lam used to work in Ministry of Public Security. Years of party membership: long-standing members may be seen as more ideologically reliable or experienced.	Original biographical dataset

4. Model

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics after coding factional ties, local embeddedness, and other control variables.

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics after coding factional ties, local embeddedness, and other control variables. I acknowledge that the sample size is very small for statistical analysis. My original plan was to apply this model to other provincial-level positions that are also appointed by central leaders. However, my intention here is to first test whether this model works. If it does, I will extend the same approach to other positions. If not, I need to reconsider and find a better direction.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Factional tie	0.12	0.33	0	1	66
Local embeddedness	0.35	0.48	0	1	66
Age	54.55	5.27	44	67	62
Male	0.89	0.31	0	1	64
Years of party membership	29.94	6.87	20	46	53
Public Security background	0.05	0.21	0	1	66

I do not want to invest additional time collecting much larger datasets which is extremely time-consuming, before first examining this paper and receiving feedback on whether this approach is viable. If the model proves to be workable, I can then scale the analysis up to at least 200 officials.

To test the two hypotheses regarding the effects of factional ties and local embeddedness on elite career outcomes following Vietnam's 2025 bureaucratic reform, this study employs a two-step empirical strategy.

Multinomial Logit Model

In the first step, I estimate a multinomial logit model to examine how factional ties, local embeddedness, and individual-level control variables shape post-reform career outcomes. The dependent variable captures an official's career status following the reform and takes three mutually exclusive categories: **promotion**, **demotion**, and **stay (baseline)**. The status quo category serves as the baseline outcome. Formally, the model is specified as:

$$Pr(Y_i = j) = \frac{exp(X_i\beta_j)}{1 + \sum_{k \neq 0} exp(X_i\beta_k)}, j \in \{promoted, demoted)$$

Where:

Y_i denotes the post-reform career outcome of official i,

X_i is a vector of explanatory variables that includes indicators for factional ties, local embeddedness, and a set of control variables. Control variables include age, gender, years of party membership, and public security background.

The coefficients β_j represent the log-odds of outcome j relative to the **baseline category (stay).**

Predicted Probabilities

Because coefficients from multinomial logit models are difficult to interpret substantively, the second step of the analysis focuses on predicted probabilities. Using estimates from the multinomial logit model, I calculate the predicted probability of each career outcome across different configurations of factional ties and local embeddedness, holding control variables at their mean values.

This approach allows for a more intuitive interpretation of how informal political connections condition elite survival under administrative restructuring. In particular, it illustrates how the presence or absence of factional ties and local embeddedness alters the likelihood of promotion, demotion, or retention in office following the reform.

IV.   Results

Table 5 presents the results from the multinomial logit regression estimating the relationship between factional ties, local embeddedness, and post-reform career outcomes. Coefficients therefore represent the change in the **log-odds** of being promoted or demoted relative to remaining in the same position. Table 5 excludes the Public Security Background variable because there is no variation in post-reform outcomes among officials with this background. None of the promoted or demoted officials in the sample previously served in the public security sector, resulting in a coefficient of 0.0000. Details of the coding procedure are provided in Section 2 of the R Markdown file.

Table 5. Multinomial Logit Regression Results

	Promoted (vs Stay)	Demoted (vs Stay)
Factional tie	30.848	-11.384
	(1.997)	(0.969)
Local embeddedness	5.868	-3.009
	(1.354)	(0.834)
Age	-0.234	0.042
	(0.222)	(0.210)
Male	-6.119	-1.689
	(1.278)	(0.810)
Years of party membership	0.139	0.007
	(0.139)	(0.158)
N	52	52

Factional Ties interpretation

Factional ties exhibit extremely large coefficients in both outcome equations. In the promotion equation, the coefficient on factional ties is 30.848 (SE = 1.997), indicating that the presence of a factional tie is associated with a substantial increase in the log-odds of promotion relative to staying in place. In contrast, the coefficient in the demotion equation is −11.384 (SE = 0.969), implying a large decrease in the log-odds of demotion relative to the baseline.

The magnitude of these estimates suggests that factional ties nearly perfectly predict promotion outcomes in the sample. Such extreme coefficients are consistent with complete separation, (almost all officials with factional ties are promoted and almost none are demoted). While the direction of the relationship is unambiguous, I cautiously interpret the precise magnitude of the coefficients here, as maximum likelihood estimates may be inflated under separation.

Local Embeddedness interpretation

Local embeddedness is also positively associated with promotion and negatively associated with demotion, though with substantially smaller coefficients. The coefficient for promotion is 5.868 (SE = 1.354), indicating higher log-odds of promotion for locally embedded officials relative to those without local ties. The corresponding coefficient for demotion is −3.009 (SE = 0.834), suggesting reduced log-odds of demotion. Compared to factional ties, local embeddedness appears to play a secondary role in shaping career outcomes. The coefficients imply that local embeddedness provides some protection against downward mobility and modestly increases promotion prospects, but does not dominate career outcomes in the same way factional alignment does. But again, since the number of cases is too small and given the research design, I do not conclude any causality here.

Among the control variables, age is negatively associated with promotion (β = −0.234, SE = 0.222) and weakly positively associated with demotion (β = 0.042, SE = 0.210). These coefficients suggest that older officials may face slightly lower promotion probabilities and marginally higher demotion risks, although the estimated effects are small. The coefficient on male is negative in both equations (β = −6.119 for promotion; β = −1.689 for demotion), indicating lower log-odds of both upward and downward mobility relative to remaining in place. Given the limited variation in gender among senior officials and the small sample size, no interpretation here.

Years of party membership has a small positive coefficient in both equations (β = 0.139 for promotion; β = 0.007 for demotion), suggesting minimal independent association with career outcomes once informal political ties are accounted for.

To facilitate (a bit more) substantive interpretation of the multinomial logit estimates reported in Table 5, I compute predicted probabilities for each post-reform career outcome under different configurations of factional ties and local embeddedness. These predicted probabilities are derived directly from the multinomial logit model and translate log-odds estimates into outcome probabilities while holding control variables constant.

Specifically, I vary three indicators of factional ties: shared hometown, shared work unit, and shared educational background, as well as local embeddedness, while fixing age, gender, and years of party membership at their sample means. Each row in Table 6 therefore represents a counterfactual scenario implied by the estimated model, rather than a raw empirical frequency.

Table 6. Predicted Probabilities of Post-Reform Career Outcomes

Hometown tie	Work-unit tie	Education tie	Local embeddedness	Stay	Promoted	Demoted
No	No	No	Non-local	0.307	0	0.693
No	No	No	Local	0.900	0	0.100
No	No	Yes	Non-local	0.307	0	0.693
No	No	Yes	Local	0.900	0	0.100
No	Yes	No	Non-local	0.307	0	0.693
No	Yes	No	Local	0.900	0	0.100
No	Yes	Yes	Non-local	0.307	0	0.693
No	Yes	Yes	Local	0.900	0	0.100
Yes	No	No	Non-local	0.000	1	0.000
Yes	No	No	Local	0.000	1	0.000
Yes	No	Yes	Non-local	0.000	1	0.000
Yes	No	Yes	Local	0.000	1	0.000
Yes	Yes	No	Non-local	0.000	1	0.000
Yes	Yes	No	Local	0.000	1	0.000
Yes	Yes	Yes	Non-local	0.000	1	0.000
Yes	Yes	Yes	Local	0.000	1	0.000

The predicted probabilities strongly reinforce the patterns observed in the multinomial logit coefficients. When an official has no factional ties (no hometown, work-unit, or education ties) and is not locally embedded, the model predicts a high probability of demotion (0.693) and a much lower probability of remaining in place (0.307), with a zero predicted probability of promotion. Introducing local embeddedness in the absence of factional ties substantially alters these predictions: the probability of remaining in place increases to 0.900, while the probability of demotion falls to 0.100. This shift reflects the negative coefficient on local embeddedness in the demotion equation and its positive coefficient in the promotion equation reported in Table 5.

In contrast, once any factional tie is present, the predicted probabilities collapse almost entirely onto the promotion outcome. Across all configurations in which hometown, work-unit, or educational ties exist, the predicted probability of promotion equals 1.000, while the probabilities of staying or being demoted fall to zero. Hometown tie is the strongest predictor of being promoted, this logic, interestingly aligns with city leaders promotion in China (Meyer, Shih, & Lee, 2016). This pattern is invariant to local embeddedness, indicating that factional ties dominate the prediction of career outcomes in the estimated model.

This extreme pattern in the predicted probabilities follows directly from the very large log-odds coefficients on factional ties in the multinomial logit model. Because the estimated coefficients imply near-perfect separation between connected and unconnected officials, the predicted probabilities approach boundary values of zero and one. Importantly, this result does not imply deterministic causation; rather, it reflects the fact that within the observed sample, factional alignment is almost perfectly correlated with promotion outcomes.

V.   Discussion

Using a multinomial logit model and predicted probabilities, I find (with caution) that factional ties overwhelmingly predict promotion, while local embeddedness primarily reduces the risk of demotion among unconnected officials. In this section, I interpret these findings in greater depth, assess their causal implications, evaluate the modeling and research design choices, and outline limitations and future strategies to strengthen causal inference.

Interpreting the Empirical Patterns

The regression results and predicted probabilities jointly suggest a highly asymmetric structure of elite selection under the reform. Factional ties are associated with near-certain promotion, while their absence corresponds to a high risk of demotion unless mitigated by local embeddedness. This pattern directly supports **Hypothesis 1**, indicating that officials with factional ties to To Lam are significantly more likely to survive, and, more importantly, to be promoted during the reform. More broadly, these findings are consistent with theories of authoritarian elite management that emphasize loyalty over competence during periods of institutional restructuring.
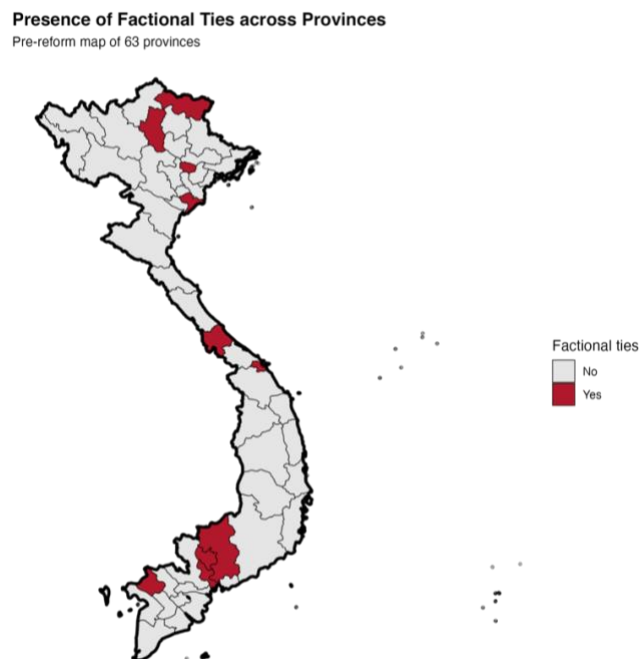
Importantly, the predicted probabilities also show that factional ties do not operate symmetrically across different forms of connection. Among the three components of factional alignment: shared hometown, shared work unit, and shared educational

background, hometown ties emerge as the most salient channel through which promotion occurs. In every configuration where a hometown tie is present, the predicted probability of promotion reaches one, regardless of the presence of other ties or local embeddedness. This pattern suggests that shared place of origin functions as a particularly strong and durable signal of political loyalty, reinforcing the core mechanism proposed in Hypothesis 1.

The predicted probabilities clarify the substantive meaning of the multinomial logit coefficients by revealing how different informal ties map onto distinct career outcomes. While local embeddedness substantially alters the probability of demotion for unconnected officials, it does not generate any meaningful probability of promotion. This finding lends partial support to **Hypothesis 2**: local embeddedness helps officials survive by protecting them from removal, but it does not facilitate upward mobility. Advancement under the reform appears to be conditional on factional alignment, especially shared hometown, whereas local embeddedness primarily functions as a defensive mechanism that allows officials to retain their positions rather than advance.
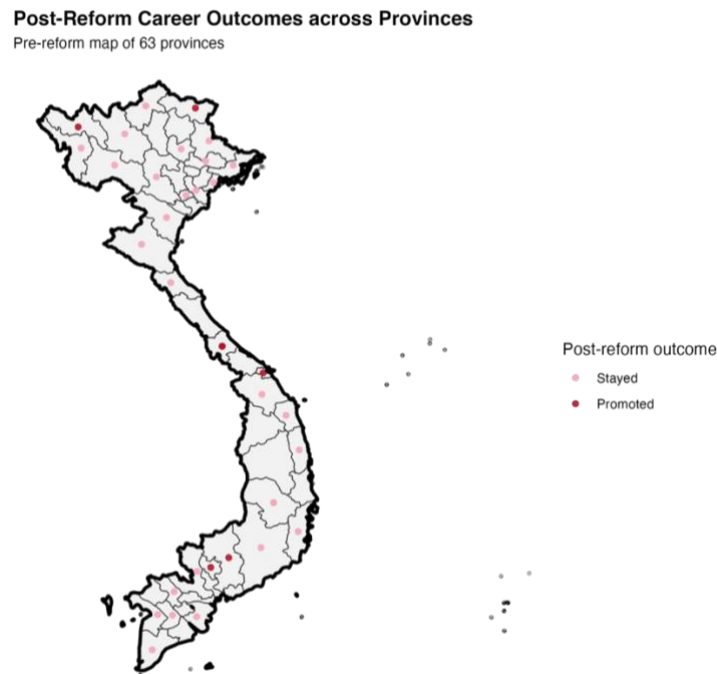
Spatial Evidence and Mechanisms

The two maps provide additional insight into the mechanisms underlying these results. **Figure 1**, which visualizes the spatial distribution of factional ties, shows that factionally connected officials are not evenly distributed across provinces but are instead clustered in specific regions. This spatial clustering suggests that factional networks are embedded within regional political structures rather than randomly assigned across the country.

Presence of Factional Ties across Provinces
Pre-reform map of 63 provinces

Figure 2, which maps post-reform career outcomes, reveals that promoted officials are disproportionately located in provinces that also appear prominently in the factional ties map. The geographic overlap between factional clustering and promotion outcomes reinforces the interpretation that factional alignment operates through regionally concentrated political networks. These spatial patterns are consistent with the regression results and provide descriptive support for the claim that informal networks shape elite survival during administrative restructuring.

Post-Reform Career Outcomes across Provinces
Pre-reform map of 63 provinces

Post-reform outcome
- Stayed
- Promoted

At the same time, the maps also underscore the limits of the current design. Because factional ties are spatially clustered, regional characteristics, such as historical importance, economic development, or proximity to political centers, may confound the relationship between factional ties and promotion outcomes. I well-noted this pattern for future direction.

Causality and Identification

Despite the strong associations observed, I acknowledged that the results should not be interpreted causally. The multinomial logit model identifies correlations between factional ties and career outcomes, but it cannot rule out alternative explanations. Factional ties may proxy for unobserved characteristics such as prior performance, ideological reliability, or informal reputation within the party. Additionally, factional ties may be endogenous to anticipated promotions, rather than their cause.

The spatial clustering observed in the maps further complicates causal interpretation. If central leaders strategically place trusted allies in politically sensitive regions prior to the reform, then factional ties and promotion outcomes may both be consequences of an unobserved selection process.

Model Choice and Evaluation

The multinomial logit model is appropriate given the categorical nature of the dependent variable and the absence of a natural ordering among outcomes. However, the results indicate near-complete separation, particularly with respect to factional ties. This separation explains the extremely large coefficient estimates and the boundary values observed in the predicted probabilities. While this does not invalidate the direction of the findings, it limits the precision and stability of coefficient estimates. Alternative modeling strategies, such as penalized likelihood methods or collapsing outcomes into a binary promotion versus non-promotion framework, may yield more stable estimates in future work.

Additionally, the multinomial logit model relies on the Independence of Irrelevant Alternatives (IIA) assumption. Given that promotion and demotion may not be independent choices from the perspective of the central leadership, this assumption may be violated. My future analyses could explore nested logit or multinomial probit models to relax this constraint.

Research Design Limitations

Several limitations constrain the current study. First, the sample size is small (N = 52), reducing statistical power and increasing sensitivity to influential observations. Second, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to observe pre-reform trends or changes in factional alignment over time. Third, key variables, particularly factional ties, are measured using observable proxies that may not fully capture the strength or salience of informal political relationships. Moreover, the spatial clustering observed in the maps suggests that province-level factors may play a role that is not fully accounted for in the model. Without province fixed effects or hierarchical modeling, it is difficult to separate individual-level effects from regional dynamics.

As I mentioned earlier, I treat this analysis as a pilot test of my measurement strategy and modeling approach. I start with a small, high-salience set of positions to verify that (1) I can consistently code factional ties and local embeddedness, and (2) the multinomial framework produces interpretable patterns that align with my theoretical expectations. If

this pilot design works and the results remain coherent under diagnostic checks, my next step is to scale the dataset to additional positions using the same coding logic. If the pilot reveals instability, such as separation, sensitivity to individual observations, or poor model fit, I will use that feedback to refine the research design and measurement rules before expanding the sample.

My future research could strengthen causal inference in several ways. First, extending the dataset to include multiple time periods before and after the reform (and especially after the National Congress) would enable a panel design and difference-in-differences estimation, allowing comparison of career trajectories between connected and unconnected officials over time. Second, exploiting plausibly exogenous shocks to factional alignment, such as sudden patron removals or leadership turnovers, could provide quasi-experimental leverage. Third, incorporating province fixed effects or multi-level models would help disentangle individual-level factional ties from regional political structures. Finally, combining quantitative analysis with qualitative evidence, such as elite biographies or internal party documents, could clarify the mechanisms through which factional ties translate into career advancement.

VI.   Conclusion

This paper uses Vietnam's 2025 administrative reform as a pilot case to examine how factional ties shape elite career outcomes during periods of institutional restructuring. Focusing on Provincial Party Secretaries, the analysis shows a clear and asymmetric pattern: officials with factional ties to General Secretary To Lam - particularly shared hometown ties - are strongly associated with promotion, while officials without such ties face a much higher risk of demotion.

Local embeddedness plays a more limited role. Officials who continued working in the same province were less likely to be demoted, but local experience alone did not translate into promotion. In this sense, factional ties appear to open the door to advancement, while local embeddedness mainly helps officials avoid removal.

As a pilot study, this paper has clear limitations. The sample size is small, and factional ties are measured through observable proxies rather than direct evidence. However, the findings suggest that this approach captures meaningful patterns in elite selection under reform. If extended to other provincial-level positions and a larger sample, this framework could provide a more systematic understanding of how loyalty and informal networks shape elite politics in Vietnam and other single-party regimes.

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