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The Internet, Political Participation, and Governance Reform in China

With China's rise and growth of Internet usage in China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has looked to the Internet as a means of receiving citizen feedback as it modernizes its policymaking processes. How has the CCP utilized the Internet to elicit citizen opinions and feedback on its policies? One study conducted by Steven Balla, Associate Professor of Political Science, Public Policy and Public Administration, and International Affairs at the George Washington University, aims to generalize the findings of the consultation and feedback mechanisms used in China's 2008 healthcare reforms and apply these feedback mechanisms to other cases of online consultation in China. His findings were summarized at an event held this semester at the Sigur Center for Asian Studies. Balla's case study of governance reform and Internet political participation helps us examine the future of the CCP as it experiments with online consultation as an instrument of governance reform. Rather than taking an all-or-nothing approach of predicting revolution or repression in China's future, the study focuses on what happens between those two extremes vis-à-vis a gradual evolution of policymaking.

Contradictions in the Chinese Political System

To understand governance reform in China, it is first necessary to consider three contradictions that exist in the Chinese political system. The first concerns the Internet as a means of both democratization and further oppression. While the Internet has the ability to empower users and spread knowledge, it also allows the

CCP to consolidate its power by serving as a means of surveillance. The second contradiction in the Chinese political system is the phenomenon of increasing political participation under government limits. Venues for participation have increased both online (e.g., microblog sites such as Wei Bo) and offline (e.g., village-level elections), but these forms of political participation are still subject to government-imposed restrictions. The third contradiction is the role of governance reforms designed to simultaneously restructure the state-society relationship. The CCP's use of public discussion in decision making processes on issues such as budget and energy development have been designed to change the processes of government decision making in a way that improves performance and increases public satisfaction. However, these reforms only promise change at a superficial level—decisions are often made beforehand by officials, and those public inputs are used to legitimate government decisions. Nonetheless, public consultation can still be an opportunity for the public voice to be at least heard, if not addressed, by officials.

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The issues raised for public discussion and consultation do not cover high stake political struggles such as issues on Tibet and Xinjiang, but rather, focus on more mundane political problems in which the state and the society interact. Placing these mundane problems in the public eye is important because it captures the everyday state-society interaction in which the CCP's legitimacy is often taken as given—officials do not approach the public in the same way as they do with those who oppose party rule—and in which citizens express their opinions without resorting to the use of violence.

China's 2008 Healthcare Reform

China's use of the Internet as a means of inviting public opinion began approximately six years ago. Healthcare reform is one of the earliest applications of this experimental governance reform. It thus sets a baseline expectation for the performance of online consultation in the future. It is also an important political issue in China due to the healthcare system's poor performance (e.g., high premium costs) since the post-Revolution era, and public dissatisfaction with and protest against it.

In October 2008, the central government initiated a formal drafting process for healthcare reform, which included soliciting 10 draft healthcare plans from domestic, foreign, and multilateral actors. As part of the reform process, the CCP opened an official website for public comments which remained open for comments

for one month. Over the one month period, the website received over 30,000 comments – no requirement of sign-in or name disclosure was necessary to post comments. A survey given to those participants who included their valid email addresses when posting comments received 541 respondents. The survey questions covered information on respondents' demographics, political attitudes, and their motivations behind commenting.

Survey Results and Implications

Survey respondents were 80% male with a median age of 36—very high, given the level of youth Internet users in China in 2008. Ninety percent of respondents had a higher education background. Many respondents were white-collar professionals such as lawyers or medical/healthcare professionals. In short, respondents came from an elite group of highly educated professionals. When questioned about their motivations behind commenting, respondents by a 2-to-1 margin stated that expressing their concerns with the healthcare proposal was more important than supporting the government healthcare reform proposal. Many indicated they wanted to affect the direction of the policy initiative. That is, many comments were negative and pushed back against the government. This is surprising given existing studies on political participation in authoritarian regimes indicate that people usually show reluctance to voice their opinions against oppressive regimes. Respondents also provided evidence to back their claims, including personal experiences in healthcare (rising costs, etc.) and comparisons with foreign countries' healthcare systems.

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The survey results have several implications for Chinese policymaking. First, online consultation on healthcare reform represents not a revolution, but rather, an evolution of the Chinese political system and its decision-making processes. The online consultation process departs from China's traditional top-down policymaking, which mobilizes the public after high-level officials make policy decisions. It instead follows a "reach-out" model of policymaking in which officials reach out to the public for their inputs in the early stage of policymaking where final decisions are not yet reached. It is important to note that this process is not a radical change. Public involvement is limited to specific political issues and specific policies at the discretion of the government. Second, survey participants treated online consultation as a potentially important factor in the CCP's policymaking – otherwise, respondents would not have spent time and energy writing substantively engaging

comments. If the CCP continues to use the online consultation system as an instrument for governance reform in China, the CCP will see a certain level of expectation to take public comments seriously. Finally, the substance and breadth of the online response bodes well for the prospect of online consultation as a governance reform tool. Online consultation can be used to elicit public opinions on certain important political issues for policymaking processes in the future.

Conclusion

Online consultation is by no means a massive opening of political participation for China. Nonetheless, it allows for public input in the early stages of policymaking, a phenomenon that did not exist previously. Whether the implementation of online consultation is institutional or leadership-driven is still uncertain. Thus, it is unclear whether the CCP will continue its online consultation efforts and consider revealing data openly. Additional questions that merit further examination are: What are the situational conditions required to implement online consultation? What factors affect the disclosure of information from the consultation process? If the CCP continues to utilize online consultation in its governance reform efforts, responses and subsequent policies that follow could provide valuable insight on how public discourse and the Internet shape China's policymaking process.

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