



**3rd International Conference
on Public Policy (ICPP3)
June 28-30, 2017 – Singapore**

Panel 09

**Authoritarian Deliberation Revisited: What Does It Mean
for Our Understanding of Democratic Governance?**

**Well-organized Deliberation or Low-Level Empowerment, Which Matters More
for Motivating Political Actions:**

An Empirical Study on Chinese Authoritarian Deliberation

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Abstract

Authoritarian deliberation, a term coined by Baogang He and Mark Warren (He & Warren, 2011), has been used widely to describe the specific form of deliberations developed in China without a regime-level democratization. In regard to the trajectories of political development, two possibilities have been put forward: a deliberation-led democratization and a strengthened deliberative authoritarianism. However, few empirical researches have been carried out to test the speculation. This study tries to fill the gap by conducting a survey on participants of participatory pricings in the past five years, and testing the correlation of their motivation toward political actions with deliberation and empowerment respectively. Results show that participants' susceptibilities towards well-organized deliberations and inertness towards low-level empowerment actually render the gap between deliberation and democracy advantageous to the reinforcement of authoritarian rules. Therefore, we come to the conclusion that compared to the scenario of a deliberation-led democratization, a deliberative authoritarianism is much more likely to be the case.

Introduction

In China, deliberation (or more specifically, consultation) as the major way of political participation has been institutionalized since the very beginning of the country's founding¹, partly due to its one-party system that translates the problem of "how to win an election against its rivals" into "how to coordinate the non-threatening minorities". However, it had not been a matter of concern to either the public or academia until the arrival of new millennium with the coming into power of the fourth-generation leadership (with Hu Jintao as the chairman) and the ensuing governmental impetus. Various deliberative innovations have thrived both locally and nationwide since then, accompanied with deliberative democracy becoming a prevailing trend in academic researches supported by generous government funding. In a nutshell, government plays the most important role in the development of Chinese deliberative democracy, and functions as the motivator, organizer and assessor simultaneously.

Different from most of the developed democracies, deliberations in China are not the supplement to the democratic system dominated by aggregative democracy and practical innovations from the bottom up, but the governmental stimulations from the top down with probably the functional needs for cooperation and legitimacy.

Authoritarian deliberation, a term coined by Baogang He and Mark Warren (He & Warren, 2011), has been used widely to describe this specific form of deliberation

¹ Nominally, election and deliberation serve collaboratively as the two major mechanisms in China's democratic system through the National People's Congress (NPC) and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) respectively. However, due to the one-party system and the opacity of the elective process, NPC remains as a "rubber stamp" with little de facto power, and deliberation through CPPCC exists independently as nearly the only avenue for non-CPC personnel to participate into politics, though in a consultative way rather than having a say in decision-making.

without a regime level democratization. In regard to the political development in China that led by deliberation, two possible trajectories have been put forward (He & Warren, 2011). One is that various deliberative innovations will relieve the tension between government and citizens with an improvement of the administrative capacity, and thus forestall the regime level democratization. And the other one is that regime democratization could nevertheless be reached since government will have no choices but reconcile to the increasing citizen expectations of political legitimacy and their enhanced negotiating ability through extensive deliberations.

The idea of authoritarian deliberation and the two possible trajectories have received wide endorsements and vigorous discussions; however, few quantitative researches have been carried out to provide empirical evidence to this theoretical prediction. This research is trying to fill the gap and answer the question that which of the two trajectories is more possible through the data of the past five years. Finding shows that compared with the scenario of a deliberation-led democratization, deliberative authoritarianism is much more likely to be the case.

Deliberation and democracy

Deliberation is often regarded as an element of democracy. Nevertheless, the linkages between them are contingent rather than necessary (He & Warren, 2011).

Theoretically speaking, deliberation is a mode of communication, through which individuals offer and respond to the reasons rather than self-regarding interests, threats and coercion. Due to the “unforced force of better argument”, individuals are

led to the possible reflection and reshaping of their previous views, which provides the basis of public opinion-formation. Thus, deliberation and its capacity of generating persuasion-based influence distinguish itself as a non-coercive form of force from other mechanisms like money (market) and administration power (government) (Jürgen Habermas, 1985; Mark Marren, 2002). However, democracy is a way of empowerment that in favor of the inclusion of all individuals potentially affected into the process of decision making. It is related to the idea of equality that each individual's opinion should weight the same and no one is superior to the others. The two different conceptions are always mentioned together, partly because that deliberative theory was initially put forward in the final decade of last century to remedy the deficiencies of aggregative democracy and complement the democratic system (Cohen, 1989; J. S. Fishkin, 1991), which is always been mentioned as the "deliberative turn in democratic theory" (Dryzek, 2000).

However, it is completely possible to conceive of deliberation without a democratic context, and China provides empirical evidences to support this assumption. After nearly four decades of China's economic reform in 1979, the country with a long history of authoritarianism shows no sign of loosing its political restrains. However, a wide variety of deliberative innovations have emerged since the new century, with the scale from locally to nationwide, topics from governmental budget to transportation price, and locale from village to metropolis. According to the data, in 2004, the total number of meetings with deliberative elements at village level in China was estimated to be 453,000 (He, 2007). Reasons for Chinese government to develop deliberative

democracy might be the functional need to respond to citizen's increasing demands for legitimacy. Since the economic reform, Chinese society has been permeated with a growth of individualism, and the traditional resources such as patriotism and Confusion values are no longer enough for the government to secure compliance. Individuals have begun to ask for "right". A rapid development of Internet, even though under surveillance and censorship, also provides citizens with avenues to express their opinions, indignation and demands. Therefore, government has been forced to find a way to reduce the tension and avoid social instability. Without the determination for a regime level democratization, deliberation seems to be the best choice left. This logic explains the widely accepted interpretation of Chinese authoritarian deliberation, which is a mechanism to improve legitimacy with the circumvention of substantive empowerment.

As a result, the first objective of this study is to test this premise through survey on the participants to see whether there exists a gap between deliberation as communication and the empowerment for making the decision.

***Hypothesis 1:** There is a statistically significant difference between participants' opinions on deliberative quality and the extent of empowerment pertaining to decision-making in Chinese deliberative democracy.*

Two trajectories

In regard to the political changes in China that led by the introduction of deliberation, two possible trajectories have been put forward.

The first one is the “deliberative authoritarianism”. Development of deliberative innovations will relieve the tension between government and citizens by providing them opportunities for expression and offering them resolutions. Thus, an improvement of administrative capacity accompanied with enhancement of legitimacy will remove the functional need of citizens for a thorough democratization, since problems could be solved anyway. Following this logic, deliberation is potentially capable of demobilizing and co-opting oppositions, through which “the authoritarian rule will continue to transform in ways that channel and manage the political demands generated by economic development in such a way that authoritarian rule is maintained and strengthened” (He & Warren, 2011).

The other scenario is “deliberation-led democratization”. A regime level democratization could be nevertheless reached due to the increasing citizen expectation of inclusion, institutionalization and election. “Once voice and rights are granted by the state, they become part of the culture of expectations, transforming supplicants into citizens, and making it difficult for regimes to dial back democratic reforms” (He & Warren, 2011). Deliberations could serve as not only the tools to eliminate conflicts, but also opportunities to improve citizens’ interests in political participation as well as their awareness of their rights and power over policy-making.

In this sense, deliberation potentially provides the base for enlightenment and the

ensuing generation of civil society.

As we could see, the key point here is the participants, of whom the changes brought about by deliberations largely determine the future to be expected. More specifically, will deliberations increase their motivation in political actions with the absence of empowerment as an additional impetus? Or will they be placated by the deliberations, count on the government to solve the problems and keep disengaged from political actions? To answer the question, correlation of political action with deliberation and empowerment should be tested respectively, which is the second objective of this study.

Hypothesis 2: Participants' motivation for political actions is associated with deliberative quality.

Hypothesis 3: Participants' motivation fore political action is associated with the extent of empowerment pertaining to decision-making.

Method

Between May 2016 and December 2016, an extensive survey was undertaken on the participants of the participatory pricing in Shanghai.

Participatory pricing is one of the most important nationwide deliberative innovations in China. Based partly on a common ownership economy, government in China has monopoly on productions like water, power, and public transportation, of which the prices are entirely decided by the government. Thus, for the sake of an improvement

of legitimacy, participatory pricings are held by the local governments to collect citizen opinions before decisions are finally made.

Several reasons exist for us to pick out participatory pricing from the numerous deliberative processes in China for the study. First, compared with the one-time local innovations, participatory pricing is held periodically and nationwide, which provides a relatively large population for sampling while opens up the possibility for horizontal (city-based comparative) and vertical (time-based comparative) studies. Second, prices of the basic necessities like water and gas are closely related to everyone's interest. Therefore, problems like participants' indifference that may exist in other forms of deliberations are precluded in this case. Participatory pricing attracts attention by nature, which improves the legitimacy of the research. Third, having been refined for more than 10 years since its first implementation in 2005, the participatory pricing is quite detailed in procedure and well-organized pertaining to the inclusion, representativeness and equality. For example, different interest groups are required to be involved in with consumers making up at least 40% of the participants.

A research carried out last year shows that Shanghai is a city with relatively low governmental control in deliberative processes and a high extent of citizen political interest, which is an exception of the statistically observed positive impact of citizen interest on governmental control. This is the reason why we chose Shanghai for this study.

The survey is supported by "Participedia" (Fung & Warren, 2011). Participedia questionnaire was translated into Mandarin and checked for accuracy. Surveys were

distributed among all of the 109 participants of the five participatory pricings held in the latest five years, and a total of 72 usable surveys were received for a response rate of 66.1%.

Variables

Our major dependent variable (DV) is political action, which is measured with one ordinal item. There are two major independent variables (IV) in this study. The first one is deliberative quality measured using five ordinal items with a Cronbach's α of 0.90. The choosing of the 5 items referred to the five characteristics for a highly qualified deliberation putting forward by James Fishkin (J. Fishkin, 2011). The other one is empowerment measured by two ordinal items with a Cronbach's α of 0.97, and this variable pertains to the extent to which participants are empowered in the making of the decision. Table 1 is the dendrogram of the result of cluster analysis, which shows that the three major variables are independent structures indeed, while the items within each variable are highly related. Besides, we also control the gender, education, political interest and attitude toward compromising in our model. Detailed information is listed below, and descriptive statistics is shown in Table 2.

Dependent variable: Political Action

- **(Action)** How likely is it that you would join the other people to help make progress on the issues you worked on in this process? (-2 = very unlikely; 2 = very likely)

Independent variable 1: Deliberative Quality

(Measured using the following 5 items with a Cronbach's Alpha = 0.90.)

- **(Information)** How familiar are you with the issues that were the focus of the meeting or process? (-2 = very unfamiliar; 2 = very familiar)
- **(AmpleOpp)** How often did you have an opportunity to express your views in the small group discussions? (-2 = very unlikely; 2 = very likely)
- **(Freedom)** Overall, how comfortable did you feel expressing what was truly on your mind? (-2 = very uncomfortable; 2 = very comfortable)
- **(Reasons)** When people expressed their views in discussions, how often did they give reasons? (-2 = never; 2 = always)
- **(Diversity)** How diverse was the range of opinions you heard from in discussions? (-2 = not diverse at all; 2 = very diverse)

Independent variable 2: Empowerment in decision-making

(Measured using the following 2 items with a Cronbach's Alpha = 0.97.)

- **(Adopted)** What is the likelihood the process's recommendations will be adopted by those in power? (-2 = very unlikely; 2 = very likely)
- **(DecPrior)** Do you think you participated in a process that got to make important decisions, or a process that came after the important decisions were already made? (-2 = make none of the decisions; 2 = make all of the decisions)

Control variables:

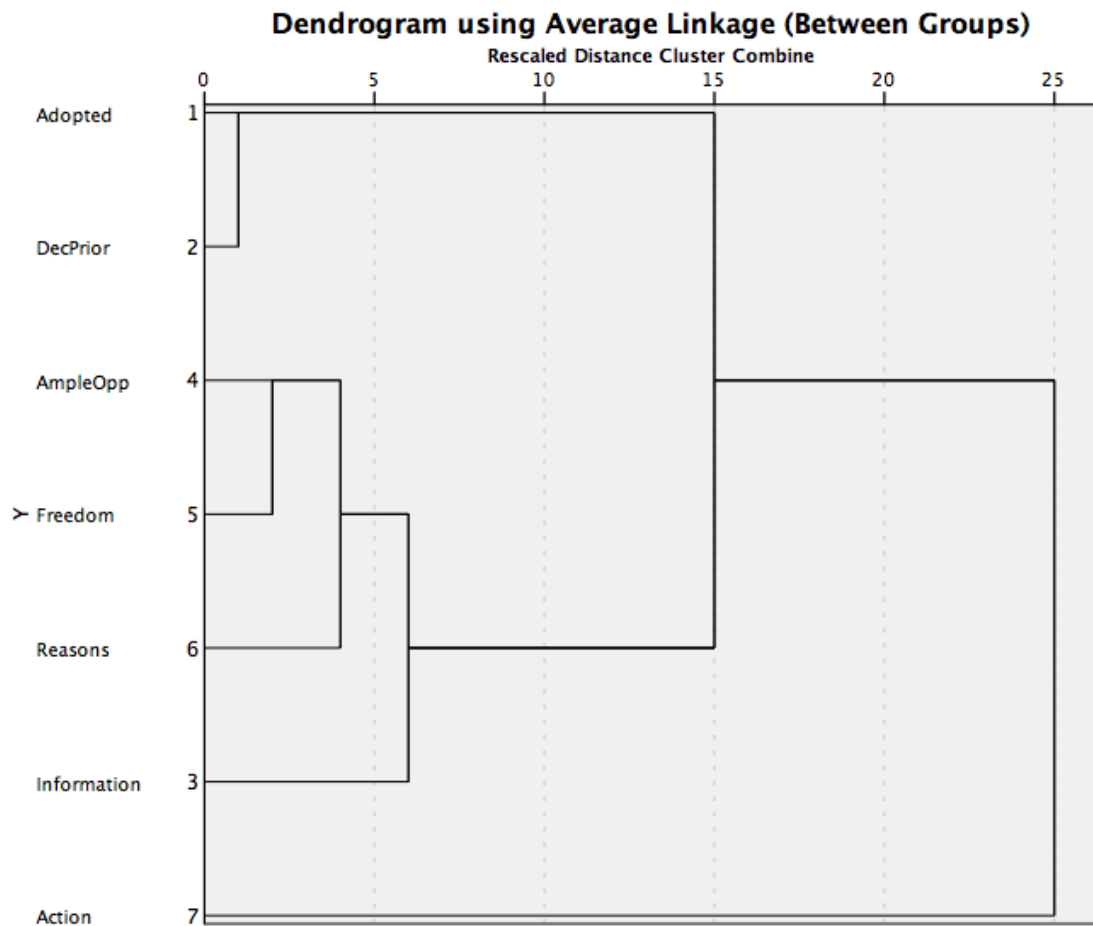
- **Education**
- **Gender**
- **Compromise**

Do you think it is more important to compromise or stick to your beliefs? (-2 = stick to your beliefs; 2 = compromise)

- **Political Interest**

How interested would you say you are in politics? (-2 = not at all; 2 = extremely interested)

Table 1: Cluster Analysis



Findings

Descriptive statistics show that mean values of deliberative quality and empowerment are respectively 1.29 and 0.15 over a total scale of 5, and a gap of 1.14 exists. We

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Dependent Variable:					
Action	72	-2	2	-.78	1.038
Independent Variable (1):					
Deliberative Quality	72	-.40	2.00	1.2889	.63680
1. Information	72	0	2	1.50	.557
2. AmpleOpp	72	-1	2	1.25	.818
3. Freedom	72	-1	2	1.25	.868
4. Reasons	72	-1	2	1.17	.787
5. Diversity	72	-1	2	1.28	.716
Independent Variable (2):					
Empowerment	72	-2.00	2.00	.1528	1.06361
1. Adopted	72	-2	2	.13	1.074
2. DecPrior	72	-2	2	.18	1.079
Control Variables:					
Education	72	4	7	5.19	.944
Gender	72	0	1	.18	.387
Compromise	72	-2	2	.53	1.113
Political Interest	72	-1	2	.68	.932

then conduct *t* test and the result in Table 3 indicates that the gap of 1.14 is statistically significant, which supports our hypothesis 1. Considering the scale is only 5, 1.14 is quite a large difference, which means that in average, deliberative quality of the participatory hearings reaches the extent of “good” while empowerment stays around “neither good nor bad”.

Table3: Paired Samples Test

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig.
Empowerment – Quality	-1.13611	.89021	.10491	-10.829	71	.000

After that, we move on to the correlation test pertaining to our following two hypotheses. Since the dependent variable here (political action) is categorical, we use multinomial logistic regression rather than OSL regression. Table 4 shows the details of dependent variable with frequency and cumulative probability, and it is clear that the cumulative probability for lower scores is high and the approach to 1 is slow, which suggests the use of *negative log-log link function* (in SPSS) to refine the model.

Table 4: How likely is it that you would join the others to help make progress on the issues you worked on in this process?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	(-2) very unlikely	23	31.9	31.9
	(-1) somewhat unlikely	18	25.0	56.9
	(0) do not know, depends	24	33.3	90.3
	(1) somewhat likely	6	8.3	98.6
	(2) very likely	1	1.4	100.0
	Total	72	100.0	100.0

All of the independent variables are continuous in nature: the empowerment index (summation of five ordinal items) and compromise index (summation of two ordinal items). All of the control variables except gender are ordinal, and to keep as much as the information carried by data, we deal with them as continuous variables. In regard to the categorical variable of gender, we introduce dummy variables to test the correlation.

Table 5 shows the result of the logistic regression. It could be found that coefficients of predictors of compromise and deliberative quality are negative and statistically

Table 5: Parameter Estimates

	Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
[Action = -2]	-3.451	1.162	8.823	1	.003	-5.728	-1.174
[Action = -1]	-2.395	1.132	4.479	1	.034	-4.614	-.177
[Action = 0]	-.009	1.127	.000	1	.994	-2.218	2.200
[Action = 1]	2.394	1.376	3.029	1	.082	-.302	5.091
Empowerment	.025	.176	.020	1	.887	-.321	.371
Compromise	-.690	.199	11.975	1	.001**	-1.081	-.299
Polinterest	.361	.201	3.226	1	.072†	-.033	.756
Quality	-.939	.337	7.775	1	.005**	-1.598	-.279
Education	-.267	.180	2.209	1	.137	-.619	.085
[Gender=0]	-.400	.410	.949	1	.330	-1.204	.405
[Gender=1]	0 ^a	.	.	0	.	.	.
Test of Parallel Lines					.670		

significant at the level of 0.05, while political interest is positive and statistically significant at the level of 0.10. Variables of empowerment, gender and education fail to predict the independent variable. Besides, test of parallel lines is passed with $P = 0.670$.

The result supports our hypothesis 2 but denies hypothesis 3. Deliberative quality is negatively associated with political action, which means that a highly qualified deliberation would curb the possibility for the following political action. While due to the absence of statistically significant correlation between empowerment and political action, the relatively low level of empowerment has no impact on participants' motivation for political actions. Additionally, participants with higher political interests are more likely to take political actions, while those with higher willingness

to compromise are prone to stay away. Gender and level of education have no significant effect on it.

Conclusion

Statistic results indicate that one of the essential characteristics of Chinese deliberative democracy is highly qualified deliberation accompanied with low empowerment in decision-making. Participants are allowed to access ample information in advance and communicate genuinely with little restrains, and arguments offered during deliberation are mostly related with reasons. But to what extent will the results of deliberations been adopted remains ambiguous, and the participants prove not optimistic about them.

Highly qualified deliberations are likely to curb the participants' motivation for political actions, probably because the government's showing concern over public opinions through the well-organized deliberations leads to an improvement of trust in its willingness and capacity to solve social problems, which remove the functional needs of the participants for political actions. Even the fact of the low level of empowerment proves incapable of giving any impetus. Thus, combination of highly qualified deliberation and low level of empowerment actually maximize the lessening of political action, which makes the prospect of deliberation-led democratization looks dim. As explained earlier, changes of participants' attitudes through deliberation is the crucial factor for the question of where deliberation leads. According to what the study shows, participants' susceptibilities towards

deliberations and inertness towards empowerment actually render the gap between deliberation and democracy advantageous to the reinforcement of authoritarian rules. Therefore, we come to the conclusion that compared to the scenario of a deliberation-led democratization, a deliberative authoritarianism is much more likely to be the case.

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