



Political rationality vs. technical rationality in China's target-based performance measurement system: The case of social stability maintenance

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Abstract

Performance measurement is not only a technical tool but also a product of politics. Therefore, examining the politics behind the implementation of performance measurement systems will yield important insights into the purposes, designs, and outcomes of those systems. This study investigates how the political function of China's performance measurement system affects its technical rationality. Drawing evidence mainly from the policy area of social stability maintenance, this article argues that these systems are in a paradoxical situation in China. On the one hand, the techniques of performance measurement are greatly improved when there is a political need to implement such systems in local governments. On the other hand, the very fact that they have a political function interferes with their functioning in a rational, effective manner. The article concludes by suggesting that one must examine both the political rationality and technical rationality underlying government performance measurement systems so as to understand their values and limitations. In the case of China, the most important function of performance measurement is to ensure local policy compliance. Although such a design causes problems in practice—most notably, pernicious gaming behavior that seriously harms public interests—the cost of implementation does not invalidate its benefits in governing China's vast localities. © 2015 Policy and Society Associates (APSS). Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Performance measurement has become a pillar of government reforms around the world during the past three decades. Mainstream literature examines performance measurement primarily as a technical tool to achieve greater rationality in management. This literature is concerned with such issues as problem detection, strategic planning, goal setting, indicator and tool selection, motivation design and the monitoring, analyzing and reporting of performance information (Lewis, 2015). The ultimate objective of performance measurement is to improve the economy, efficiency and effectiveness (the “3Es”) of public-service delivery. The value of performance measurement comes from its ability to make a system function more rationally—technical rationality. The belief is that “what gets measured gets done.”

However, performance measurement reforms and systems are also products of politics (Van Dooren, Bouckaert, & Halligan, 2010). A technical view of performance measurement sometimes does not provide an adequate explanation

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for why a performance-oriented reform is initiated, why a particular measurement is adopted or why well-designed measurement systems sometimes fail to produce expected results. Failure to consider politics when studying performance measurement reforms risks overstating the rationality of the reforms—in reality, what gets measured may not necessarily get done (see [Bevan & Hood, 2006](#); [Gao, 2010](#)).

Examining the politics behind the implementation of performance measurement systems can clarify their purpose, design and outcomes. Some studies have made such an attempt from two perspectives: first, they examine how politics (i.e., power struggle defined by the constitutional structure) and leadership affect the design, reform tempo and effectiveness of performance measurement in achieving the 3Es ([Radin, 2006](#); [Van Dooren et al., 2010](#)). Second, they examine how performance measurement is used to achieve political purposes rather than merely to improve management rationality ([Bertelli & John, 2010](#); [Gao, 2009](#); [Moynihan, 2008](#)).

This study engages in this dialog by examining how the political function of performance measurement affects its validity as a technical tool and what the consequences are for implementing such systems. This study will use China's target-based performance measurement system (hereafter referred to as the TRS, from the term "target-based responsibility system") as an example. As some studies have shown, Chinese leaders in the reform era have relied heavily on this system as a political instrument to enhance the party-state's capacity to ensure policy compliance across the vast local bureaucracy ([Burns & Zhou, 2010](#); [Edin, 2003](#); [Gao, 2009](#)). The result has been both impressive progress and serious problems in local governance ([Chan & Gao, 2012](#); [O'Brien & Li, 1999](#)). Despite the valuable contributions of these studies, they provide inadequate discussion of how the TRS's political function affects its technical power. This study aims to examine this issue in more depth.

This article argues that the TRS faces a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, the techniques of performance measurement are greatly improved when there is a political need for implementing such systems in local governments. This is evidenced by the fact that the development of measurement techniques is not even—techniques are better developed to measure performance targets that are of crucial importance for the party-state. The system also combines clearly defined targets with high-powered incentives, which have proven to be effective in inducing local officials to comply with policy orders from above. On the other hand, the political function of the TRS interferes with its technical rationality. Chinese local officials are required to accomplish targets that are impossible to comply with—for example, targets that are at odds with the local situation. The fundamental reason such "unreasonable" targets are put in place is political: for Chinese leaders, the most important function of the TRS is to ensure local policy compliance. The system informs local officials about what should be given priority in policy implementation and what will happen to them if they do not comply. Although such a design causes problems in practice—most notably pernicious gaming behavior that seriously harms public interests—the cost of implementing the TRS does not invalidate its benefits in governing China's vast localities.

To explore these issues, this paper adopts a case study approach. It takes an in-depth look at how the TRS is used to deal with rising social tensions in local regions and the consequences of using these targets to improve social stability. Three factors contributed to the choice of this policy area: first, maintaining social stability has been the Chinese government's most pressing political concern for the past decade and therefore has been given top priority on the national policy agenda. This study illuminates how performance measurement techniques were developed to achieve this crucial political goal, but simultaneously constrained by that function. Second, the construction of performance measurement in this policy area—how local governments' performance is defined and assessed—demonstrates clearly the distinct features of Chinese target-based performance measurement overall. Third, as maintaining social stability is a nationwide task, there is adequate data on the implementation dynamics and the consequences and costs of using performance measurement to achieve political goals.

This study contributes to existing literature in two major ways: first, it provides a concrete empirical case illustrating how the political function of performance measurement affects its technical power. By doing so, it enhances understanding of the politics and consequences of government performance measurement in an authoritarian state. Second, it contributes to scholarship on China's contentious politics by analyzing a key mechanism that China's national leaders have adopted to deal with rising social tensions. Although several studies mention the importance of performance evaluation in maintaining social stability, they either do not provide adequate empirical analysis of the design of this strategy ([Li, Liu, & O'Brien, 2012](#)), or they examine the use of TRS in social stability maintenance from a specific perspective—for example, as a tool for controlling work-related fatalities ([Chan & Gao, 2012](#)). This study will use firsthand data to provide a more comprehensive analysis of how the TRS is used to maintain social stability at local levels.

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