



Policy feedback in transitional China: The sectoral divide and electoral participation



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ABSTRACT

In studies of public reaction to policy initiatives, researchers often assume that universal social programs have the same effect on all social aggregates and are therefore conducive to social and political participation because of their comprehensive coverage, which suggests inclusive citizenship. However, structure-based differences in accessibility can distort these social programs into privileges for some and can reinforce existing inequalities. This study illustrates how social structure determines policy feedback in terms of political and civic participation in China. Using a nationally representative sample from 2005, we find that social insurance privileges public sector employees, encouraging them to be more active in political elections than in civic elections, whereas employees in the disadvantaged private sector emphasize civic elections over political elections. We argue that structural divisions in the social insurance regime serve the political purpose of maintaining state control in transitional China.

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1. Introduction

As the old saying goes, “New policies create new politics.” Social programs that are intended to address social conflicts, social justice concerns, and economic inefficiency wittingly or unwittingly promote new social interests that can ignite a new political process with a different agenda. Political feedback on social programs has recently attracted much research attention (Bruch et al., 2010; Campbell, 2012; Chen, 2013; Flavin and Griffin, 2009; Goss, 2010; Jordan, 2013; Mettler, 2007; Mettler and Soss, 2004; Skocpol, 2008). Studies have identified two mechanisms that affect policy feedback. First, the resource allocation created by policy regimes influences the distribution of social interests, which may divide the public stance on political issues because policies that are “visible and proximate to one may be invisible and distant to another” (Soss and Schram, 2007: 121). Second, policies convey meaning in terms of citizenship and social status. They provide “cues that define, arouse, or pacify constituencies” (Soss and Schram, 2007: 113). Thus, targeted social programs tend to curb recipients’ political and civic participation due to the social stigma and humiliation associated with involvement in the programs. In contrast, universal social programs help to foster political and civic participation because the benefits are shared by all and are not directed toward particular social groups (Kumlin and Rothstein, 2005; Mettler, 2007; Mettler and Soss, 2004; Sharp, 2009; Skocpol, 2008; Soss, 1999; Soss and Schram, 2007).

The administration of social programs is a relatively neglected area of study. Although the distinction between targeted and universal social programs is crucial, how a program is administered may also affect its outcomes. Universal eligibility

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does not guarantee that a social program has equal access. For instance, pay-as-you-go social insurance may not be accessible to the self-employed or to those without a stable income. As differential access to benefits often follows the structural inequalities that divide sectional interests, the implementation of a program may affect the political feedback process. To illustrate this point, we use the social insurance program in China as an example to show that differential access to benefits leads to varied political and civic behavior between workers in the public and private sectors.

We use a structural perspective because social insurance coverage is not determined by individual attributes. It is instead mostly an outcome of sectoral arrangements and its implications for policy feedback go far beyond personal interests. With the introduction of market reforms, the dualistic structure of the public and private employment sectors has become a distinctive feature in China. As a society in transition, China has been torn between the status quo and change; any policy initiative is bound to favor some and upset others. The state may use social insurance policies strategically to reduce opposition to its economic and political agendas. It has been well documented that social insurance programs in China tend to protect public sector employees, because the government sees this group as a reliable source of political support (Bai et al., 2000, 2006; Chan et al., 2008; Gu, 1999; Guan, 2000; Huang et al., 2010; Leung, 1994; Li and Zhang, 2010; Qian, 1996; Siqueira et al., 2009). In contrast, private sector employees are left to look after their own interests through the market and through active participation in the social events that affect their lives. Due to this differential access to benefits, employees from the two economic sectors can be expected to have different concerns about the political and civic events that may affect their lives. We argue that the Chinese social insurance program divides rather than unifies public engagement in political and civic processes. To test our thesis, we use data from the 2005 Chinese General Social Survey, a nationally representative sample survey, to examine how social insurance benefits affect political and civic participation and widen sector differences. Our results suggest that the Chinese government has carefully managed the policy feedback process through the implementation of a differentiated social insurance program.

2. Resources, meanings, and social structure

The theory of policy feedback posits that policies are not only outcomes of politics, but can also become new inputs into the political process. As Mettler and Soss (2004: 60) pointed out, research on policy feedback focuses on “whether policies render citizens more or less engaged in politics and how public programs shape citizens’ beliefs, preferences, demands, and power.” Studies in this tradition have emphasized two key factors that control policy feedback, resource distribution and the meanings created by policy initiatives. The more personal the interests at stake, the greater the incentive to participate in the political process to influence the outcomes. However, involving oneself in the political process requires resources such as money, time, and civic skills (Brady et al., 1995). Social programs often result in the distribution and redistribution of resources, which can both facilitate and inhibit social and political participation by affected social groups. Social policies also convey meaning to their stakeholders, especially the hidden message of inclusive citizenship. For example, universal social programs, such as social insurance, may encourage donations to campaigns related to common interests (Campbell, 2002). Relief programs may encourage partisanship when assistance benefits the members of one political party more than the members of another (Chen, 2013). Means-tested social programs, in contrast, tend to dampen social and political participation because they attach inferior status to their recipients (Schneider and Ingram, 1993).

The sociological approach often emphasizes social structure in dividing people and their interest in the political process. However, this focus has been largely ignored in policy feedback studies. As Mettler and Soss (2004) bluntly stated, the social structural approach “treats mass opinion and behavior as a *vox populi* that emerges from sources that are not overtly political and that generate input for the political system.” As a result, social structure has been considered marginally relevant at best and most studies on policy feedback have centered on the characteristics of political institutions, such as policy design, political parties, and program administration (Campbell, 2012). Campbell’s (2002, 2003a, 2003b) study of political activism among senior citizens, however, demonstrated that age structure and income distribution affected people’s reactions to welfare policies. Political institutions are embedded within a social structure. Not only are political parties rooted in sectional interests defined by the existing social structure, but policy design and program administration are also incorporated into the current social configuration. Soss et al. (2008) noted that government officials relied on social categories to target clients for service delivery and stakeholders for assessing policy outcomes.

We must take social structure into account when evaluating a policy’s effects. Schram et al. (2009) and Schram (2005) argued that policy implementation reorders the racial hierarchy by imposing conditions that limit benefits to certain social groups, suggesting that policy institutions are capable of both reshaping and entrenching the existing social structure. Moynihan and Herd (2010) further pointed out that administrative barriers, such as red tape, may be used as deliberate strategies for distributing benefits to selected welfare recipients. Chen (2013) found that the incumbent political party strategically administered relief programs to gain advantages during elections. It would be misleading to suggest that universal social programs are neutral in resource distribution and that they convey the idea of inclusive citizenship to all (Mettler and Stonecash, 2008; Schneider and Ingram, 1993). Social structure is far from being non-political, and it seems sensible to bring social structure into the policy feedback process.

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