

Popular Support for Community Self-government in Urban China

Chunlong Lu, School of Politics and Public Administration,
China University of Political Science and Law

Abstract

From the outset of the post-Mao reform, the central government has made genuine efforts to adapt the grassroots government system in the urban areas to social changes brought about by the reform in the urban neighborhoods, such as the drastic decline of the role of work units and the rapid increase in private ownership of residential properties. This system was anchored by its self-governing body, Residents' Committee (RCs, jumin weiyuanhui). Residents' Committees were first established by the government in the 1950s. Before the post-Mao reform, the central government used RCs to assist work units at the grassroots level in implementing Party and government policies, monitoring and controlling the population, and providing residents with some basic social welfare services. Moreover, the central government treated the RCs as its administrative extensions, in conjunction with work units, at the local level.

Introduction

Before reform, urban residents relied more on their work units than on the RCs for their basic life needs. Therefore, the RCs “were seen to be performing trivial and routine tasks”¹. However, since the outset of the Post-Mao reform, the importance of the work units in meeting the residents’ basic life needs declined. More importantly, most work units no longer provided the social services, such as housing, childcare, medical care and other social welfare services, which they did in the pre-reform era. And many urban residents do not belong to any work unit at all (e.g., those who are laid off from the work units and those who are employed in the private or foreign or joint-venture enterprises). It is in this larger

context that the Chinese government initiated the revitalization of RCs.

In 2000, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued its decree, “Views for Advancing the Construction of Urban Residential Communities,” which marked the beginning of the central government’s push for more autonomy of grassroots governing bodies in urban China. The decree called for the establishment of new grassroots governing bodies, Community Residents’ Committees (CRCs), which are supposed to be different from old RCs. The CRCs tend to have more residents and more autonomy than old RCs. In 2008 when my survey in five Chinese cities (Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu, and Hangzhou) was conducted, most of these five cities’ RCs had already been transformed into the CRCs. According to the same decree, the CRCs should operate based on the four democratic principles: “democratic election, democratic decision making, democratic management, and democratic oversight”.

How much support does urban grassroots

¹ R. Benewick, I. Tong, and J. Howell, *Self-Governance and Community: A Preliminary Comparison between Villagers’ Committees and Urban Community Councils*, *China Information: A Journal on Contemporary China Studies* 18 (2004), p. 14.

self-government enjoy from China's urban residents? Why do or do not urban residents support the self-government system, particularly newly-established CRCs, in their local communities? The answers to these questions should help us better understand the socio-political bases of urban self-government and hence predict the future of this system and the role of such a system in the political development of urban China.

1. Defining and Measuring Popular Support

To address the first research question of how much support the current urban self-government system enjoys from ordinary residents, we first define political support according to David Easton's conceptualization. Based on this definition, we then operationalize and measure such support among our respondents.

Defining Popular Political Support

In studying mass support for the current self-government system, we draw mainly on Easton's conceptualization. When defining political support as a set of attitudes, Easton first identifies three major objects toward which such support is directed—the regime, the authorities and the political community². The regime, which is usually considered the most important object, refers to the fundamental values, norms and institutions of the government; the authorities incorporate not only the incumbent leaders but the political leadership in general; the political community denotes the group of persons who are bound together in a common political enterprise.

Subsequently, Easton makes a distinction between two dimensions—"diffuse support" and "specific support"³. Diffuse support represents a person's conviction that the existence and functioning of the government conform

to his or her moral or ethical principles about what is right in the political sphere. Of the three political objects mentioned above, the regime is the primary object of diffuse support. It is believed that citizens are linked to the regime by diffuse support, which stems from their assessment of the fundamental values, norms and institutions of the government. As distinct from diffuse support, specific support means a person's satisfaction with specific policies and with the performance of the government. Of the three political objects, the authorities are considered to be the primary object of specific support. Citizens are linked to the political authorities through their specific support, which derives from their perceptions and evaluations of the actual policy outputs of the authorities.

Following Easton's conceptualization, we define mass support for current urban self-government in this study from two dimensions accordingly—diffuse support for the self-government institutions currently implemented in residents' communities and specific support for major policies that are made and implemented by the incumbent community authorities.

Survey and Sample

The data used in this study came from a public opinion survey conducted in five Chinese cities (Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Chengdu, and Hangzhou) in the middle of 2008. The survey was based on a probability sample of the general urban residents of the five Chinese cities, aged 18 years and older. This probability sample was derived from a multistage sampling strategy. Three urban districts (qu) were randomly chosen at the first sampling stage in each city. At the second sampling stage, two streets (jiedao) were randomly selected from the three districts in each city, yielding a total of 30 streets. From each of the thirty streets, two residents' communities were randomly chosen at the third stage of sampling, yielding a total of 60 residents' communities in five Chinese cities. Then 2400 households were randomly chosen from 60

² D. Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, New York: John Wiley & Son, 1965, Chapters 11-13.

³ *Ibid.*

Tab. 1. Specific Support for Urban Self-Government

| Item | 1 Very Nega- tive % | 2 Nega- tive % | 3 Uncer- tain % | 4 Positive % | 5 Very Positive % | 1-5 Mean | Total % |
|---|---------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|-------------|------------|
| 1. Maintaining good living environment for the whole community | 4.5 | 22.2 | 11.6 | 51.3 | 10.4 | 3.45 | 100 |
| 2. Taking care of the needy | 8.0 | 21.8 | 13.5 | 44.3 | 12.4 | 3.32 | 100 |
| 3. Providing adequate community service | 6.8 | 21.7 | 18.6 | 40.1 | 12.8 | 3.34 | 100 |
| 4. Overall perceptions of the CRC policy outcomes and performance | 8.4 | 22.5 | 10.3 | 42.7 | 16.1 | 3.25 | 100 |

NOTE: For each of items in this index, respondents were asked to grade self-government policy performance based on the grading scheme commonly used in China's schools: on a 5-point scale, whereas 1 = very poor; 2 = poor; 3 = so-so; 4 = good; and 5 = very good.

Source: own elaboration.

residents' communities. At the final stage, one individual was chosen randomly from each of the 2400 households as the interviewee.

College students of political science were employed as field interviewers; they were trained by project members in field interviewing techniques before the actual survey was carried out. The technique of face to face interview was used in the survey. Our interviewers conducted face to face interview in the respondents' home, reading the well-designed questionnaire in the same manner (ensuring reliability). Respondents were offered confidentiality and encouraged to provide answers that best captured their true feelings.

Measuring Popular Support for Urban Self-Government

Mass political support defined as diffuse support for political institutions and specific support for government policies has been empirically measured in earlier studies of both Chinese and non-Chinese settings⁴. Diffuse

support for political institutions is typically gauged by evaluations of how well, in reality, the system of government upholds basic political values and rules in which a person believes; whereas specific support for government policies is typically gauged by people's evaluations of major policies that are made and implemented by the incumbent political authority rather than of any specific leaders. Based on this empirical measurement tested in the earlier studies, we designed our own measures of urban residents' diffuse support for the self-government institutions and specific support for major policies that are made and implemented by the incumbent authorities in their communities.

To capture specific support for urban self-government, we have fashioned four items to capture respondents' evaluations of specific policies and their outcomes. These items are linked to the following community policy areas:

- Maintaining community environment (e.g., community security and safety, sanitation,

⁴ J. Chen, *Popular Political Support in Urban China*. Stanford University Press and Woodrow

Wilson Center Press, 2004.

Tab . 2. Diffuse Support for Urban Self-Government

| Item | 1 Very Nega- tive % | 2 Nega- tive % | 3 Uncer- tain % | 4 Positive % | 5 Very Positive % | 1-5 Mean | Total % |
|---|---------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|-------------|------------|
| 1. Trust in the Community Residents' Committees | 3.8 | 14.1 | 8.3 | 54.1 | 19.7 | 3.73 | 100 |
| 2. The representation of the will and interest of community residents | 2.8 | 10.8 | 10.2 | 48.3 | 27.9 | 3.85 | 100 |
| 3. Assessment of the administration of community affairs | 2.5 | 17.4 | 16.3 | 51.1 | 12.7 | 3.54 | 100 |
| 4. Evaluation of the election of leadership in the CRCs | 8.0 | 22.6 | 11.9 | 44.3 | 13.2 | 3.29 | 100 |

NOTE: Item 1 reads: "Could you tell me how much trust you have in the self-government bodies, the CRC?" Respondents were asked to answer this question on a 5-point scale, whereas 1 = none at all; 2 = not very much trust; 3 = not quite sure; 4 = quite a lot of trust; and 5 = great deal of trust. Item 2 reads: "To what extent, do you think that the self-government bodies, the CRC, can represent the will and interest of community residents?" Respondents were asked to answer this question on a 5-point scale, whereas 1 = none at all; 2 = not very much; 3 = so-so; 4 = quite a lot; and 5 = great deal. Item 3 reads: "In general, the administration of community affairs has been equal and transparent for all residents." Respondents were asked to assess this statement on a 5-point scale, whereas 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = not quite sure; 4 = agree; and 5 = strongly agree. Item 4 reads: "In general, in the first election of the CRC leaders in my community in 2003, I would like to say, it is the residents' vote that determines the selection of leadership in the CRC." Respondents were asked to assess this statement on a 5-point scale, whereas 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = not quite sure; 4 = agree; and 5 = strongly agree.

Source: own elaboration.

and environment)

- Taking care of the needy
- Providing adequate community service

The relevance of these policy areas to our Beijing samples was assessed in several interview conducted prior to the administration of formal surveys. The results from these pre-survey interviews indicated widespread interest among interviewees in each of these policy areas. The relevance of the items in this index of specific support has been also confirmed by some earlier studies on urban self-government⁵. The decree which issued by the

Ministry of Civil Affair in 2000 also confirms the validity of the item in our index of specific support. According to the decree, the newly-established CRCs have to take following tasks: providing community service, maintaining community sanitation and environment, protecting community safety, and prospering community culture.

As tab. 1 shows, a little more than 50% of our respondents had either positive or very positive evaluation of maintaining good living environment for the whole community (61.7%), taking care of the needy (56.7%), providing adequate community service (52.9%), and overall perceptions of the CRC policy out-

⁵ A.C. Choate, *Local Governance in China, Part II: An Assessment of Urban Residents Committees Municipal Community Development*, Asian Foundation Working Paper, No. 10, 1998; James Derleth and Daniel R. Koldyk, *The Shequ Experi-*

ment: Grassroots Political Reform in Urban China, *Journal of Contemporary China* 13 (2004): 747-777.

Tab. 3. Comparison of Specific Support and Diffuse Support for Urban Self-Government

| Level of Support | Specific Support % | Diffuse Support % |
|--|-----------------------|----------------------|
| “Positive” and “Very Positive” responses to all four items | 25.8 | 36.5 |
| “Negative” and “Very Negative” responses to all four items | 12.5 | 2.5 |

Source: own elaboration.

comes and performance (58.8%). Moreover, the mean scores of the four items ranged from a low 3.25 to a high 3.45 on a 5-point scale where “1” stands for “very negative” and “5” refers to “very positive.” In general, therefore, the results suggested that the residents’ evaluation of major policies that are made and implemented by the incumbent CRC authorities was somewhat positive. These four items were then combined to form an additive index to capture a collective profile of a respondents’ specific support for current urban self-government.

To capture diffuse support for current self-government institutions (or system), we asked respondents first how much trust they have in the newly established urban self-governing bodies, the CRCs, and second to evaluate the implementation of general self-government principles in their own communities. These general principles, which are prescribed by the decree which issued by the Ministry of Civil Affair in 2000, include “democratic election, democratic decision making, democratic management, and democratic oversight”. According to the decree, these general principles are supposed to serve as the cornerstone of current urban self-government. To gauge our respondents’ assessment of how well the principles were implemented in their communities, we used two items (i.e., item 2, 3, and 4) corresponding to these general principles listed above (tab. 2).

As tab. 2 shows, a majority of our respondents had either “positive” or “very positive” attitudes toward trust in the newly-established

CRCs (73.8%), the representation of the will and interest of community residents (76.2%), assessment of the administration of community affairs (63.8%), and evaluation of the election of leadership in the CRCs (57.5%). These results seem to confirm the argument of some recent field reports that people in urban areas have increasingly supported the new system of urban self-government since the reform of the old self-governing bodies, the RCs. The four items used in this study to gauge respondents’ affect for the self-government system implemented in their communities were combined to form an additive index of respondents’ diffuse support for this system.

Furthermore, it should be noted that there was a significant disparity between the overall evaluation of current self-government institutions implemented in the sample communities and residents’ evaluation of major policies that are made and implemented by the incumbent CRC authorities. This disparity can best be revealed and summarized by comparing the percentages of the respondents who gave positive (including “positive” and “very positive”) and negative (including “negative” and “very negative”) responses to all items in each of the two dimensions of political support. As Table 3 shows, while only one-fourth (25.8%) of our respondents responded positively to all four items for the evaluation of policy outcomes, more than one-third (36.5%) responded positively to all four items for the evaluation of the implementation of self-government institutions in their communities. The same table also shows that 12.5% of the sample gave

Tab. 4. Average Scores for General Trust and Objective Networks

| Item | Minimum | Maximum | Mean of Average Community Scores |
|--|---------|---------|----------------------------------|
| General Trust Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people? | 1.00 | 3.00 | 2.08 |
| Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance, or would they try to be fair? | 1.87 | 3.00 | 2.74 |
| Do you agree that most people, regardless of whether known or unknown, can be trusted or cannot be trusted? | 1.34 | 3.00 | 2.26 |
| Objective Networks Join and participate in non-governmental citizen-rights protection groups/activities (yes = 1; no = 0). | .03 | .34 | .028 |
| Join and participate in non-governmental charity groups/activities (yes = 1; no = 0). | .04 | .45 | .041 |

Source: own elaboration.

negative responses to all items for the evaluation of policy outcomes, whereas only 2.5% gave such responses for the evaluation of the self-government institutions. All these results clearly indicate that in our sample, a larger number of respondents firmly supported the self-government institutions implemented in their communities, while a smaller number of them firmly supported the policy outcomes made by the incumbent CRC authorities.

More importantly, however, the results presented in Table 3 also indicate that, respectively, about 61.7% and 61% of our respondents were ambivalent about the policy outcomes made by the incumbent CRC authorities and their self-government institutions. It is quite clear that a sizable majority of people still felt ambivalent about both the policy outcomes made by the incumbent CRC authorities and the self-government institutions.

2. Explaining Popular Support

Why do or do not urban residents support the self-government system currently implemented in their communities—and the policy outcomes made by the incumbent self-govern-

ment authorities? To answer this question, we focus on objective social networks and subjective general trust which exist in an urban community. Scholars such as Robert Putnam have suggested that the existence of objective social networks and subjective general trust will contribute to the good governance in a community⁶.

Measuring General Trust

As Eric Uslaner describes, general trust is “trust in people whom we don’t know and who are likely to be different from ourselves”⁷. This kind of trust may be also considered as “individuals’ estimate of the trustworthiness of generalized others, or abstract trust”⁸. Accordingly, we measure this kind of indiscrimi-

⁶ R. Putnam, R. Leonardi, and R. Nanetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

⁷ E. Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002, p.15.

⁸ P. Paxton, *Is Social Capital Declining in the United States? A Multiple Indicator Assessment*, *American Journal of Sociology* 105 (1999): 98-99.

native trust by asking our respondents three questions as follows:

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?⁹

Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance or would they try to be fair?¹⁰

Do you agree that most people, regardless of whether known or unknown, can be trusted or cannot be trusted?¹¹

As tab. 4 shows, the means of average community scores for the three items of the subjective norms of generalized social capital were all above the mid point (2 or “50-50 chance”) of the 3-point scale, with a low of 2.08 for trust vs. caution and a high of 2.74 for being fair vs. taking advantage.

Measuring Social Networks

To operationalize the objective networks of generalized social capital, we tap into people’s participation in the inclusive (or universal) non-governmental organizations or groups. Formed among equal members on a voluntary base, these organizations/groups are what Francis Fukuyama calls “broad radius organizations”¹², which tend to connect people together from different social, economic, oc-

cupational, and even political backgrounds¹³. As a result, they tend to be heterogeneous in membership and broad in purpose. To measure participation in this kind of network, we asked our respondents whether they ever joined in activities of any organizations/groups of two categories within the past two years: non-governmental citizen-rights protection groups and non-governmental charity groups¹⁴. Both categories of groups in China are more likely to have diverse memberships, since the goals of these organizations/groups (i.e., citizen rights and charities for all) tend to have a strong appeal to people from all walks of life¹⁵. In our survey, respondents were asked to register their responses on a dichotomous, 0-1 scale, where 0 stands for “didn’t participate” and 1 refers to “participated.” The means of average community scores indicate that 2.8 % (.028 x 100%) and 4.1 % (.041 x 100%) of respondents participated, respectively, in non-governmental citizen-rights protection groups and in non-governmental charity groups across all sampled communities (tab. 4).

Analytical Results

We expect that both general trust and social networks—have a positive impact on the performance of community self-government institutions in urban China, therefore, leading to higher level of popular support for community self-government. There are at least two major reasons for this expectation. First, in general, both the general trust and inclusive social networks encourage individuals across social, economic, and ethnic divides to compromise

⁹ Respondents were asked to answer this question on a 3-point scale, with 1 indicating “need to be very careful,” 2 indicating “either way,” and 3 indicating “most people can be trusted.” This question is very similar to the question (i.e. “most people can be trusted”), which has been typically asked to measure general trust in other survey studies, such as the World Value Surveys.

¹⁰ Respondents were asked to answer this question on a 3-point scale, with 1 indicating “would take advantage,” 2 indicating “50-50 chance,” and 3 indicating “would try to be fair.”

¹¹ Respondents were asked to answer this question on a 3-point scale, with 1 indicating “cannot be trusted,” 2 indicating “50-50 chance,” and 3 indicating “most people can be trusted.”

¹² F. Fukuyama, *Social Capital and Development: The Coming Agenda*, SAIS Review 22 (2002), p.34.

¹³ See, also, S. Knack, *Social Capital and the Quality of Government: Evidence from the States*, American Journal of Political Science 46 (2002): 772-785.

¹⁴ E. Uslaner found that there was a strong correlation between generalized trust and charitable contribution. See Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust*, p.133.

¹⁵ J. Wang, Y. Yang, and W. Chen, *A Report on Socio-psychological Research in China in 2006*, in X. Ru, X. Lu, and P. Li, eds., *Analysis and Forecast on China’s Social Development*, 2007.

and cooperate¹⁶. As Uslaner points out, general trust “can lead us to civic engagement with people who are different from ourselves”¹⁷. As a result, this kind of general cooperative spirit creates a desirable environment for a representative government to function effectively and responsively.

A second reason is that China’s urban neighborhoods have become increasingly diverse and their residents have become more mobile since the onset of the post-Mao reform. With the drastic decline of government-run work units—which used to build and/or manage their own separate housing units—and rapid housing commercialization, as mentioned above, the composition of urban neighborhoods has become a function of individual choice. Moreover, as China’s urban areas have become more cosmopolitan, its urban population in general has become increasingly diverse socially, culturally and economically, and increasingly mobile spatially. In order to perform well to satisfy such a diverse and ever changing urban population, the CRC as the core of the self-government system needs effectively to represent the broad interests of a diverse population. Since general trust, as mentioned above, nurtures government’s responsiveness to citizens at large rather than to narrow interests, a higher level of general trust in a community is likely to facilitate better performance of the CRC in that community.

After we conducted a series of bi-correlation analysis, we found that, both general trust and participation in inclusive social networks—had a significant and positive impact on CRCs performance. In other words, as we expected, the CRCs in the neighborhoods that are endowed with abundant general trust and inclusive social networks tend to gain higher level of popular support than those in the neighborhoods that lack this kind of trust and

social networks.

3. Conclusion

Overall, both the general trust and inclusive social networks positively affected CRCs’ performance, as measured by their responsiveness to the interests of residents at large and their effectiveness in conducting public affairs. Therefore, the CRCs in the neighborhoods that are endowed with abundant general trust and inclusive social networks tend to gain higher level of popular support than those in the neighborhoods that lack this kind of trust and social network.

The findings from this study have political implications. The performance of community self-government such as CRCs in urban areas may be significantly improved by increasing the right kind of social capital along the two dimensions, that is, general trust and social networks. Therefore, the central government shall take measures to encourage the development of various social networks in the community.

Acknowledgements

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¹⁶ F. Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, New York: The Free Press, 1995.

¹⁷ Uslaner, *The Moral Foundations of Trust*, p. 249.