

An institutional analysis on local governments in the United States and China

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Keywords: institutional analysis, local government

Abstract: The American political system is a so-called “check and balance system”. The political power is divided into executive branch, legislative branch, and judicial branch. The American government power is extremely decentralized. The 51 states have their own power resources with which the Feudal government cannot interfere; Mayor-council and Council-manager are two main forms of local government. The Council-manager has become the main form adopted by the local government in the U. S. China has a political system with “one governing party” and a highly centralized power system. Local governments of China comprise a hierarchical system. During the past forty years, China has adopted a series of key reform measures, including introducing a national system of public servants, decentralizing power, carrying out institutional reform.

1. Introduction

China has made great progress in economy area due to adopting the open and reform policy since 1978, now it is facing more and more challenges, from official corruption to social problems. The government party and the central government have felt not only domestic but also foreign pressure. In today's global world, the Chinese government cannot ignore those external requests that China follow the internal rules. With such a background, we can consider how to use western countries' experience as a reference. And the U.S.A, which is the most advanced country in the world with a “check and balance political system” and a tradition of protecting people's freedom, is a model that we should pay more attention to our study. Maybe there still exist many problems in American society, but we can discard the dross and select the essential.

2. Politics and government in America

2.1 Brief Description of the United States and its National Government Structure

The United States of America gained its independence on July 4, 1776. It covers an area of 9,372, 610 square kilometers, with a population of 329 millions in 51 states. At the beginning of the United States Constitution is the declaration: “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America “ (U. S. Constitution, 1789, Preamble). This is the root of American political system. In the United States, the Constitution has kept a long-term stability and has become the foundation of governmental administration. According to the Constitution, the United States is a Federal Republic Country. The country has a strong democratic tradition. The power of the national government is divided into three branches: the executive branch (the president and the federal agencies), the legislative branch (Congress), and the judicial branch (the federal courts). The Constitution includes ten amendments known as the Bill of Rights to safeguard individual liberties.

Politically, the United States electoral system revolves around two major parties-the conservative and free-enterprise-oriented Republican Party, and the more liberal Democratic Party. Elected members of both houses in the legislature, the executive branch, and presidential candidates tend to emerge from one or the other of these two parties. While independent candidates exist, and third party options have emerged (such as the Reform Party), politics continues to be dominated by the Republican/Democratic dichotomy. (The above description of political and government is online at

www.countryWatch.com update2019/5/4.).

To summarize, the American political system is a so-called “check and balance system. This can be reflected in two perspectives. First, the political power is distributed evenly in executive branch, legislative branch, and the judicial branch. Each branch has limited power and supervises each other. Second, the government power is extremely decentralized. The 51 states have their own power resource with which the Feudal government can’t interfere. In addition, most government officials are elected directly by the people.

2.2 What Local Government Means in the USA

In the earliest American communities, local government was just simply a social organization of people, where people lived in the same frontier community. They could help each other with barn raising, birthing, and healing. They farmed, hunted, worshiped, and sometimes fought together for the common defense. (Banovetz, 1998).

As communities grew, local government became more complex. The local governments now build and maintain streets, parks, and schools; they supply clean water and treat sewage, they pick up and dispose of the garbage; they provide police and ambulance service; they offer aid to the impoverished and the handicapped; they support mental health service, senior citizens programs, and youth activities, etc. From the point of view of state leaders, local governments take care of decisions that are important locally, which leaves state officials free to take care of policy concerns that affect a larger portion of the state’s population. From the view of personnel management, the local community takes the responsibility of hiring and firing at the local level. This takes the pressure off the wider political system, and can keep problems from reaching the state level. From the view of maintaining system legitimacy, local government places some of the responsibility for making tough decisions about services and taxes in the hands of locally elected officials. These decisions are more likely to be accepted if they are made locally. Most of these decisions can be changed by local political action without involving the wider system. Overall, local people like local government because of the access citizens to their government and control over various life-style decisions. (Williams, 1967). Through the above introduction, we can easily find that one important feature of American local government is its autonomous jurisdiction and self-governing system.

2.3 The feature of local government in the USA

All local governments in America possess varying degrees of autonomy. They vary from state to state. But their functions, powers and structure are determined by the state constitution and by statutes of the state legislature. The Bureau of Census identifies five types of local government in American intergovernmental system. (Stouffer, Opheim, Day, 1996). They are counties, townships, municipalities (or cities), school districts, and special districts. While counties, townships and municipalities are considered to be general purpose governments, school districts and special districts are considered as special purpose government.

In contrast to the 51 governments at the national and state levels, the local level in the United States consists of over 87, 000 separate governments. And the local governments are organized differently from the political arrangements found at the national and state levels Mayor-council, council-manager and commission are the three broad classifications of local government in the United States. (Stouffer, et al, 1996).

The mayor-council form is the traditional form of American city government, which is the form that most closely parallels the American federal government, with an elected legislature body (the council) and a separately elected the chief executive officer (the mayor). In the mayor-council form, five or more council members are elected by the voters to enact local laws and to establish city policy. The mayor-council form is characterized by a separation of executive and legislative powers. It is a system of checks and balances patterned after the traditional national and state government. The mayor-council form of city government may follow one of two designs-strong mayor or weak mayor.

In the weak mayor form, the council has substantial administrative as well as legislative power. The mayor is primarily a ceremonial figurehead, possessing little if any administrative authority. Usually, this person is a member of the council, selected by fellow members to serve as chairperson and mayor for a one-year term.

In the strong-mayor city, the mayor is the principal administrative office, having the authority to appoint many of the city's officials and, under specified circumstances, to remove them. Typically, a strong mayor has a veto power over the ordinances passed by the council.

The council-manager form of local government is a system that combines the strong political leadership and strong experience administration. The council is the governing body of the city elected by the public voters. It provides legislative direction for the city. It is also responsible for making policy, approving the budget, and determining tax rates.

3. Politics and government in China

3.1 Brief Description of China and its National Government Structure

The People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded on October 1, 1949. It covers an area of 9.6 million square kilometers. In December 2018, it had a population of 1,390 million in 23 provinces, 5 autonomous regions, 4 municipalities and 2 Special Administrative Region. China is a country with 56 nationalities but Han nationality is the largest one that accounts for about 94% of the total population. Beijing is the capital of the country.

Under the Chinese Constitution, National Governmental and Political Structure China are a socialist country led by the working class and a people's democratic dictatorship based on the alliance of workers and peasants. The organs of state power include the National People Congress, Chairman, State Council, Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Local People Congresses and Local Governments Autonomous Organs in the nationality autonomous regions, the Peoples Supreme Court and the People's Supreme Procuratorate.

The system of the National People Congress (NPC) is a radical political system. The People's Congress of China is the supreme organ of state power, and its permanent organization is the Standing Committee of the Peoples Congress of China. The Standing Committee exercises legislative power. It meets annually to review and approve major new policy directions, laws, the budget, and major personnel changes.

The Local People Congresses at different levels are the state power organs at local level.

China is a country with several political parties and practices multiparty cooperation and a political consultative system under the leadership of the Communist Party. The democratic parties join state power, the contribute consultation on policies and selection of leaders and participate in the state, the formulation and practice of policies and laws. (The above description of Chinas government system is online at(<http://www.countryWatch.com,Chinasinformation>))

3.2 What Local Government Means in China

In China, local governments are the executive organs of the state power at different local levels. It is one of the tools with which the party implements its policy. Local governments are the administrative organs of state under the leadership of the State Council and obey the State Council. Generally speaking, governors, mayors, county heads, district heads, township heads and town heads are responsible for the local people.

The main function of local government is managing the economy of areas under its jurisdiction. This includes: setting up socio-economic development strategies of the regions; solving important economic contradictions between branches and regions; organizing and coordinating production and circulation, enforcing economic laws and regulations, appointing and dismissing cadres; and providing basic conditions and services for economic development.

In China, the personnel management power is separated from administrative responsibility. The personnel authority is controlled by the Communist Party. Local governments of China comprise a hierarchical system with a characteristic of leadership at different levels, the lower level subordinate

to the higher levels. This means that lower-level governments must accept the leadership, instructions, supervision and administration of higher-level governments conscientiously and complete the tasks received from them.

3.3 The Political Reform in China

China had a long history of planed economy featuring strict State control before the adoption of the policy of reform and opening up to the outside world in 1978. During the forty years of economy reforms and opening policy, China has made great achievements. However, as China develops, the shortcoming of the planed economic system becomes clear, and the political structure has exposed its weakness, which is hindering the economic development. In order to build a more efficient and pragmatic government, China has adopted a series of key reform measures, including separating the government from enterprises, introducing a national system of public servants, decentralizing power.

3.3.1 Separation the Government from Enterprise

After the reform of the economic system in 1978, local governments have increasingly participated in economic construction and played an important role in rural-based industry promoting economic development. As such, local governments directly intervened in the economy and played a leading role by providing a series of favorable conditions for enterprises. These included amongst others transferring governmental functions to help the development of rural industries, identifying projects for enterprises, resolving the problem of shortage of special personnel for enterprises, providing credit guarantees for the management of indebted enterprises, improving infrastructure, opening overseas markets, fostering backbone enterprises, establishing enterprise groups, and developing scale economies.

3.3.2 The Personal System Reform

The main personnel system reform in China is the civil service reform. The ‘Provisional Regulations for State Civil Servants’ went into effort on October 1, 1993. The main purpose is to achieve scientific management of state civil servants (‘Provisional Regulations for State Civil Servants’, 1993, p278). The main focus of present civil service reform plan to facility personnel elimination. A ‘contract system’ has been implemented, which has shaped the appointment system. In addition, both transfers and the scope of recruitment examinations have undergone great change.

3.3.3 From Centralization to Decentralization

Since 1979, China has been converting its institutional structure from a highly centralized one into a decentralized one. Decentralization is likely to promote economic activity through server routes including an increased infusion of capital and other resources, a more extensive provision of infrastructure, and a more effective enabling environment than would have been the case under a centralized system. In addition, decentralization will expand employment, improve economic efficiency and enlarge participation of local people in economic and social affairs.

4. Conclusion

Many foreign scholars view the “one governing party” and highly centralized power system as the main features of Chinese political system. Under such a situation, what the local government should do was very simple: local leaders just needed to obey orders from the central government without questions, and be in complete accordance with the higher level government. In this sense, what they faced everyday was not an organic system but a rigid procedure, not creative and active participation but passive submission, not the real will from local people but some thinking imposed on them from above.

During the past forty years, China's political system has begun to change owing to the reform and open door policy. The most important change is that the central government has decreased a lot of control over local governments and has given them relatively large room to develop themselves.

Local government has more power than before to make its own decisions, which mainly focuses on economic area.

Since the one governing party system itself has not been changed, the vertical power form is still the same as the past. Through the study of U. S. system, we suggest that

Chinese government has to do more work on system reform. The urgent work includes:

First, China should rule the country by law. Every person, including the governing party and the central government must follow the law. Whoever violates the law must be punished. In order to keep the dignity of the law, the judicial branch must be independent and professional. This is the basic guarantee of our future. No independence, no authority.

Second, China should continue to decentralize the central government power to the local government. During last forty years, with the process of market-oriented economy, the government actually has decreased a lot of control over many affairs. But the planned economy still has a certain room. For example, many local business programs can't be implemented without the assent of the central government. Government officials have practically large power to make economic decisions, which should be returned to the market.

Third, China should continue the reform of civil servants according to professional principles. We should recruit civil servants by their qualities and abilities, and strengthen their training. Meanwhile, we should pay much attention to government leaders' training. In an organization, a leaders performance influences or even determines the staffs' performance. The mission of the Communist Party of China is to "Serve the people. "In a sense, this mission must be reflected through every leaders commitment and practice. They must fulfill the mission statement by their performance. But some officials in China are not interested in how to serve the people, but believe power is like a ticket that will be invalid after the term of office. If the leader of an organization lacks mission, the organization would be like an aimless boat drifting out to the sea. Members didn't know where to go and why to go. At that time, corruption will emerge easily because of lack of the basic moral value.

We look forward to seeing China's progress by implementing all the proposals. Through political reform, China will become more prosperous in the 21st century.

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