PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND POLITICAL EFFICACY: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS FROM EVIDENCES IN CHINA

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Abstract - Political efficacyindicates the public'sconfidence and trust in government and their belief that they have the capacity to understand and influence public policies and political affairs. It is heraldedas an essential indicator of the political system's democracy and health during the process of constructing democracy at the grassroots level.It is argued that when the public efficacy is low, it indicates the public has low trust in the government. There has been a worldwide trend of a declining trust level in government, especially in many democratic countries. However, China, a typical authoritarian country, enjoys extraordinary high level of public trust, consistently ranking at the top of many major international surveys. Meanwhile, China has been rated at the bottom of all major international indexes in open government, freedom of speech, transparency, and anti-corruption. This phenomenon has puzzled many political observers. This study tries to provide some empirical evidences to debunk this contradictory myth. It assesses Chinese local governments' efforts in encouraging public participation and promoting transparency in recent years, and evaluates the effects of such efforts on Chinese citizens' political efficacy to provide some empirical evidence for policy reforms. This study is based on the scientific data from a longitudinal national survey with a random sample ofmore than 25,000 citizens in all 36 major cities in China that we have conductedeach year from 2010 to 2014. We find that,consistent with the results of those major international surveys, the Chinese citizensindeeddisplay high trust in the local governments. However, the respondents are dissatisfied with government's efforts to engage them;nor are they satisfied with the degree of transparency by the local government. The results also indicate low internal and external political efficaciesof the Chinese citizens. They seem to have little confidence that the policy makers will respond to their needs. Nor do they believe they can understand or influence the policy making.Possible mediating factors that may have influenced the Chinese citizens' political efficacy are explored. The results have strong implications for policy makers to further enhance citizens' political efficacy. Local governments need to adopt more proactive and effective initiatives to engage the citizens through more open communication, transparent systems and timely responses to the citizens' needs.