Critical Issues Confronting China: Managing Local Cadres: Understanding Local Officials’ Policy Behavior
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Whereas Chinese top officials all seem alike in their public persona, at least as portrayed in the media, Chinese local officials are very different from one another when they deal with local challenges on the ground. For example, confronting social unrest over land expropriation, Bo Xilai, former Party Secretary of Chongqing in Sichuan Province, hired thugs to crack down on local protests, whereas Wang Yang, former Party Secretary of Guangdong Province, placated protest leaders through negotiations.

How do we understand such variation in local cadres’ behavior? What motivated them to behave differently? Does the official evaluation system, or promotion criteria, provide the best explanatory power? If not, what are the alternatives? Jessica C. Teets, Associate Professor in the Political Science Department at Middlebury College, and her colleagues delved into these questions and analyzed survey data to distill the most important factors shaping behavior.

Using the official evaluation system is certainly the simplest and most direct way, thereby often the default method, to model local officials’ motivations. But it is widely recognized that this system does not capture most of the variations in behavior. All the targeted policy goals on the evaluation form, such as local fertility rates or local government revenue, with corresponding assigned “target values,” do not constrain or motivate cadres’ behavior uniformly. For example, one of the possible “intervening variables” could be age. As cadres approach their retirement age with their terminal positions in sight, they tend not to care about official evaluation as much, and would opt for inaction by claiming “no solution” (“没办法”) when confronting a challenge.

How to analyze local officials’ own preferences to explain more variation than the official evaluation system became the focal point of Teets’ research. As an expert in governance and policy diffusion in authoritarian regimes, Teets has extensively studied policy experimentation by local governments in China. Her presentation was based on the survey results over two consecutive years, with a sample size of 943 local officials from eight provinces. She acknowledged at the outset that this sample was not random, and that the survey takers were mostly from developed coastal areas, which might generate bias in the results.

As one would expect, some officials consider news from the media or their peers as a
legitimate source for formulating policy priorities and respond to this demand. Some officials prefer less risk than others when implementing policies. They are more risk averse with policy experiments. Some officials have more confidence in their own ability to make a difference, and would advocate policy propositions that they believe in, whereas others’ behavior is more anchored by the promotion or selection criteria for cadres, and take their cues from the central government. If these officials detect a signal from Beijing against policy experimentation, as they have in recent years with “top-level design,” they would respond to this new environment by becoming more cautious and conservative.

How to best capture all this variation in root preferences? Teets deployed a methodology called “principal component analysis (PCA),” a kind of factor analysis, to reveal the underlying patterns in the data. PCA results divided the sample into four different personalities, based on the answers to the survey questions. The first type is what she called the “consultative leader.” This type of leader responds to citizen demands and resolves local problems while trying to avoid backlash. The second type is the “strategic autocrat.” Such officials look up to the central government for policy directions, have faith in themselves to make a positive difference and get rapidly promoted. The third type is the “typical bureaucrat” who is afraid of making mistakes. He would rather avoid local people’s complaints by saying “没有办法” (“no solution”) than to take the risk to do something to alleviate problems. The fourth type is the “policy entrepreneur.” Believing in their own technocratic problem-solving abilities, such officials are motivated to get promoted and to champion specific new policies.

The explanatory values of these personalities in the behavior outcomes are significant. Under President Xi Jinping’s rein, there is generally less willingness for policy experimentation and innovation. But the degree of reluctance varies across the four types of personalities. The “consultative leader” and the “entrepreneurial leader” still tinker with various policies in order to solve local problems. They just don’t publicize their work in the more centralized environment fostered by Xi Jinping.

Teets recommended using an evolutionary approach to understand how people navigate differently through the same incentive system, as well as to study different institutions or regions for future research, as this approach is able to consider more interactions between and variations among the underlying factors. She acknowledged the trade-off between the simplicity of using the official evaluation framework and the explanatory vigor of this more complex analytical model. But every researcher has to make this choice him or herself.