

Rory Truex, Making Autocracy Work: Representation and Responsiveness in Modern China

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Rory Truex, *Making Autocracy Work: Representation and Responsiveness in Modern China*

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Why do nondemocracies have democratic-looking political institutions? We can observe parliamentary proceedings in countries like Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Cuba. This dissonance—between political systems clearly designed to inhibit political competition and institutions like legislatures, elections, and opposition parties—has provoked a rich body of research into authoritarian institutions over the last two decades.

The dominant theories to emerge from this agenda have focused on political elites. Authoritarian legislatures have been argued to coopt elites that would otherwise threaten the regime, to provide a forum for negotiating the distribution of power and perquisites among them, or to channel elite opinion into government policymaking [1].

In *Making Autocracy Work*, Rory Truex develops an alternative perspective on authoritarian parliaments with an entirely different focus: the public. Focusing on China's National People's Congress, he argues that authoritarian governments like China's face a conundrum. To avoid policy blunders, they want parliamentarians to learn about public dissatisfaction and share that information with political leadership. Yet these same representative activities—such as proposals to the legislature—can focus and mobilize public opinion on grievances. This threat of destabilizing representation is especially problematic for “no-go” topics about which the political leadership has no intention of changing policy.

An attractive solution for autocrats is “representation within bounds.” In this model, parliamentarians can represent public interests, but only within a policy space defined by the political regime. In China, that space includes policies on education, healthcare, environmental policy, and economic regulation, a wide array of topics that interest the public. Of course, subjecting the Communist Party to authentic political competition, promoting universal human rights, or advocating for a judiciary independent of

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political interference fall outside that space. These “no-go” zones are defined by their near-complete absence from China’s public sphere, but Truex also shows how training sessions for legislators blend instructions to represent the public with the duty to protect the interests of the Communist Party. Legislators in China effectively have two principals: party and public.

This model of bounded-yet-authentic representation leads to observable implications that the book tests in impressive empirical work. Truex traces the impact of individual legislative proposals in Hainan province (chosen for its high level of legislative transparency) to examine effects on policy. He reports original national survey data to show that the public believes in the efficacy of legislative policy proposals, but only for issues that do not threaten the regime’s interests. He also provides evidence that legislators enjoy considerable returns to office by analyzing the stock prices of businesses whose CEOs become People’s Congress deputies. Perhaps most impressively, Chapter 4 provides novel evidence that representatives in China actually represent. It uses unsupervised machine learning to classify the topics of several thousand legislative proposals and compares them to the citizen-reported perceptions of the issue’s importance in a nationally representative survey. Together, these chapters offer an empirical foundation for the claim that representation is indeed happening on issues ranging from environmental protection to migrant labor. The empirical chapters conclude with thoughtful reflections on limitations and alternative explanations of the findings, providing readers with context to draw their own conclusions.

The theory developed in this study contributes to what might be termed the “informational turn” in Chinese politics. A recent wave of research argues that China’s political institutions help the autocratic government gather information about public preferences. Martin Dimitrov argues that the petitions collected by various letters-and-visits institutions are crucial indicators of public preferences in the absence of deputy elections [2–4]. Melanie Manion shows that elected local congressional deputies advocate for their constituents, even if most villagers have little interest in them [5]. Peter Lorentzen explains how tolerating certain protests reveals difficult-to-observe sources of public discontent. Repression is therefore selectively applied to limit the chance of destabilizing the regime [6, 7]. A common thread across these studies is explaining the apparent paradox of autocracy (i.e. no binding constraint on political leaders, short of revolution) combined with the appearance of political representation. The surprising consensus is that much of the observed representation and responsiveness in China is *authentic*, despite evident political constraints.

Representation within bounds helps us understand why we observe “rubber stamp” parliamentarians like those in China behaving like their constituents would wish, rather than only as regime lackeys. Yet the model Truex developed in Chapter 2 left me wondering why all parliamentary representation takes place in public. If the regime’s primary interest in a parliament is the information it generates about public preferences, why allow that communication to happen in public when it runs the risk of further mobilizing citizens behind their grievances? As the book notes, many information-gathering channels such as domestic surveillance, direct appeals to authorities, public opinion polls, and enlisting journalists to write internal reports do not have the same, potentially destabilizing public feedback loop.

The book led me to consider two possibilities for reconciling a view of the National People’s Congress as an information-gathering tool and its highly public, potentially

threatening form of information transfer. First, blending the rationalist approach that forms the basis for “representation within bounds” with historical institutionalism could help us understand why it was deemed important to create a parliament in the first place. Truex adopts this perspective in Chapter 7 when he seeks to understand institutional change in China’s parliament, pointing to critical junctures such as Mao’s disbanding of the institution and the more rigid enactment of “bounds on representation” in the post-Tiananmen period.

Second, by taking place “on stage,” parliamentary representation also has propagandizing effects. The regime may benefit not only from the information it receives, but also from the public witnessing this performance: parliamentarians advocating their views and the government (in some cases) adopting these proposals. A memorable demonstration of legislative responsiveness may buy the ruling party public goodwill. Truex’s previous experimental research offers evidence of similar effects: simply alerting Chinese citizens to the presence of channels to contact the government improves satisfaction with the regime [8]. Combined with Dimitrov’s argument that citizens withdraw their participation from unresponsive authoritarian institutions, this helps make sense of the public nature of parliamentary information transfer [9]. Publicizing representative behavior may help ensure that Chinese citizens continue to share their troubles with their People’s Congress representatives, rather than in the streets.

This suggests a broader critique of the “informational turn” in the study of Chinese politics. By focusing on what the regime obtains, information-based models may underestimate the role of political theater in shaping public perceptions [10]. Citizens are not only principals transmitting information to the regime in hopes of shaping policy: they are also the audience to acts of authoritarian representation. Their satisfaction likely depends not only on public policies, but also on these public performances of representation.

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10. Manion’s (2015) Survey research on local congresses suggests that many Chinese citizens are paying little attention to People’s Congress deputies who serve at the local level. However, the annual political theater around China’s National People’s Congress is hard to miss.

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