

Online Consultation and Governance Reform in Chinese Ministries and Provinces

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Abstract

This research examines the conditions under which Chinese central government ministries and provincial governments implement online consultation, a prominent instrument of governance reform in which officials provide interested parties with opportunities to offer feedback on proposed public policies. The research assembles original data regarding the online consultation practices of more than one hundred central government ministries and provincial governments. The analysis demonstrates that online consultation practices are more developed in provincial governments than central government ministries. Across organizational contexts, online consultation is more advanced in the disclosure of proposed policies than in the circulation of feedback submitted in response to draft laws and regulations. Finally, online consultation is primarily utilized by organizations with substantial resources, as well as organizations operating in environments not characterized by fundamental political sensitivities. These results are consistent with the expectation that although online consultation increases information disclosure and public participation in government decision making, such reforms are indicative not of the end of authoritarianism but rather the resilience of the Chinese Communist Party.

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Contemporary authoritarian regimes often have incentives for advancing reforms that increase transparency and citizen involvement in public decision making (Huntington 1991, Levitsky and Way 2002, Magaloni 2006). For example, one of the highest priorities of the current generation of Chinese leaders is improving the government's performance along a number of crucial dimensions, such as reducing corruption among public officials and enhancing protection of social welfare and the environment (China Real Time 2014, Riley 2013). By instituting information disclosure and public participation reforms, the leadership is explicitly not pursuing Western-style democracy (Xinhua 2014), but rather seeking to bolster the regime's procedural legitimacy and enhance the durability of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) monopoly over political power (Li 2012, Shambaugh 2008).

Although the impetus for governance reform in China emanates from concerns that are national in scope, reform measures are ultimately implemented in the context of particular ministries and levels of government (Fewsmith 2013; Florini, Lai, and Tan 2012; Teets 2014; Truex N.d.).¹ The Chinese government consists of a well-established collection of central ministries and sub-national jurisdictions. These government organizations vary widely in capacity and performance (Fewsmith 2013), as well as in the economic, social, and political environments within which they make decisions (Steinhardt and Shan 2014). Such internal and external differences fundamentally shape organizational need for and ability to implement transparency and citizen involvement reforms, which constitute a significant change from traditional closed, insider modes of authoritarian decision making (Wang 2008).

Given the ministerial, sub-national nature of governance reform, it is essential to analyze the implementation of information disclosure and public participation instruments across organizational contexts. Existing research typically focuses on best practices in governance reform and considers the implications of illustrative examples for stability and change in the Chinese political system (Balla 2012, 2014; Balla and Liao 2013; Fewsmith 2013; Fishkin, et al. 2010; O'Brien and Li 2000). Although broadly comparative analyses have been conducted (Lorentzen, Landry, and Yasuda 2014; Lu 2012; Manion 1996; Teets 2014), research investigating the conditions under which governance reforms are adopted is nevertheless in its early stages.

This research examines the conditions under which central government ministries and provincial governments utilize online consultation, a prominent instrument of governance reform (Horsley 2009). Under online consultation, government officials provide interested parties with opportunities to offer feedback on proposed public policies. In 2008, the Chinese government

¹ For simplicity, government organizations of all types, such as agencies, bureaus, and commissions, are referred to as ministries, except in contexts in which such organizational distinctions are salient.

announced that it will “make use of the Internet as a standard method of inviting public opinion on draft laws and regulations” (Xinhua 2008a). Despite such national aspirations, and consistent with China’s system of fragmented authoritarianism (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988), implementation of online consultation varies widely across ministries and levels of government. Some government organizations make extensive use of online consultation, while others have not incorporated public feedback into decision making processes. Furthermore, the institutional character of online consultation, in terms of elements such as the nature of information that is publicly disclosed, varies substantially across implementing organizations.

To analyze variation in the implementation of online consultation, this research assembles original data about the practices of central government ministries and provincial governments. These data, collected from more than one hundred government websites, facilitate investigation of the importance of internal characteristics and external environments in organizational utilization of online consultation. Given the range of organizations for which information is generated, the analysis significantly advances knowledge of the implementation of online consultation, which has thus far been drawn mainly from a small number of particularly salient cases (Balla 2012, 2014; Balla and Liao 2013; Ding 2009; Ford 2012; Horsley 2009).

By analyzing the roles of organizational capacity and environmental opportunities and constraints in conditioning the use of online consultation, the research highlights both the promise and limitations of online consultation as a governance reform. The analysis indicates that the institutional character of online consultation is more advanced in the disclosure of proposed public policies than in the circulation of feedback submitted in response to draft laws and regulations. In addition, the online consultation practices of provincial governments are more developed than the practices of central government ministries. Finally, online consultation is primarily utilized by central government ministries and provincial governments with substantial policymaking and administrative capacity, as well as organizations operating in environments not characterized by political sensitivities with immediate implications for the fundamental legitimacy of the CCP. These results suggest that although online consultation increases information disclosure and public participation in government decision making, such reforms are indicative not of the end of authoritarianism (Chang 2001) but rather the resilience of the CCP (Li 2012, Shambaugh 2008).

Chinese Experiments with Governance Reform

One argument for fragmented authority in political systems is that experiments with procedural and substantive reforms occur within the jurisdictional limits of particular government organizations (Kollman, Miller, and Page 2000). Reforms that are by some definition successful can subsequently be adopted by additional ministries and levels of government, while less promising reforms can be abandoned without diffusing across the political system (Volden 2006).

Such experimentation with governance reforms has been occurring in China over the past several decades (Fewsmith 2013; Florini, Lai, and Tan 2012; Teets 2014; Truex N.d.).

Village Elections

One of the most publicized governance reforms has been the expansion of local elections (Nathan 1986, O'Brien and Li 2000). Experiments with elections began to occur in villages early in the post-Mao period (O'Brien and Li 2000). Initial experiences were often characterized more by strict party control over nominations and voting procedures than by secret ballots for multiple candidates (Manion 1996, Shi 1999b). Over time, the notion of semi-competitive elections, in which candidates outnumber by at least one the positions on village committees being contested, gained support among Chinese leaders and was enshrined in the Organic Law of Village Committees (OLVC) (O'Brien and Li 2000). Through this institutionalization, village elections have been transformed from occasional, idiosyncratic exercises to routine applications of governance reform mandated to occur periodically in hundreds of thousands of villages across the country (O'Brien and Han 2009).

The institutional character of elections has varied over time and across villages (Kennedy 2002; Shi 1999a). When weighed against expectations articulated in the OLVC, the prevalence of elections that are high in quality has increased in recent years (Lu 2012, O'Brien and Han 2009). Despite such improvements, high-quality elections continue to constitute a relatively small percentage of the total number of village elections (Lu 2012). Research demonstrates that the quality of elections is a function of a variety of village characteristics, such as outward migration and the presence of dominant clans (Lu 2012). In addition, the character of particular elections often varies substantially across procedural dimensions. Villages have made substantial progress in conducting elections with multiple candidates (Lu 2012). By contrast, political interference in candidate nominations remains a commonplace occurrence (Lu 2012).

Such variations inform notions of the efficacy of local elections as instruments of governance reform. On the one hand, elections provide villagers with opportunities to participate in democratic exercises (Li 2003, O'Brien 2001, Shi 1999b; but see Chen and Zhong 2002, Zhong and Chen 2002). On the other hand, party officials retain ultimate authority over many aspects of political life in villages (O'Brien and Han 2009, O'Brien and Li 2000). From the perspective of Chinese leaders, elections offer a mechanism for accomplishing ends such as removing incompetent, corrupt officials from positions of local authority (O'Brien and Li 2000, Shi 1999b). In the end, village elections constitute a means of enhancing the procedural legitimacy of the CCP by increasing citizen involvement in the governing of local affairs.

Deliberative Decision Making

Another widely considered governance reform is public deliberation in the policymaking process (He and Warren 2011, Leib and He 2010). Deliberation encompasses a variety of information disclosure and public participation mechanisms. In 1997, for example, the Chinese government specified that the price of public goods, such as gas, water, and mass transportation, must be discussed at public hearings (He and Warren 2011, Zhang 2013). Although critics complain that price hearings are often tightly orchestrated events (Liu 2014), evidence indicates that, within constraints, participants utilize suggestions and challenges to expand discussions beyond the parameters established by government officials (Zhang 2013).

Over the past decade, deliberative polling has been applied to public decision making in Wenling, a coastal city in Zhejiang Province (Fishkin, et al. 2010; He 2014; Leib and He 2010). In deliberative polling, probability sampling is used to construct bodies of citizens who participate in moderated discussions of particular issues in public affairs (Fishkin, et al. 2010). In Wenling, deliberative polling was originally utilized to prioritize government spending on infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges, schools, and parks (Fishkin, et al. 2010). Over time, deliberative polling has expanded to encompass discussions of the city's budget in general (He and Warran 2011).

By some measures, deliberative polling has had an impact on both citizens and government officials. Participants have demonstrated an increase in knowledge about issues in public budgeting, and have prioritized infrastructure improvements that benefit the city as a whole over particularistic projects (Fishkin, et al. 2010; He 2014). Government officials, in turn, have emphasized as high priorities the implementation of projects identified by citizen bodies (Fishkin, et al. 2010).

Deliberative decision making is not without its limitations. Inequities in underlying social structures, such as disparities across registered residents and migrant workers, have been manifested in deliberative discussions (He 2014). Participants have expressed concerns about stating opinions hostile to government officials and established courses of action (He 1997). It has proven difficult, in certain respects, to institutionalize participatory budgeting. There is no guarantee, for example, that experiments continue when supportive government officials are transferred, and deliberative polling has thus far not become a common feature of budgetary decision making across the country (Fewsmith 2013).

Government Websites

Government websites are platforms through which information disclosure and public participation reforms are increasingly implemented (Schlaeger and Jiang 2014). Historically, government websites have been oriented toward conveying information, rather than providing citizens with opportunities to express political sentiments (Guo 2006, Jiang and Xu 2009). Some

portals, however, allow citizens to directly communicate with public officials and alert decision makers about corrupt government practices (Hartford 2005, Lollar 2006).

For the most part, citizens are relatively uninformed about the prospects of e-government (Guo 2006). Discussion forums on government websites are often devoid of political debates and posts that are critical of public officials (Zhou, Chan, and Peng 2008). Citizens with awareness of the participatory possibilities of government websites typically have been online for long periods of time and are well established in Chinese society (Balla 2012, Guo 2006).

The institutional character of government websites varies substantially across ministries and levels of government. Ministries of the central government have historically disclosed greater amounts of information through official websites than provincial governments (Zhou 2004). Provincial government websites, however, are often better organized and more functional than websites operated by central government ministries (Zhou 2004). This distinction especially holds for coastal provinces, which outperform other jurisdictions, both regionally and nationally, in providing citizens with opportunities to participate in government decision making (Zhou 2004). Such variations highlight that the Chinese Internet is not a monolithic entity, but rather a collection of disparate digital spaces (Lindtner and Szablewicz 2011), each with its own information disclosure and public participation features and, by extension, implications for stability and change in the Chinese political system.

Online Consultation

Online consultation is a relatively recent manifestation of the use of government websites as instruments of governance reform. The underlying notion of the solicitation of citizen feedback on draft laws and regulations, however, dates back to the early years of the People's Republic of China (Horsley 2009). By the 1990s, organizations from across the Chinese government had experimented with providing citizens with opportunities to comment on prospective courses of actions (Horsley 2009).

In the 21st century, government notification and citizen feedback no longer occur primarily through traditional modes of communication, but rather over the Internet. Early applications of online consultation addressed such issues as marriage, property, and labor contract law (Horsley 2009). By the end of the last decade, it was estimated that dozens of central government ministries and provincial governments had experimented with online consultation (Horsley 2009).

Much of what is known about online consultation is a function of case studies of particularly salient applications, such as health care reform and criminal procedure law (Balla 2014, Ford 2012). Such case studies offer insight into the characteristics of participants in online consultation (Balla 2012), the content of comments submitted in response to draft laws and

regulations (Balla and Liao 2013, Ford 2012, Xinhua 2008b), and the impact of comments on government decision making (Ford 2012). Together these case studies suggest that online consultation holds promise as an incremental governance reform that facilitates transparency and citizen involvement in the policymaking process.

Given the case study orientation of existing research, little is known about the implementation of online consultation as a general matter. Under what conditions, for example, do central government ministries and provincial governments utilize online consultation? What factors are associated with the nature of the information that is publicly disclosed by government organizations during the implementation of online consultation? Such institutional characteristics are crucial in making inferences about the implications of online consultation for democratization, procedural legitimacy, and the durability of Chinese authoritarianism.

The Politics of Governance Reform

Accounts of governance reform in China typically emphasize the importance of central, provincial, and local leaders in experimenting with innovative approaches to government decision making (Fewsmith 2013; Florini, Lai, and Tan 2012). Historically, the default for government officials has been to not consult with citizens during the making and implementing of public policy (Wang 2008). In recent decades, however, the imperatives of advancing economic growth and ensuring social stability have provided government officials with incentives to pursue governance reforms such as online consultation (Fewsmith 2013; Florini, Lai, and Tan 2012).

The underlying premise of this research is that government officials possessing the requisite resources implement governance reforms in contexts in which it is difficult to meet imperatives through traditional approaches to policymaking. Given that governance reforms entail the disclosure of information and management of public participation, the implementation of instruments such as online consultation requires significant organizational capacity. In addition, the economic, social, and political environments within which government organizations operate condition the utility to officials of transparency and citizen involvement in decision making processes. Given that internal characteristics and external environments vary systematically across government organizations, it is possible to specify expectations regarding the circumstances under which central government ministries and provincial governments are most inclined to implement online consultation.

Online Consultation across Levels of Government

The first expectation is that the online consultation practices of provincial governments are more developed than the practices of central government ministries. Under fragmented

authoritarianism, responsibility for fostering economic growth and social stability has been substantially devolved to organizations below the central government, typically without the provision of commensurate resources and instruments of governance (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1998, Teets 2014, Wong 2009). Given such circumstances, officials in provincial governments have particular incentives to implement the information disclosure and public participation reforms of online consultation.

Online Consultation across Provincial Governments

The governments of economically and socially disadvantaged provinces typically lack the capacity to implement governance reforms that increase transparency and citizen involvement in public decision making (Fewsmith 2013; Florini, Lai, and Tan 2012). For example, instruments of public deliberation have primarily been applied in relatively wealthy, urban locations (Fishkin, et al. 2010; He 2014; Leib and He 2010). It is expected that the online consultation practices of provinces with such characteristics are more developed than the practices of economically and socially disadvantaged provinces.

Provincial governments differ from one another in organizational resources. Governments vary, for example, in revenues and expenditure commitments (Lorentzen, Landry, and Yasuda 2014; Wong 2009). It is expected that the online consultation practices of governments with greater organizational resources are more developed than the practices of governments with fewer resources.

Provincial governments operate in widely differing political environments, such as in the prevalence of citizen protests against public officials and government organizations (Steinhardt and Shan 2014). Mass incidents occur in response to such issues as labor disputes, environmental degradation, and the requisition of agricultural land for industrial purposes (Hou 2014, Tong and Lei 2010). Local governments have incentives to forestall the occurrence of mass incidents, not only to limit disruption, personal injury, and property damage, but also to avoid the media attention and higher-level government intervention that regularly accompanies such threats to economic growth and social stability (Tang 2013). It is therefore expected that the online consultation practices of provinces where the occurrence of mass incidents is relatively frequent are more developed than the practices of provinces with fewer citizen protests.

One obstacle to information disclosure and public participation is corruption on the part of government officials. Government corruption takes on a number of forms in China, such as bribery, extravagant expenditures, and moving money and family members overseas (Doane 2014, Langfitt 2014, Wan 2012). In recent years, corruption has ranked among the top concerns of Chinese citizens (Poushter 2013), and President Xi Jinping has made combatting corruption one of the cornerstones of his administration (Shankar 2014). It is expected that the online

consultation practices of provinces where corruption is relatively limited are more developed than the practices of provinces where corruption is a common occurrence.

Online Consultation across Central Government Ministries

Central government ministries, like provincial governments, differ from one another in organizational resources. It is, however, “notoriously difficult to find specific budget information for individual government ministries” (Riley 2014). Government reports typically aggregate financial information into broad areas of policy, such as education, public security, and science and technology (National People’s Congress 2014). It is expected that the online consultation practices of ministries in areas in which financial resources are relatively abundant are more developed than the practices of ministries in areas with limited resources.

Central government ministries make policy in areas of varying political sensitivity (Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China 2014, Tsai 2010). Some ministries, for example, address issues in state security and foreign affairs. Such issues are of the utmost political sensitivity, in that the territorial sovereignty and fundamental legitimacy of the CCP are immediately at hand. Other ministries have responsibility for making social policy, in such areas as health, education, and the environment. Although social issues can be contentious under certain circumstances, social policy itself is not sensitive in an inherent manner. Finally, some ministries govern the operation of economic affairs. Relative to other types of policies, it is uncommon for issues of commerce and infrastructure to evoke political sensitivities. It is expected that the online consultation practices of ministries operating in areas that, relatively speaking, are not politically sensitive are more developed than the practices of ministries with particularly sensitive responsibilities.

Central government organizations occupy a number of functional positions in the Chinese government. The State Council, the preeminent executive organization in the Chinese state, is composed of 25 ministries and commissions, including the Ministry of Agriculture and National Health and Family Planning Commission. These ministries and commissions are among the central government’s primary policymaking organizations. More than three dozen other organizations report directly to the State Council. These organizations, which rank below ministries and commissions, range from the Xinhua News Agency to the State Administration for Religious Affairs. Finally, State Council ministries and commissions have dozens of affiliated organizations, such as the China National Commission for Disaster Reduction, which operates under the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Given the policymaking preeminence of ministries and commissions, it is expected that the online consultation practices of such organizations are more developed than the practices of organizations performing alternative, subsidiary functions in the Chinese central government.

Assessing Online Consultation Practices

To bring evidence to bear on the research's expectations regarding the implementation of online consultation, the practices of 138 central government ministries and provincial governments were examined in detail. Specifically, the websites of all central government organizations that operate as part of the State Council, as well as the websites of all provincial governments, were evaluated for evidence of online consultation.² For ministries and governments that utilize online consultation, the institutional character of organizational practices was assessed with respect to a variety of transparency and operational attributes.³

To identify central government ministries and provincial governments that have implemented online consultation, websites were searched for indicative links and keywords.⁴ Ministries and governments are considered to have implemented online consultation if organization websites both identify draft laws and regulations and offer interested parties the opportunity to submit feedback on such proposals.⁵ These indicators separate online consultation from other types of interactions between government officials and citizens, such as the reporting of news, circulation of questionnaires, lodging of petitions, and submission of unsolicited comments and complaints. According to these standards, 57 ministries and governments have utilized online consultation.⁶

For these 57 central government ministries and provincial governments, information was collected about the implementation of online consultation. When, for example, did the ministry or government conduct its initial online consultation? How many online consultations has the organization conducted?⁷ The websites of the Guangxi provincial government and China Food and Drug Administration contain information about online consultations that occurred in 2000 and 2001, respectively. These online consultations were conducted earlier than the initial consultations catalogued on the websites of other ministries and governments. Ministries and governments that have implemented online consultation have conducted an average of 69 consultations, with a median of 39 consultations. The Ministry of Commerce has conducted 530 online consultations, more than one hundred more consultations than any other organization.

² This research is distinctive in its specific focus on online consultation. Previous research has appraised Chinese government websites with respect to information disclosure and public participation more generally (freedominfo.org 2012, Jiang and Xu 2009, US-China Business Council 2014).

³ The website evaluations were conducted in, and are therefore current as of, the fall of 2014. All coding decisions were arrived at via consensus among the two authors.

⁴ Such indicators include 意见征求 (*yijian zhengqiu*) and 意见征集 (*yijian zhengji*), which reference the solicitation of opinions and suggestions.

⁵ Some ministries and governments catalog online consultation, either in addition to or in lieu of organization websites, via the website of the Legislative Affairs Office (LAO) of the State Council (<http://www.chinalaw.gov.cn/>). For each ministry and government, both the organization website and LAO website were examined for evidence of online consultation.

⁶ An additional eight websites contain links suggestive of online consultation. These links, however, are devoid of content or cannot be opened at all. In the absence of confirmation of the circulation of policy drafts and solicitation of citizen feedback, these organizations are coded as not having utilized online consultation.

⁷ The information on ministry and government websites is in some instances not sufficiently detailed to identify the earliest online consultation or number of consultations that have been conducted.

Thirteen ministries and governments have conducted at least one hundred online consultations. On the other extreme, the State Administration of Cultural Heritage has conducted a single online consultation.

The online consultation practices of central government ministries and provincial governments vary along a number of transparency and operational dimensions. The vast majority of ministries and governments post to their websites the full texts of draft laws and regulations. A small number of organizations, however, provide summaries of proposed policies rather than the texts of proposals themselves.

In general, there is a common format to the manner in which central government ministries and provincial governments disclose information about online consultation. Figure 1 presents the online consultation website of the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security. This website is indicative along a number of dimensions of the online consultation practices of dozens of ministries and governments. First, the website lists the title and date of each online consultation the ministry has conducted. Second, the title of each online consultation is a hyperlink that, when clicked on, opens the text of the ministry's draft law or regulation. Third, the text provides information about the manner in which interested parties can offer feedback on the proposal. Common submission options include the sending of emails and filling in of comment boxes embedded in ministry and government websites. Figure 2 provides an example of a comment box, taken from the website of the State Administration of Taxation.

The vast majority of central government ministries and provincial governments do not circulate information about feedback submitted in response to draft laws and regulations. Neither comments themselves, nor the number or overall tenor of comments, are disclosed by ministries and governments that follow the common format of online consultation. Exceptions to this nondisclosure include the National Administration of Surveying, Mapping and Geo-information and Guangdong and Ningxia provincial governments, which make publicly available the full texts of comments.⁸ It is especially uncommon for ministries and governments to offer public responses to citizen feedback. Such responses are provided by three organizations. The Ministry of Transport and Beijing and Shanghai municipal governments document the percent of comments with which the organization agrees.⁹ As this discussion indicates, online consultation practices are less well-developed in the disclosure of citizen feedback than in the circulation of proposed government policies.

Measuring Internal Characteristics and External Environments

⁸ It is not necessarily the case that such ministries and governments post to their websites all comments that are submitted during all online consultations.

⁹ The municipalities of Beijing and Shanghai are the administrative equivalents of provinces, in that they are first-tier jurisdictions that report directly to the central government.

To assess the importance of organizational capacity and environmental opportunities and constraints in conditioning the implementation of online consultation, information about the internal characteristics and external circumstances of central government ministries and provincial governments was assembled from a number of sources. The primary source of information is official statistical publications of the Chinese government. The Chinese government periodically reports information about national- and provincial-level government operations, economic conditions, and population characteristics.¹⁰ The analysis also utilizes information from the China General Social Survey (CGSS). The CGSS is a periodic, nationally representative survey of Chinese citizens that measures a broad array of attributes, attitudes, and behaviors of more than ten thousand respondents.¹¹

Variation across Levels of Government

The earliest documented online consultations in both central government ministries and provincial governments occurred at the turn of the 21st century. Ministries, as a general matter, began utilizing online consultation prior to governments. By 2007, for example, half of the ministries that have utilized online consultation had conducted initial consultations. In contrast, less than twenty percent of governments that have implemented online consultation had by that point established consultation practices.

Despite this initial disparity, the utilization of online consultation has subsequently spread more widely across provincial governments than central government ministries. More than two-thirds of governments have initiated online consultations, nearly twice the percent of ministries.¹² Furthermore, the typical government that has implemented online consultation has conducted 51 consultations, twenty more than the typical implementing ministry.¹³

The information disclosure practices of provincial governments are generally more thorough than the practices of central government ministries. Ninety-five percent of governments that utilize online consultation post to the Internet the full texts of draft laws and regulations. The prevalence of such postings is approximately ten percent lower among ministries. In addition, governments are nearly twice as likely as ministries to circulate information about feedback

¹⁰ Official government statistics are distributed by sources such as the China Data Center at the University of Michigan (<http://chinadatacenter.org/>), All China Market Research Company (<http://www.acmr.com.cn/en/#>), and China Statistical Yearbooks Database (<http://tongji.cnki.net/overseas/brief/result.aspx>).

¹¹ The CGSS is implemented by Renmin University of China and Hong Kong Science and Technology University. The CGSS can be accessed at <http://www.cssod.org/cgss/register.php>.

¹² When the analysis is restricted to State Council ministries and commissions (i.e., organizations performing alternative, subsidiary functions are eliminated), the percent of central government organizations that have adopted online consultation is similar to the percent for provincial governments.

¹³ In this comparison, the median is utilized as the basis of identifying the typical ministry and government. The mean number of online consultations conducted by ministries is substantially influenced by the presence of two outlying organizations that have each completed in excess of four hundred consultations. No other ministry has initiated more than 137 online consultations, and no government has conducted more than 163 consultations.

submitted in response to draft laws and regulations. Finally, two of the three organizations that offer public responses to citizen feedback are provincial governments.

Variation across Provincial Governments

To examine variation in the implementation of online consultation across provincial governments, governments that have conducted consultations are compared along a number of dimensions with governments that have not established consultation practices. These two sets of provinces are presented in Figure 3. The analysis also assesses the correlates of the frequency with which adopting governments utilize online consultation, as well as whether these governments make publicly available the content of feedback submitted in response to draft laws and regulations.¹⁴

The analysis is limited by the relatively small number of Chinese provincial governments,¹⁵ as well as the cross-sectional nature of the information that has been collected about online consultation practices. Furthermore, a number of provincial-level economic, social, and political characteristics are highly correlated with one another, making it difficult to identify the independent associations of these characteristics with the implementation of online consultation. Coastal provinces, for example, are for the most part wealthier and more urbanized, with better-resourced governments than provinces from other regions. Given these limitations, the analysis constructs descriptive profiles of the types of governments that have and have not implemented online consultation.

Both in utilization and institutional character, the online consultation practices of governments in wealthier provinces are more developed than the practices of governments in economically disadvantaged provinces. The average per capita gross regional product (GRP) is sixteen percent higher in provinces in which the government utilizes online consultation. In addition, the association between per capita GRP and the number of online consultations conducted by the government is positive, as indicated by a .36 correlation coefficient. Finally, the average per capita GRP of provinces in which the government posts to the Internet information about feedback submitted in response to draft laws and regulations is nearly double the average per capita GRP of provinces in which the government does not disclose this information.¹⁶

The organizational resources of provincial governments are also associated with the utilization and institutional character of online consultation. One measure of organizational capacity is the

¹⁴ Other aspects of the institutional character of online consultation are not examined because of limited variation across governments. For example, twenty of the 21 adopting governments post to the Internet the full texts of draft laws and regulations, and 19 of these governments do not offer public responses to feedback submitted in response to proposed policies.

¹⁵ There are 31 Chinese provinces, 21 of which have implemented online consultation.

¹⁶ Similar results hold for urbanicity, in that the utilization and institutional character of online consultation are more developed in relatively urban provinces than in more rural locations.

ratio of government revenues to expenditures (Lorentzen, Landry, and Yasuda 2014). The governments of Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong have the largest revenue to expenditure ratios, while the western provinces of Tibet, Qinghai, and Gansu have the lowest ratios. Consistent with expectations, the online consultation practices of governments in stronger financial health are more developed than the practices of governments with relatively low revenue to expenditure ratios. For example, the average revenue to expenditure ratio is thirteen percent higher for governments that conduct online consultations and 51 percent higher for governments that post information about feedback submitted in response to draft laws and regulations. The correlation between the ratio of revenues to expenditures and the number of online consultations conducted by the government is .47.

The political environment within which provincial governments operate, measured as the occurrence of mass incidents, is associated with development of online consultation practices.¹⁷ The correlation between the number of mass incidents and number of online consultations conducted by the government is .43.¹⁸ The average number of mass incidents is more than three times as large in provinces in which the government posts information about feedback submitted in response to draft laws and regulations. Such patterns are consistent with the notion that, as threats to economic growth and social stability, mass incidents provide government officials with incentives to adopt governance reforms such as online consultation.

Although the Chinese government as a whole performs poorly on measures of corruption and transparency (Transparency International 2014, US-China Business Council 2014), less attention has been devoted to gauging the performance of provincial governments. As a result, this research uses as a proxy for provincial government corruption the percent of citizens who indicated, in response to a question in the CGSS, that they have recently suffered an injustice at the hands of a government official or organization. The association between this measure and the utilization and institutional character of online consultation is not strong or consistent. Although the average percent of respondents who claim to have experienced government injustice is lower in provinces with governments that have implemented online consultation, this percent is higher in provinces with governments that post information about feedback submitted in response to draft laws and regulations. Furthermore, the -.05 correlation between citizen perceptions of government injustice and the number of online consultations conducted by the government is exceedingly weak.

In sum, although online consultation has been adopted by provincial governments throughout China, systematic differences exist between governments that have and have not conducted consultations. Economic and social characteristics are associated with the utilization of online

¹⁷ The measure of mass incidents utilized in this research is a count of the number of incidents in the province involving more than five hundred protestors (Tong and Lei 2010).

¹⁸ The average number of mass incidents is slightly (three percent) higher in provinces in which the government utilizes online consultation.

consultation, in that consultation practices in wealthy, urban provinces with well-resourced governments are more developed than practices in disadvantaged provinces. The importance of political considerations in conditioning the use of online consultation, however, is not consistent across measures of the occurrence of mass incidents and citizen perceptions of government corruption. This association between political sensitivity and the implementation of online consultation is further examined in the analysis of variation in the consultation practices of central government ministries.

Variation across Central Government Ministries

To assess the importance of organizational capacity and environmental opportunities and constraints in central government ministry utilization of online consultation, a series of logistic regressions is estimated.¹⁹ The dependent variable in these regressions is a dichotomous indicator of whether or not the organization has adopted online consultation practices. The first explanatory variable is an indicator of whether the organization is a State Council ministry or commission, as opposed to an organization performing an alternative, subsidiary function. The second explanatory variable distinguishes state security and foreign affairs organizations, such as the Ministry of Public Security and Ministry of National Defense, from organizations that govern social matters and economic affairs. The final explanatory variable measures central government expenditures in the broad policy area in which the organization operates.²⁰

Table 1 reports the results of the logistic regressions. The first three columns are estimations of the bivariate associations between the explanatory variables and the adoption of online consultation by central government ministries. All three associations are statistically significant. Ministries and commissions are more likely to utilize online consultation than State Council organizations performing alternative, subsidiary functions. State security and foreign affairs organizations are less likely to conduct online consultations than social and economic policy organizations. As government expenditures in the policy area increase, the likelihood that organizations in the area implement online consultation decreases.

This last result runs counter to the expectation that financial resources facilitate the development of online consultation practices. One explanation for the result is that the expenditures of state security and foreign affairs ministries are especially sizeable, more than six times greater on average than expenditures for social and economic ministries. Furthermore, it is particularly unusual for state security and foreign affairs ministries to conduct online consultations. Neither

¹⁹ The larger number of central government ministries (107), relative to provincial governments, makes regression analysis feasible, although the number of observations is small by standards of maximum likelihood estimation.

²⁰ Information about central government expenditures is available at www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2013/html/Z0903E.xls. For each organization, expenditures in the policy area in which the organization operates are divided by total expenditures.

the Ministry of State Security nor Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, has established online consultation practices.

The final column of Table 1 reports the results of the estimation that includes all three explanatory variables. The association for ministries and commissions is unchanged, in that such organizations are more likely to utilize online consultation than organizations performing alternative, subsidiary functions. This association is not just statistically significant, but substantively meaningful as well, as ministries and commissions are more than twice as likely as other types of State Council organizations to adopt online consultation.²¹ By contrast, the other explanatory variables, as a reflection of their close association, diminish in statistical significance or are no longer significant at all.

Similar results hold for the frequency with which central government ministries conduct online consultations, as well as whether adopting organizations make publicly available the content of feedback submitted in response to draft laws and regulations.²² For organizations that utilize online consultation, ministries and commissions have initiated on average more than twenty more consultations than other types of State Council organizations. Ministries and commissions are also forty percent more likely than other types of organizations to make feedback publicly available. State security and foreign affairs ministries that have established online consultations have conducted fifteen percent fewer consultations than social and economic ministries. In addition, no state security or foreign affairs ministry posts feedback to the Internet. These last two results indicate that State Council ministries and commissions operating in areas that are not politically sensitive are more likely than other types of central government organizations to develop online consultation practices.

Online Consultation and the Chinese Political System

This research advances understanding of governance reform in China by examining the conditions under which central government ministries and provincial governments implement online consultation, a prominent instrument of information disclosure and public participation in government decision making. The analysis demonstrates that online consultation practices are more developed in provincial governments than central government ministries. Across organizational contexts, online consultation is more advanced in the disclosure of proposed policies than in the circulation of feedback submitted in response to draft laws and regulations. Finally, organizational capacity and the making of policy in areas not characterized by fundamental political sensitivities are associated with the implementation of online consultation.

²¹ To assess the substantive significance of the association between organization type and online consultation, Monte Carlo simulations were conducted. In these simulations, the explanatory variables other than the indicator of whether the organization is a State Council ministry or commission were held constant at their mode or mean.

²² Given the limited number of central government ministries that have implemented online consultation (36), regression analysis is eschewed in favor of descriptive comparisons across adopting organizations.

These results suggest that online consultation operates as an incremental governance reform that enhances, rather than undermines, the durability of the CCP. The implementation of online consultation emphasizes the provision of information about draft laws and regulations to a greater extent than public deliberation about prospective courses of action. Online consultation is for the most part associated with the making of economic and social policy, as opposed to politically sensitive issues of state security and foreign affairs. Such patterns are consistent with the notion that government officials utilize online consultation as a means of enhancing information disclosure in circumstances in which the fundamental legitimacy of the CCP is not immediately at hand.

Although not a significant step toward Western-style democracy, online consultation is not without consequence for the development of the Chinese political system (Florini, Lai, and Tan 2012; Lorentzen, Landry, and Yasuda 2014). By enhancing information disclosure in the making of public policy, online consultation introduces democratic principles into central government ministries and provincial governments that have previously had little, if any, sustained interaction with civil society (Florini, Lai, and Tan 2012; Teets 2014). Similar to elections and other governance reforms in historical authoritarian contexts (Miller N.d., O'Brien and Han 2009), it is possible that online consultation will transform over time from a modest procedural innovation to an instrument with fundamental implications for stability and change in the Chinese political system.

Going forward, this possibility is best assessed through sustained, varied attention to the utilization and institutional character of online consultation. Although broad in its orientation, this research does not consider the details of a variety of salient aspects of the operation of online consultation. Issues such as the characteristics of participants, content of feedback on draft laws and regulations, and impact of comments on government decision making have received attention in the context of particular applications of online consultation (Balla 2012, Balla and Liao 2013, Ford 2012, Xinhua 2008b). A task for future research is to examine such issues across a wide array of central government ministries and provincial governments, thereby increasing the generalizability of existing findings and interpretations.

One potentially insightful avenue of research on online consultation that has not yet been widely explored is to conduct interviews with government officials and citizen participants (Ford 2012, Thompson 2009). Although interviews present a variety of logistical and inferential challenges, such an approach promises to illuminate causal mechanisms that have thus far been left unspecified in research on online consultation. For example, by enhancing understanding of the determinants of best practices in online consultation, interview-based research has the potential to strengthen information disclosure and public participation in the making of economic and social policy across central government ministries and provincial governments. Such

developments in state-civil society relations are salient not just from the perspective of Chinese citizens and government officials, but also for researchers and practitioners interested in the application of democratic principles in contemporary authoritarian regimes throughout the world.

Figure 1: Common Format of Online Consultation



Source: Screen shot taken by the authors on December 10, 2014.

Figure 2: Comment Box for Public Feedback



Note: This comment box was captured via a screen shot taken by the authors on December 15, 2014. In addition to offering a field through which interested parties submit the text of their feedback, the website provides users the option of recording their name, employer, address, telephone number, and email address.

Figure 3: Provincial Implementation of Online Consultation



Note: The 21 dark-shaded provinces have conducted online consultations, while the ten light-shaded provinces have not established online consultation practices. Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau are not included in any of this research's analyses.

Table 1: Implementation of Online Consultation by Central Government Ministries

<i>Explanatory Variables</i>	<i>Results of Logistic Regressions</i>			
Ministry or Commission	1.40*** (.48)			1.55*** (.65)
Security Organization		-1.48** (.81)		-.93 (1.10)
Government Expenditures			-13.61** (7.37)	-10.89* (7.73)
<i>Intercept</i>	-1.00*** (.25)	-.23 (.24)	.06 (.32)	-.33 (.37)
<i>Wald Chi Square</i>	8.42***	3.31*	3.41*	8.63**
<i>Number of Observations</i>	103	83	70	65

Note: Each column presents the results of a logistic regression. The numbers in the cells are parameter estimates, with robust standard errors in parentheses. The number of observations is less than the total of 107 central government ministries because of missing data, which vary in prevalence across variables. Given the directional nature of the expectations, all hypothesis tests for the explanatory variables are one tailed. ***=statistically significant at $p < .01$.

**=statistically significant at $p < .05$. *=statistically significant at $p < .1$.

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