Abstract

Can meaningful representation arise in the authoritarian setting? If so, how, when, and why? The book proposes a theoretical framework for understanding the tradeoffs associated with allowing representation in authoritarian environments, and then tests the theory through a detailed inquiry into the dynamics of China’s National People’s Congress (NPC). I argue that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is deliberately engineering a system of “representation within bounds” in the NPC that fosters information revelation but prevents destabilizing political activism.

While many observers paint NPC deputies as tone-deaf and disconnected, my original data on their backgrounds and behaviors shows quite the opposite. Deputies’ opinions and motions address the issues deemed most serious by the people they claim to represent. This congruence occurs despite the lack of any semblance of electoral accountability. However, deputies remain fiercely loyal to the CCP, and rarely use their positions to advocate for liberalizing political reforms. This is the source of the disconnect between what observers tend to think of NPC deputies, and what they tend to think of themselves.

Beyond establishing this behavioral pattern empirically, the focus of the book is to investigate the incentive structures that produce this special brand of representation. The CCP regime is trying to maximize the parliament’s informational benefits, and minimize any reformist elements. This is a complicated middle road to walk. Deputies are incentivized to be responsive to their constituencies on certain policies, but reticent and loyal to the regime on core political issues. The analysis shows that the former is achieved through socialization and meritocratic selection practices, and the latter through a combination of indoctrination, punishment for disloyalty, and rent distribution.

The findings challenge existing conceptions of representation and authoritarianism. For a broad range of non-political issues, meaningful representation can and does arise in an authoritarian setting. It arises not from electoral accountability, but from top-down accountability to a regime with informational needs. More broadly, the system of “representation within bounds” suggests that democracies do not have a monopoly on responsive governance. More than a few non-democracies, China included, pay attention to public opinion, provide public goods, craft reasonable legal frameworks, and strive to maintain broad public support. Representation follows a separate logic in the authoritarian setting – it occurs without free elections and campaigns and party competition – but that does not mean it is empty.
Chapter Contents

1. Introduction: Authoritarian Representation

Tone Deaf - Representation on the Rise? - What We Know About Authoritarian Representation - Representation Within Bounds - Outline - My Contribution

The Introduction outlines the core questions, theory, empirical findings, and contribution of the book. Can meaningful representation arise in the absence of an electoral connection? I address this question through a detailed look at China’s National People’s Congress (NPC). Authoritarian parliaments engender stability by revealing citizen grievances, but they may undermine stability if representatives become agents of political change. The book details how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) attempts to engineer a top-down system of “representation within bounds” in the NPC.

2. A Theory of Authoritarian Representation

Miscalculating - The Problem of Information - Authoritarian Policymaking with Representation - Plausibility - Observable Implications - Alternative Frameworks

Chapter 2 uses simple extensive form games to explain why authoritarian regimes have an interest in promoting parliamentary representation, and the costs associated with doing so. Without knowledge of citizen grievances, autocrats may unknowingly choose policies that endanger their own survival. Representatives in parliament can convey public opinion and collectively serve as a ”barometer of the masses.” However, conveying this information raises public interest in different policy issues, which can prove dangerous if opinion runs against the interests of the regime. Successful autocrats either choose no representation or constrained “representation within bounds.” The theory generates some helpful observable implications about the characteristics of a stable authoritarian representative system and the nature of the “ideal deputy.” The chapter concludes by comparing these implications to those offered by competing frameworks.
3. Does the NPC Matter?

Supported, Concerned, Submitted, Best Wishes - Partial Responsiveness - NPC 101 - Hainan Deep Dive - Deputy Perceptions - The View From Outside - “Small Things”

The theory suggests the CCP will exhibit “partial responsiveness” to representative behavior. Chapter 3 provides a short assessment the influence of deputy opinions and motions and the NPC more broadly. I randomly select a subset of ten opinions from Hainan’s Provincial People’s Congress and trace their influence through the system. Although not all motions and opinions matter, the analysis shows that roughly half appear to exert a real influence on a policy outcome. As an additional test, I present survey experiments that probe the perceived influence of different types of NPC proposals. Citizens are generally optimistic about deputy influence on many non-political issues, but skeptical about their ability to bring about democratic reforms. Interviews with deputies from other provinces confirm that the government exhibits responsiveness to their proposals, but only for non-political issues.

4. Testing Representation

Hongyu Online - How to be a Deputy - Research Design - Data - Testing Representation - Housing Issue Case Study - The Boundaries

Chapter 4 evaluates the quality of representation in the NPC using new data on deputy backgrounds and behaviors. I extend the well-known “congruence test” from American politics to the Chinese setting. After deriving estimates of public opinion using national survey data, I show that deputies demonstrate preference congruence with their geographic constituents on a range of issues. They focus their policy proposals on the problems that concern citizens from their home provinces, but they also remain largely reticent on issues of political reform. To further probe the nature of representation, I present a case study of the housing issue over time, which illustrates how public opinion shocks lead to deputy action in parliament.

5. Promoting Connections Without Elections

Xu Zhiyong is Missing - The Importance of Selective Empathy - The Quota System - Socialization and Indoctrination - Getting Ahead in the NPC - Thinking About Congruence

The remainder of the book investigates the incentive structures behind these representational patterns. A functioning system of “representation within bounds” requires authoritarian legislators to have empathy with the citizenry, but only on non-political issues. Chapter 5 describes the two
primary mechanisms through which the CCP promotes this special brand of constituent ties. Analysis of primary documents from NPC training sessions shows that the CCP encourages deputies to espouse representational norms, while simultaneously fostering loyalty to the one party system. Quantitative analysis of career paths demonstrates that deputies are rewarded for their representative activities, but punished if they transgress certain boundaries. Combined, these incentive structures produce the representational patterns we observe in Chapter 4.

6. The Returns to Office

Huang’s Story - The Importance of Loyalty - Data - Research Design - The Returns to Office - How Seats Matter - Everyone Else - Why Not More Rents?

As shown in Chapter 2, a successful authoritarian parliament also motivates representatives by giving them rents, a vested interest in the survival of the regime. This chapter tests for the presence of rents using new data on the financial ties of NPC CEO deputies. Entropy balancing is used to construct a weighted portfolio of Chinese companies that matches companies with NPC representation on relevant financial characteristics prior to the 11th Congress (2008-2012). The weighted fixed effect analysis suggests that a seat in the NPC is worth an additional 2.01 to 2.04 percentage points in returns and a 6.92 to 7.46 percentage point boost in operating profit margin in a given year. Interview evidence confirms the importance of NPC seats for fostering business relationships among large companies, and it is likely the “returns to office” are even higher for less famous deputies.

7. Conclusion: Making Autocracy Work

The Coming Collapse of China? - Responsive Authoritarianism - Moving Forward

The book concludes by considering the implications of the findings for our understanding of China and authoritarian politics. I argue the CCP’s “authoritarian resilience” lies in its ability to be responsive, to collect information from citizens and adjust policies accordingly. The NPC system of “representation within bounds” is but one of many such mechanisms. More broadly, the findings suggest that democracies do not have a monopoly on responsive governance. Autocrats are oft-depicted as rent-seeking machines that maintain power through coercion, yet more than a few non-democracies, China included, have governments that strive to maintain broad public support. Using cross-national data, I show that contrary to existing findings, democracies do not appear to have an inherent advantage in public good provision. The book concludes with a speculative note on the future of the NPC and the dynamics of “responsive authoritarianism.”
About the Author and Research

I am Assistant Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Princeton University. My research on Chinese politics is published or forthcoming in the *American Political Science Review*, *Comparative Political Studies*, and has been featured in the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*. Current projects explore how Chinese citizens evaluate their political system; the relationship between media bias and credibility in non-democracies; and patterns in dissident behavior and punishment. I received my undergraduate degree from Princeton in 2007 and will receive my Ph.D. in political science from Yale in December 2014.

As mentioned previously, the book research has received the Westview Press Award for best graduate student paper at the MPSA 2012 Annual Conference, and the Best Paper Award at NYU’s 2012 Annual Graduate Student Conference in Political Economy. One of the chapters was published as the lead article in the May 2014 issue of the *American Political Science Review*.

The research was conducted primarily during my time as a doctoral student at Yale, under the direction of Thad Dunning, Ken Scheve, Lily Tsai, and Susan Rose-Ackerman. I have benefitted from feedback at various presentations and job talks at Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Berkeley, NYU, Duke, Emory, as well as the MPSA and APSA annual conferences.