

A Research on Civil Participation in Urban China Housing Policy Development

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Abstract. The core feature of public politics is public property. Political participation will help with justice as fairness of a policy. However, there are troubles both in theory and practice. Housing policy, related to people's wellbeing, is an important public policy recently. In some districts of China, citizens are encouraged to participate in the process of making policies, and they have got good results. In this essay, problems of various ways of participating will be put forward, and proposals will be offered after an analysis on practices in some districts.

Keywords: housing policy, political participation, ways of participation

1. Introduction

Habitation is a basic need and right for a human being. Home ownership is desire of every living person, but housing problem is inevitable in the civilization and industrialization of any country. It has been a hot topic on the internet, TV and magazines, and this problem is especially obvious in advanced cities of China. People living in cities are confronted with severe trouble in buying a dwelling place, and things can be much worse for people of low income. Due to the existence of market failure in free market economy, the government has to optimize the allocation of resources, promote social justice and increase welfare through effective measures. In practice, housing policy is always put forward by government, without extensive political participation or any systematic guarantee. The ability and conditions are limited, thus, housing policies that have been put forth fail to solve problem once for all. In this case, study on political participation in the formation of housing policy is of great importance.

2. Concept and theoretical foundation

Political participation is an important concept of politics, also named political participation, public involvement, public or citizen engagement, but political participation is much used than the others. It smacks of politics, and is used in administrative domain, to describe the participation of citizens into the process of making policies. In this process, citizens can have access to the power of decision-making. This kind of participation is of material meaning.

After 1960s, with the setting in of information age, market failure and mistakes of government accelerated the desire of political participation through out the planet. Political participation campaign got stronger. Western scholars began to bring political participation into study. Their research yielded a rich harvest, such as *The New Public Service, Serving, not steering, Citizen Governance, Leading American Communities into 21st Century, and public deliberation: Pluralism, Complexity and Democracy*.

It was much later when scholars of our country started to take this concept into research. Related academic theses turned up at the end of 1990s. These researches are dealing with subjects namely study of intension of political participation, background, importance, theoretical basis, problems and obstacles, countermeasures. Zhang Meiye [1] believes that political participation is a process that citizens get involved in making policies that are directly related to their living and vital interest through various ways. They

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express their opinions efficiently; positively influence making policies, in order to improve the ability of government in political, economical and cultural issues. Meanwhile, they help and supervise government, in order to improve government's representativeness and fairness in realizing public interest. Huo Haiyan [2] thinks that with the deepening of reform and opening up, the adjustment of relationship between government and society and the foundation of socialist market economic structure, civil society springs up in China, thus, political participation will be more wide-spread, and the mode of policy-making will also transform. Cao Yangting [3] holds the opinion that political participation in China is still in primary stage, participation consciousness, level and interaction mechanism between government and citizens need to be improved. Moreover, citizens need to be informed of information connected with policy. Housing policy is a special public policy, but systematic research into participation in housing policy is barely seen. There are only some comments and news scattering on the internet. Thus, this thesis focuses on political participation in housing policy, and this is of innovation sense.

3. Current situation of political participation in making of housing policy

Political participation is universally adopted in China; some representatives are listed below through a comprehensive collection of materials on the Internet:

3.1. Participation in Shanghai

In 2009, Housing Security and Housing Authority of Shanghai collected suggestions by giving out consultative paper, and gave answers to questions raised by citizens, related to construction manner of economically affordable housing, standard type of flat, fitment, price management, admittance condition, providing standard, application auditing, alienation and property management. In this period, citizens were free to air their opinions through letters, faxes, e-mails and filling in questionnaires.

This was the first time that the Shanghai government collected suggestions about social welfare security in public, and it was also an effective attempt to broaden public participation in vital political issues. In recent years, Shanghai government have solicited suggestions by putting regulation draft on the internet and sitting legislation hearing of witnesses to broaden public participation in legislation. Nice mechanism helps government to hear public voice and put decision-making on a more scientific and democratic basis and this is the key to realizing interests of people.

3.2. Participation in Fuzhou

Fuzhou is the earliest to put forward economical rental housing policy, and the most famous is Temporary Regulation of Economical Rental Housing Management of Fuzhou, put forth in 2008. This is an exploration to provide housing security for middle-income families, on the basis of that-the lowest-income families are already covered. However, this exploration needs to be improved because the coverage of economical rental housing policy is relatively narrow.

In responding to the State Council's requirement of accelerating the development and substantially increasing the accommodation of public rental housing to solve low-income families' housing problems, and Principle of Accelerating the Development of Public Rental Housing formulated by Ministry of Rural-Urban Construction, Bureau of Housing Security and Real Estate Management of Fuzhou starts the drafting of Temporary Regulation of Public Rental Housing of Fuzhou.

The Executive Meetings of Fuzhou decide to make Temporary Regulation of Public Rental Housing of Fuzhou public according to The Legislation Law of the People's Republic of China. This action aims at promoting democracy, centralizing of people's wisdom, and raising the degree of public participation. Suggestions from citizens and the personages of various circles of society will be solicited and taken into consideration.

3.3. Participation in Shenzhen

Shenzhen Municipal Government solicited public opinions about Temporary Regulation of Withdrawing of Housing Accumulation Fund from March 16th, 2011 to March 25th, 2011. This action successfully drew attention of enterprises and their employees and received thousands of suggestions. The Housing

Accumulation fund Center is thinking about these ideas and will amend the regulation appropriately based on people's livelihood. There are over 3,200 letters and e-mails from citizens, and over 6,000 comments in blogs on Sina and Tencent. It is estimated that more than 10,000 netizens concern about this issue.

Apart of above, citizens in Chengdu, Dong Guan and many other cities of China are promoting political participation in making housing policy as well, and have got noticeable achievements.

4. A summary of participation approaches

In conclusion, approaches of political participation are as follows:

4.1. Internet

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The rise and popularization of internet provide a convenient, direct and sufficient platform for the realization of people's benefits. Housing problem has been a feverish speculation, people discuss on the internet and consensus is formed, then they have their pursuit expressed in a strong way, to force the decision-making party. With the booming development of internet, participation through internet has become an important part of public participation, and it is more and more important and universally used. However, due to its features, internet has inevitable shortcomings, such as the difference of internet distribution which will restrict people's ability to participate. The validity of participation through internet will be influenced by factors as follows: some local governments ignore the construction of government site; main body of participation can be emotional and extreme because of the virtuality and cripticity of internet; lack of criterion mechanism.

4.2. Questionnaire

It's a way to find out the demand and suggestions of citizens, and it also helps the government to make policies which accord with public opinion most. Meanwhile, it also gives a rise to decision-making ability of government and gives impetus to the foundation of service-oriented government. It has advantages namely an economization of time, cost and manpower, easy quantization of outcomes, and practical tracking survey; while it has disadvantages, too: it's hard to setting questions that can best reflect participants' attitudes and recommendations; the design shall be simple, so the outcomes can be extensive but not deep; the rate of recovery of questionnaires is low.

4.3. Public Hearings

Public hearing system originated from western countries where the legal systems are advanced, and it is a system promoted by modern democratic society. It means when the government is making a decision, it should take opinions on all sides and expertise into consideration. Peng Zongchao and Xue Lan, scholars of our country, believe that public hearing system positively affects reform of public decision-making system in all aspects namely civil directive political participation, representative of profits, legal authorization, openness and transparency, and social stability. Public hearing is superior to traditional investigation, but it has disadvantages. For example, the results of hearing are subjective and selection of representatives is arbitrary. Sometimes the choice of opinions is nonobjective. However, institutionalization of hearing will help conquer this limitation. Once founded, public hearing system will redound to the consciousness of political participation and ability of citizens. It has a greater influence on society and can attract more attention than any other way of participation.

In November, 2002, it was the first time that the 16th National Conference for CCP put forward to establishment of public hearings. Public hearing system has been applied to administrative punishment in China in administrative punishment, public hearing and administrative legislation. Prominent achievements will be made if it is widely applied to housing policy.

4.4. Administrative affairs bulletin board

It means government makes all predicted results of one new policy public within a time limit for public supervision before putting this policy into effect, in order to hear the voice of citizens. During this period, any people have an access to express their own opinions about this new policy. Effective suggestions will be taken into consideration by government in the process of making final decision.

Administration open system is not only a formal method of public supervision; it is also an important approach for citizens to participate in policy-making. This method has been applied in various areas contemporary in China, such as election, education, medical charge and other important matters, but has not been used in the process of making housing policy yet.

5. Other participation approaches

5.1. Public opinion

Apart from internet, public opinion includes newspaper, broadcast, TV and other media. With the development of science, mass media has become a channel for public opinion, which has a strong political power.

Traditional media such as newspaper, broadcast and TV in China, has presented new trends. Firstly, industrialization and marketability has changed the tradition that part organ and publication ruled the whole mass media in the past planned economy age. Secondly, the mass media has relocated its position-service to people. In the past years, journalism and publishing always report only good news, as an official organ of the Socialist Party and government. But now they begin to pay attention to reflecting different opinions and desires of the whole society. Political participation columns such as correspondence and hot line are launched. These columns help to form a platform for public participation in housing policy.

In an era of digital and online media, the communication playing field has been leveled between expert institutions, traditional journalists as gatekeepers of information, and users of information. The balance of control has shifted in the direction of the people formerly known as the audience, with an engaged segment of media users participating as active contributors, collaborators, creators, disseminators, recommenders, and at times, critics in the climate change debate. These participatory individuals—empowered over the past decade by the many changes in the media system—are what communication researchers have traditionally defined and tracked as the ‘issue’ public. [4]

Research on the connection between policy making and public opinion concludes that on most policy issues, decisions reflect the preferences of the small issue public surrounding a debate, since this segment is the most participatory and the voice that is heard loudest and most frequently among elected officials [5][6]. Studies find that the size of the issue public on climate change has increased over the past decade and is likely to continue to shift in marginal ways in reaction to focusing events, levels of news attention, and the efforts of advocates to intensify public concern and broaden involvement.¹

5.2. lobbying group

Since 1980s, ideas like government of catalysis, authorization but not service and market orientation have drive government to deliver parts of its obligations to market and society. Meanwhile, volunteer activities flourish; non-profit organizations have become a third power to make up for government failure and market failure, and play an important role in all kinds of public issues.

Policy advocating, strategic federation, policy lobbying and appealing to consensus are strategies that non-profit often used to influence public policy. Lobbying is an activity that non-profit organizations take to get involved in policy-making process, intending to affect formulation of public policy. [7] Environmental non-profit organizations in China are particularly splendid. In 2003, represented by Green Home, these organizations initiated a movement to protect Nu River. In this movement, they had their voice heard by the government through arousing media, scholars and the masses. This efficiently affected policy-making and strengthened social effect of environmental issues. As a result, in 2004, the Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao, lay

¹ Matthew C. Nisbet, *Public Opinion and Political Participation in the Climate Change Debate*, A forum where top experts explore the big ideas and core skills defining the 21st century, October 24, 2011

the dam project, which had been decided, over. This was the first time that the civilian organization affected the decision of the government on public affair.

However, there exists a strong desire for foundation of non-profit organizations, which attempt to get involved in the process of policy-making, and this will do good to the improvement of accuracy and scientificity. Moreover, it will also help ensuring that policy-making is citizen oriented, and this is important for the construction of a harmonious society. To sum up, every approach has its advantages and disadvantages, listed as below:

Table 1 Advantages and Disadvantages of Ways of Participation

| Way | Advantages | Disadvantages |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Internet | Participants equality, participation liberty, low cost, inspire enthusiasm, extend scale, promote political civilization and probity | Fallibility of information source, virtuality and cripticity of internet, emotional and extreme participation, affect social fairness |
| Questionnaire | Save time, cost and manpower, easy quantization of outcomes, and practical tracking survey | Extensive but not deep outcome, low rate of recovery |
| Public hearing | Cultivate consciousness and ability of participation, high social influence and social attention | Arbitrary selection of representatives, subjective elements, nonobjective choice of opinions |
| Administration open | Fairly and transparently keep citizens informed of contents and results, possible superintendence | Huge divergence leads to violent hostility, bad for stability and solidarity |
| Public opinion | High efficiency, in time | Easily affected by the government, only report good things |
| Lobbying group | Respect reality, reasonable suggestions, earnestly consider public desire | Can't consider in a macroscopic way, shortsighted |

6. Advices on political participation in housing policy

6.1. Deepening structural reform of decision-making of housing policy, insuring political participation

Presently, the main task of structure of the administration is to distribute decision-making right reasonably. To achieve this goal, government needs to keep its duty within macroeconomic control, basic construction and public service, deliver the right of resource allocation to market, vigorously foster intermediary organizations, and retrocede some rights of social administration to them; That is, to comprehensively implement the spirit of the 16th Party Congress, continue transforming government functions, and enhance the adjustment of institutions; put an end to absence from their duties, mismatches and overrun of duties; normalize the limits of power of government. In this sense, citizens can be attracted to participate in making of housing policy positively, speak up initiatively and help dealing with serious situation and solving housing problems.

6.2. Enhancing the systematic construction of political participation

First of all, extend citizens' right to know, open housing information, and provide smooth channel for political participation. The government needs to erect social value for the sake of public interests, enhance systematic construction of opening housing information, and put an end to abuse of power for personal gains. Secondly, accelerate systematic innovation, and broaden channels for participation. Housing market involves multi-stakeholders, which brings forward a challenge for the old tradition that state interests come first. To fulfill this purpose, the government needs to take interests of the whole society into consideration, respects desires of all social members when making housing policies. Take Guangdong for example, Regulations on Administration of Controllable detailed urban planning prescribes that the city programming committee is a deliberative organ, aiming at deliberating particular programs. It also prescribes that programs which haven't

been passed by the city programming committee are forbidden for approve of the municipal government. It is one representative act of promoting democratic administration and strengthening construction of ability of administration.

6.3. Creating participation-typed culture, improving civil ability of political participation

Currently, civil participation in China is led by the Party and government, so people need encouragement to abandon the bondage of traditional political culture, and actively take part in formulation of housing policy. Most importantly, improve education of citizens especially the exotic population. Secondly, enhance the legal awareness and idea of the public, and properly guide participation to improve the quality and order of civil participation.

6.4. Establishing a reasonable hortation mechanism

The government provides opportunities for citizens to participate in regulation of housing policy, and consults them for suggestions. People whose suggestion is adopted by the government will receive a hortation. Thus, this practice will give rise to people's enthusiasm in participation in housing policy.

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