

CHINESE PARLIAMENTS' CONNECTION WITH CONSTITUENTS THROUGH THE INTERNET: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study surveyed over a hundred Chinese city and county parliaments' websites for the publishing of the representatives' contact information, and related the publishing of the representatives' contact information – an important measure of the openness of the Chinese city and county parliaments – with the social/economic factors of the regions studied.

INTRODUCTION

China has become the world's second largest economy with a GDP of 56.9 trillion China Yuan (\$9 trillion) [19], after more than three decades' high-speed growth. Accompanying the drastic economic growth is the fast growth of telecommunications, and the fast growth of adoption of the Internet among Chinese population: as of the end of 2013, the number of the Chinese Internet users has reached 618 million [6], the largest in the world, which is 45.4% in the Chinese population.

As the number of the Netters grows, the Chinese government is catching up with the trend to provide government information and government services online, or embarking e-government practices (see, for example, [4], [20], [15]).

Leveraging the Internet for government operations and for the interaction between governments and citizens – e-government - are believed to have the benefits of “cost effectiveness in government and public operations, ..., with better and continuous contacts with citizens” [3]. The Chinese government also has been making efforts to advance e-government, which is a desirable trend. It is generally accepted that the development of e-government should be stage-wise, with models of theories of various stages, such as Gartner's four-stage model - Web presence, Interaction, Transaction, and Transformation [1]. Holliday and Kwok [10] called for the Hong Kong government to go beyond service delivery to encompass citizen engagement and participation. To the current study, participation is an issue to be focused upon, since the objective of study here will be the e-government implementation of the Chinese parliament, or the People's Congress as the official name.

In modern democracies, parliaments play the following roles: gathering the opinions from their districts to form the ideas for legislation proposals; oversight and check-and-balance over executive and judicial branches; serving their constituents. To fulfill the above roles and functions, parliaments in every level and their members must have close and regular contacts with their constituents. Direct contacts with constituents is a must for the parliament members to perform their duties and deliver their services, and for the citizens to be involved in the political process of the country or the region.

In all representative democracies, the contact information of representatives is a basic piece of open information that is mandatorily accessible to the constituents, in order for the latter to contact their representatives when needed. In China (People's Republic of China, PRC hereafter), however, while the People's Congress (PC) is the "institution of people exercising their power to rule the country" (PRC Constitution, Article 2, Chapter 1), the PCs at all levels, especially the regional and local levels, have not been able to fully play their roles as truly representative parliaments, in the fulfilment of their responsibilities in legislation, check and balance, and serving their constituents. The first author conducted a semi-random sampling of websites of People's Congress (PCs) at provincial and municipal levels. Ninety-two 92 PCs' websites were visited, which covered almost all provincial PCs and major municipalities in most provinces. It was found that among the 92 PC websites visited, 48 (52%) did not have the list of People's Delegates (PDs). The other 31 (33.7%) only had list of names but with no other information. Twelve PC websites (13%) had the work affiliation of the PDs but many had just the name of the organization without the PD's position. Among the 92 PC websites visited, there was only one that had the PDs' phone numbers, just above 1%. His activities were reported by some media outside the PRC [5]. There needs to be a persistent push on the Chinese government, here the PCs, toward more equal and open communications with and disclosure to their citizens. Specifically, the publishing of the names and contact information of parliament members or People's Delegates (PDs) as in the Chinese context is a critical issue.

Due to China's drastic economic growth in the recent three decades, there have been studies of China on almost all subjects of social, humanities, and business fields, including e-government. Researches published as early as in the first decade of this century (such as [17], [11], [16]), most of which were centered on the government executive branch's web portals. There has yet to be seen a research on the legislative branch (People's Congress – PC) which, by nature, should have close and frequent interaction with citizens. It is worthy to conduct an exploratory study involving the e-government implementation status and issues of the Chinese People's Congress.

This study aims at conducting a systematic survey of the status of PC websites on city and county levels – where Chinese citizens have the most interaction with their governments. Specifically, it will focus on a fundamental ground of the PCs' functioning: the PC's publishing of the list and contact information of representatives (People's Delegates – PDs). In addition to the survey and measurement of the Chinese PCs' e-government implementation, with specific focus on the publishing of People's Delegates (PDs)' contact information, efforts will also be made to identify possible contributing social-economic factors, and to explore relationship between these factors and the publishing of PDs' contact information – which will be an important indication of the openness of Chinese parliament and the parliament's accessibility to and interaction with of its constituents. We hope that through this exploratory study, a relationship can be established between the two, to help researchers to foresee the development and maturity of representative democracy in Chinese cities and counties, and to understand the social-economic driving forces of such development and maturity.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

Chinese People's Congress (PC)'s websites are an important part of the Chinese government's e-government implementation. A relevant research on e-business readiness was done by Bui, Sankaran, and Sebastian [2]. In their research, a metric of eight factors with 52 measures were compiled. These eight factors are: Knowledgeable Citizens, Access to Skilled Workforce, Macro Economy, Digital Infrastructure, Industry Competitiveness, Culture, Ability, Willingness to Invest, and Cost of Living and Pricing.

Because the focus of the current study is e-government at local levels (city and county), macro economy becomes irrelevant, and culture is not as important. So we decided to exclude these two factor categories from our consideration of factors. However, the **economic development status** of the region (city/county) of interest should remain an important precursor of the e-commerce activities and e-government implementation status of the concerned region.

At the same time, since the focus is e-government rather than e-commerce, the “Ability, Willingness to Invest” is less critical. However, “Cost of Living and Pricing” does reflect the urbanization of the region, and urbanization is the precursor of higher awareness of individual rights and willingness to participate in public affairs. Therefore, we have chosen to consider factors in this category.

Among the remaining factors, “Knowledgeable Citizens” and “Access to Skilled Workforce” can be reflected through the **level of education development** in the city/county concerned. “**Internet Infrastructure**” is directly related to citizens’ access to e-government, and should therefore be used as an important measure of the foundation of e-government.

In addition to the above factors that are derived from Bui and others’ metric[2], we will introduce the following four new factor categories: (1) **overall development of tertiary industry**, (2) **degree of openness and the extent of foreign economic interaction (foreign trade, foreign investment)**, (3) **transportation and tourism**, and (4) **number of newspapers and magazines published in the region**.

The above are hypothesized factors that we would examine for a possible relationship with the openness of city/county PCs’ websites in terms of the publishing of PDs’ contact information.

DATA COLLECTION

1. Sample Selection

We have selected all the 31 Chinese provinces and provincial-level municipalities (there are four such municipalities that also govern their vicinity rural areas: Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing). Under each provincial-level administration region, we will select three city/county level People’s Congresses (PCs), to survey the PC’s website to examine its functionality in terms of providing citizens the contact information of its People’s Delegates (PDs).

The cities/counties selected for each provinces are: the capital city, which is usually the most developed city in the province; two other cities/counties that are sufficiently far away from the capital city, to assure representativeness of economic and geographical diversity.

For each city/county selected, we have designed a scale of 0 to 10 to rate the PC’s websites, ranging from no website at all (0 point), to having PC’s own website featuring the name list of the PDs, with their contact information (10 points).

2. Social-Economic Data

We obtained data regarding the eight factor categories from the official Chinese government *Statistical Gazette of Economic and Social Development*, required by law to be compiled and published in every province, city, and county in China. We chose to parse the *Statistical Gazette* of the cities and counties

we will choose as the subject of our study for the social-economic factors we identified in the previous section, and the cross section in time is the year 2013 [19]

DATA ANALYSIS

We surveyed 125 Chinese People's Congresses (PCs) websites at provincial, major municipalities (mostly capital cities), and county levels, for all provinces in China. The average score of these 125 PCs' websites were 3.90, which means that on the average the PCs had name lists of PDs that were hard to find (score = 4) or worse: they only had PC's websites with no name list of PDs (score = 3). When we examined the PCs' websites by the level of the governments (provincial, capital cities, or county-level), the Eastern region stood out in the overall average (PCs of all levels together), and the county-level PCs' websites; the latter being very significant – the average scores of the Eastern region county-level PCs had an average score almost twice that of the other regions.

We ran cluster analyses of the PCs' websites, and identified two clusters: the high-performers group, and the low-performers group. The high-performer group had an average score of 8 (meaning: the PC publishes the name list of the PDs, with the PDs' work affiliation – so it is possible to contact the PDs if the citizens really try hard), while the lower-performer group had an average of 3 (meaning: the PC has its own website, but there is no name list published). The predictors of these two groups were:

- % Tertiary industry in GDP
- % Import/export in GDP
- % Primary industry in GDP
- % Urban population in total population
- % College students in population

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

1. China's People's Congresses (PC) at the sub-national levels performed barely acceptable in terms of publishing the People's Delegates' (PDs') contact information;
2. Regional difference is very significant: the Eastern region led the whole country on the average, and especially at the county level; at the county level, the Northern and Northwestern regions lagged behind the whole country;
3. Several factors were found that were associated with the performance in terms of PDs' contact information publishing: the structure of economy of the region (the percentage of primary and tertiary industries, as well as the import/export activities), and the demographics of the region (percentage of urban population, and that of college students in the population). It is interesting to have found these factors, and it is also reasonable to have these structural factors or indicators of economy and demographic to be associated with the overall social and political development level of the region of interest.

The findings of this preliminary study paves the road for further studies on the readiness for e-government development in the legislature branch of the Chinese government, and the relationships between social-economic factors and e-government development in China and emerging countries.

References are available upon request from the first author.