

An Analysis of the Policy Change from “One-Child” to “the Universal Two-Child” in China

– Based on the Theories of the Advocacy Coalition Framework

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Abstract: In the early 20th century, China gradually adjusted its family planning policy due to the unbalanced population structure. From the selective two-child policy in 2013 to the universal two-child policy in 2016, China ended the one-child policy that had lasted for decades. In fact, after the implementation of the selective two-child policy, it has always been a hot topic of public debate. However, the government has been cautious about this issue and has yet to make a clear statement. After much debate, the universal two-child policy was introduced. The existing literature mainly analyzes the reason and purpose of introducing the two-child policy but rarely analyzes the policy agenda setting in the process of policy change. Therefore, this paper will analyze China’s fertility system based on the agenda-setting process’s internal mechanism. As the leading theory of agenda setting, the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) helps explain the causal relationship between the policy of “one child” and the policy of “universal two-child policy” in China; this provides a new perspective for understanding China’s general and significant policy changes. Therefore, this paper will analyze the internal logic and the dynamic mechanism of the process of two-child policy change and assess the interpretation limits of the Advocacy Coalition Framework in the policy process in China.

Keywords: the policy of “one child”, the universal two-child policy, the Advocacy Coalition Framework, policy learning, policy change

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Since the late 1970s, China has strictly implemented a stable “one-child” family planning policy. The implementation of the family planning policy alleviated the considerable pressure caused by the rapid population growth in the early days of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. With the implementation of the family planning policy in the past 40 years, the fertility rate has dropped

significantly. The results of the second national census show that China's total fertility rate has dropped from 1.22 in 2000 to 1.18 in 2010,¹ which is far below the level of population substitution. Stable implementation of the family planning policy for more than 30 years has realized the "controlling population growth" policy. However, the policy effect of the family planning policy has also caused much negative feedback. After 1992, China's total fertility rate continued to fall below the level of population turnover. Over the next two decades, China's population situation has been at a low fertility level. The low fertility rate has led to a gradual change in the type of economic growth in China. The decline in the fertility rate of the population naturally leads to a reduction in consumer demand. The scale of birth control means that the level of household consumption has fallen, and the driving force to stimulate economic growth needs to be increased. Besides, the ageing process of China's population has accelerated significantly. In 2000, China's population at the age of 65 accounted for about 7%. In 2010, this group reached about 8.87%.² The ageing of the population is accelerating, and the proportion of working-age labour for the population is decreasing year by year, which has an essential impact on China's labour market, pension industry, consumer market, education industry and other fields. Therefore, the issue of fertility policy reform has received more and more attention, and the adjustment of fertility policy has gradually become the focus of significant livelihood issues. In 2009, based on the pressing pressure caused by a series of events, the government initiated the exploration of fertility policy reform. After several years of policy agenda, it finally issued the "one child" policy in 2013. The government passed the resolution again in 2015 and implemented the universal two-child policy to respond to the population ageing action; this has completely changed the core of the "one-child" family planning policy and realized a significant change in the population birth policy. So, this article will apply the theory of ACF to China's family planning policy changes and explain the internal logic and dynamic mechanism of the policy change process. At the same time, it also pointed out that the ACF has a certain degree of limitation in interpreting China's specific policy changes.

1.2. Research Significance

In social policy, the policy process research adopts the stage analysis method as the mainstream research method. The stage method decomposes the complex policy process into several functional stages, such as the issue emergence, policy formulation, policy implementation and policy evaluation. The research focus of China's population family policy is mainly on the interpretation and effect evaluation of family policy at various stages, emphasizing the research on the status and significance of implementing the fertility policy. Facts mostly describe the research on population policy change, and there is a list that needs to be more on the policy agenda of fertility policy and the dynamics of change. At the same time, although the research on ACF is pervasive abroad, the policy research and application in mainland China still need to be deepened. Therefore, the theoretical significance of this study is to draw on the interpretation limits of the Advocacy Coalition Framework applied to China's policy process to draw a holistic analysis of the changes in the two-child policy and objectively understand China's birth policy. The issue provides an entirely new explanation and an analytical basis for improving the realistic quality of the policy activity. Also, it provides a more effective analytical model for understanding policy changes for Chinese social policy research. China's two-child policy change is taken as the object of study because China's fertility policy has continued since

¹ Data resource: Bulletin of the Second National Census, National Bureau of Statistics

² Data resource: Bulletin of the Second National Census, National Bureau of Statistics

the founding of the People's Republic of China. The two-child policy is a directional change, and the policy change trajectory is unmistakable. The changing trajectory of population policy fully reflects the essential characteristics of China's policy process and has a strong representation. The birth policy reform has always been accompanied by huge controversy. Whether to let the two-child policy cause intense discussion at the social level, the opposition and supporters each held their word. As an essential driver of policy changes, the guidance of social opinion has objectively spawned extensive and in-depth policy interactions and consultations. Changes in fertility policies have a far-reaching impact, and they have essential values for research and interpretation. The two-child policy dominates the historical transformation of the population problems. It affects the transformation of China's labour supply and economic growth, which is of great significance to the sustainable development of China's economy and the stability of social order. Therefore, a practical understanding of this policy process is conducive to an in-depth understanding of the content of population fertility policy and to providing recommendations for policy evaluation and improvement. More importantly, case studies on changes in fertility policies can assess possible problems in the process of the policy changes and provide references for their pros and cons to promote the healthy operation of China's policy agenda; this has important practical significance for the development of Chinese society.

2. Theory

2.1. Basic Concepts of the Advocacy Coalition Framework

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) is a policy process theory constructed by American policy researchers Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith in the late 1980s to transcend policy stage theory. ACF attaches great importance to the interaction between the actors in each coalition. Each advocacy coalition comprises participants from different organizations within the policy subsystem. The policy subsystem covers various actors from different types of organizations, but they actively pay attention to current policy issues. In addition to traditional interest groups, the formation of advocacy coalition also includes members of the judiciary, members of the legislature, members of governments at all levels, social organizations, research institutions, experts, scholars, and news media.

The Advocacy Coalition Framework advocates using a shared "belief system" as the coalition's core. The framework assumes that policy participants can consciously transform their beliefs into policy products based on an integrated and systematic policy belief system. The framework for advocating coalition advocates belief rather than traditional interests as the basis for alliance formation. It is precise because beliefs are more "inclusive", cover an extensive range, and verification is relatively simple. Moreover, a consistent belief system guarantees the cohesion of the coalitions to take action [1].

Sabatier built the Advocacy Coalition Framework on at least four basic premises. Firstly, understand the process of policy change and the role of policy learning, which requires a period of ten or several decades. Second, to think about policy changes within such a period, the most helpful method is to focus the investigation on the "policy subsystem", that is, to examine the various agencies that try to track and influence government decisions in a particular policy area. These policy subsystems should include intergovernmental dimensions, and all levels of government should be included. Finally, social policy can be summarized as a belief system, value orientations and causal assumptions. Under the premise of at least these four basic assumptions, the advocacy coalition framework can have a strong explanatory power to understand policy learning and policy changes in the policy process [2].

Based on the policy change process under the Advocacy Coalition Framework, the three-stage logic of policy stalemate, policy compromise, and policy change is presented. As the initial stage of policy change, policy stalemate transitions from policy learning to policy compromise. Policy

compromise is a staged product of policy change. Policy change is ultimately achieved through the dynamic mechanism of policy change and the strategic use of competitive advocacy coalition resources. The final product of the policy adjustment process is realizing policy changes.

2.2. The Explanatory Power of ACF on the Policy Change from “One Child” to “the Universal Two-Child”

In the period of social transformation, China faces more and more complicated social problems, and the social form has gradually differentiated from the original “unary society” to “multiple society”. ACF born in the context of pluralistic culture can be applied to China. The causality in the transition from the “one-child” policy to the “universal two-child” policy can be reasonably and effectively explained based on the ACF. Firstly, in terms of period, the “one child” to “universal two-child” policy has undergone 35 years of change, which coincides with the ten-year or even decades-long timeframe required for the application of ACF. Secondly, the ACF uses many policy subsystems composed of participants who focus on the same problem and seek to influence public policy as the analysis unit, which can more effectively explain the emergence of the “one-child” policy to the release of the “universal two-child” policy change. At the same time, the broadness of the objects within the policy subsystem of the Advocacy Coalition broke through the traditional “iron triangle” concept. The Advocacy Coalition actors have jointly influenced the change from “one child” to the release of the “universal two-child” policy. Expanding the policy subsystem to the scope of the included objects can more effectively explain the influence of different policy actors. Finally, the Advocacy Coalition Framework uses the belief system held by all coalitions as a tool to explain the process of policy change. The process from the “one-child” policy to the “universal two-child” policy is, to a greater extent, the struggle between coalition with different beliefs rather than the result of competition for interests. The learning of different value orientations in the belief system has become the driving force of the staged change of fertility policy. It has promoted the transition from the “one-child” policy to the “universal two-child” policy. Based on the foundation of the theoretical framework of the Advocacy Coalition, combined with China’s birth policy from “one child” to the release of the “full two-child” policy change, It can be found that the whole transformation process of fertility policy also presents a three-stage logic of policy stalemate, policy compromise and policy transformation.

3. Policy Change from “One Child” to “the Universal Two-Child” Based on the ACF

There are considerable differences in beliefs in the belief systems of the two major advocacy coalitions. First, differences in core beliefs of the policy include differences in the choice of policy tools for compulsory or voluntary birth, that is, government-led or citizens’ autonomous decisions and priority of basic rights. In addition, the difference in beliefs in the secondary aspect mainly refers to the relevance between releasing the two and causing social problems and the reasonableness of the fine under the “one-child” policy.

Sabatier believes that policy learning with belief as the main content in the ACF will occur between different coalitions. However, it also mainly occurs in the minor aspects of the belief system. Different coalitions will keep their core beliefs. Policy learning plays a vital role in policy changes, and there is extensive and in-depth policy learning in policy changes, including policy learning within the coalitions and policy learning between the coalitions; this policy-oriented learning has an obvious connection with policy changes [3].

In order to develop their policy propositions and gain competitive advantages, each coalition will have priority in value, the driving force for the sustainable development of the Chinese economy, the ageing population and the lack of labour, and the limited carrying capacity of resources and the

environment. The family planning policy needs to persist in deep thinking and research in such problem areas as there are inconsistent opinions on some issues, and the coalition members need to be consulted and adjusted, which advocates the coalition's internal learning. For example, during the discussions and research conducted within the coalition, the team led by Zhai Zhenwu formulated a "three-step plan". At the same time, a revision plan to start in 2011 with the first batch of Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang provinces, divided into three batches, is gradually opening up in the country as "one spouse can have two children for an only child" [4].

The Alliance of Advocates framework theory believes that two competing coalitions are not "dialogues between disabled." They will not be deaf to the other's views. On the contrary, they will convince each other that their understanding of the problem is wrong. However, when their deep core beliefs compete, they will be deaf to the competitors until external factors change the power contrast in the subsystem. For example, Hu Angang, a well-known national affairs expert, has actively supported family planning for many years. In 2000, during the Tenth Five-Year Plan, it was stated to relevant parties that "we must adhere to the family planning policy." Ten years later, he wrote an article in the Economic Information Daily calling for a two-child policy, which results from typical policy learning. Supporting the coalitions through policy learning also recognized the opposition to some of the coalitions' views. China's economy must adjust its population policy for sustainable development. However, the adjustment of population policy must be carried out in a region-by-region and step-by-step manner to be reasonable. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the increase in the number of people and the pressure on the environment [5].

Eventually, after policy learning, the central decision maker decided to make new arrangements, and policy changes occurred.

4. Conclusion and Reflection

Since the Chinese family planning policy in the early 1980s has been implemented steadily for nearly 40 years. Changes in socio-economic conditions and the impact of shock events over the years have driven changes in the relatively stable policy belief system within China's two-child population policy subsystem. Two advocacy coalitions were formed to support the one-child alliance and oppose it. Each coalition holds a system of opposing beliefs divided into multiple levels, including deep core, policy core, and minor aspects. The root cause of the coalition's conflict is whether to open up the two-child birth policy and conduct different levels of interaction based on the judgment of the population situation, the root cause of population problems, and the evaluation and adjustment of family planning policies. In order to realize their respective policy propositions, the members of the two sides launched a policy-oriented learning behaviour and opened the internal path of policy change. Policy learning occurs at three levels within the coalition: between coalitions and authoritative decision-makers. In the end, policy learning promoted the change of the policy belief system, which affected and changed the coalitions' resources and strategies. The dominant advocacy coalitions held the right to speak, and policy changes occurred.

At the same time, through the ingenious process of the two-child policy change process, It is found that there are many problems in the process of policy change. First, when the cross-collision learning dilemma is encountered between two opposing coalitions, the authoritative decision-maker acts as an intermediary, and the political tendencies are often obvious, but the response speed is slow. More than scholars, experts, policy researchers, and other field actors are insufficient required. Secondly, professional forums are less spread. If policy adjustments involve the interests of the vast majority of people, they will attract widespread attention. However, the public often needs more attention to the events and actions that promote policy changes. Professional forums' propaganda and advocacy role

is limited, and the news media cannot be the critical force to promote policy changes. Thirdly, inconsistent information resources may cause impediments to policy changes. Accurate and reliable information resources are the primary condition for scientific decision-making and the basis for forming policy beliefs. Ensuring the authenticity and immediacy of decision-making information is a prerequisite for promoting policy reforms reasonably. In the process of the two-child policy change, the critical decision-making information, such as the judgment of the population situation, the level of ageing, the possibility of a birth rebound, and the data held by the two coalitions, need to be more consistent. The biased information resources will affect everyone's cognition and judgment on policy issues, leading to the confrontation of policy convictions among the coalitions and the inability to reach policy consensus, thus affecting the realization of policy changes [6].

Therefore, ensuring the effective operation of the policy agenda and optimizing the dynamic mechanism of policy changes is particularly important. On the one hand, paying attention to policy issues and improving the information feedback mechanism is necessary. Identify policy issues promptly, reasonably open the policy agenda, and promote policy changes. Policymakers should strengthen the establishment and improvement of information systems. Establishing an information feedback mechanism enables authoritative decision-makers to grasp the trends of critical issues and timely understand the effects of policy implementation. Improve the ability to collect information resources and make accurate judgments.

On the other hand, it encourages social participation and improves the scientific nature of policy formulation. The reasonable change of policy direction requires the joint participation of multiple subjects. Whether it is an actor in the coalition or the public, the mass media and other subjects are the backbones of promoting policy changes, ensuring that each subject fully expresses its interests, and channels and mechanisms for expressing interests should be improved to stimulate the enthusiasm of social participation. At the same time, broaden the channels and procedures for public participation. For public opinions and major livelihood issues, governments at all levels can take measures to set up public hospitality days and visits, conduct public symposia, and set up special groups for technical consultation and evaluation to encourage social participation. It benefits to improve the rationality of policy formulation, balancing the interests of all parties and reducing reforms.

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