

A Structured Analysis of “Performancism” in Chinese Grassroots Governance

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of advancing the modernization of China’s grassroots governance system and governance capabilities, strengthening the performance evaluation of grassroots governments has become an important means to promote governance efficiency. However, unreasonable performance evaluations have led grassroots governments into the dilemma of “performancism.” This paper, based on a structured theoretical perspective, explores the process of the generation of “performancism” and the risks it entails, focusing on the explanatory framework of behavior, structure, and interaction relationships. It also offers multidimensional recommendations for resolving “performancism” at the grassroots government level.

Keywords: grassroots government governance, performancism, behavior, structure

1. Introduction

In China, grassroots governance, as an integral component of local governance, constitutes one of the fundamental foundations for advancing the modernization of the national governance system and capabilities. Strengthening the construction of grassroots political power and enhancing the governance capabilities of grassroots governments are imperative objectives. Performance evaluation of grassroots governments was originally conceived as a crucial means to promote their governance efficiency. However, in certain regions, the practical implementation of grassroots evaluations has fallen into the pitfalls of excessive emphasis, excessive detail, and excessive generality. As a result, grassroots governments and officials have tended to instrumentalize, formalize, and superficialize their work in order to meet assessment criteria. Data from two surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021 by the People’s Forum reveal that 69.84% of surveyed grassroots officials believe there is a prevalent issue of formalism, characterized by a variety of unnecessary and burdensome tasks, with varying degrees of complexity. Furthermore, 66.67% of officials recognize problems in the evaluation process, such as the overemphasis on visible outcomes and the use of “traceable assessments” [1]. It is undeniable that the current state of grassroots government performance evaluation in some regions of China reflects the predicament of “performancism” in grassroots governance.

2. The Predicament of Grassroots Government Governance: From Performance Management to “Performancism”

The concept of performance management was first introduced by American management scholar Aubrey Daniels in the 1970s. Since then, Western academia has conducted extensive and profound research in this area, with the study of performance management in the public sector emerging as a new branch of public management research [2]. Since the 1990s, as China’s socialist market economy reform continued to deepen and democratic politics advanced, performance management was introduced to China as a means to enhance government efficiency. It was widely applied in the practice of performance evaluations at all levels of government, serving as a crucial lever to promote government function transformation and administrative system reform.

The term “performancism” was initially used to describe businesses that placed performance at the core of their management [3], relying solely on performance appraisal as the exclusive and ultimate criterion for employee management and resource allocation, thus representing an extreme form of performance management. In this paper, the author extends the concept of “performancism” to the field of government governance, with a focus on emphasizing the reactions of grassroots governments as evaluation subjects under unreasonable performance assessments and the governance dilemmas generated as a result. “Performancism” is defined here as a situation where grassroots governments, in order to cater to superiors’ performance evaluations, excessively pursue universally visible, short-term, and quantifiable work within the evaluation scope, neglecting the unique, long-term, and unquantifiable work outside the assessment scope, resulting in an imbalance in governance structures. In other words, the relationship between performance evaluation and grassroots government governance has been inverted, where performance evaluation, originally intended to serve grassroots government governance, has now made grassroots government governance subservient to performance evaluation. In recent years, the supervisory and assessment measures by higher-level governments on grassroots government governance have been continuously strengthened. Performance indicators have become increasingly multidimensional and detailed. In some regions, the practice of performance evaluation for grassroots governments has transitioned from performance management into the trap of “performancism,” thereby leading grassroots governments into the predicament of “performancism.”

3. Understanding the Predicament of Grassroots Government Governance “Performancism”: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Currently, there is no shortage of research in academia on the issue of “governance dilemmas of grassroots governments under unreasonable performance evaluations.” Scholars have constructed various analytical frameworks from different perspectives and theories. Externally, the “governance dilemmas of grassroots governments under unreasonable performance evaluations” manifest as “frequent compliance with inspections and assessments” [4], formalism characterized by “emphasizing traces over actual achievements” [5], insularity where “discourse diverges from practice” [6], and professional fatigue among grassroots officials [7]. Internally, these dilemmas can be attributed to the “pocket effect” [8], caused by the expansion of supervisory authority leading to skewed resource allocation, imbalances in the hierarchical relationships between higher and lower levels of government [9], and a misalignment between the actual situations at the grassroots level and the governance goals set by higher authorities within a pressure-driven system [10].

A comprehensive review of existing research reveals two main shortcomings. First, some analyses follow a logic of action, while others follow a logic of structure, often neglecting the dual logic of action and structure and their interplay. Second, research primarily focuses on surface-level phenomena such as “formalism” and similar issues, leaving room for further exploration of the

comprehensive structural and interaction mechanisms that underlie these problems. In light of these observations, this paper introduces the concept of “performancism,” applies structuration theory, and attempts to elucidate the mechanisms behind the issue of “performancism” in grassroots government governance by constructing a threefold analytical framework that encompasses action, structure, and the interaction between action and structure. This, in turn, aims to clarify the risks associated with grassroots government governance “performancism” and propose avenues for regulation.

“The Structuration Theory” developed gradually in the 1970s by British sociologist Anthony Giddens as a critique and reconciliation of the two major camps in the field of sociology at the time, subjectivism, and objectivism. The fundamental premise of structuration theory posits that action and structure are not mutually exclusive or binary concepts but rather interrelated and mutually constitutive. This is reflected in the “duality of structure,” which means that structures both constrain and enable actions [11]. Conversely, actions generate structures, allowing structures to form, persist, and change.

Within “The Structuration Theory”, structures are defined as “rules and resources that are organized as features of social systems” [12]. In this paper, the structures of grassroots government governance under performance evaluation are divided into formal structures and informal structures. Formal structures encompass various rules and resources related to performance evaluation within the domain of grassroots government governance, while informal structures refer to the opposite. The concept of practical consciousness is crucial in structuration theory and refers to the ability of actors to monitor their own actions in non-discursive or routinized forms [13]. Numerous social individuals, acting as agents, actively construct, adjust, and change social structures through their actions. In this paper, grassroots government governance actions are categorized into standard actions and non-standard actions, where standard actions refer to actions within the scope of performance assessment and conducted with the purpose of performance evaluation, while non-standard actions refer to actions outside this scope. In grassroots government governance, both standard and non-standard actions, as well as formal and informal structures, are equally important. Only by achieving a balanced state between action and structure can the optimal results of grassroots governance be realized.

4. Analysis of the Action-Structure Nexus in the Genesis of Grassroots Government “Performancism”

The genesis of the predicament of grassroots government governance “performancism” can be elucidated through the examination of actions, structures, and their interrelationships.

4.1. Analysis of Actions Leading to Grassroots Government “Performancism”

The actions by higher-level governments in performance evaluations refer to the actions related to performance assessment carried out by higher-level governments as the assessing authorities on grassroots governments. This encompasses the formulation of performance assessment methods, the issuance of requirements, daily supervision, and the execution of operations related to performance assessments. When higher-level governments excessively emphasize performance assessments and expand their scope, concurrently increasing the influence of performance assessment results in resource allocation, these unreasonable actions in performance evaluations reinforce standard actions by grassroots governments and weaken non-standard actions in the interaction between higher and lower levels of government, leading to an imbalance in grassroots government governance actions.

On the one hand, higher-level governments include an increasing number of tasks related to grassroots government governance into performance assessments, converting some non-standard actions in grassroots government governance into standard actions. Simultaneously, they closely link

performance assessment results with resource allocation. As rational actors, grassroots governments are compelled to invest limited time and effort into work within the scope of performance assessment to secure resources favorable for their development, thereby increasing the proportion of standard actions in grassroots government governance actions. On the other hand, the difficulty, complexity, and evaluative challenge associated with tasks outside the scope of performance assessment often deter grassroots officials with limited capacity and experience. They redirect their time and effort into tasks beneficial for performance evaluation, considering non-standard actions as “futile work,” as they fall outside the criteria of performance assessment. This further constrains the generation of non-standard actions.

4.2. Analysis of Structures Leading to Grassroots Government “Performancism”

The structures of performance assessments by higher-level governments refer to the resources and rules aligned with comprehensive performance assessments conducted by higher-level governments and their departments on grassroots governments. This includes various annual comprehensive performance assessment methods, performance evaluation indicator systems, written materials related to performance assessment, and various development resources and promotion opportunities allocated by higher-level governments based on performance assessment results. Structures aligned with the unreasonable performance assessment actions of higher-level governments exhibit the following characteristics: first, an excessive complexity and refinement of the performance assessment standard system; second, an overemphasis on the role of comprehensive performance assessment in rating, ranking, and resource allocation for grassroots governments; third, mechanization and superficiality in the performance assessments by higher-level governments, focusing on formal documentation while neglecting actual impact and authenticity.

The structures of grassroots government governance are classified into formal structures and informal structures based on their alignment with performance evaluation. An excessive emphasis or devaluation of either part can lead to an imbalance in the overall structure of grassroots government governance. The impact of the unreasonable performance assessment structures by higher-level governments on grassroots government governance is evident. In terms of regulations, grassroots governments continuously generate various regulations and systems aligned with performance assessments. In terms of resources, grassroots governments allocate more resources to tasks within the scope of performance assessment. The excessive expansion of formal structures continuously encroaches upon the space of informal structures, leading to an imbalance in the structure of grassroots government governance.

4.3. Analysis of the Action-Structure Nexus Leading to Grassroots Government “Performancism”

Analyzing the genesis of the predicament of grassroots government governance “performancism” based on the “duality of structure” in structuration theory reveals two aspects. On one hand, structures exert both constraints and enabling forces on actions. Formal structures primarily enable standard actions, while informal structures primarily enable non-standard actions. On the other hand, actions lead to the generation, continuation, and change of structures. Standard actions in grassroots government governance promote the formation and reinforcement of formal structures, just as the healthy development of non-standard actions also encourages the formation, continuation, and development of informal structures.

In the context of standard actions and formal structures, centralizing performance evaluations as standard actions enhances their mutual reinforcement in grassroots government governance practices. In the context of non-standard actions and informal structures, the mutual reinforcement of non-

standard actions outside performance evaluations weakens significantly as performance evaluations expand. Regarding standard actions and informal structures, dominant standard actions weaken informal structures, and disadvantaged informal structures exert less restraint on standard actions. In the context of non-standard actions and formal structures, dominant formal structures increase their restraint on non-standard actions, while diminishing non-standard actions have a decreasing weakening effect on formal structures.

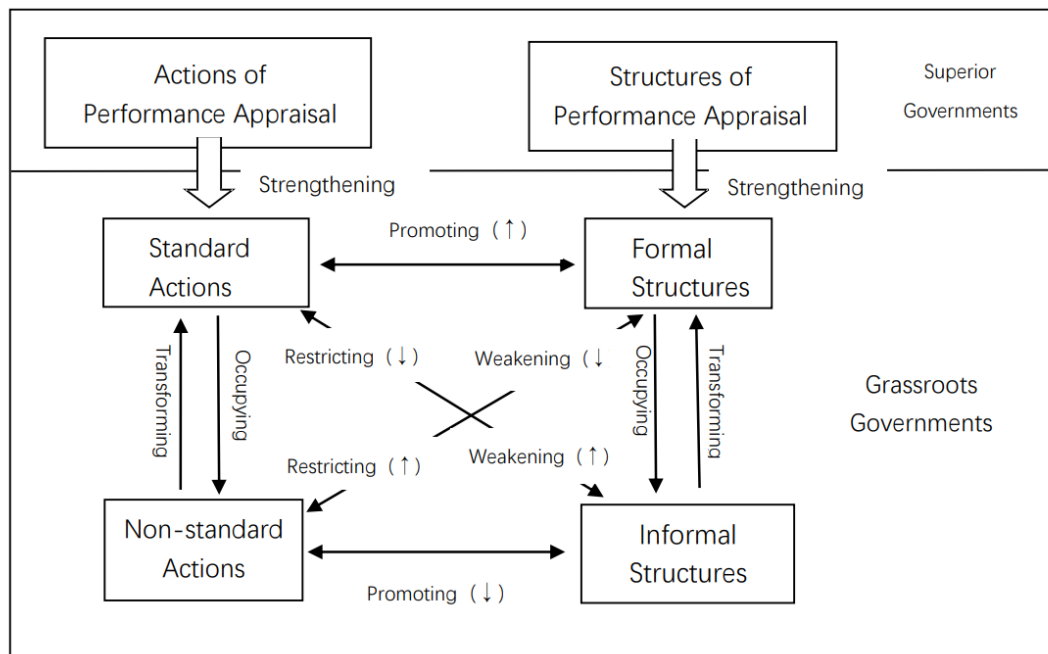


Figure 1: The Structured Analysis of the Genesis of Grassroots Government “Performancism”.

In summary, the unreasonable performance evaluation actions and structures by higher-level governments have triggered a reinforcing effect on standard actions and formal structures in grassroots government governance. Simultaneously, this effect has been continuously strengthened through the interaction between actions and structures, resulting in grassroots governments falling into the predicament of governance action-structure imbalance known as “performancism.”

5. Risks of Grassroots Government “Performancism”: Disruption, Imbalance, and Internal Exhaustion

The manifestation of “performancism” in grassroots government governance is reflected in the following three aspects:

5.1. Disruption Between Tasks and Efficiency

“Disruption between tasks and efficiency” refers to an endless increase in governance tasks at the grassroots government level while the improvement in governance efficiency remains limited. Grassroots governments traditionally accumulate governance experience and develop governance methods by managing various tasks closely connected with the public through governance structures, thereby enhancing their governance capabilities. Under the influence of “performancism,” the governance actions of grassroots governments have become nearly synonymous with standard actions. However, certain completely formalized tasks within standard actions, detached from the actual needs of the public, not only fail to contribute to the improvement of grassroots government governance

efficiency but also lead to negative effects such as formalism. In grassroots government governance practices, people often perceive the trend toward standardization, orderliness, and proceduralization driven by performance assessment requirements and the increase in various tasks aligned with this as evidence of improved governance efficiency. However, in the face of the continuous expansion of performance assessments, an increasing number of tasks, including handling sporadic inspections, preparing reports, participating in meetings convened by higher-level authorities, and filling out various domain-specific reports, increasingly consume the limited time and energy of grassroots governments. This makes it progressively difficult to transform governance tasks into effective governance at the grassroots level.

5.2. Imbalance in Relations with Superiors and Subordinates

The imbalance in relations with superiors and subordinates resulting from “performancism” is manifested in the transformation of grassroots government relationships from relationships with the public (subordinates) to relationships with higher-level governments (superiors). In other words, in the practice of governance, grassroots governments decide which areas to focus on, to what extent, and the range of the population to engage with based primarily on their performance assessment relationship with higher-level governments. For instance, the task of establishing high-quality development demonstration points for various grassroots governments has formed a relationship of assessment between the higher-level and lower-level governments. To gain an advantage in performance assessments, various grassroots governments select appropriate locations, invest considerable resources, and transform experimental demonstration points into staged examples, ultimately making points “represent” the whole, forming deep connections with specific subsets of the population within these regions, and even engaging in “collusive” behavior. Meanwhile, the majority of the population not selected as “points” fails to establish such connections.

5.3. Internal Exhaustion in Grassroots Government Governance

Internal exhaustion refers to a state in which an organization consumes itself, sustains itself, self-replicates, and grows without actual development along one dimension. Grassroots governments, positioned at the lowest end of a top-down pressure management system, must fulfill performance assessment requirements imposed by higher-level governments and their respective departments while also addressing complex demands and service needs directly from the public. They are already in a challenging situation where they are dealing with numerous issues.

With the strengthening, refinement, and broadening of performance assessments for grassroots governments, standard actions and formal structures gradually dominate the actions and structures of grassroots government governance. In practice, formalized work such as meetings and report submissions for performance assessments continues to expand. However, such work does not address substantive issues but rather consumes the limited time, energy, and resources of grassroots officials that should be used for economic development and improving the well-being of the people. Some policies and reforms aimed at promoting local development are implemented through performance assessments, but they ultimately result in more formalized documentation rather than tangible outcomes. Grassroots officials are forced into a cycle of “focusing on appearances rather than substance” and engaging in impractical work. As a result, grassroots governments find themselves trapped in the internal exhaustion dilemma of heavy burdens with ineffective results.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Upon reevaluating the mechanisms behind the emergence of grassroots government “performancism,” it becomes evident that the fundamental cause of “performancism” lies in the excessive emphasis on

standard actions and formal structures, leading to an imbalance in governance structures. By altering the unreasonable performance assessment actions and structures of higher-level governments, adjusting the proportion of standard actions to non-standard actions and formal structures to informal structures at the grassroots government level, and breaking the cycle of “performancism” in grassroots government governance through positive interaction and mutual construction between actions and structures, we can address the risks associated with it.

Specifically, we can take the following steps: 1. Streamline the performance assessment indicator system, eliminating as much as possible repetitive and low-value formalized tasks. This would free up time and space for grassroots government governance, allowing it to genuinely reduce its burden. 2. Shift the concept of performance assessment, avoiding the tendency to place all work in the “basket” of performance assessment. Instead, scientifically determine the assessment content and emphasize key assessment areas. 3. Improve the methods of performance assessment by reducing the frequency of routine assessments. Place greater emphasis on the actual outcomes of work during inspections and checks, considering their long-term and sustained effects. 4. Adjust the role of performance assessment in resource allocation. Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach of “judging heroes based on performance.” Encourage grassroots governments to tap into local resources to address issues that are specific, long-term, and complex.

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