

The Enlightenment of “Local Government in the United States” on China

Hongxin Luo

School of Public Administration, Sichuan University, Chengdu 610041, China

Abstract: This article summarizes the main content of the book "Local Government in the United States" and discusses the implications of "Local Government in the United States" for local governments in China. The composition types of local governments in the United States include counties, townships, municipalities, school districts, and other special districts and quasi government organizations, with complex and diverse organizational forms. Local governments in the United States emphasize their basic functions of providing public goods and services, and apply enterprise management to their internal operations. The governance process reflects the core characteristics of high autonomy. The local government reform movement of "reshaping government" advocates for cooperation between governments and cooperation between the government and various governance entities in society. Vertical federal and state governments delegate power to local governments, while horizontal local governments share governance power with governance entities. Market mechanisms are introduced in the supply of public goods and services, demonstrating a clear customer orientation. Drawing on the achievements and experiences of local governments in the United States, we attempt to gain inspiration for local governments in China: strengthening institutional environment construction and promoting local government cooperation; Cultivate civic participation awareness and broaden channels for democratic participation; Central decentralization of power to local governments and rational decentralization of governance entities; Accelerate the transformation of government functions and improve the quality of public services.

Keywords: Local Government in the United States, Governance, Government Reform, Ostrom.

1. Introduction

As a complex and difficult to define structure with its constituent elements and internal relationships, local governments in the United States have attracted numerous scholars to conduct in-depth research on it due to its complexity and diversity. Local governments are organized from bottom to top based on grassroots consciousness, and local autonomy forms the foundation of American democracy. On the other hand, state and federal governments attempt to demonstrate their authority and control over local governments, manifested as a top-down sense of domination. This tension between bottom-up and top-down inevitably creates conflicts and contradictions, and the movement and struggle for local autonomy runs through the entire history of the United States, forming a tense state in American society. The advantage of local autonomy and central control is always in a dynamic state of change. The political system of the United States is manifested as a complex and diverse dynamic network governance system composed of multiple entities, including the federal government, state governments, formal local government systems including counties, townships, municipalities, school districts, and other special districts, quasi government organizations, various political parties, non-governmental organizations, interest groups, etc.

The book "Local Government in the United States" by Robert L. Bish, Elinor Ostrom, and Vincent Ostrom observes and understands the structure, function, and problems of local government in the United States from a unique institutional analysis perspective, attempting to deeply characterize the characteristics of local government in the United States, providing us with basic principles and important analytical tools for understanding the experiment of local autonomous governance in the United States.[1].

2. Main Content of “Local Government in the United States”

2.1. Point Out the Main Idea: The Surface is Intricate and Complex, but in Reality, it Implies Order

Firstly, in Chapter 1, the author presents various types of local government organizational models and composition types in the United States, reflecting the diversity of forms of local government units, including Counties, Townships, Municipalities, School Districts and Special Districts, and Quasi Governmental Organizations. The diverse and seemingly disorganized local government organizational system in the United States has been referred to by some as the "cram quilt" model. However, the author believes that by delving deeper into the complex local government organizational units, a common order can be found, and it is more meaningful to focus on how community citizens self-organize through local governments to achieve their common wishes and meet their common needs. Compared to the single center governance represented by "one community, one government", the appropriate description of the American political system should be multi center governance. The American government system relies on the decentralization of power, and the balance and coordination of various subject relationships are achieved through negotiation and cooperation among entities with equal status. Therefore, in the struggle for autonomy and domination, every local government reform movement in American history has attempted to promote the adjustment and adaptation of the principles of local responsibility autonomy and limited autonomy.[2].

2.2. Struggle Reform: The Game between Local Autonomy and Central Control

Secondly, in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, the author introduces the struggles and efforts of local governments in the United States to strive for local autonomy, discusses the reforms and achievements of local governments in the 20th century, and analyzes governance issues in large urban areas based on this, highlighting the conflicting views of various parties on the nature and expected consequences of local government reforms. In the early 19th century, local autonomy laid the foundation for democratic politics in the United States. However, with the influx of a large population into industrialized areas after the Civil War, population size had a crucial impact on political organizational patterns. Machine politics and boss rule emerged and fostered corruption. The struggle for change among Progressive Party members ultimately led to fundamental constitutional changes that limited the power of state legislatures and expanded the power of local communities. In the 20th century, the attention of various communities shifted to transforming the internal structure of local governments to improve management capabilities, which put forward higher requirements for the efficiency and economy of local governments. Measures such as administrative restructuring, election reform, and civil service system reform were taken to reform the internal structure of local governments. Subsequently, through mergers or alliances, local governments became larger governments, achieving restructuring and turning to mergers and alliances. At the same time, the role of the federal government in local government affairs is becoming increasingly prominent, and the trend of nationalization in local governments in the United States is increasing. The struggle of the Progressive Party in the 19th century was to fight for the power of local autonomy, while the reforms of the 20th century focused more on the federal government's control over local governments. Along with the reform, there are numerous contradictions and debates regarding the governance of big city areas. Big city governments face issues such as "great ineffectiveness" and government failures. The popular voices supporting big city reform in the past are now constantly questioned. However, the author believes that under the seemingly chaotic characteristics of power division and multiple jurisdictions on the surface of big cities, there still exists an "order" that effectively provides various services for communities. The following text will analyze these systems.[3].

2.3. Case Evidence: Empirical Research from the Perspective of Political Economy

Once again, in Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8, the author analyzes the institutional logic of local governments providing public services in the United States from the perspective of political economy, and uses various empirical analyses to support it, attempting to respond to the "order" implied in the surface chaos and disorder of local governments in the United States mentioned earlier. Chapter 5, based on the differentiation of supply and production functions of public goods and services, examines the production and consumption organizations of public goods and services, and discusses various models and possibilities of cooperative production in the public economy. Based on this theoretical foundation, Chapter 6 conducts empirical research on solid waste collection services, fire protection services, police services, public service industries,

education, and other aspects of cities, demonstrating the diverse and complex institutional models of both intra - and inter organizational arrangements in local public economy. Chapter 7 further explores the impact of urban public service industry structure and institutional scale on the performance of intra - and inter organizational arrangements in local public economy, and points out that the key to improving performance lies in adopting specific organizational scale and arrangement types for specific services, and making them well integrated. Chapter 8 is an evaluation of the fiscal arrangement relationship between the federal government, state governments, and local governments, reflecting the types of fiscal revenue and the problems existing in local government finances. It is worth mentioning that we can glimpse the shadow of other works by the Ostroms in the cases mentioned in Chapters 6 and 7. For example, the book "Institutional Construction of Public Services: Institutional Structure of Urban Police Services" also mentions the organizational arrangements of police services, while "The Way to Governance of Public Affairs: The Evolution of Collective Action Institutions" is an institutional analysis of the governance of public pond resources.

2.4. Summary Statement: Current Problems, Challenges, and Future Prospects

Finally, in Chapter 9, the author reorganizes the writing of the book, identifies the problems and challenges faced by local governments in the United States, and provides possible solutions and future prospects. The operational system of local government governance in the United States should consider different fields of power and different levels of analysis (constitutional choice level, collective choice level, and operational choice level). The system of local affairs governance must be a complex nested and combination of various rules and organizations. Reflecting on the essence and interrelationships of local governments in the United States, as well as how local governance systems operate and reform to meet the changing needs of the times, has become a fundamental challenge faced by American citizens. One key issue is that people seem to easily confuse similar and common problems, leading to a trend of elevating individual or regional problems to national problems. This makes problems highly abstract and difficult to accurately locate and properly solve, and we also fall into the trap of self fantasy thinking. In order to face this challenge, we must first acknowledge that individuals are highly prone to making mistakes, and adopt a broad mindset to absorb different or even hostile viewpoints, return to the field, and test various possible hypotheses and theories through empirical research. The expectation of perfection is naive, but the expectation of improvement is reasonable. The key is what efforts and changes we need to make to achieve such improvement.[4].

3. Basic characteristics of local government in the United States

3.1. Organizational Form: Complex and Diverse

As mentioned earlier, in the local government system of the United States, there are basic local government units such as county governments, township governments, and municipal governments established for general purposes, as well as school district governments and other special district governments established for special purposes. County

governments, township governments, municipal governments, semester governments, and other special district governments jointly form the formal local government system of the United States; In addition, there are various quasi government organizations that serve and care for various special groups, forming the informal local government system in the United States. Local governments of various types, fields, and levels exhibit complexity and diversity in their organizational forms, resulting in different organizational arrangements due to differences in geography, types of public services provided, and scope of local affairs. Local governments with diverse forms have varying scales and functions. Local governments in the United States are independent and not subordinate to each other, and gradually form competition and cooperation in the process of regional affairs governance and public service provision, making the local government system flexible and adaptable, able to meet the public service needs of different interest groups to a greater extent, and better play government functions.

3.2. Basic Functions: Public Services

Providing public goods and services is one of the basic functions of government. As a developed capitalist country, the United States has local governments as grassroots governments, and providing public services accounts for a large proportion of local government functions. Even special zone governments and quasi government organizations are usually established to provide certain special public goods or services. The public goods and services provided by local governments include solid waste collection services, fire protection services, police services, public service industries, school education, housing planning, and other aspects mentioned in the book. Compared to the direct operation of public enterprises and other behaviors that directly connect to the microeconomics, local governments in the United States often promote overall economic development by providing various public services and revising reasonable systems to create a favorable economic and market environment. [5] And with the functional reform trajectory of "free competition government regulation relaxation re regulation" of the US government since the 18th century, the public service function of local governments in the United States has been more emphasized.[6].

3.3. Internal Operations: Enterprise Management

In terms of internal operations of local governments, the United States has shown clear characteristics of enterprise management. The Council Manager Plan, widely adopted by small and medium-sized municipalities in the United States, essentially draws on the management model of private commercial companies, where citizens act as shareholders, the city council acts as the board of directors, the mayor acts as the chairman of the board, and the city manager acts as the CEO. Citizens nominate and elect members of the city council and mayor through non partisan voting. The city council and mayor select and hire city managers to manage daily affairs and exercise their powers according to the will of the council, thus forming a balanced situation of mutual supervision and restraint among citizens, city council, mayor, and city managers. The enterprise management model can enable professionals to do professional things, which is conducive to promoting the professional management of local governments, simplifying administrative procedures, and

improving administrative efficiency.

3.4. Governance Process: Highly Autonomous

The high degree of local autonomy forms the foundation of American democracy, and the governance process of local governments in the United States reflects the core characteristics of high autonomy. The power of local governments comes from bottom-up citizen elections and top-down federal and state government grants. The result of the long-term game between the Dillon Law and the Currey Law is that local governments must exercise their power while respecting the legal principles of the federal and state governments, and the federal and state governments must also fully respect and safeguard their autonomy. The high degree of autonomy of local governments is reflected in the fact that the majority of important government members are elected by citizens, including leaders of important departments such as mayor, city council, education committee, finance, land, police chief, finance chief, judges, lawyers, auditors, and other key positions; The awareness of democratic participation is strong and profound. Under the highly transparent operation of local governments, citizens can directly participate in the daily affairs and decision-making of the government, and actively become members of government institutions to provide suggestions and contribute to regional development. As the scope of common issues expands, local governments in the United States are gradually abandoning traditional narrow autonomy thinking and seeking cooperation and mutual benefit among local governments in the governance of some cross regional affairs.[7].

4. Trends in Local Government Reform in the United States

After the Great Depression and World War II, social changes in the United States intensified, and local government governance faced severe challenges. Issues such as fiscal deficits, rigid bureaucratic organizations, official corruption, rent-seeking power, and trust crises were highlighted. In order to solve government crises and better adapt to the trend of globalization and informatization, a grand "Reinventing Government" reform movement was first launched in local governments in the 1980s. [8].

4.1. Subject Relationship: Collaboration

The flourishing development of governance theory has also injected a source of ideas into local government reform in the United States. With the advancement of globalization and informatization, the governance tasks of local governments not only include local public affairs, such as environmental governance, industrial transfer, public safety, regional economic integration, and many other cross regional public affairs have begun to emerge. Horizontal local governments have shifted from a relatively independent and non-interference state in the past to actively seeking cooperation and mutual benefit, in order to integrate governance resources, better solve public problems, and seek public interests. [9] At the same time, governance theory advocates for the joint participation of multiple subjects in the process of public affairs governance. The government's efforts are singular and limited, and it must rely on the power of society and citizens to achieve the governance of public affairs. The government, private enterprises, social organizations, volunteer teams,

individual citizens and other governance entities establish equal dynamic network relationships under the premise of mutual trust. Each entity relies on and checks and balances each other, reaches consensus through negotiation and continuous interaction, shares governance power together, governs public affairs together, provides public goods and services together, and ultimately achieves a win-win situation of mutual benefit.

4.2. Power Division: Decentralization

In terms of vertical division of power among federal, state, and local governments, both have delegated power to local governments to varying degrees, giving them more autonomy in local affairs and providing a power foundation for local governments to better fulfill their responsibilities and complete governance tasks. Especially, the expansion of real power for grassroots institutions and management personnel has fully guaranteed the legitimacy of grassroots autonomous governance and promoted the improvement of administrative efficiency. In the horizontal division of power between local governments and various governance entities, the prerequisite for achieving governance is the sharing of public power. Local governments, while clarifying their own functions and responsibilities, appropriately share public power with participating enterprises, social organizations, volunteer organizations, etc., transfer some functions to social entities, and fully leverage market and social forces to make up for the shortcomings of government governance.

4.3. Public Goods: Marketization

The numerous theoretical schools of new public management have also had a significant impact on local government reform in the United States. In terms of the supply of public goods and services, local governments introduce market mechanisms, fully utilizing market-oriented tools such as privatization, user payment, contract outsourcing, franchising, voucher system, decentralized decision-making, deregulation, property rights transactions, and internal markets, [10] to decentralize the production functions of public goods and services to various social entities, fully integrate and utilize social resources, achieve economies of scale, and introduce competition mechanisms to incentivize market entities to provide higher quality public goods and services. Local governments view citizens as customers and exhibit a distinct customer orientation. After fully understanding the needs of service recipients through various means, they provide corresponding public goods and services, while paying attention to customer feedback. Based on public feedback, they improve public services and continuously enhance the quality and level of public goods and services.[11].

5. The Enlightenment of “Local Government in the United States” on China

5.1. Strengthening Institutional Environment Construction and Promoting Local Government Cooperation

Institutional economics believes that high transaction costs can affect the cooperative behavior of trading entities, and even lead to confrontation. Promoting cooperation between local governments in different regions requires reducing the

transaction costs of the main body, which requires an institutional environment. Reasonable institutional design can coordinate the interests of all parties by improving the mechanism for balancing interests between regions, thereby reducing the transaction costs of local government cooperation, more effectively reducing local government conflicts, and promoting the formation of a win-win cooperation situation. [12] In the process of the development of contemporary socialist market economy in China, conflicts between local governments caused by insufficient institutional supply are not uncommon. Issues such as local protectionism and environmental pollution control are constraining the development of local governments, and have a negative impact on the healthy operation of regional economy and society, hindering the implementation of central policies. It is urgent to strengthen the construction of institutional environment, introduce high-level laws and specialized local regulations to clarify the distribution of interests and power responsibilities of local governments, regulate their administrative behavior, reduce the transaction costs of local government cooperation, and create a good institutional environment for cooperation between local governments.

5.2. Cultivate Civic Participation Awareness and Broaden Channels for Democratic Participation

For a long time, the progress of local democracy construction has been lagging behind, and citizens overly rely on government decision-making and lack political awareness to participate in local governance. The foundation of local democracy construction is weak, and the types of channels for citizens to participate in social governance are single and often not smooth. The participation of grassroots people in local government decision-making is not high, which is not conducive to the implementation of people's autonomy. Local governments should focus on cultivating the political participation awareness of the people, encouraging grassroots people to engage in self-management and self-supervision, expanding democratic participation channels at multiple levels, in various fields, and throughout the entire process, releasing the space for people to participate in politics, offer suggestions, and jointly govern, and solve public affairs in a democratic way, effectively absorbing the people into the process of local government governance.

5.3. Decentralization of Central and Local Governments, Reasonable Decentralization of Governance Subjects

Local governments in the United States have a long history of autonomy, and relatively speaking, China places more emphasis on central control. In fact, local autonomy and central control are not in conflict, and the two can achieve dynamic balance through reasonable institutional design. Under the premise of adhering to the unified leadership of the central government, appropriate delegation of power to local governments, [13] reasonable division of responsibilities and authorities at all levels of government, can enhance the flexibility and adaptability of local governments in public affairs governance, fully leverage their local advantages in regional affairs governance, stimulate their enthusiasm, provide better public products and services to the people, better realize public interests, and also enhance the trust of

local people in the central government, strengthen central authority. At the same time, attention should be paid to strengthening supervision of local governments, ensuring the legitimate use of power, and avoiding the drawbacks of excessive autonomy of local governments. On the other hand, the government and other governance entities such as enterprises, social organizations, volunteer departments, and individual citizens also need to achieve the sharing of governance power. Government delegation of power to society can stimulate the governance vitality of all social entities and make up for the shortcomings and shortcomings of the government.[14] In the governance process of local public affairs, the government should clarify its relationship with the market, society, and the masses, appropriately transfer public power, streamline administration and delegate power, and achieve the sharing of public power, equal communication, and mutually beneficial cooperation with various non-governmental entities.

5.4. Accelerate the Transformation of Government Functions and Improve the Quality of Public Services

Local governments in the United States emphasize their public service functions. China's administrative system reform has always called for accelerating the transformation of government functions and building a service-oriented government, but the actual reform measures are more focused on restructuring and streamlining institutions. In the new era, the growing demand for a better life for the people has put forward higher requirements for the quality of public goods and services provided by the government, and relying solely on the government to provide public goods and services can no longer meet the requirements of the times. A major characteristic of local governments in the United States in the supply of public goods and services is marketization and privatization. Local governments distinguish between supply and production functions, and assign a portion of production functions to enterprises and social organizations to reduce administrative costs and improve the quality of public goods and services. One of the core principles of accelerating the transformation of government functions and building a service-oriented local government is to enhance the effective supply of public goods and services.[15] Local governments should clarify their positioning, continue to promote the marketization and privatization process of public goods and services supply, make reasonable use of various market-oriented means such as outsourcing contracts, franchising, and voucher systems, continuously improve the quality of public services, and better respond to the needs of the people.

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