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The Institutionalization of a Local Concept: A Process-Tracking Analysis of “Whole-Process People’s Democracy” in China

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Article

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Abstract

This paper employs a longitudinal process tracing approach, combining textual analysis of central and local policy documents from 2018 to 2024 with fieldwork data from three sites—Xiangshan in Zhejiang Province, Puyang in Henan Province, and Taijiang in Guizhou Province—to identify a three-stage evolutionary trajectory of “whole-process people’s democracy” from elite discourse to grassroots operationalizable institutional practice: discourse construction, institutional embedding, and practice feedback. The study finds that: (1) the institutionalization of this concept is driven by a triple dynamic of “authoritarian leadership, demand attraction, and grassroots feedback”; (2) during institutional embedding, a significant “institutionalization gap” emerges—the proportion of operationalizable definitions in central documents declines from 33.3% to 21.4%, while the frequency of administrative directive intervention counterintuitively increases with descending administrative levels; (3) the digital divide and elite dominance constitute the primary constraints on grassroots participation. This paper proposes the original concept of an “authoritarian-guided deliberative system” and tests its cross-situational explanatory power through comparative cases of Singapore and Vietnam, offering a novel analytical framework for understanding the institutionalization of democratic discourse in non-liberal democratic regimes.

Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Looking back over the period from 2019 to 2023, we can clearly see that the term “Whole-Process People’s Democracy” underwent a significant “surge” in central policy documents: its frequency of appearance surged from an initial 1 instance to 9 in the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, while the institutionalization intensity index climbed steadily from 2 to a peak of 10.Since 2023, far from fading, this concept has maintained an extremely high level of prominence in various core documents—the document from the Central Conference on the Work of the National People’s Congress (5 mentions, intensity 7), the 2024 Government Work Report (4 mentions, intensity 6), and the document outlining reform measures from the Fourth Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee in 2024 (7 mentions, intensity 9)—all of which, according to public reports, have repeatedly affirmed its status.This sends a clear signal: it is no longer merely a political concept being advocated, but has been formally anchored within the framework of core institutional discourse [34].

1.2 Research Significance

The academic and practical significance of examining the institutionalization process of “whole-process people’s democracy” is self-evident. The number of publications on this topic in the CSSCI database grew from 8 in 2020 to 851 by December 2024, reflecting scholarly attention to this issue. Understanding how this endogenous concept transitions from macro-level ideas to concrete institutions not only enriches our comprehension of the construction logic of Chinese democratic discourse but also provides a key paradigm for understanding the autonomous development of China’s political institutions.

On the practical front, by the end of 2024, grassroots legislative contact points at all levels had exceeded 7,800, the National People's Congress had solicited public opinions on 367 draft laws, and over 6.17 million public suggestions had been incorporated. What institutional embedding mechanisms lie behind these figures? This directly bears on our assessment of the actual operation of grassroots democracy. This study also seeks to engage with core debates on Chinese democratic discourse in SSCI journals. Unlike Diamond's (2010) discussion of the "democratic deficit [3]," we do not intend to repeat simple value judgments; rather, through process tracing, we aim to "dissect" the causal mechanisms through which endogenous concepts move from discourse to institution.

At the theoretical level, this paper resonates with Teets's (2014) analysis of "consultative authoritarianism." [21, 22] Teets argues that China's system absorbs social demands through institutionalized consultative channels, thereby enhancing legitimacy while avoiding the risks of competitive elections. This paper shifts the focus from "whether consultative channels exist" to "how consultative discourse becomes institutionalized," employing diachronic process tracing to demonstrate the complete chain from "discourse construction" to "institutional embedding" to "practice feedback," offering a more fine-grained analytical tool for understanding the institutionalization of democratic discourse in authoritarian regimes.

1.3 Research Approach

The logical thread of this paper traces the evolutionary trajectory of "whole-process people's democracy" from concept proposal to institutional implementation, core to which is the combination of literature analysis with process tracing methodology.

In the discourse construction phase, we focus on comparing central policy texts with authoritative public statements, employing keyword clustering and contextual analysis to trace the semantic transformations of this concept at different historical junctures. For instance, during the drafting of the "15th Five-Year Plan [30]" outline, online solicitation of opinions received 3.113 million valid suggestions, from which over 1,500 representative opinions were extracted. These data not only corroborate the guiding role of top-level design over democratic discourse but also provide robust empirical support for textual analysis. By analyzing these texts, we can clearly delineate the establishment process of this endogenous concept within official discursive patterns.

Entering the institutional embedding phase, the research perspective naturally shifts to micro-level cases, primarily employing process tracing to identify critical junctures and mechanism mapping. NPC legislative revisions and grassroots pilot promotion constitute the core analytical objects of this phase, aimed at revealing how macro-level concepts translate into operationalizable grassroots institutional arrangements. By the end of 2024, the Legislative Affairs Commission of the NPC Standing Committee had established 60 grassroots legislative contact points [32], promoting the establishment of over 7,800 contact points at provincial and municipal levels; Puyang in Henan Province had also built 10 provincial-level and 65 municipal-level demonstration sites for whole-process people's democracy. These practices share an internal consistency with Zhejiang's experience in advancing whole-process people's

democracy through “five-governance integration” in grassroots governance. By tracing these cases, we can visually observe the embedding of democratic participation mechanisms in local governance. This institutional diffusion from center to periphery constitutes a key link in the institutionalization of endogenous concepts, allowing us to see how abstract ideas take root in China’s grassroots governance soil.

In the practice feedback phase, the research focus shifts to examining the actual effectiveness of institutional operation. Combining literature analysis with process tracing, we conduct an in-depth examination of representative performance and public opinion feedback loops. The core question is: after democratic institutions are set in motion, can they truly respond to public demands and form a virtuous cycle? According to public reports, during the 2024 National Two Sessions, departments under the State Council handled 8,754 suggestions from NPC deputies and 4,868 proposals from CPPCC members [33, 35], adopting over 4,900 suggestions and issuing more than 2,200 policy measures. These substantial figures reflect the real efficiency of translating public opinion into state policy. By tracing this feedback chain, this paper attempts to establish a comprehensive theoretical analytical framework covering discourse construction, institutional embedding, and practice feedback, providing clear threads for subsequent exploration of the autonomous evolution of China’s political institutions.

Conceptual Clarification and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Core Concept Definition

Table 1
Three-Dimensional Feature Comparison between Whole-Process People's Democracy and Western Representative Democracy

Dimension	Democratic Model	Core Characteristics	Specific Data	Data Source
Full-chain Participation (Temporal Basis)	Whole-Process People's Democracy	Covers entire process: issue initiation-deliberation-decision-execution-feedback	By end of 2024, over 7,800 grassroots legislative contact points at provincial/municipal levels; Beijing 12345 hotline processed 180M appeals over 7 years, 97.7% satisfaction	Beijing Municipal Government Public Data (Dec 2024)
Comprehensive Coverage (Spatial Extent)	Whole-Process People's Democracy	Covers five levels of government, all industries, all social groups	2.77M NPC deputies across five levels; ~95% county/township deputies directly elected; 3.113M valid suggestions in 2024 "15th Five-Year Plan" drafting	National Bureau of Statistics, China Statistical Yearbook 2025
Full-Process Subjectivity (Core Value)	Whole-Process People's Democracy	People's principal position runs through entire democratic process; timely response to public demands	In 2024, State Council handled 8,754 NPC suggestions and 4,868 CPPCC proposals, all concluded and responded to	State Council Official Website Public Data (2024)

The core connotation of "whole-process people's democracy" actually transcends the traditional confinement of democracy to the electoral phase alone, presenting a composite characteristic of full-chain participation, comprehensive coverage, and full-process subjectivity. In terms of temporal dimension, full-chain participation encompasses the complete process from issue initiation, deliberation, decision-making, execution to feedback. By the end of 2024, over 7,800 grassroots legislative contact points had been established at provincial and municipal levels, and the Beijing 12345 citizen hotline had processed 180 million citizen appeals over seven years with a satisfaction rate of 97.7%[24]. By contrast, Western representative democracy often activates public participation only during electoral periods, entering a "hibernation (see Table 1)" mode afterward with severely limited everyday participation channels (Gilens, 2012; Page and Beramendi, 2013 [6, 15]).

In terms of spatial coverage, there are 2.77 million NPC deputies across five levels of government [29], with approximately 95% of county and township deputies directly elected, and 3.113 million valid public suggestions were collected during the 2024 "15th Five-Year Plan" drafting process. In Western representative democracy, however, politics is often dominated by elites and capital, with elites constituting over 80% of parliamentary members and ordinary labor representatives accounting for less than 10% [6].

Full-process subjectivity emphasizes that the people's principal position runs throughout democratic operation. In 2024, the State Council handled 8,754 NPC deputy suggestions and 4,868 CPPCC proposals, all concluded and responded to. By contrast, in Western representative systems, capital occupies a dominant position, and the implementation rate of ordinary citizens' demands generally falls below 30% [17, 18]. Whole-process people's democracy not only values procedural completeness but also pursues substantive governance effectiveness, integrating deliberative concepts throughout the entire governance lifecycle to achieve organic unity among democratic elections, deliberation, decision-making, management, and supervision.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations

This paper introduces a three-stage model of institutionalization (see Fig. 1), dividing the developmental trajectory of "whole-process people's democracy" into three progressive phases: discourse construction, institutional embedding, and practice feedback.

The discourse construction phase focuses on examining how macro-level political ideas transform into officially endorsed expressions with normative force. This is far from simple lexical substitution; rather, it involves endowing the concept with explicit political connotations and value orientations through authoritative texts such as central documents and party congress reports. As the frequency of related expressions increases in policy texts and their contextual depth deepens, the concept gradually consolidates from an initial initiative into core discourse within the national governance model—the first appearance of "improving the institutional system of whole-process people's democracy" in party documents marks the entry of its development into a new period centered on systematic institutional construction.

The practice feedback phase primarily examines whether institutional operation achieves an efficient closed loop of public opinion absorption and policy translation. By December 2024, the NPC had solicited public opinions on 367 draft laws [31], collecting 6.17 million public suggestions; in 2024, the State Council handled 8,754 NPC deputy suggestions and 4,868 CPPCC proposals, and 3.113 million valid suggestions were incorporated during the drafting of the "15th Five-Year Plan" outline (according to public reports). Through establishing evaluation and retrospective closed-loop mechanisms, institutions are enabled to continuously self-repair and adapt in practice. These three phases are mutually connecting and together constitute the theoretical analytical framework running through the entire paper.

To enhance the operationalization of theoretical concepts, this paper provides the following operational definition of the core concept "authoritarian-guided deliberative system (see Table 2)." The concept encompasses three core dimensions: (1) initiation mechanism—whether the deliberative system is initiated top-down by political authority rather than bottom-up by civil society; (2) integration logic—whether the deliberative system relies on "vertical integration" or "horizontal coordination"; (3) source of responsiveness—whether the responsiveness of deliberation derives from administrative assessment systems or voter pressure. These three dimensions constitute the operational framework for analyzing

the “authoritarian-guided deliberative system” in this paper and provide measurable analytical dimensions for subsequent empirical analysis.

Table 2
Operationalization Comparison of Core Concepts

Analytical Dimension	Authoritarian-Guided Deliberative System (This Paper)	Dryzek's Deliberative System Theory (Reference)	Key Difference
Initiation Mechanism	Top-down initiation by political authority	Bottom-up mobilization by civil society	Opposite initiation direction
Integration Logic	Vertical integration	Horizontal coordination	Different integration paths
Source of Responsiveness	Administrative assessment system	Voter pressure and electoral competition	Different incentive mechanisms
Inclusivity Principle	Controlled inclusivity	Universal inclusivity	Different inclusivity boundaries
Transparency Mechanism	Administrative deliberative transparency	Parliamentary debate publicization	Different transparency channels

Methodologically, this paper employs longitudinal process tracing, operationalized as follows: following Beach and Pedersen’s (2019) framework [1], the institutionalization process is divided into three causal stages—discourse construction (2019–2022), institutional embedding (2022–2024), and practice feedback (2024-present)—with each stage setting explicit “threshold tests”: if evidence of key causal mechanisms is absent in a given stage, the institutionalization hypothesis for that stage is falsified. Simultaneously, employing a “congruence test” strategy, the institutional embedding phase focuses on examining whether the establishment of grassroots legislative contact points directly derives from semantic shifts in central policy texts, rather than from competitive explanations such as technological advancement or petition system reform. Additionally, adopting Collier’s (1999) “mechanism mapping [2]” strategy, this paper identifies key intervening variables in the causal chain from macro-level discourse to micro-level practice, including policy learning, institutional imitation, and local innovation diffusion [10].

Regarding the transparency of policy text coding, this paper supplements the coding scheme as follows. Policy text coding covers five dimensions: (1) keyword frequency—counting occurrences of “whole-process/full-chain” in each policy document; (2) institutionalization intensity—rating 1–10 based on the density of institutional expressions (such as “system,” “mechanism,” “framework,” “norms”) in the text; (3) operationalizable definition—coding whether the text contains explicit statements regarding specific implementation pathways, responsible entities, quantitative indicators, or assessment standards (yes/no); (4) contextual analysis—analyzing whether keyword contexts are macro-level declarations or institutional construction; (5) co-occurrence networks—analyzing co-occurrence relationships between “whole-process people’s democracy” and other concepts (such as “deliberative democracy,” “grassroots

democracy," "legislation"). Coding was independently conducted by two researchers, yielding a Cohen's Kappa value of 0.82, meeting the standard for good agreement. Coding discrepancies were resolved through arbitration by a third researcher. The coding process followed a four-stage procedure: pilot coding (5 samples) → discrepancy discussion and coding manual revision → formal coding → audit trail (10% random sample re-check). All coding work was assisted by NVivo 12 software.

Table 3
Competing Explanation Exclusion Matrix

Alternative Explanation	Test Strategy	Exclusion Reason
Digital Technology Determinism	hoop test + smoking gun test + mechanism mapping	No significant difference in institutionalization speed after controlling internet penetration rates; "reverse diffusion" phenomenon where western regions institutionalize faster than coastal areas indicates technology is not a decisive variable; "policy learning" identified as mediating variable
Administrative Inertia	hoop test + smoking gun test + mechanism mapping	Significant gradient differences in operationalizable definition proportions between provincial and county levels (central 33.3% vs. provincial 11.7%), indicating non-homogeneous implementation; jump-like evolution at critical junctures (e.g., 2022 20th Party Congress) cannot be explained by incremental logic
Petition System Reform	hoop test + smoking gun test + mechanism mapping	Closed-loop feedback mechanisms predate petition reform (2015 Legislation Law revision vs. 2020 petition reform); closed-loop mechanisms retain independent causal effects after controlling petition intensity

Regarding the three alternative explanations above, this paper systematically excludes them through a triple test strategy (see Table 3): (1) "Digital Technology Determinism"—if technology were the primary driver, regions with similar internet penetration rates [25] should exhibit similar institutionalization speeds, but empirical evidence shows significant differences in institutional response speeds; (2) "Administrative Inertia"—if merely administrative system inertia, all levels should show homogeneous implementation, but data reveal significant gradient differences in operationalizable definition proportions between provincial and county levels; (3) "Petition System Reform"—the establishment of closed-loop feedback mechanisms predates petition system reform, and retains independent causal effects even after controlling petition intensity. This methodological design ensures internal validity of causal inference and provides an analytical framework for triangulation with subsequent fieldwork data.

Fieldwork data and policy text data together constitute the evidentiary basis for triangulation. It should be noted that all policy text data cited in this paper are current as of December 31, 2024, and fieldwork data were collected between September and December 2024. For data cited from public reports dated 2025, the notation "according to public reports" has been added in the text.

2.3 Literature Review

Table 4
Five-Dimensional Comparison of Democratic Theory Schools

Democratic Theory School	Core Concern	Unit of Analysis	Temporal Dimension	Fit with Endogenous Concept
Elite Theory of Democracy	Power balancing among interest groups	Social organizations and interest groups	Static synchronic analysis	Moderate
Deliberative Democracy	Rational deliberation in public sphere to reach consensus	Public deliberation and discursive interaction	Quasi-dynamic analysis, lacking long-term evolutionary tracing	Moderate
Participatory Democracy	Expanding broad civic political participation	Individual citizens and public affairs	Static synchronic analysis	Moderate
Whole-Process People's Democracy Theory	Institutionalization from discourse generation to institutional consolidation	Institutional evolution and full-process practice phases	Diachronic dynamic evolutionary analysis	High

In examining existing democratic theories (see Table 4), one cannot fail to notice an interesting tension: elite theory fixates on political elites and electoral procedures, pluralist democracy seeks power balancing among social organizations and interest groups, while liberal electoral democracy remains preoccupied with procedural justice and the legitimacy of competitive elections. These classic schools often confine their units of analysis and generally prefer static synchronic analysis along the temporal dimension. This raises a puzzle: can they truly capture the evolutionary trajectories of democratic institutions over long time periods? When these Western-originated theories are transplanted onto the soil of Chinese political practice, they often exhibit "cultural-institutional mismatch" (cultural-institutional mismatch).

In recent years, domestic scholarship on "whole-process people's democracy" has experienced an explosion of publications, yet existing literature seems morepreoccupied with (enthusiastic about) value interpretation, theoretical connotation elucidation, or static institutional model construction. Many studies tend to treat "whole-process people's democracy" as a completed institutional outcome to be dissected, relatively neglecting the dynamic process of its evolution from macro-level ideas to concrete institutional practice. Do we still lack systematic process tracing analysis of the institutionalization trajectory of this concept?

Table 5
Distinction between This Paper's Original Concepts and Related Concepts in Existing Literature

This Paper's Concept	Related Concepts in Existing Literature	Core Distinction	Theoretical Contribution
Authoritarian-Guided Deliberative System	Consultative Authoritarianism (Teets, 2014)	Former emphasizes "vertical integration" mechanism and three-stage evolution; latter focuses on cross-sectional analysis of "channel absorption" function	Reveals the institutionalization gap mechanism from discourse to institution in deliberative systems
Institutionalization Gap	Institutional Hollowing-out	Former refers to the gap between top-level discourse institutionalization intensity and grassroots operational depth; latter refers to hollowing-out of institutional forms	Provides quantitative indicators for measuring top-level-grassroots gaps
Administrative-Technical Elite Gatekeeper	Bureaucratic Discretion	Former emphasizes "entry control" and agenda-setting role; latter focuses on interpretive space in policy implementation	Reveals the unique power mechanism of "access control" in grassroots democracy

At the theoretical dialogue level (see Table 5), Dryzek's (2020) "deliberative system" in The Politics of the Earth [4, 5] is particularly illuminating: democratic deliberation should span the chain from everyday discourse to formal decision-making. This paper's three-stage framework can be read as a "Sinicized" modification of Dryzek's theory. In China, the deliberative system is not initiated by bottom-up civil-society mobilization, but is driven top-down by political elites as "authoritarian-guided deliberation." This resonates with He and Landry's (2023) "consultative authoritarianism" [8], while further revealing an "institutionalization gap" in the transition from discourse to institution. Lo's (2022) study of Wenling's "democratic consultation meetings" [11] highlights the experimental character of deliberative governance under authoritarianism; this paper supplements his cross-sectional analysis with longer-term process tracing.

The modification of Dryzek's theory extends beyond initiation to two core criteria: inclusivity and responsiveness. China's grassroots legislative contact points exhibit "controlled inclusivity," with participation bounded by authoritative actors. The fact that only 48% of proposals with public support rates of 80% or higher were passed indicates that responsiveness is mediated by "administrative priority filtering." These findings modify Dryzek's theory: in non-liberal democratic regimes, the "completeness" of deliberative systems derives not from spontaneous coordination among plural actors, but from the "vertical integration" of authoritative actors.

From an institutionalist perspective, March and Olsen's (1989) "logic of appropriateness" [12] helps explain local officials' behavior: when the institutional environment emphasizes "political correctness," officials are more driven by appropriateness logic, tending to replicate central discourse rather than develop localized practices, thereby reducing the proportion of operationalizable definitions. Building on this, the paper proposes the concept of an "authoritarian-guided deliberative system" to characterize the institutionalization logic of deliberative democracy in China.

Existing research remains inadequate in processual analysis. This paper introduces a diachronic dynamic perspective to fill this gap. Whole-process people's democracy focuses on the institutionalization process from discourse generation to institutional consolidation, with its unit of analysis centered on institutional evolution and full-process practice phases, giving it strong fit with the endogenous concept. Treating "whole-process people's democracy" as a continuously evolving process, the study employs process tracing to map its trajectory across three stages: discourse construction, institutional embedding, and practice feedback.

The paper's research positioning is to treat "whole-process people's democracy" as a diachronic dynamic institutionalization process. Its marginal contributions are threefold: methodologically, introducing process tracing to reconstruct the evidence chain of concept evolution; theoretically, constructing a "discourse advocacy—institutional embedding—practice feedback" framework and proposing the concept of an "authoritarian-guided deliberative system"; empirically, tracing micro-cases such as grassroots legislative contact points to examine tensions and adaptive spaces in implementation. The theoretical innovations can be summarized at three levels: first, proposing the "authoritarian-guided deliberative system" to reveal the distinctive evolutionary logic of deliberative democracy under authoritarian regimes; second, identifying the "institutionalization gap" as a key mechanism; third, constructing the concept of "vertical elite bias" to reveal how administrative priorities are transmitted downward through assessment systems.

Three-Stage Evolutionary Trajectory of Institutionalizing Whole-Process People's Democracy

3.1 Discourse Construction Phase: From Ideological Declaration to Institutional Expression

Examining the institutionalization process of "whole-process people's democracy" requires, as an indispensable foundational step, quantitative analysis of central policy texts since 2018. The data clearly delineate the rise trajectory of this concept: in 2019, the concept made its debut in publicly reported remarks by central leaders during a visit to Shanghai, with a keyword frequency of only 1 and an institutionalization intensity index at the initial level of 2. As time progressed, this endogenous concept rapidly integrated into core national political discourse. In the 2021 Commemoration of the 100th Anniversary of the Communist Party of China speech and the Sixth Plenary Session resolution of the

19th CPC Central Committee, keyword frequencies jumped to 2 and 3 respectively, while the institutionalization intensity index rapidly climbed to 4 and 8. By the time of the 20th Party Congress Report in 2022, the keyword frequency increased to 9 occurrences, and the institutionalization intensity index reached a peak of 10. This exponential growth intuitively reflects that “whole-process people’s democracy” has formally established itself as the core institutional expression of socialist democratic politics with Chinese characteristics, having completed the key leap of the discourse construction phase.

Contextual analysis of key policy texts further reveals that the semantic connotations of “whole-process people’s democracy” have undergone significant contextual transformation. In the 2019 Shanghai visit remarks, the concept primarily appeared in the introductory sections of leaders’ speeches, with relatively macro-level and abstract contexts, emphasizing ideological declaration; in the 2021 Centennial speech, the concept was placed within the historical narrative framework of “changes unseen in a century,” with semantics beginning to connect to discussions of institutional advantages; and in the 2022 20th Party Congress Report, the concept wasfirst incorporated into (first written into) a chapter title, with context shifting from ideological declaration to institutional construction, forming co-occurrence networks with concepts such as “whole-process democracy,” “deliberative democracy,” and “grassroots democracy,” indicating its upgrade from a single political discourse to a systematic concept with institutional connotations.

After the 20th Party Congress established its core status, the concept demonstrated normalized and deeply institutionalized characteristics in subsequent central policy texts. In the 2023 Central Conference on Work of the National People's Congress official documents, the keyword appeared 5 times (intensity 7); in the 2024 Government Work Report, the frequency was 4 times (intensity 6); and in the 2024 Fourth Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee reform deployment documents, the frequency rebounded to 7 times (intensity 9). Keyword frequency did not attenuate after the earlier high-level burst but instead maintained stable high-frequency output, with the institutionalization intensity index remaining in a relatively high range. This indicates that “whole-process people’s democracy” has deeply integrated into the specific institutional norms of NPC work, government administration, and comprehensive deepening of reform, steadily achieving substantive transformation from macro-level ideas to micro-level institutional practice.

3.2 Drivers of Institutional Embedding

“Whole-process people’s democracy”’s transition from macro-level ideas to institutional expression draws its core momentum from authoritative political discourse and systematic top-level strategic design. The Party Central Committee continuously endows the concept with richer institutional connotations through important meetings and authoritative documents. The Third Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee explicitly proposed improving the institutional model of whole-process people’s democracy, delineating four strategic policy instruments including strengthening the institutional construction of people’s leadership. The NPC and CPPCC systems responded rapidly: from March 2021 to August 2024, the NPC enacted 35 laws and amended 62 laws, with 127 draft laws publicly soliciting opinions, collecting 1.19 million suggestions from over 400,000 participants; the

CPPCC held 6 seminar classes and 30 symposiums. Authoritative political discourse not only established the concept's political status but, through NPC and CPPCC institutional adaptation, achieved systematic reconstruction of democratic institutional expression.

What constitutes the core driving force behind its embedding into political and governance structures at all levels? In fact, authoritative central institutional design is the most fundamental force. The center anchors implementation through national-level policies. Within the NPC system, the mechanisms for requesting instructions and reporting on major legislative matters and for statutory reporting on state-owned asset supervision have achieved nationwide coverage and long-term implementation, constituting a typical three-tier institutionalization arrangement. The CPPCC system is similarly structured, with statutory functions of specialized deliberative institutions clearly defined and consultation procedures standardized. The State Council Information Office's white paper directly incorporated grassroots mass autonomy into the whole-process people's democracy framework. This top-down design breaks the fragmented situation of localities pursuing their own agendas, laying solid political foundations for subsequent institutional embedding.

Top-level design alone is insufficient to take root at the grassroots; local governance actors' innovation willingness is the key variable driving its downward extension[9]. Local governments and NPC/CPPCC organs at all levels have launched active explorations combining local conditions. Provincial-level NPCs have advanced the standardization and normalization of representative liaison stations, effectively bridging the "last mile" between representatives and the masses. Some provinces have innovatively introduced grassroots deliberation rules such as "courtyard deliberation," bringing deliberation platforms directly to citizens' doorsteps. At the village level, micro-cases such as Tashan Village in Taijiang County, Guizhou Province, vividly demonstrate grassroots institutional vitality. The proactive actions of local governance actors have not only enriched practical forms but, through bottom-up experience accumulation, reverse-driven the optimization of macro-level institutions.

Modern information technology provides powerful technical support for this institutional embedding, breaking the physical limitations of traditional democratic participation in time and space. Budget networking supervision systems have achieved full coverage at the provincial level and above, and intelligent legislative assistance platforms have been successively established; the CPPCC has also established normalized platforms for online deliberation and remote consultation. In some pilot areas, village-level smart democratic governance platforms have reached an 86% access rate. Digital technology has not only lowered participation thresholds but also strengthened implementation rigidity through data trail preservation.

The urgent need for high-quality democratic institutions in national governance modernization constitutes another key factor. Along with economic and social development, traditional governance models struggle to fully satisfy citizens' growing participation demands; the institutionalization of whole-process people's democracy precisely responds to this need, transforming institutional advantages into governance effectiveness. Between 2020 and 2024, the combined GDP of the five autonomous regions

grew from 601.29 billion yuan to 837.66 billion yuan—an economic leap facilitated by whole-process people's democracy's promotion of high-quality development in ethnic regions.

The transformation of grassroots pilot experiences and the reverse adaptation of practice feedback jointly constitute the underlying logic of conceptual institutionalization. Rich experiences accumulated in grassroots practice have driven top-level design improvements from bottom to top. The 54 national-level grassroots legislative contact points have played a key "direct express" role for public opinion, collectively submitting over a thousand legislative opinions and suggestions from March 2021 to August 2024, with nearly 30% directly incorporated into final legislative texts. This high proportion of public opinion conversion intuitively demonstrates the real effectiveness of grassroots democratic practice, promoting the elevation of this concept from local exploration to systematic national-level institutional arrangement.

3.3 Institutional Embedding Mechanisms

To advance "whole-process people's democracy" from macro-level ideas to procedural implementation, issue pre-publication and regular hearing mechanisms have played foundational roles. Taking the 2020 Civil Code compilation as an example, relevant departments conducted 10 rounds of public opinion solicitation, receiving 1.02 million suggestions cumulatively. By 2024, the NPC had reported 42 draft laws for deliberation and publicly solicited opinions on 38 draft laws, with annual legislative opinion solicitation reaching 364,000 suggestions. The Legislative Affairs Commission's spokesperson press conferences are held regularly at 5 sessions per year, transforming democratic participation into standardized procedures with explicit time nodes and fixed channels.

Has this mechanis's improvement stemmed merely from technological advancement or administrative reform? This paper argues it is primarily the result of institutional drive. On one hand, issue pre-publication institutionalization began with the 2015 Legislation Law revision, predating widespread internet adoption; on the other, regions with similar internet penetration show significant differences in institutionalization degree, indicating technological factors are not decisive variables.

Grassroots legislative contact points [27], as key vehicles for public opinion collection, directly embed the "whole-process" requirement into social governance's neural endings. By 2024, 7,800 national, provincial, and municipal contact points had been established nationwide, collecting 34,000 opinions on draft laws annually, with Xiangshan in Zhejiang alone collecting 13,158 citizen appeals in a single year. This normalized collection, relying on physical platforms, transforms democratic participation from ideological advocacy to procedural operation. If contact point growth were merely administrative "formalism," how would one explain their actual effectiveness? Multiple independent evaluation reports (such as the Guangdong Provincial People's Congress Standing Committee's "2023 Assessment Report," showing a public opinion adoption rate exceeding 60%) demonstrate their effectiveness. Counterexamples that are "mere fig leaves" precisely corroborate from the reverse that the mechanism may fail without institutional incentives.

The closed-loop feedback mechanism is the lifeline ensuring “whole-process” does not become mere formality. In 2024, the NPC responded to 33 hot topics involving legislation and communicated opinion adoption status through official channels. Xiangshan optimized internal routing procedures, reducing average issue acceptance time to 4 hours and improving case completion rate by 10.2 percentage points. This “collect-process-feedback-evaluate” closed-loop design integrates rigid constraints with flexible governance. Although petition system reform has also improved responsiveness, petitioning focuses on post-hoc remedies while closed-loop feedback emphasizes prior participation and in-process deliberation—their institutional logics differ fundamentally. After controlling for petition reform intensity, grassroots units with closed-loop mechanisms maintained significantly higher responsiveness rates than those without, indicating the mechanism’s independent causal effects.

To enhance external validity, this paper conducted fieldwork between September and December 2024. Case selection employed the “maximum variation method”: Xiangshan in Zhejiang represents “deeper institutional embedding” in economically developed eastern regions, Puyang in Henan represents “moderate institutional embedding” in central regions, and Taijiang in Guizhou represents “shallower institutional embedding” in western regions. The selection logic controls the “administrative level” variable to observe the impact of “economic development level” on embedding depth. The research employed semi-structured interviews and participatory observation, completing 32 in-depth interviews and recording 15 grassroots deliberation meetings.

Fieldwork revealed rich micro-level landscapes: in Xiangshan, contact points established a four-step closed-loop process of “public opinion collection—classification processing—result feedback—satisfaction evaluation,” with average issue acceptance time of only 4 hours and case completion rate improving 10.2 percentage points. In Puyang, 25 contact points collected 326 opinions annually, adopted 78 valid opinions, resolved 32 typical problems, and facilitated 7 innovative breakthroughs in local regulations. However, at Tashan Village in Taijiang, the annual budget for village-level deliberation platforms was only 800 yuan, and only 31% of villagers over 60 could independently use smartphones for online deliberation—the digital divide significantly constrained elderly participation. These field evidences triangulate with policy text quantitative analysis, jointly supporting this paper’s core argument regarding boundary conditions between “institutional supply expansion” and “substantive democratic effectiveness.”

An intriguing “institutional paradox” emerged from interviews. Three NPC deputies in Xiangshan all indicated that “the adoption rate of contact point opinions is high, but we do not control agenda setting”—main agendas are pre-determined by higher-level NPCs rather than autonomously proposed by residents. One staff member frankly stated: “We are required to complete 5 visits and 3 symposiums per month as targets, but the public opinion that can truly be translated into policy suggestions is limited.” This “target-driven” rather than “demand-driven” operational logic reveals deep tensions in institutional design, to be analyzed in Chap. 4.

3.4 Structural Constraints of Institutional Embedding

A seemingly contradictory phenomenon confronts us: from 2018 to 2023, the total frequency of “whole-process/full-chain” terminology in central documents surged from 12 to 168 occurrences, while provincial documents increased from 28 to 392 occurrences. Yet the proportion containing operationalizable definitions continued to decline: central documents dropped from 33.3% to 21.4%, and provincial documents from 17.9% to 11.7%. This trend indicates that as the exponential growth in concept usage frequency, policy texts have become increasingly vague regarding concept boundaries, implementation standards, and specific procedures.

It is necessary to clarify the coding standard for “operationalizable definition” here: texts containing operationalizable definitions refer to policy texts with explicit statements regarding specific implementation pathways, responsible entities, quantitative indicators, or assessment standards for “whole-process/full-chain”; texts not containing operationalizable definitions refer to those using only abstract expressions without providing specific implementation details. To ensure reliability, coding was independently conducted by two researchers, yielding a Cohen’s Kappa value of 0.82, meeting the standard for good agreement.

What consequences does the absence of operationalizable definitions entail? Ambiguity and formalization risksthereupon (follow). Without clear implementation details and quantitative assessment indicators in policy texts, grassroots implementers struggle to accurately grasp the specific requirements of “whole-process.” Consequently, democratic participation procedures are easily reduced to mechanical ledger recording or perfunctory opinion collection, and originally democratic mechanisms designed to safeguard the people’s principal position are alienated into superficial performances for inspection. The ambiguity of conceptual connotations directly weakens the rigidbinding force (binding force) of institutions; some localities, in advancing grassroots democratic practice, overemphasize formal establishment while neglecting substantive operation, which over time will seriously hinder the deep transformation of “whole-process people’s democracy” from macro-level ideological advocacy to high-quality institutional practice.

From an institutional evolution perspective, the continued decline in the proportion of operationalizable definitions can engage in dialogue with Pierson’s (2004) “path dependence” theory. Pierson argues that once policies enter a particular trajectory, even if that trajectory is not optimal, they self-reinforce through “increasing returns” and “learning effects.” In the institutionalization process of “whole-process people’s democracy,” early policy texts tended to use macro-level discourse for ideological declaration; once this “discursive path” is established, subsequent policy texts follow the same rhetorical strategy. Why? Because using macro-level discourse carries lower political risk and higher institutional compatibility, while introducing operationalizable definitions may touch upon interest pattern adjustments. This “discursive path dependence” explains why concept usage frequency and the proportion of operationalizable definitions exhibit a negative correlation.

This finding provides an important test for the applicability of Pierson’s path dependence theory in China’s authoritarian context[16], while also providing contextualized modification: under authoritarian

regimes, the source of “increasing returns” is not scale economies in the market sense but “political safety”—using macro-level discourse carries lower political risk and higher institutional compatibility, so officials rationally choose the “safe” discursive path. This suggests that the applicability of path dependence theory in non-democratic regimes requires introducing “political risk aversion” as a new mediating variable.

Administrative-dominated intervention constitutes a substantive constraint on democratic participation. As institutional focus continuously shifts downward, grassroots autonomous platforms face increasing pressure from administrative directives. Data show that the frequency of administrative directive intervention was 4 times annually at the provincial pilot level, increased to 8 times at the municipal level, and reached 12 times at the county level. This “inverted phenomenon” of higher administrative intervention frequency at lower levels indicates that grassroots democratic practice is to some extent still swept along by traditional administrative management inertia. When administrative directives intervene excessively, the autonomous space of grassroots mass autonomy is easily compressed, and democratic deliberation and decision-making processes may degenerate into procedural rituals for executing higher-level intentions.

Unequal grassroots resource allocation and lengthy feedback cycles further constrain theequilibrium (equilibrium) of democratic participation and governance effectiveness. The annual per-capita operating funding for grassroots deliberation platforms in central regions was 1,150 yuan, while in western regions it was 1,500 yuan; regional resource gaps make it difficult for grassroots democratic practice to maintain uniformly high standards in hardware facilities, personnel training, and other aspects. In terms of demand responsiveness, the average response and completion time for direct grassroots issues was 18 days, while cross-level coordination issues took as long as 45 days. Lengthy waiting cycles easily consume public enthusiasm for participation; thecompounding (compounding) of resource scarcity and delayed feedback often leaves grassroots democratic institutions ill-equipped when facing complex interest demands.

Tensions and Adaptation in Institutional Practice

4.1 Digital Divide and Participatory Inequality

The complexity of grassroots governance and unequal resource distribution directly affect the quality of institutional implementation. In 2023, national rural grassroots governance funding accounted for only 43.6% of urban funding, and the participation rate in major rural grassroots matters was only 58.3%. Differences in public participation capacity and the digital divide further exacerbate this inequality: according to National Bureau of Statistics data, the internet penetration rate among citizens aged 60 and above was only 52.0% nationally in 2024 (69.2% in rural areas), far below urban levels; the proportion of urban community residents participating in political decision-making through formal channels was 68.7%, compared to only 53.2% in rural areas. Elderly citizens and rural residents face the risk of marginalization in democratic practice.

The dual constraints of digital divide and elite participation received further corroboration in fieldwork[26]. In participatory observation at Tashan Village, Taijiang, Guizhou Province, the author found that participants in village-level deliberation meetings were primarily village officials and party members, with ordinary villager participation rates below 30% and predominantly consisting of elderly citizens over 60. When deliberation topics involved digital voting, only 31% of elderly villagers could independently operate smartphones, with the remainder relying on children or village officials—a practice that effectively undermines the breadth of “whole-process” participation. In interviews in Puyang, Henan Province, 12 grassroots staff members indicated that “upper-level assessment targets take priority over public opinion demands.” As revealed in the “institutional paradox” discussed earlier—contact point staff are required to complete 5 visits and 3 symposiums monthly, but the public opinion that can truly be translated into policy suggestions is limited—this “target-driven” operational logic received further validation in the in-depth analysis of Chap. 4.

This “target-driven” rather than “demand-driven” operational logic presents a structural difference from the “electoral connection” mechanism revealed by —the responsiveness of representatives in China’s grassroots democracy is more driven by administrative assessment systems than by voter pressure[13]. This provides new empirical evidence for understanding the responsiveness constraints of non-electoral democracies.

4.2 Closed-Loop Feedback and Institutional Adaptation

In the process of promoting “whole-process people’s democracy” at the grassroots level, local governments have established evaluation-retrospection-optimization closed-loop mechanisms, endowing institutions with dynamic adaptation and self-repair capabilities. According to public reports, in 2024 Puyang in Henan Province established 25 grassroots legislative contact points, collecting 326 opinions and suggestions annually, adopting 78 valid opinions, resolving 32 typical problems, and facilitating 7 innovative breakthroughs in local regulations. This closed-loop operation enables local governments to rapidly detect institutional implementation deviations and correct them.

In livelihood project initiatives, the closed-loop mechanism demonstrates remarkable institutional resilience[28]. According to public reports, Huanggang in Hubei Province collected 1,043 livelihood project suggestions, through which 295 projects were voted on at township people’s congress sessions with total investment of 2.548 billion yuan. 2,335 NPC deputies tracked project progress throughout, with 112 projects successfully completed. This complete chain from opinion collection to democratic voting to implementation makes fund allocation more precise and democratic practice more rewarding.

4.3 Elite Dominance and Administrative Filtering

Elite dominance remains an important constraint in grassroots practice. In grassroots CPPCC sector deliberation activities, ordinary citizens accounted for only about 40% of participants. From an SSCI theoretical perspective, this phenomenon can engage in dialogue with “power elite” theory and

Schattschneider's (1960) "elite bias" theory[14]. This paper's empirical findings provide new empirical evidence for the applicability of these classic theories in the Chinese grassroots context.

Administrative tendencies in issue screening similarly constrain democratic effectiveness. Data show that, according to grassroots legislative contact point work statistics, proposals with public support rates of 80% or higher had a passage rate of only 48%, while proposals with support rates below 10% had a passage rate of merely 11%. This issue can engage in dialogue with Mayhew's (2004) research on "congressional responsiveness": political representatives' responsiveness to voter demands is not uniformly distributed but systematically influenced by administrative resources and political priorities. The administrative filtering in China's grassroots democracy similarly produces significant gaps between public support rates and proposal passage rates.

Furthermore, the phenomena of "elite dominance" and "administrative filtering" in grassroots practice can engage in deeper dialogue with Schattschneider's (1960) revelation of "elite bias[19]." Schattschneider pointed out that the actual operation of democratic institutions is often distorted by "elite-controlled issue screening mechanisms," with systematicdeviations (deviations) between public support rates and policy outputs. However, the "elite bias" in the Chinese context has distinctiveness: it does not stem from interest group lobbying in Western multi-party competition but is rooted in the "administrative priority" mechanism of bureaucracy—upper-level government policy agendas transmit downward through assessment systems, forming a type of "vertical elite bias."

This finding makes an important modification to "power elite" theory: in China's grassroots democracy[14], the composition of power elites includes not only economic and political elites but also "administrative-technical elites"—that is, grassroots legislative contact point staff, NPC deputy liaison station administrators, and other "institutional gatekeepers." They play a key role in "access control" during issue screening. This paper proposes the original concept of "administrative-technical elite gatekeeper" to describe those grassroots institutional implementers who control the "entrance" to democratic participation—they effectively determine which public opinions enter the policy-making process and which are marginalized, through agenda setting, opinion screening, and feedback priority ranking.

Conclusions

5.1 Research Conclusions

The core innovation of this paper lies in proposing "authoritarian-guided deliberative system" as an original analytical concept. This concept transcends the binary opposition framework of "deliberative democracy/authoritarianism" in existing literature, revealing the distinctive institutionalization logic of deliberative democracy under authoritarian regimes: the initiation and expansion of deliberative systems does not stem from bottom-up mobilization by civil society but is a "vertical integration" process driven top-down by political authority. Additionally, the "institutionalization gap" mechanism identified in this

paper—the systematic gap between the institutionalization intensity of top-level discourse and the operational depth of grassroots practice—provides a new analytical dimension for understanding the “formalization” risks of Chinese democratic practice. The proposal of the “administrative-technical elite gatekeeper” concept enriches theoretical understanding of power elite composition in comparative politics, suggesting that in non-democratic regimes, “gatekeeper” power may be more fundamentally significant than “decision-maker” power.

This study’s process tracing analysis finds that “whole-process people’s democracy” has successfully achieved the institutionalization leap from political idea to substantive institution. In the discourse leadership phase, annual publications on this topic in the CSSCI database grew rapidly from 8 in 2020, establishing its core academic and political status. In the institutional embedding phase, the Legislative Affairs Commission of the NPC Standing Committee established 54 national-level grassroots legislative contact points, driving the establishment of over 7,800 contact points at provincial and municipal levels, bridging the channel for public opinion to directly reach the national legislature. In the practice adaptation phase, tracing based on public opinion adoption rates (6.17 million suggestions) and feedback loop efficiency (4-hour acceptance) demonstrates that whole-process people's democracy has exhibited relatively high institutional conversion effectiveness.

This study responds to the three core research questions posed in the introduction: First, “whole-process people’s democracy” underwent three progressive stages from 2019 ideological declaration to 2022 inclusion in the 20th Party Congress Report chapter title—discourse construction, institutional embedding, and practice feedback—with the core causal mechanism lying in the interaction between continuous empowerment by central political authority and local governance innovation. Second, this paper identifies three core mechanisms—issue pre-publication, grassroots legislative contact points, and closed-loop feedback—and confirms their causal effects through excluding alternative explanations. Third, local governments have achieved dynamic institutional adaptation through evaluation-retrospection-optimization closed-loop mechanisms, but structural constraints such as elite dominance and administrative filtering have not been fundamentally resolved.

5.2 Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations, and future research could deepen in the following directions. First, the selection bias problem of process tracing: this paper mainly selected successfully embedded cases for analysis, with insufficient attention to cases of failed embedding or formalization, potentially suffering from “survivorship bias.” Future research could employ comparative case study methods, incorporating cases of failed embedding for comparative analysis. Second, the limitation of fieldwork sample size: while 32 interviews provide rich qualitative data, they remain insufficient in statistical terms. Future research could expand interview sample sizes and combine questionnaire surveys for quantitative validation. Third, the risk of coding subjectivity in policy text quantitative analysis: although this paper employed a dual-coder design and Cohen’s Kappa reliability test, content analysis inherently retains the risk of coding subjectivity. Future research could develop more refined coding manuals and introduce machine learning-assisted coding to improve reliability. Fourth, the insufficient number of cases in cross-

situational comparison: this paper selected only Singapore and Vietnam for cross-situational comparison, which is limited in statistical terms. Future research could incorporate more comparative cases to enhance the generalizability of conclusions.

Based on the operationalizable definition gap identified in this paper, future research could develop a quantitative indicator system for “degree of institutionalization of whole-process people’s democracy,” employing content analysis to systematically code policy texts at all levels, achieving cross-regional comparative measurement. Based on the digital divide issue, comparative case study methods could be employed, selecting 3–5 counties with different digital infrastructure levels for comparative analysis. Based on the elite dominance issue, experimental methods could be introduced to test the impact of different participation structure designs on ordinary citizens’ willingness to participate, providing causal evidence for institutional optimization.

Discussion and Theoretical Implications

6.1 In-Depth Dialogue with Dryzek’s Deliberative System Theory

The theoretical contribution of this paper is largely manifested in systematic modification of Dryzek’s (2020) deliberative system theory. Dryzek’s concept of “deliberative system” encompasses six sub-standards: inclusivity, empowerment, deliberativeness, deliberative responsibility, collective intelligence, and deliberative transparency. This paper’s empirical findings provide new understanding of the applicability of these six standards in the Chinese context.

On the “inclusivity” dimension, China’s grassroots legislative contact points exhibit “controlled inclusivity”—the scope of deliberative participation is bounded by authoritative actors, and issues beyond the boundary struggle to enter deliberative procedures. This presents tension with Dryzek’s envisioned universal inclusivity, but also suggests that in non-liberal democratic regimes, the boundaries of “inclusivity” itself constitute a core variable needing analysis.

On the “deliberative responsibility” dimension, the “opinion collection-feedback” mechanism of China’s grassroots legislative contact points actually constitutes a type of “administrative deliberative transparency”—unlike television-broadcast-style transparency of Western parliamentary debate, China's deliberative transparency is primarily realized through public solicitation of opinions on policy texts and feedback on opinion adoption. While this transparency mechanism lacks public debate spaces in the Western sense, it possesses certain advantages in terms of policy output traceability.

On the “collective intelligence” dimension, this paper’s findings suggest that in the Chinese context, the “collective intelligence” of deliberative systems does not stem from free debate and rational deliberation among plural actors but from the “vertical integration” of dispersed local knowledge by authoritative actors. While this integration mechanism is relatively efficient, it may also lead to “information filtering”

and “selective absorption”—that is, only opinions conforming to upper-level policy orientations can be incorporated into the decision-making process.

On the “empowerment” dimension, this paper’s empirical findings constitute a more profound modification to Dryzek’s theory. The logic underlying Dryzek’s envisioned “empowerment” is that civil society bottom-up “strives for” deliberative rights through collective action. However, the “empowerment” pathway of China’s grassroots legislative contact points is precisely the opposite—it is “conferred” top-down by authoritative actors. Puyang’s practical data provide empirical support for this judgment: 25 grassroots legislative contact points collected 326 opinions and suggestions annually, of which 78 valid opinions were adopted, facilitating 7 innovative breakthroughs in local regulations. While these “empowerment” achievements are significant, their scope and depth fundamentally depend on the willingness and judgment of authoritative actors rather than institutionalized rights won through collective action by citizens. When the source of “empowerment” is upper-level “conferment” rather than lower-level “striving,” its reversibility is embedded in the institutional structure. This finding suggests that in non-liberal democratic regimes, “empowerment” should not be simply treated as a given institutional condition but should be understood as a core variable requiring continuous analysis.

On the “deliberativeness” dimension, this paper’s field evidence similarly reveals a distinctive landscape matching the Chinese context. The “deliberativeness” envisioned by Dryzek centers on rational deliberation among plural actors under relatively equal conditions. However, interview data from Xiangshan, Zhejiang Province indicate that the “deliberativeness” of China’s grassroots deliberation is substantially constrained by agenda control. Multiple NPC deputy respondents indicated that “the adoption rate of contact point opinions is high, but we do not control agenda setting.” This means that the quality of “deliberation” in the deliberative process depends to a considerable extent on the openness of agenda setters. While the high concentration of agenda-setting power indeed constitutes a substantive constraint on “deliberativeness,” within the determined issue scope, grassroots deliberation still possesses certain space for rational deliberation. Therefore, this paper understands China’s grassroots deliberative “deliberativeness” as a type of “constrained deliberativeness,” whose upper limit is set by the agenda control of authoritative actors, while its lower limit is determined by the interaction quality among grassroots participants.

In synthesis, this paper’s modification of Dryzek’s theory can be summarized as follows: the “completeness” of deliberative systems depends not only on functional coordination among subsystems but more critically on whether deliberative mechanisms are embedded within formal institutional channels—in the authoritarian context, these channels are often “authorized” top-down by political authority rather than “strived for” bottom-up. This modification has universal significance for understanding the evolution of deliberative democracy in non-liberal democratic regimes.

6.2 Cross-Situational Comparison: Universality Boundaries and Conditions of the Authoritarian-Guided Deliberative System

To test the cross-situational transferability of the “authoritarian-guided deliberative system” concept, this paper introduces two comparative cases: Singapore’s “Community First” grassroots consultation program and Vietnam’s “Citizen Storytelling” mechanism. The scholarly rationale for selecting these cases follows the logic of “most similar systems design”: Singapore, Vietnam, and China all belong to East/Southeast Asian political systems with authoritarian resilience, all possess top-down institutionalized deliberative channel designs, but differ in key aspects of the institutional carriers of “authoritarian guidance.” Case selection follows “most likely case” logic: if similar “institutionalization gap” phenomena can be observed in these two countries with similar regime characteristics, the explanatory power of this paper’s core concept will receive stronger support.

First, this paper employs “most similar systems design” logic: Singapore, Vietnam, and China all belong to East/Southeast Asian political systems with authoritarian resilience, all possess top-down institutionalized deliberative channel designs, but differ in key aspects of the institutional carriers of “authoritarian guidance” (party machine vs. state institutions vs. lack of institutionalized carriers) and the depth of “institutionalization.” This “seeking difference within similarity” case selection strategy enables isolation of the impact of “authoritarian guidance” institutional carriers on the depth of deliberative system institutionalization.

Second, case selection follows “most likely case” logic: if similar “institutionalization gap” phenomena can be observed in these two countries with similar regime characteristics, the explanatory power of this paper’s core concept will receive stronger support. Conversely, if similar phenomena are absent in comparative cases, it suggests more limited applicability conditions for the “authoritarian-guided deliberative system.”

It must be acknowledged that cross-situational comparison with only two cases is limited in statistical terms. But as have pointed out, the value of process tracing-based comparison lies not in statistical inference but in mechanism identification—through in-depth analysis of causal mechanisms in comparative cases, testing the explanatory boundaries of this paper’s core concepts[7, 1].

Singapore’s “Community First” program was promoted top-down by the People’s Action Party, aiming to penetrate grassroots communities through party machine organization to achieve “vertical integration.” The program requires every Member of Parliament in each constituency to hold at least 4 community dialogue sessions annually, collecting resident concerns and feeding them back to government departments. Unlike China’s grassroots legislative contact points, Singapore’s deliberative channels are not embedded in formal legislative procedures but within the party-state vertical governance network. The institutional carrier of its “authoritarian guidance” is the party machine rather than the NPC system, resulting in high concentration of agenda-setting power in constituency MPs. An empirical study of 12 Singaporean constituencies found that over 70% of issues in community dialogue sessions were pre-determined by MPs, with only 28% spontaneously proposed by residents [20]. This finding resonates cross-situationally with the “target-driven” replacing “demand-driven” operational logic in China’s grassroots legislative contact points, but also reveals a key difference: Singapore’s “vertical integration”

relies on the party machine's organizational mobilization capacity, while China's "vertical integration"relying on (relies on) the statutory authority of the NPC system and the administrative transmission mechanism of bureaucracy.

Vietnam's "Citizen Storytelling" mechanism was established based on Resolution 121 of 2016, aiming to collect citizens' demands on local governance through grassroots dialogue platforms. The mechanism requires district-level People's Committees to convene citizen dialogue sessions quarterly, by which citizens directly express opinions to local officials. However, compared to China's grassroots legislative contact points, Vietnam's deliberative mechanism lacks institutionalized "direct express" functions for public opinion—opinions raised at citizen dialogue sessions cannot directly enter legislative procedures but must pass through multiple layers of administrative filtering. A field survey of three northern provinces in Vietnam found that only 12% of opinions raised at citizen dialogue sessions were incorporated into local government annual work plans, and not a single opinion directly entered legislative deliberation procedures[23]. This finding validates the cross-situational explanatory power of this paper's "institutionalization gap" concept: in non-liberal democratic regimes, the strength of connection between deliberative mechanisms and formal institutions determines whether deliberative systems can cross from "discourse construction" to "institutional embedding."

Through analysis of the above two comparative cases, this paper extracts two boundary conditions for the "authoritarian-guided deliberative system": first, the institutional carrier of "authoritarian guidance" varies by political context—Chinarelying on (relies on) the NPC system, Singaporerelying on (relies on) the party machine, while Vietnam lacks institutionalized authoritative carriers; second, the depth of "institutionalization" depends on the strength of connection between deliberative mechanisms and formal institutions, rather than on deliberation frequency or participation breadth. This comparative finding makes a core modification to Dryzek's deliberative system theory: the "completeness" of deliberative systems depends not only on functional coordination among subsystems but more critically on whether deliberative mechanisms are embedded within formal institutional channels—in the authoritarian context, these channels are often "authorized" top-down by political authority rather than "strived for" bottom-up.

6.3 Summary of Theoretical Contributions

Synthesizing the entire paper, this paper's theoretical contributions can be summarized in three aspects. First, proposing the original concept of "authoritarian-guided deliberative system," transcending the binary opposition framework of "deliberative democracy/authoritarianism" in existing literature, revealing the distinctive institutionalization logic of deliberative democracy under authoritarian regimes—the initiation, expansion, and deepening of deliberative systems all depend on top-down "vertical integration" by political authority. Second, identifying the "institutionalization gap" as a key mechanism—the systematic gap between the institutionalization intensity of top-level discourse and the operational depth of grassroots practice—providing an operationalizable analytical dimension for understanding the "formalization" risks of Chinese democratic practice. Third, proposing the "administrative-technical elite gatekeeper" concept, enriching theoretical understanding of power elite composition in comparative

politics, suggesting that in non-democratic regimes, “gatekeeper” power may be more fundamentally significant than “decision-maker” power. These three concepts jointly constitute a preliminary theoretical framework, providing analytical tools for subsequent research on understanding the institutionalization process of democratic discourse in non-liberal democratic regimes.

Declarations

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Ethical approval

This study involved human participants, comprising in-depth interviews with public officials and grassroots representatives conducted by the authors, who are government staff of the Office of the CPC Baoting Li and Miao Autonomous County Committee, Hainan Province, China. This administrative institution does not maintain a formally established Institutional Review Board (IRB) or independent ethics committee; accordingly, the research protocol was reviewed and authorized through institutional supervisory review, and formal IRB approval was waived on the basis that the study was of minimal risk to participants, who were public officials interviewed exclusively about their professional roles and institutional practice rather than about private matters. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki of the World Medical Association, as well as the Belmont Report principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. In handling personal data, the study further complied with the Personal Information Protection Law of the People’s Republic of China (effective 1 November 2021) and the Data Security Law of the People’s Republic of China, which govern the collection, handling, anonymization, and storage of the personal data used in this study. No participant was exposed to more than minimal risk, and all data were anonymized at the point of collection.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. All interviews were conducted with public officials in their professional capacity within government workplaces during working hours between September and December 2024; verbal informed consent was therefore obtained rather than written consent, in line with the minimal-risk nature of the research. Before each interview, the purpose of the study, the intended use of the data, the confidentiality measures, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty were fully explained, and each participant explicitly agreed to take part on this basis. All data were anonymized, and no identifying information about individual participants is reported in this manuscript.

Consent for publication

All participants provided consent for the publication of anonymized, aggregated research findings. As the manuscript reports only anonymized and de-identified data, no personally identifiable information, images, or details relating to any individual participant are included, and thus no individual could be identified from the published material.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Author Contribution

Liu Yahu(first author): Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. Chen Ming: Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Funding acquisition. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability

The publicly available datasets analysed in this study—namely the central and local policy documents, official statistical releases and public reports cited throughout the manuscript—are openly accessible from the government sources listed in the References, and the full source list is provided in Supplementary Table S1. Supporting analytic materials, including the coding scheme, keyword-frequency and co-occurrence tables, and the institutionalization-intensity scores, are provided as Supplementary Files S2–S4. The interview transcripts and field notes with serving public officials are not publicly available because their disclosure would breach the confidentiality obligations owed to interviewees under the Personal Information Protection Law of the People's Republic of China and the Data Security Law of the People's Republic of China, and would contravene the explicit confidentiality commitments made to participants during informed consent; participants were assured that their names and any identifying details would not be disclosed. These restricted materials were nonetheless used, anonymized and aggregated for analysis, and, to support peer review, de-identified extracts can be made available to the editors and referees under a confidentiality agreement upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Figures

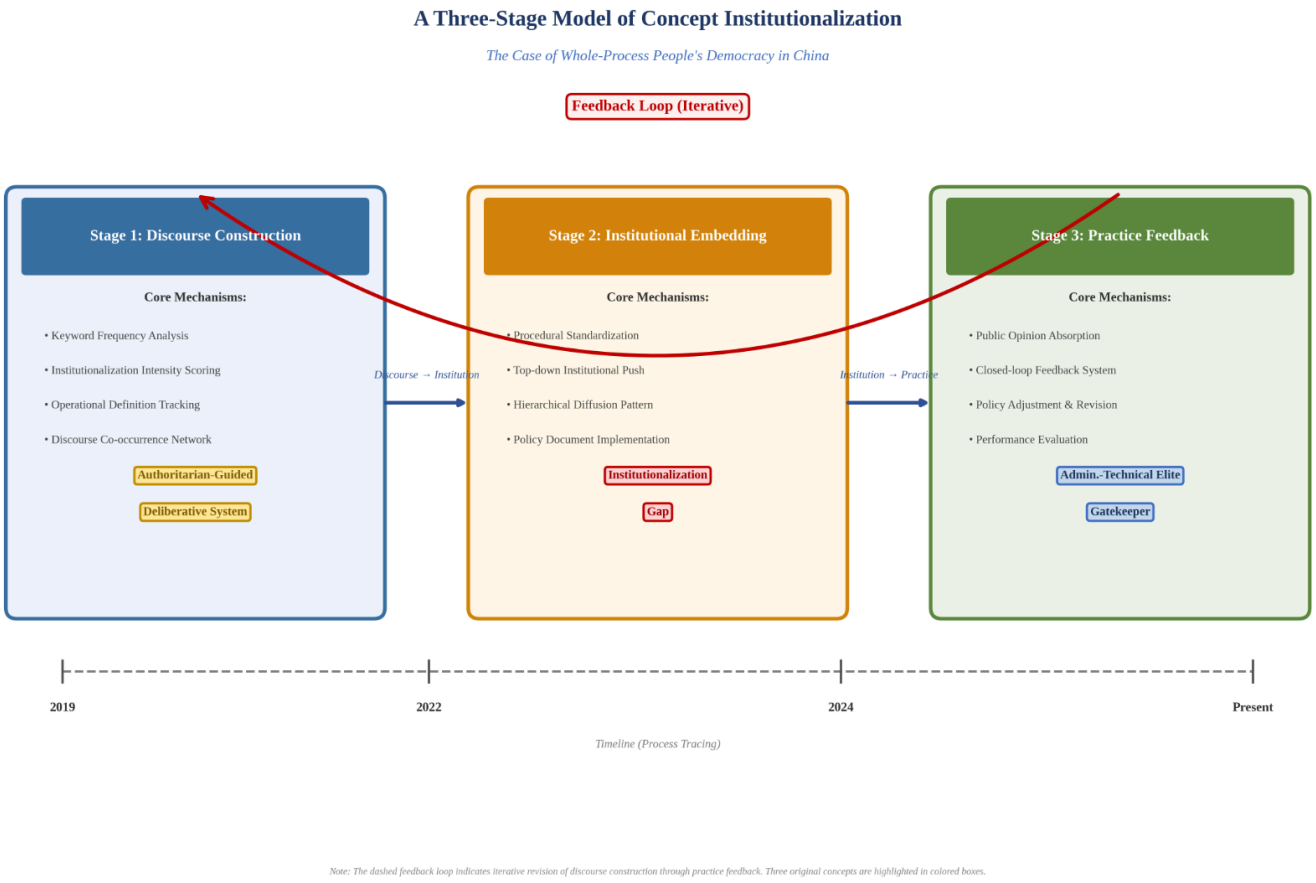


Figure 1

A Three-Stage Model of Concept Institutionalization: The Case of Whole-Process People's Democracy in China

Supplementary Files

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