

## Introduction

### Tone Deaf?

The nearly 3,000 deputies to China's National People's Congress (NPC) are widely dismissed as little more than cronies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), brought to Beijing each year to warm seats and vote through the legislative initiatives of central leadership. To date, no single bill before the full NPC plenary session in March has ever been voted down, a pattern that has earned the parliament the familiar "rubber stamp" moniker among critics. Reform-minded citizens and scholars dismiss deputy policy proposals as "meaningless" and complain they never do anything "really important" (Personal Interview BJ006). National-level deputies are "elected" by provincial-level congresses, but all candidates first receive nominations from the CCP or other Party-led organizations. Strict limits on the ratio of candidates to seats effectively allow CCP leaders to pick and choose representatives (O'Brien 1988, 1990; Jiang 2003). The deputies themselves hold no campaigns, have little name recognition, and are consistently maligned as "tone-deaf" and unrepresentative of the population at large (Mu 2012). In a recent editorial, Minxin Pei puts it bluntly: "in a fundamental sense, the NPC has little connection with real Chinese society" (Pei 2010).

Conventional wisdom holds democracy to be a necessary condition for meaningful representation. Economic theories of representation assume that in the absence of elections, office holders will protect their own interests and neglect constituent preferences (Becker 1958; Barro 1973, p. 19). Manin (1997) identifies regular elections as one of his four principles of modern representative government. In designing the

U.S. House of Representatives, Madison (1788) believed biennial elections were needed for legislators to maintain “an intimate sympathy with the people.” In this view, the supposed tone-deaf nature of the NPC is exactly what we should expect. Chinese representatives have little in the way of electoral accountability, and so there is no reason for them to develop meaningful constituent ties.

Many deputies work to defy their poor reputation. Shanghai deputy Zhu Guoping, for example, conducts investigations of different societal issues to inform her policy proposals. She organizes the local cadres of her area to visit hundreds of families in the neighborhood in order to be “crystal clear on changes in the needs of the people” (Xie 2009). Li Qingchang, a factory worker and deputy from Heilongjiang, established a team of three people to answer calls and pages from common citizens. He received 27,552 messages within seven years (Zhang and Wu 2008). In a recent statement to the press, deputy Wang Lin went so far as to argue that NPC deputies are more responsive than their Western counterparts:

Compared with parliamentary representatives in the West, who act on behalf of party group interest, the driving force behind the performance of our duties is the expectations of the people, it is a sacred responsibility given by the people. The expectations of the masses, this moves me, educates me, and pushes me to perform my responsibilities. (Liu 2009)

Wang’s assertion is a little too bold – and reeks of Party propaganda – but it suggests we should at least pause before dismissing the possibility of authoritarian representation.

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Many observers and citizens critique NPC deputies as tone-deaf and disconnected, but many deputies and insiders insist that they represent the interests of their constituents. This contrast yields the core questions for the book. Can meaningful representation arise in the authoritarian setting? If so, how, when, and why? What incentives do authoritarian representatives face, given the absence of true electoral accountability? And more broadly, how do representatives affect regime stability and governance outcomes?

### **The Purpose of a Parliament**

The average authoritarian regime regularly convenes legislative meetings, at least nominally inviting other voices into the policy process

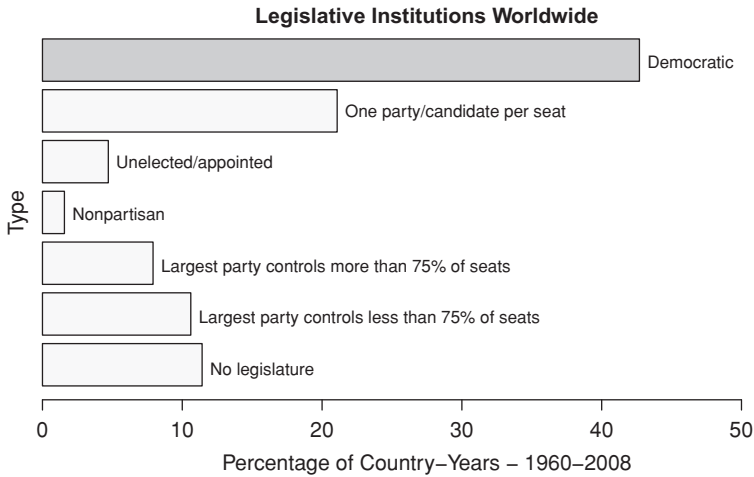


FIGURE 1.1 Variation in legislative institutions (1960–2008)

(Truex 2014). According to Svobik’s (2012) recent data, depicted in Figure 1.1, around 46% of country-years worldwide since 1960 have been under authoritarian regimes with parliaments of some shape or form, compared with about 43% under democracy.<sup>1</sup> Historically, the modal legislator is just as likely to operate under the constraints of authoritarian rule as under the constraints of democratic accountability.

Recent empirical research suggests that authoritarian parliaments are more than just “window dressing” or “rubber stamps,” as they are often maligned. Nondemocracies with nominally democratic institutions appear to be more stable than those without (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007). There is also evidence that legislatures are associated with higher levels of growth (Gandhi 2008; Wright 2008), although endogeneity concerns prevent a causal interpretation (Pepinsky 2014). Only certain types of regimes seem to need the parliamentary safety valve – those that lack natural resources, face organized opposition, and possess a weak coercive apparatus. The existence of parliaments seems to vary systematically with these factors (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2008; Magaloni 2008).

If authoritarian regimes create and manipulate parliaments to aid in their own survival (Gandhi 2008; Myerson 2008; Svobik 2009, 2012; Boix and Svobik 2013; Pepinsky 2014), we must look to their needs to

<sup>1</sup> The remaining 11% of country-years are authoritarian systems with no legislatures.

understand prospects for representation. Existing arguments identify two such needs. Proponents of the *cooptation* view argue that parliaments and accompanying elections allow regimes to identify and placate popular members of key opposition groups (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2008; Magaloni 2008; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Blaydes 2011). The *power-sharing* framework emphasizes the elite side of the story. Parliaments exist to help the dictator credibly commit to distributing resources to the rest of the ruling coalition (Myerson 2008; Svobik 2009, 2012; Blaydes 2011; Boix and Svobik 2013). This reduces monitoring costs, preserves the elite bargain and decreases the likelihood of coup attempts.

Neither the cooptation nor the power-sharing view makes strong predictions about the nature of representation, and as I explain in detail in Chapter 2, neither seems particularly well suited to the Chinese case. The CCP has proven remarkably sophisticated at the coercive side of the equation, so much so that nothing resembling an organized, unified opposition exists in Chinese society. NPC deputies are also widely considered to be regime loyalists, not malcontents (O'Brien 1994). With respect to power sharing, a number of senior leaders are members of the NPC, but most China scholars would agree that high-level CCP organs (namely the CCP Politburo and Politburo Standing Committee) are where internal bargaining really takes place.

These studies do well to draw our attention to authoritarian parliaments, but they often fail to account for the inner workings of actual parliaments. Existing micro-level research is richer in this regard and starts to reveal some interesting patterns in legislator behavior. Among other conclusions, O'Brien's seminal work on the NPC (O'Brien 1988, 1990, 1994; O'Brien and Li 1993) suggests that many deputies feel a sense of responsibility to serve as "remonstrators" for their constituents, reflecting local grievances upward to the central government. Manion's (2013, 2014) rich surveys show lower-level deputies in China speaking a new "language of representation" and engaging in pork-barrel politicking on behalf of their constituents. Similar findings are reported by Roman (2003) in his study of municipal-level representatives in Cuba. In Brazil, Desposato (2001) finds that deputies were more likely to offer dissenting votes when facing pressure from local elites and well-informed urban voters. In Vietnam, Malesky, Schuler and Tran (2012) randomly expose delegates to the Vietnamese National Assembly (VNA) to a transparency/publicity treatment by building websites that highlight their representative activities. The results suggest some "adverse effects of

sunshine,” as delegates receiving the treatment showed signs of conformist behavior.

Two general trends appear in this research tradition. First, despite the presence of nominal elections, delegates to authoritarian parliaments appear to feel primarily accountable to their respective regimes. Second, despite this top-down accountability, some delegates actively advocate the needs of their constituents and voice real criticism of government policies.

These studies offer a strong foundation on which to build. Theoretically, we need a framework that accounts for the incentives and tradeoffs facing legislators and for the regimes and constituents they serve. Empirically, we have yet to conduct many of the core empirical analyses in the study of representation – tests of the associations between legislator behavior and policy outcomes; citizen preferences and legislator behavior; legislator behavior and career outcomes; and legislative membership and individual “returns to office.” The core motivation of this book is to break new ground in all of these areas.

### **Representation within Bounds**

My framework involves three types of actors: the Autocrat, the Deputy, and the Citizen. Chapter 2 examines the inner workings of their preferences and interactions with a formal model, but the summary in this chapter should prove sufficient for readers without an interest in the more technical derivation. The Autocrat represents the ruling regime, which I assume is trying to stay in power and has the capacity to set policy. The Citizen, which represents the population or segments within the population, has her own policy preferences, as well as the ability to engage in a protest or revolution that could potentially yield regime change. I will return to the role and preferences of the Deputy after considering some key tradeoffs facing the Autocrat.

#### *The Information–Attention Tradeoff*

In order to stay in power and avoid a costly revolution, the Autocrat must placate the Citizen and provide a minimal standard of welfare. The Autocrat’s dilemma is that he has incomplete information about Citizen preferences and is uncertain how best to please the restive population. Without specific information revelation mechanisms, the Autocrat is “flying blind” and may unknowingly choose policies that endanger his own survival (Lorentzen 2011).

This is where the Deputy enters the picture and where representation can prove helpful to the regime. Parliamentary representatives reduce information uncertainty by fostering the revelation of citizen grievances, serving as “remonstrators” for the population (O’Brien 1994). I allow the Deputy to convey information about the Citizen’s issue preferences using a simple message, facilitating a policy response by the Autocrat. In China, we observe this in the form of NPC deputy proposals, which annually convey thousands of policy demands to the central government, and hundreds of thousands of policy demands at lower levels in the People’s Congress system. In Vietnam, the VNA’s vigorous query sessions appear to play a similar informational role. In Morocco, the king has the right to create parliamentary fact-finding missions on specific issues. In Cuba, deputies to the National Assembly of People’s Power (NAPP) serve on commissions that investigate societal issues (Roman 2003). These types of processes give regimes valuable insight into the needs and wants of their populations.

Representation brings informational benefits but carries certain risks. Debates in parliament have the capacity to spill over to the public discourse. In terms of the theory, I assume that conveying the message to the Autocrat also raises general Citizen interest in the issue at hand, which heightens the stakes of the policy decision. This is most problematic on issues of political reform, where the preferences of the Autocrat and the Citizen directly conflict, and where the Autocrat has little willingness to offer concessions. On these issues, loudmouth members of parliament have the potential to incite popular passions and give rise to unnecessary concessions or, worse, destabilizing collective action.

### *Engineering the Ideal Deputy*

For authoritarian regimes trying to meet citizen demands and dampen pressures for political change, the ideal parliamentary representative exhibits a very distinct behavioral pattern. I call this concept “representation within bounds.”

#### *Concept Definition: Representation within Bounds*

A behavioral pattern whereby authoritarian parliamentary representatives reflect the interests of their constituents on a broad range of issues, but remain reticent on sensitive issues core to the authoritarian state.

In terms of the theoretical framework, the ideal Deputy conveys Citizen preferences on a wide range of nonpolitical issues (what I refer to in Chapter 2 as “weak or no preference issues”), but keeps quiet about citizen demands for democratic reform (“strong preference issues”). This form of representation allows the Autocrat to learn Citizen preferences and respond accordingly, minimizing the potential for collective action.

In addition to identifying this pattern, the theory points to possible incentive structures that produce this special brand of representation. I consider two possible levers the Autocrat can manipulate to achieve the representation within bounds equilibrium. First, the Autocrat has the potential to influence the Deputy’s empathy with the Citizen, the degree to which she shares the preferences of her constituents and internalizes their welfare. Everything else equal, deputies with higher levels of empathy will be more active in revealing citizen grievances. As such, the regime will devise ways to foster “selective empathy” – deputies who are politically aloof but otherwise in touch with popular sentiment. Second, the Autocrat can offer the Deputy private rents. From the perspective of the regime, rents or “returns to office” have uniformly positive effects on representative behavior, as they give the Deputy a vested interest in the survival of the political system. The theory predicts that the Deputy will enjoy substantial benefits in equilibrium, which can dampen any reformist impulses and encourage good behavior.

### *Theory Summary*

To summarize, meaningful representation can and does arise in an authoritarian setting, in the absence of electoral accountability. It arises not from bottom-up citizen pressure, but from top-down accountability to a regime with informational needs. However, deputy activism on sensitive political issues can engender unwanted citizen attention, so regimes prefer their deputies to exhibit “representation within bounds.” Engineering this behavioral pattern requires simultaneously fostering empathy with the citizenry on everyday issues, and loyalty to the regime on matters central to the nature of the authoritarian system.

This take on representation is different from other frameworks for understanding authoritarian parliaments. The quality of representation can be placed on a spectrum, shown in Figure 1.2. At the low end, deputies engage in minimal representation and do little to reflect the interests of their constituents on any issue. This appears to be the observable implication of the window-dressing view of authoritarian parliaments, as well as the power-sharing view (Myerson 2008; Svobik

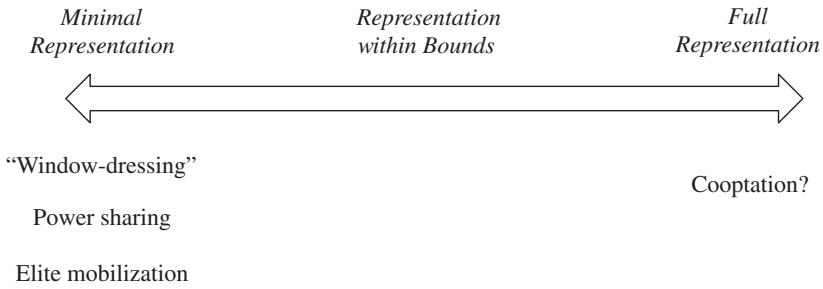


FIGURE 1.2 The spectrum of representation

2009, 2012; Blaydes 2011; Boix and Svobik 2013).<sup>2</sup> At the other end, deputies reflect the interests of their constituents on all issues, including political reform. This brand of full representation seems consistent with cooptation theory, which holds that parliaments are sounding boards for oppositional elements of society (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2008; Magaloni 2008; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Malesky, Schuler and Tran 2012). My theory, which focuses on the information–attention tradeoff, yields the unique representation within bounds prediction.

### Research Overview

The remainder of the book is focused on testing the observable implications of the theory in the Chinese setting. Admittedly, China should not be considered a “typical case” on many dimensions (Gerring 2007; Seawright and Gerring 2008). It represents the world’s largest population, second largest economy, and largest authoritarian country. Its National People’s Congress and accompanying people’s congresses at lower administrative levels constitute the largest legislative system in the world. There are 3,000 deputies at the national level alone.

While China’s sheer size makes it generally unrepresentative of the broader population of authoritarian systems, it does possess aspects that are more typical. According to Svobik’s classification (2012), the NPC can be considered a noncompetitive legislature, with “one party or candidate per seat.”<sup>3</sup> This is the most common type of authoritarian parliament,

<sup>2</sup> A new perspective on China’s People’s Congress system, the “elite mobilization view” (described in Chapter 2), also suggests that deputies care little about their constituents, and simply echo the preferences of regime leadership (Lu and Liu 2015).

<sup>3</sup> This label is somewhat misleading, as NPC rules do require that the number of candidates exceed the number of seats, and non-Party members are permitted to run. However,



occurring in about 37% of authoritarian country-years. It is also classified as a civilian, one-party system, attributes that are found in 69% and 36% of authoritarian country-years, respectively (Svolik 2012).

My analytical goal is not to overturn the alternative theories, as this is generally difficult to do with a single case. Instead, I will demonstrate that my framework has more explanatory power for understanding China's National People's Congress, a case of unusual importance. The hope is that researchers of other authoritarian systems will find that my insights resonate with their observations.

The empirical aspects of the project draw on a range of data gathered during several fieldwork trips in Beijing and other parts of China from 2011 to 2015. I utilize original datasets of deputy backgrounds, legislative behaviors, career outcomes, and financial connections; surveys of Chinese netizens; interviews with deputies, citizens, financial experts, and NPC insiders; and analyses of primary NPC documents. Combined, these sources allow me to triangulate on the true dynamics of the parliament and overturn some common misconceptions about deputies and their behavior.

There are real limitations to some of the information I have obtained. This is an issue that confronts many China scholars, as well as other social scientists working on sensitive issues in sensitive contexts. I will make a point of highlighting those limitations in the interest of allowing readers to develop their own assessments of the empirical inferences. Should the NPC continue to liberalize, other researchers may be able to conduct better tests in the future. I try to highlight these research opportunities where possible.

The remainder of the book is structured as follows. Chapter 2 begins by articulating the theory more formally, using a simple extensive-form game. The model illustrates the importance of information in authoritarian policy making, as well as the risks and rewards associated with allowing parliamentary representation. It generates some helpful observable implications about the characteristics of a stable authoritarian representative system and the nature of the ideal deputy. These implications are summarized in Table 1.1. I also justify the core assumptions of the framework and define "strong preference issues" in the Chinese case.

Part of the controversy surrounding the NPC stems from the fact that there is relatively little understanding of the nature of the institution.

China's "democratic parties" are little more than subservient organizations of the CCP, and for this reason the NPC is categorized as having one party or candidate per seat.

TABLE 1.1 *Observable implications and empirical tests*

Observable implication	Empirical test/source
1. An authoritarian regime will incorporate deputy proposals on weak or no preference issues into policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Analysis of proposals/responses from Hainan province</li> <li>– Analysis of citizen perceptions survey</li> <li>– Interviews with deputies/NPC staff</li> </ul>
2. Deputies in stable authoritarian parliaments should exhibit “representation within bounds” behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Analysis of deputy proposals and constituent preferences</li> <li>– Case study of deputy–elite linkages in Jiangxi province</li> </ul>
3. Regimes will devise incentives to foster selective empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Analysis of deputy career paths and performance</li> <li>– Analysis of deputy training materials</li> </ul>
4. Regimes will reward deputies with rents to instill loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Analysis of returns to office for NPC-affiliated companies</li> <li>– Interviews with financial experts</li> </ul>

Chapters 3 and 4 describe the representational and policy-making patterns in the parliament (Observable Implications 1 and 2), which prove consistent with the concept of representation within bounds.

The theory predicts that the CCP regime actually uses the parliament for information and incorporates deputy ideas into policy making. Chapter 3 provides a short assessment of the influence of deputy proposals. I randomly select a subset of opinions from Hainan’s Provincial People’s Congress and trace their influence through the system. At the national level, there are no hard data released explaining what happens to any individual proposal, but Hainan’s equivalent provincial process is nearly fully transparent. Although not all proposals matter, the analysis shows that roughly half appear to exert a real influence on a policy outcome. Of course, we should be concerned about possible selection issues in relying solely on a single provincial case, especially one that is an outlier on the transparency dimension. As an additional test, I present survey experiments that probe the perceived influence of different types of NPC proposals. Citizens are generally optimistic about deputy influence on many nonpolitical issues, but skeptical about its ability to bring about democratic reforms. Deputy interviews confirm that the government exhibits responsiveness to their proposals, but only for nonsensitive issues. The

chapter also includes some background information on the NPC's formal institutional role and deputy channels of influence.

Chapter 4 uses new data on deputy backgrounds and behavior to investigate whether NPC deputies are really tone-deaf and disconnected, as they are commonly maligned as being (Observable Implication 2). Beginning with Miller and Stokes (1963), numerous studies of the American system have evaluated the quality of representation through the metric of “preference congruence” – the degree to which legislator behavior aligns with constituent interests. I extend this classic research design to the Chinese setting to test the citizen–representative informational linkage. I find that deputies' policy proposals show congruence with the concerns of their geographic constituents on a range of non-political issues. To rule out the criticism that deputies are simply echoing provincial elites, I investigate the relationship between elite statements and deputy proposals in Jiangxi province. Although a degree of elite mobilization likely occurs in the NPC, the majority of proposals show no discernible evidence of echoing behavior.

Chapter 4 closes with a discussion of the representational limits of the NPC, the lack of activism and influence on political reforms. My database of publicly available proposals shows that very few directly challenge the regime's core political interests in any way. Interviews with NPC insiders confirm this intuition and paint the deputies as agents of the CCP, not the people.

The latter half of the book investigates the incentive structures behind these representational patterns. A functioning system of representation within bounds requires authoritarian legislators to have empathy with the citizenry, but only on issues unrelated to the regime's core interests. Chapter 5 describes the two primary mechanisms through which the CCP promotes this special brand of constituent ties (Observable Implication 3). An analysis of career paths demonstrates that deputies are rewarded for their representative activities, but punished if they transgress certain boundaries. Documents from NPC training sessions shows that the CCP encourages deputies to espouse representational norms, while simultaneously fostering loyalty to the current political system.

The framework suggests a successful authoritarian regime also motivates representatives by giving them a vested financial interest in its survival. Chapter 6 tests for the presence of rents using data on the financial ties of NPC deputies (Observable Implication 4). Approximately 500 deputies in the 11th NPC (2008–2012) can be considered chairpersons, CEOs, or leaders of various companies. Within this group, around

50 deputies were CEOs of publicly listed firms that first gained representation in the 11th NPC. A weighted fixed-effect analysis suggests that a seat in the NPC is worth an additional 1.5–2 percentage points in returns and a 3–4 percentage point boost in operating profit margin in a given year (Truex 2014).<sup>4</sup> A seat signals competence and connections, which in turn foster investment and new business relationships. It is likely that this reputation boost and the associated returns to office are even higher for deputies from humbler backgrounds.

Combined, these incentive structures appear to produce the representational patterns we observe in Chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 7 explains how the CCP arrived at the current equilibrium. Since its inception in 1954, the NPC has been a tool of regime leadership. Consistent with the theory, the evolution of the NPC can be understood through the lens of the CCP's informational needs. When citizens have credibly demonstrated the revolutionary threat, as during the Democracy Wall and Tiananmen Square movements of the 1980s, representation in the body has been strengthened. When deputies have stepped out of bounds, the regime has reengineered the institution to rein them in. The vibrant but bounded NPC we observe today only really emerged in the post-Tiananmen period, the result of several vacillations between openness and repression.

Chapter 8 concludes by considering the generalizability of the representation within bounds framework beyond the Chinese case. After outlining the scope conditions of the argument, I show that emerging empirical research on Vietnam and Cuba suggests the presence of some of the dynamics observed in the NPC. I close with a speculative note on the future of the CCP and China's People's Congress system.

### My Contribution

Those readers familiar with political science will note that the title of this book is a play on the title of Robert Putnam's canonical work, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. There is perhaps no book more influential in the field of comparative politics. Putnam (1994) examines variation in the performance of 20 regional governments in Italy in the 1970s, using a rich multimethod design to show that citizens'

<sup>4</sup> This chapter was published in article form as Truex, R. 2014. "The returns to office in a 'rubber stamp' parliament." *American Political Science Review* 108(2): 235–51.

associational life and civic engagement improve bureaucratic responsiveness. In a phrase, social capital makes democracy work.

I have chosen the title *Making Autocracy Work* not with the intention of addressing Putnam's arguments, but to shift the discourse about the nature of authoritarian government.<sup>5</sup> My hope is that readers see contributions in the following areas.

First and foremost, my goal is to argue that there is such a thing as authoritarian representation. Despite Madison's assertions to the contrary, it seems that representatives can develop an "intimate sympathy with the people" in the absence of frequent elections. My analysis in Chapter 4 suggests they convey the interests of their constituents on a wide range of nonpolitical issues. Representation follows a separate logic in the authoritarian setting – it occurs without free elections and campaigns and party competition – but that does not mean it is empty.

Second, the book offers several new empirical designs and findings on authoritarian representation. I have placed a premium on gathering original data on a range of outcomes in China's legislative system, which has allowed me to investigate some core relationships in the study of representation. I have found that authoritarian legislators demonstrate congruence with their constituents; that an authoritarian government actually incorporates legislator ideas into policy making; that there are hard career incentives fostering this limited representation; and that deputies seem to accrue financial benefits from their positions. To my knowledge, all of these analyses represent firsts in the field of authoritarian politics.

Third, the book offers theoretical and conceptual ideas that likely travel beyond the NPC. The key tradeoff is that representation brings regimes informational benefits but attention costs. Regimes must learn the grievances of the population, but too much discussion of irreconcilable political sensitivities only makes things worse. These ideas may extend beyond parliamentary representation to other public arenas where information is exchanged. China scholars have already suggested that the CCP regime may only partly constrain traditional and social media, perhaps in the interest of information revelation (King, Roberts and Pan 2013; Stockmann 2013; Lorentzen 2014). Lorentzen (2013) argues that protests may even play an informational role and enable responsive governance. These

<sup>5</sup> Note that autocracy strictly refers to a government where one person rules with absolute power. Contemporary China is not an autocracy, but an authoritarian regime. I have employed this title for stylistic reasons and to have symmetry with Putnam, not to place China in the autocracy category.

types of activities appear similarly bounded, with the government cracking down on political dissent but tolerating criticism on other issues.

Finally, the broader argument suggests that democracies do not have a monopoly on responsive governance. Authoritarian regimes are often depicted as power-maximizing, rent-seeking machines that buy and coerce their way into power (Boix 2003; Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003, 2008; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006; Svobik 2013). Yet more than a few nondemocracies, China included, gather information from their citizens, provide public goods, and strive to maintain broad public support. Consultative institutions like the NPC appear key to making autocracy work.