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THE DEVIATION IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT'S PUBLIC POLICIES: PERSPECTIVES FROM PUBLIC AND SELF INTEREST

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Abstract

Since the emergence of policy implementation research in the West during the 1970s, it has become a vital area of academic inquiry in public policy and administrative studies. Policy implementation forms the essential link between policy formulation and execution, determining the ultimate success of public governance. In China's political system, local governments serve as key executors positioned between central directives and local realities. This dual role they adopt not only enhances the flexibility and efficiency of policies through their obedience to the central government and their autonomy in local adaptation, but also provides space for selfishness and rent-seeking behavior, resulting in deviations during the implementation process. The purpose of this study is to analyze the mechanisms and driving factors behind these policy implementation deviations at the local level. Drawing upon interdisciplinary theories of political

science, public administration, and policy studies, this research adopts the “policy fuzziness-conflict” framework to investigate the tension between public interest and self-interest within local government behavior. Through theoretical analysis and literature synthesis, the study constructs a comprehensive framework that integrates local government attributes, intergovernmental relations, and administrative functions. Findings reveal that policy ambiguity, interest conflicts, and structural incentives significantly influence deviation behaviors. The conclusion emphasizes the need to strengthen institutional coordination and value alignment to enhance the effectiveness of public policy execution and promote sound local governance in China.

Keywords:

Policy Implementation Deviation, Public Policy, Public Interest and Self-Interest, Local Government

1. Introduction

Policy implementation is the "last mile" of public policy, a core link transforming institutional visions into tangible social outcomes, whose effectiveness directly determines the stability and sustainability of a modern national governance system. As a unitary state, China's central government sets policy objectives and directions through a highly centralized decision-making system, while local governments take on specific execution and implementation responsibilities. In the governance system, local governments function both as "policy terminals" and "feedback nodes," bearing the crucial mission of translating policy concepts into social practice. However, within the complex political structure and administrative hierarchy, policies often undergo multi-level transmission and re-interpretation from central design to local implementation, in which institutional friction, information attenuation, and interest-based political struggles become key variables affecting policy outcomes.

China's policy implementation mode generally reflects a typical top-down hierarchical operational logic: the central government formulates policy agendas and overall objectives, transmit them level by level through institutional documents and planning directives. Provincial, municipal, county, and township governments then assume the tasks of refining and executing

these policies sequentially. This vertically centralized structure exhibits significant advantages in ensuring the uniformity of decrees and safeguarding national overall interests, but in practice, it can also lead to "level-by-level re-translation" of policy intentions during multi-stage transmission. Due to local governments' discretionary authority, adjustments made to implementation processes based on local realities may stem from administrative efficiency considerations, or may carry obvious interest-oriented traits. It is precisely within this institutional context that phenomena such as policy implementations deviating, deforming, or misaligning from original objectives bear significant structural causes.

The underlying driving force of policy implementation deviations is rooted in local governments' inherent value tension—the coexistence of "public interest orientation" and "self-interest orientation." On one hand, the public nature of government originates from the legitimacy foundation of state power; from Plato's theory of "city-state justice," Rousseau's social contract theory, to Marx's discussions on state public functions, the pursuit of public interest has always been the value origin of government behavior. On the other hand, as limited rational organizational entities, local governments and individual bureaucrats within them also exhibit self-interest motivations, pursuing departmental or personal interests in policy resource allocation and administrative execution. Since Reform and Opening-up, with the marketization of the economic system and the moderate decentralization of administrative power, local governments' self-interest expression has been continuously strengthened under the drive of development competition and performance assessment, leading to deviant behaviors such as "selective implementation," "additional implementation," and "counter-measure implementation," which intensify the governance dilemma of "actions at the top with counter-measures below."

Therefore, systematically analyzing the generation logic and behavior patterns of local government policy implementation deviations from the perspective of the value contradiction between "public interest orientation" and "self-interest orientation" in government – in conjunction with China's top-down administrative operation system—can not only reveal the structural tension between "ideal" and "reality" in policy practice, but also provide theoretical support and practical references for optimizing policy implementation and modernizing the national governance system.

2. Research method

2.1 Literature Research Method

Comprehensively and systematically sort out existing theoretical achievements in three core fields: policy implementation, public interest and self-interest of governments, and local government policy implementation, while tracking cutting-edge research trends in this field. Through the induction and integration of classic theories and frontier perspectives, a solid and rigorous theoretical analysis framework will be built for this study.

2.2 Comparative Research Method

Focus on the research results and theoretical systems of policy implementation and policy implementation deviation in China and the United States, and carry out targeted cross-regional comparative analysis. Relying on the mature experience of the American academic community in the field of government behavior research, this method will focus on learning from its practical measures to restrict government self-interest in the policy-making link, so as to provide international reference and innovative ideas for local policy implementation research.

2.3 Case Study Method

Select representative domestic public policy cases, and disassemble and analyze the whole process from top-level formulation, deployment to implementation. Taking cases as the carrier to break through the barrier between theory and practice, this method will concretely analyze the contradictory logic between the public interest and self-interest of governments, and accurately restore their mechanism and transmission path on policy implementation deviation.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Western Policy Implementation Research: Paradigm Evolution and Core Issues

Western research on policy implementation emerged formally in the 1970s, marking its beginning with *Implementation: How Great Expectations in Washington Are Dashed in Oakland* by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973). It has gone through three generations of iterative paradigm development:

First-generation paradigm (early 1970s) : Focused on single-case empirical analysis, which formally established policy implementation as an independent research field in policy science. However, it failed to form a universally applicable theoretical framework, and research results were mostly concentrated on the implementation process of specific policies, making it difficult to promote across cases (Saetren, 2014). Representative studies include Derthick's

(1972) tracking of U.S. social policy implementation and Bardach's (1977) strategic analysis of policy implementation.

Second-generation paradigm (mid-to-late 1970s) : Began to construct multi-dimensional theoretical models, forming two core research paths: top-down and bottom-up. The top-down path emphasized the authority of top-level design and the implementation efficiency of policy goals, with the policy implementation process framework proposed by Van Horn and Van Meter (1976) as a typical representative, but often ignored the initiative of grassroots organizations and bureaucrats. The bottom-up path focused on the action logic of street-level bureaucrats, the information advantages and rational calculations of grassroots actors. Hjern (1982) emphasized the independent operation of grassroots implementation networks, and Hjern and Hull (1982) further proposed the "implementation structure theory", arguing that diversified, autonomous implementation subjects are the core carriers of policy implementation.

Third-generation paradigm (1980s to 1990s) : Showed the characteristics of theoretical integration and methodological diversification, with core requirements including clear key variables, theoretical hypotheses guiding empirical analysis, cross-field comparative research, and longitudinal tracking design. The intergovernmental relations model proposed by Goggin et al. (1986, 1990) and the policy change and learning model by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) both reflected the integration of the previous two generations of paradigms. In this period, new methods such as policy network analysis were introduced. Policy Networks (Marsh, 1998) regarded policy implementation as a process of interest coordination and negotiation among multiple actors, and Rhodes (2006) further emphasized the role of trust and cooperation in policy networks.

After the 1990s, although Western research on policy implementation entered a low ebb, the research focus shifted to policy change, policy learning, and post-positivist perspectives. At the same time, the academic community began to reflect on research dilemmas: Pulzi and Treib pointed out that insufficient knowledge accumulation is the core bottleneck; Goggin et al. believed that it is difficult to unify the key variables affecting policy implementation; O' Toole (2000) criticized that most policy recommendations in existing research stay at the conceptual level and lack practical guiding significance.

3.2 Chinese Policy Implementation Research: Reflecting on the Local Context

Compared with the West, Chinese research on policy implementation started in the mid-to-late 1990s, with scholars such as Ding Huang, Jing Yuejin, Xu Xianglin, and Chen Zhenming conducting systematic research earlier. Due to essential differences between Chinese and Western public management models, Western policy research focuses on the policy formulation process, while Chinese academic research centers on the policy implementation stage—policy implementation obstruction by local governments is even recognized as an institutionalized informal behavior (Yin Huafang et al., 2007; Zhou Xueguang, 2008).

Domestic scholars take "flexible implementation" as the core analytical concept. Chen Zhenming (1998) defined policy flexibility as an implementation method that balances principles and flexibility, specifically dividing it into three types: "seeking spiritual similarity rather than formal similarity", "seeking formal similarity rather than spiritual similarity", and "seeking neither spiritual nor formal similarity", with the latter two directly constituting policy implementation deviation. Scholars such as Liu Shiding (1997) emphasized that policy flexibility is an unauthorized decision adjustment within the system, and Zhuang Chuisheng (2000) further proposed the concept of "distorted policy flexibility", clarifying its connection with implementation deviation. The interest analysis framework constructed by Ding Huang et al. (2004) pointed out that policy implementation is essentially a game process among relevant actors, and interest conflicts are the core cause of implementation obstruction.

However, scholars such as He Donghang and Kong Fanbin (2011) pointed out that although existing research pays attention to the characteristics of the Chinese context, the "Chinese consciousness" in policy implementation research still needs to be strengthened, and a systematic local theoretical framework has not yet been formed. Research shows that there are significant differences in focus, analytical logic, and theoretical basis between Chinese and Western policy implementation research. Chinese research needs to further combine the local political ecology to explore a more explanatory analytical framework for policy implementation.

4. Definition of Related Concepts and Theoretical Analysis Framework

4.1 Policy Implementation and Implementation Deviation

4.1.1 Policy Implementation

Public policy is an institutional arrangement formulated by the government to address social problems, and its operation process typically includes policy agenda-setting, policy formulation, policy implementation, and policy evaluation stages. Among these, policy

implementation is a key link in transforming policy goals into governance outcomes, directly affecting the degree to which policy goals are achieved.

Although academic circles differ in the division of policy process stages, policy implementation has always been an indispensable and mandatory link. This paper argues that public policy implementation refers to the process in which policy implementation subjects, through resource integration and by using specific means and measures, implement policies formulated by higher-level governments to achieve policy goals. Local governments at all levels and their functional departments constitute the main subjects of policy implementation, and policy implementation is essentially an administrative management process that transforms abstract goals into tangible social outcomes.

4.1.2 Policy Implementation Deviation

Policy implementation is a highly complex administrative activity, and deviations often occur in practice due to the influence of multiple subjective and objective factors.

This paper argues that policy implementation deviation refers to the phenomenon where the final implementation effect of policy implementation subjects deviates from the established policy goals. Its emergence stems not only from the objective constraints of policy design and implementation environment but also from the cognitive abilities, interest orientation, and organizational operation status of implementation subjects.

In terms of causes, policy implementation deviation is mainly reflected in three aspects: first, policy design is complex or policy goals and standards are not clear enough; second, there is tension between implementation subjects (in terms of ability, cognition, or interests) and policy goals; third, changes in the policy implementation environment occur in temporal and spatial dimensions. These factors interact with each other, leading to the risk of policy distortion and deviation during the implementation process.

4.2 Local Governments: Key Subjects of Policy Implementation

Local governments are important hubs connecting central policy goals with grassroots governance practices. Under China's unitary system, local governments enjoy a certain degree of discretion in policy implementation under the unified leadership of the central government.

This paper argues that local governments embody two attributes in policy implementation: public interest orientation and self-interest orientation. The public interest orientation is reflected in the implementation of public goals and the provision of public services,

while the self-interest orientation is manifested in the focus on local, sectoral, or individual interests. These two attributes constitute an inherent tension: moderate self-interest helps to enhance implementation motivation, while excessive self-interest may lead to policy implementation deviation. Therefore, the behavior of local governments needs to achieve a dynamic balance between public interest orientation and self-interest orientation.

4.3 Theoretical Analysis Framework: Matland's Ambiguity-Conflict Model and Its Application

4.3.1 Selection of the Analysis Framework

Traditional policy implementation research mostly adopts top-down or bottom-up analytical approaches, but these are difficult to explain the differences in the implementation process of different types of policies. Matland's Ambiguity-Conflict Model provides a more explanatory analytical tool for policy implementation by introducing two dimensions: policy ambiguity and policy conflict.

In this model, policy ambiguity is mainly reflected in the uncertainty of policy goals and policy instruments, while policy conflict refers to the degree of divergence among policy participants in recognizing policy goals.

4.3.2 Typology of the Ambiguity-Conflict Model

Based on different combinations of policy ambiguity and policy conflict, policy implementation can be divided into four ideal types:

(1) Administrative Implementation (Low Ambiguity - Low Conflict)

Policy goals are clear and enjoy a high degree of consensus, and the implementation process is dominated by the bureaucratic system. The implementation effect mainly depends on resource allocation and organizational capabilities. In this context, the self-interest orientation of local governments is constrained by institutions, and the public interest orientation occupies a dominant position.

(2) Political Implementation (Low Ambiguity - High Conflict)

Policy goals are clear but interest conflicts are prominent, and the implementation process is accompanied by obvious power games. Local governments may conduct strategic implementation based on local interests or development demands, and the self-interest orientation is more likely to emerge. The effect of policy implementation depends on the power structure and coordination capabilities.

(3) Experimental Implementation (High Ambiguity - Low Conflict)

Policy goals or instruments are not clear enough, but there is little divergence among participants. Local governments conduct exploratory practices within a large scope of discretion, and their self-interest orientation may be transformed into a driving force for promoting innovation and improving efficiency. The implementation result is greatly affected by specific contextual conditions.

(4) Symbolic Implementation (High Ambiguity - High Conflict)

Both policy goals and instruments are unclear, and there are significant conflicts among participants. Policy implementation is more symbolic, and local governments often adopt a minimal implementation strategy. Their behaviors are significantly influenced by local political alliances and interest structures.

Figure1: Matland's "Blurred - Conflict" Policy Implementation Analysis Framework

Policy Ambiguity /Policy Conflict	Low Conflict	High Conflict
Low Ambiguity	Administrative Implementation	Political Implementation
High Ambiguity	Experimental Implementation	Symbolic Implementation

5. Case Study

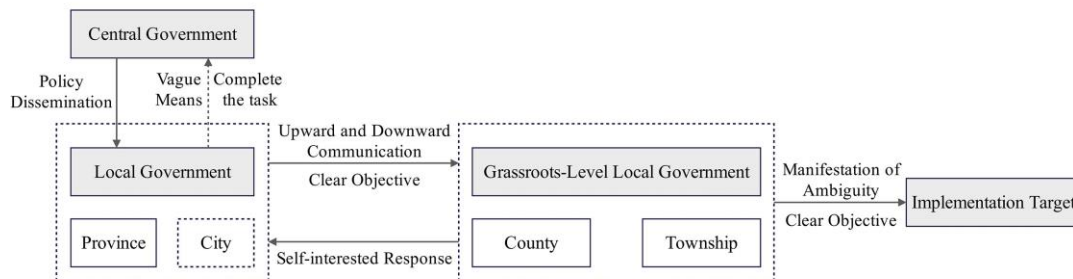
Building on the theoretical framework of policy ambiguity-conflict model and the discussion of local government self-interest in the previous section, this section takes the policy of relocation for poverty alleviation as a case study to empirically test the interaction between policy attributes, subject behavior, and implementation outcomes. This case is chosen because it is a typical "high ambiguity-high conflict" policy with explicit political and performance orientations, making it an ideal context for understanding the internal logic of policy deviation in China's hierarchical governance system.

5.1 Problem Statement and Overview of Policy Implementation

As a targeted poverty alleviation measure in China, relocation for poverty alleviation aims to address structural poverty caused by adverse natural or ecological conditions through spatial rearrangement of populations and settlements. Launched on a large scale during the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016–2020), the policy covered a wide geographic area with intensive resource input, completing resettlement of a large population in a short time through government-led concentration. Characterized by strong political mobilization and performance

orientation, the policy involved multiple levels of government and diverse stakeholder interactions in its implementation. As a key implementer, local governments played a decisive role in translating and operationalizing the central policy. Unlike existing studies that focus solely on policy ambiguity or conflict, this analysis incorporates local government self-interest as a core explanatory variable to better explain the systemic deviation between policy design and implementation outcomes.

Figure 2 : The Dynamic Changes of Policy Ambiguity During the Implementation Process



5.2 Subject Interaction and Policy Implementation Deviation: A Self-Interest Perspective

With clear political goals and rigid performance requirements, the relocation policy faced escalating implementation pressure as it extended downward through the four-tier governance structure (province, city, county, township). At the meso level, local governments not only used the policy as a poverty reduction tool but also embedded it into local development agendas, leading to "localized adaptation" of central guidelines. For example, expanding resettlement scales and promoting urban concentration became additional means to boost urbanization rates and local performance. While such strategic actions achieved short-term performance goals, they created structural risks for subsequent policy stages.

Despite local variations in implementation methods, the core institutional requirements of relocation for poverty alleviation remained consistent across regions. Notably, "demolition of old houses and reclamation of land"—a critical post-relocation link that has been understudied in academic research—emerged as a key site where implementation deviations are concentrated. Since demolition and reclamation follow resettlement in the policy sequence, local governments prioritized quantifiable resettlement tasks while delaying or weakening follow-up demolition work.

(1) Implementation Deviation in Central-Local Interaction

In central-local relations, the central government granted local authorities broad discretion over resettlement scale and location, while setting strict requirements for demolition and reclamation based on the "one household, one homestead" rule. This "flexible front end, rigid back end" institutional structure incentivized local governments to expand resettlement scales to meet performance targets, while underestimating the costs and social conflicts associated with subsequent demolition. As relocation scales increased and resettlement sites shifted to urban areas, the difficulty of demolishing rural old houses accumulated exponentially, forcing grassroots governments to repeatedly balance task completion and social stability in implementation.

Local government self-interest stems from dual pressures: top-down administrative assessment and political mobilization, and bottom-up local development needs. Under these combined influences, local governments often resorted to selective implementation and strategic adjustment, gradually diverting policy outcomes from the central government's original intentions.

(2) Implementation Deviation in Subject-Object Interaction

In the demolition and reclamation stage, policy goals weakened progressively during hierarchical transmission. Although grassroots governments clearly understood policy targets, they adopted ambiguous interpretation and flexible operation to reduce direct conflict with resettled households. Resettled households, despite being information-disadvantaged, rationally weighed potential costs and generally acquiesced to this ambiguous interaction, which maintained superficial policy stability.

From the perspective of the ambiguity-conflict model, policy conflict intensified significantly in grassroots fields due to increased stakeholders, while policy ambiguity became an external feature actively constructed by implementers. This ambiguity did not arise from unclear policy texts but rather from strategic choices made by local governments based on self-interest, even as they had a clear understanding of policy goals.

In practice, grassroots governments used tactics such as deferring demolition or replacing target houses to meet superior assessments. These flexible measures fulfilled formal policy tasks but undermined the land consolidation and institutional standardization functions of demolition and reclamation, constituting concrete manifestations of policy implementation deviation.

The above analysis confirms that policy implementation deviation in relocation for poverty alleviation is not caused by ambiguous policy goals but by strategic adaptation driven by local government self-interest within a pressure-based system. This case further validates the explanatory power of the ambiguity-conflict framework and highlights the mediating role of subject behavior in translating policy attributes into implementation outcomes. The next section will generalize these empirical findings and discuss their theoretical and practical implications for public policy in China.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of finding

This study, grounded in China's hierarchical governance context, explores the underlying mechanisms of policy implementation deviation through case-based analysis. The findings reveal that the process of policy transmission and execution—from central formulation to local implementation—is essentially a process of multi-actor interest bargaining and compromise. The emergence of deviations should not be interpreted merely as administrative failure, but rather as the result of a complex interaction among value conflicts, policy attributes, and hierarchical differentiation.

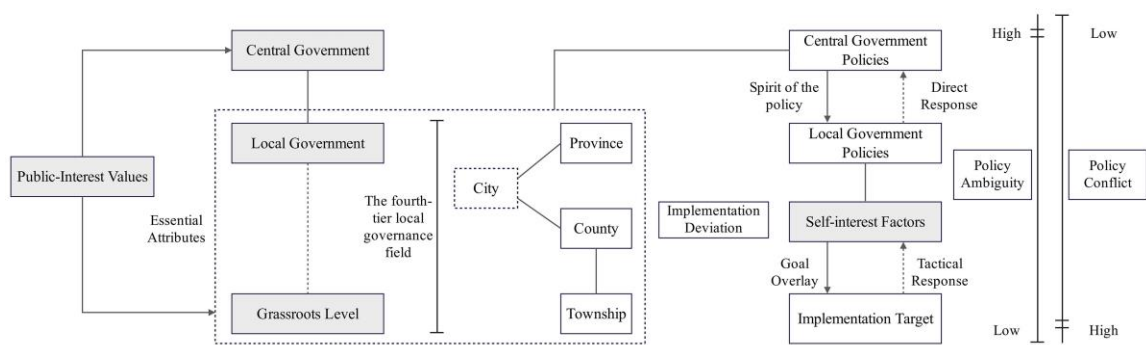
First, the tension between public interest and self-interest represents the intrinsic motivation behind policy deviation. As dual actors, local governments must simultaneously uphold the legitimacy of public authority while responding to performance pressures, fiscal constraints, and local development goals. This dual orientation generates an inevitable value conflict: while public interests reflect the central government's macro objectives, local governments' self-interests manifest through selective compliance and adaptive implementation.

Second, the inherent ambiguity and conflict within policy design provide structural conditions that enable deviation. Drawing on Matland's ambiguity–conflict model, this study finds that ambiguous policy goals grant local actors interpretive flexibility, allowing them to insert local objectives into national directives. Meanwhile, policies with strong local conflict dynamics force governments to negotiate among competing stakeholder interests, often leading to compromised or distorted implementation outcomes.

Third, the functional differentiation within the multilevel administrative hierarchy exacerbates informational distortion and goal displacement. Provincial governments

mainly act as transmitters and supervisors of central policy; municipal governments further refine and contextualize implementation plans; county and township governments serve as direct executors. As policy moves downward, its abstract intentions are reshaped by complex local realities. In responding to upper-level performance evaluations, lower-level governments frequently adopt strategic behaviors, resulting in discrepancies between intended and actual policy outcomes.

Figure 3: Analytical Framework for Policy Implementation Deviations - Self-Interest, Ambiguity and Conflict



6.2 Policy Implications

To mitigate the adverse effects of local self-interest in policy execution, reliance solely on administrative orders is inadequate. Instead, a systematic institutional design is required to balance central authority and local autonomy, thereby reducing the structural space for deviation.

(1) Clarify Authority and Responsibility through Legal Institutionalization.

The division of powers between central and local governments, as outlined in the Constitution, should be refined through legislative or administrative clarification. Defining the specific duties of provincial, municipal, county, and township governments can reduce overlaps, prevent shirking, and constrain discretionary manipulation in policy execution.

(2) Regulate Local Discretion and Formalize Policy Refinement Standards.

While local flexibility is essential for adapting to regional contexts, it must operate within a clearly defined institutional boundary. Central authorities should establish guiding frameworks that distinguish between rigid and flexible policy components, limiting arbitrary “reinterpretation” of policy intent while permitting necessary contextual adaptation.

(3) Build Comprehensive Supervision and Evaluation Mechanisms.

Shift from ex-post accountability toward process-based supervision, integrating procedural

oversight with outcome-based assessment. By embedding monitoring mechanisms throughout the entire implementation cycle, central authorities can detect deviations early and prevent the inefficiency of post-facto corrections.

(4) Enhance government transparency and reduce policy ambiguity.

Open access to policy documents and procedural information can strengthen public oversight while increasing the cost of rent-seeking for local governments. Greater transparency discourages self-interested manipulation, aligns local actions with public values, and fosters a governance environment grounded in legal certainty.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

Overall, policy implementation deviation is an inevitable byproduct of the interplay between structural incentives and policy complexity. This study constructs an analytical framework linking value tension (“public vs. self-interest”) with policy attributes (“ambiguity and conflict”), outlining a logical chain that explains how deviations emerge within China’s administrative system. Nevertheless, the proposed recommendations remain theoretical and principle-based.

Future research should focus on operationalizing these institutional insights. Key directions include developing quantitative indicators to measure the degree of local self-interest in policy execution, designing differentiated deviation-correction mechanisms for various policy types (such as redistributive versus regulatory policies), and exploring how multi-level coordination can enhance consistency in national policy outcomes. These inquiries will contribute to refining China’s policy implementation system and advancing the modernization of governance capacity.

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