



After Election: Villagers' Participation and Collective Decision-Making -Collective Decision-making of China Rural Community in the New Context of Villagers' Election and Self-governance

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the collective decision-making process in the context of villagers' election and self-governance in China rural community. Taking X village for example, after describing the process of decision-making, the interactions was discussed among some important factors, including the efficiency and effectiveness of decision-making, villagers' participations, the structure and function of village political institutions, decision-making mechanisms and counseling rules. According to the survey, collective decision-making can be divided into two types: administrative decision-making and participant decision-making. Participant decision-making process involves differentiated and conflicting interests, consciousness of interests, and extensive villagers' participation. In the new context, the most important factor for collective decision-making is the building of a new balance mechanism—"negotiation and balance" counseling rule, in order to absorb and organize differentiated and conflicting interests.

Keywords: Administrative decision-making, Participant decision-making, "Mobilization and voting" counseling rule, "Negotiation and balance" counseling rule

1. Background and Questions

In the year of 2005, X villagers elected their own villager committee. The present village head promised to build tarred road for the village in the election. The committee began the program in 2007. The program was made in April and was approved by the local government soon. Although the plan, procedure and funds were approved by the villagers in the villagers' meeting, the program could not be performed smoothly because of the differentiation and conflict of the villagers' interest. In response to the challenge, the committee had revised the plan for several times. Finally, as the weather got cold, the program had to be shelved.

The rural area has achieved dramatic economic development and performed the institutions of villagers' election and self-governance in recent years. However, the public construction program must be suspended by the conflicts of villagers' interests. Why? Are the villagers impeding the public affairs for their own interest after the consciousness of interest? Is it because the new autonomic organization can not deal with the public affairs effectively? Or the institution cannot adapt to the new situation? By describing the collective decision-making process of X village, this paper tries to analyze the interactions among several factors that may influence the collective decision-making process, including the efficiency and effectiveness of decision-making, villagers' participations, the structure and function of village political institutions, decision-making mechanisms and counseling rules.

2. Literature review

How is the collective decision produced? Who can influence the making of collective decision? How do they interact with each other and develop consent? In this part, the author tries to build a framework for analyzing collective decision-making process.

2.1 Decision-making formation theories

The decision-making formation theories focus on such issues as environment, assessment, choosing, performance, feedback and revision of policies.

The first theory is the "rational model" or "scientific model". Borrowing form the economic assumption of "economic man" or "rational man", some politicians argued that the politics can be developed to a precise science like economics. As for the decision-making, all-round rationality can help mankind identify the problems, define policy alternatives and make the most effective choice. (Yan, Jirong, 2004, p 247)

The second theory is the “bounded-rationality model”. As for Herbert Simon, the world is large and complex, and we do not have the capacity to understand everything. We also have a limited time in which to make decisions. We are also limited by the schemas we have and other decisional limitations. As a result, our decisions are not fully thought through and we can only be rational within limits such as time and cognitive capability. (Simon, 1982)

The third theory is the “muddling-through decision-making model”. According to Lindblom (1968), policy making is typically a never-ending process of successive steps in which continual nibbling is a substitute for a good byte. To Lindblom, there are some inherent deficiencies in the rational decision-making model. The first one is that policy-makers must identify the problems continually rather than predetermine them. The second is that rational decision is impossible because of the limitation of time and information and the consumption of analysis. The third one is that policy-maker must confront the dilemma of objectives and values. Therefore, the collective decision-making process is a never-ending process.

To conclude, the collective decision-making process is such a never-ending process that we should study it in a dynamic perspective rather than a static one.

2.2 Theories on participants

Although the decision-making process theories regard decision-making as a continuous process, they do not point out the participants and their interaction. The following theories can help us identify the several kinds of participants in decision-making process.

2.2.1 The “government-society” perspective

From the “government-society” perspective, the participants can be divided into two types according to their nature: public power and social force. For public power, public decision-making is a problem-solving process, which is a response to public interest and desire. (Zhao, 2000: p195) On the other hand, for social forces public decision-making process is a process, in which various social forces require public power to authoritatively distribute common resources on the basis of their interest and needs. (Easton, 1965) So, the decision-making process is an interaction between government and society.

2.2.2 Interest group, economic organization and party

In my opinion, the participations of social forces can be divided into two types: individual participation and collective participation. The collective participation contains the participations of interest group, economic organization and party.

The interest group theory can date back to the period of the foundation of U.S.A., when politicians, including Madison and Washington, argued that party is a common phenomenon for a free society. (Hamilton, 1980) In the influences of scientism and behaviorism, the concept of interest group developed to a new interest theory at the beginning of the twentieth century. For Bentley, all are the group interests, while both individual interest and state interest are frictional. Society is the balance of the interests of groups and the function of government is to coordinate and balance the interests of groups. (Bentley, 1967: p258-259) In the 1950s, Truman (1951) conducted empirical study on interest group and perfected interest group theory. After that, interest group developed into pluralistic elitism and corporatism by absorbing pluralism and elitism. (Zhang, 2005)

Michael G. Roskin pointed out the difference between interest group and economic organization and that between interest group and party. Economic organizations work for their own economic profit, while interest groups involve public interest. Parties strive to possess public power, while interest groups attempt to exert influence on public power. (Roskin, 2004)

To sum up, decision-making process involves five types of participants: individual, interest group, parties, economic organization, and public power.

2.3 Social theories on collective decision-making

Up to now, we have identified the process and participants of collective decision-making. But how do they interact with each other and produce consent?

2.3.1 Rational choice theory

According to rational choice theory, there are two basic factors for interaction: actors and things. The actors possess the things, from which they can get interests. These things can be called resources or cases. The relationship between actors and resources is control and interest relations. (Colman, 1990: p34) More importantly, interest is shaped by needs and desire. Social action is a decision-making process, in which actors possess, control and exchange resources to meet their needs, guided by the principle of maximizing interest by minimizing cost.

Furthermore, social actors can be both individuals and groups. When social actor is individual, the process is called individual decision-making, while that is called social decision-making when social actor is group.

2.3.2 The social background of collective decision-making

However, the decision-making process is not independent and exclusive as the chemical experiment in the laboratory; rather it is embedded in the social and cultural background. (Granovetter, 1985) To conclude the political systematic theory, James E. Anderson (1994) pointed out that the requirement of policy-making comes from environment, which is inputted to the political system. Generally, environment requires and limits policy-making and the environment includes geographic characteristics, demographic factors, politics, culture, social structure and economic institutions.

2.3.3 The mechanism of the collective decision-making

The key question of collective action is: how different rational actor produce cooperative decision and consent? Or what mechanisms coordinate the interests of different actors? There are four main ways to coordinate and balance the different interest: (a) ideal rational choice; (b) institutionalization; (c) compulsory power; and (d) authorization.

Furthermore, these mechanisms are not independent, but interrelated and intertwined. They work together to balance the interests of different participants and produce collective decision and action. However, their functions differ among different social and cultural environments. As Samuel P. Huntington (1992) said in his *Political Order in Changing Societies*, in traditional society, political order is determined by the interaction of rational choice and authorization; in pride society, political order involves the relationship of rational choice and compulsory power; and in civil society, political include more interrelation between rational choice and institutionalization. As a matter of fact, there exist all the mechanisms in one society, even with playing different roles.

2.4 Framework for analyzing collective decision-making

Now, we can find that there are several factors can influence the decision-making process. In order to combine all the factors, we can build a framework that can tell us the process more directly and comprehensively. The framework can be illustrated by the figure 1.

First of all, collective decision-formation is a never-ended process, including identifying problems, revising plan and interacting continually. Secondly, the main participants can be divided into two types: government and social forces. Social forces involve individuals, interest groups, economic organizations and parties. As government is a factor of political environment, I list only four participants in the figure. Thirdly, the interaction and action of each participant must abide by the mechanisms, which developed through history. These mechanisms include rational choice, institutionalization, authorization and compulsory power. Finally, all these factors, influencing collective decision-making process, are shaped and influenced by and interacting with distant social environment and social process.

3. The phase of decision-making guided by the village committee

Just after the Spring Festival of 2007, the village committee took positive action and made a plan on building tarred road. From the survey, I found that there were five main steps to make the plan, including the villagers meeting.

Firstly, the village committee went to the local government and asked for advice and permission. The secretary of the village CPC (Communist Party of China) insolently told me, "Accompanied by YR (the village head), I went to the town government and met with the vice administrative chief who is responsible for the facility construction. He showed us the layout of building tarred road. He said the road of our village should be built three years ago. Unfortunately, the program was not performed for some reasons. So it is appropriate to build tarred road now."

Then, the committee made the plan of building tarred road. After communicating with the government, the committee held meetings for several times. Finally, they made a plan and divided work among the members. The village head described the primary plan, "In the end of February, we held a significant meeting. We made the primary plan and reported it to the town government. More importantly, we divided the work. According to the decision of this meeting, I assumed the work of communicating with the town government. ZY (the secretary of the village CPC) was responsible to propagandize the plan to the villagers. And YJ (the vice village head) was assigned to make budgeting. "

Thirdly, the committee held meeting which aimed to report the plan to the villager representatives. One of the villager representatives told me, "It is beneficial for us to build tarred road. There are so many motor vehicles in our village that the soil road cannot meet the needs of the villagers. At the meeting I strongly agreed to this program. Nearly all the representatives approved the program too."

The last procedure of the decision-making process is the holding of the meeting of all villagers. The attendants of the meeting included two supervisor of the town government, three members of village CPC, five members of village committee, four leaders of villager production team, and all villagers over sixteen years old. Following is the meeting agenda:

a) One of the supervisors of the local government addressed the attendants. He introduced the background of this program. Then he said that the government would support the program and wished the project would be finished soon.

b) The village head introduced the plan on how to build the tarred road. He said building road as a long-term program dated back to the beginning of 1990s. The committee had made a new plan of residence in 1991 and constructed the main road of the “#” shaped plan. He said that because of the limit of budget, they cannot build all the roads this time but only the front main road which stretched to the public road five mile away.

c) The vice village head who was responsible for budgeting introduced the budget. He said all the residents must invest to guarantee the performance of the program to supplement the government funds. He said every villager had to hand in 150 yuan.

d) The secretary of the village CPC encourage the villagers to work together to finish this beneficial program.

e) All villagers voted and approved the program.

To sum up, there are several characteristics of decision-making of this phase: a) the decision-making is relatively efficient, because the process lasted only three months; b) the decision-making was dominated by the village committee and we can outlined the process as “village leaders----villager committee----village elites----all villagers”; c) the main mechanism is order and support, that is, the committee made decision and then asked for consent of the villagers, even ordered and directed the villagers.

4. The phase of villagers’ participation and decision revision

However, the performance of the plan was not “favoring” for the committee. Although the plan was passed at the villagers meeting, lots of villagers rejected to carry out the plan. Why?

4.1 An example of the participation of individual

There is a field in the western end of the village, which was contracted by CHZ for ten years. The performance of the plan would require him to cut down about fifty trees in the field. All the trees were just five years old and were useless. However, according to the contract, the field was owned by the committee, so the committee tried to force him to cut the trees.

CHZ rejected the policy strongly. He said, “*At least, the committee should pay for my lost.*” Then the committee promised to pay his for these trees by 100 yuan per tree.

However, CHZ applied for more compensation. He said there was more expected profit, so the committee must pay these trees by 1 000 yuan per tree. His requirement was impossible for the committee. Finally, after negotiating for several times, the committee promised to pay 20 000 yuan for these trees.

This case indicates, after the implementation of the Family Unity Contracted Responsible System, farmers became independent market participants, owning the rights of management of and benefiting from land. This institution proceeds to incite farmers’ consciousness of interest. More importantly, farmers have resources to negotiate with the public authority, which was impossible thirty years ago. (Li, 1998)

4.2 An example of participation of organized interest group

There are several pools in the village, which are used to save water for irrigation. However, the pool dried up in recent years. So the committee changed these fields to residence.

However, building houses on these fields is expensive. For example the resident must raise the ground sill in order to build house, because the land was much lower than those around. Furthermore, there were not public facilities, such as public road, drainage system and so on. So, all the villagers were reluctant to build houses there.

In order to perform the unified plan of residence-construction, the committee promised to construct public facilities in these areas five years ago. YC (a villager) told me, “The committee has promised to construct the road, drainage and electric facilities five years ago. So we built houses here. But five years past, it is still very inconvenient to live here. I think the committee is not believable. So I will not invest to build the tarred road unless the committee performs the promise made five years ago.”

There are four pools in the village, which were changed to residence area. So this case involved about forty families, or 200 persons. They all wanted the committee to build public facilities now, or they would not invest to build tarred road. So they applied together. They all agreed that they would not support the program if the committee did not build public facilities for them.

YC said, “YD (another villager) and I went to the home of the village head one night. I also carried some presents to him. I told him that it is a good thing to build tarred road and we support the program actively. What I want to say is that the committee has promised to build public facilities in the new residence areas five years ago. Why not build them at the same time? However, the villager head rejected our application at once. He said there was not too much money to do all these work. More importantly, he said the money appropriated by the government can be used only to build tarred road, which is prescribed clearly by the government. Finally, I told him that this is not only our desire, but also the

desire of 200 persons. If the committee can not solve the problems, all involved would not support the new program.”

The committee knew that it was unreasonable not to build public facilities in these areas. In order to guarantee the performance of the plan of building tarred road, the committee organized a meeting to interpret the case to those villagers, who built houses in the new residence areas. Finally, the committee promised that if there was enough money, they would build the public facilities, or they would build in three years.

This case indicates that it is a matter of fact that those persons who have common interest can express their desire. Compared to individual, the organization has more strength to negotiate with the public power. However, there is no normal procedure for villagers to express their desire, so they must organize themselves and express their needs by visiting the village head. When failed, they even expressed their ideas by threatening.

4.3 An example of participation of dispersive interest group

As said above, there are four main roads in the “#” shaped distribution in the village. However, because of the limit of budgeting, the new tarred road can only cover one principal road. First of all, in order to ensure the quality of the road, the committee determined to build an 8-meter-wide road, which would be unnecessary to rebuild in twenty years, or it would be a waste. Secondly, as the limit of budgeting, building all the four main roads can not ensure the quality of the roads, which may be rebuilt in several years.

Some villagers who live in the back of the village rejected the plan, the moment the plan was performed as the committee got the appropriated money by government. QZ said, “It is unfair to build the front road for the villagers who live in the back of the village. All villagers hand in equal money, but only those living in the front of the village can use the road directly. The chance is that all the roads in the village are not solid. If the other roads are not built, the tarred road will be damaged too. So I argue that all the roads should be built, even if the roads are not as wide as expected.”

The message was dispersed so quickly that it was supported by nearly all the villagers who lived in the back of the village. More importantly, from the survey, there was no evidence that someone had organized the villagers to reject the program and express their argument. The message was dispersed mainly by chatting.

One villager said, “I have bought a new truck to do transportation business. If the road in front of my gate can be built, I can donate 5 000 yuan. To tell the truth, if the road can not be built, I am reluctant to hand in any money.”

Another said, “It is really unfair. I did not hand in any money. Not because I reject the program of building tarred road, but because I must protect my right of using public facilities. Another reason is that all the villagers in the back of the village have not hand in money. If I provide money, others will criticize me.”

There were a large number of different reasons given by villagers, although the only way to reject the plan was to reject to take out money. Finally, the committee was forced to change the primary plan by narrowing the road and building all the main roads.

Although the participants’ reasons may be different, however they have common interest. Even they are not organized to express their desire and needs, they also develop a same tone on the basis of informal communication. This indicates that interest group not only can be formally organized ones but also those informally exist. However, the prerequisite is there are opportunities, whether form or informal, that can help members express and communicate their viewpoint.

4.4 An example of participation of economic organization

In the large project, there were a lot of small projects, which can carry profit for economic organizations. In the villagers’ meeting, the committee made a plan on how to lease these projects. It is said that the procedure will be fair, open and just.

Some villagers have organized a construction team, which mainly worked outside the village. They wanted to assume some projects in this program. So FB, the leader of the team, went to the home of vice village head, who responsible for budgeting in this project. The vice head promised to lease some appropriate projects, if they were able to finish the work.

However, after the meeting of invitation public bidding, the committee was inclined to employ another construction team, which was introduced by the town government. The team got high praise from other villages too. When the members of the inside construction team heard this message, they went to the office of the committee and asked for opportunity to assume some projects. FB said to me, “Why provide opportunity to outsiders to earn our own money? So we went to the office to persuade the committee to lease the projects to us. They were holding meeting when we reached the office. I said our team could finish the work. All the members live in the village, so it would be very convenient to organize. And we could do extra works if required, because we are the members of the village...Some members were somewhat angry, when they heard that outsiders would assume the project. They required the committee to protect the insiders’ interest and all of us would support the committee in the future. Even some villagers said that we will reject the committee’s decision, if the committee cannot meet their needs. So your admission would be appreciated

by all of us.”

As a matter of fact, the team communicated with the committee for several times. Finally the committee leased half of the projects to that inside team. The village head told me, “I was embarrassed then. To tell the truth, the village construction team cannot work as well as outside ones. So we should lease the project to outsiders to protect the quality of the program. But some members of the construction team rejected to hand in money, if they cannot get the opportunity. So we were forced to meet their needs.”

For another time, the villagers rejected to hand in money as an instrument to express their desire. However, they were neither individuals nor interest groups, but an economic organizations. Although the construction team was a small-sized organizations, it was an inside organization which was embedded in the village. The social network provided them an instrument and opportunity to contract the projects. As for the committee, the decision may not meet the principle of maximizing profit and minimizing cost.

To conclude, the phase of villagers’ participation and decision revision, there are some characteristics: a) the decision-making is not dominated by public power or individuals or interest group or other organizations, but was the product of the interactions among several participants, including the public power; b) actually, the revision disturbed the performance of the primary plan made by public power, which used to be the dominant force to make collective decision. (Yang, 1993)

5. Analysis of the decision-making process

In order to describe and interpret the process of decision-making referred to above, I will find the characteristics of the two phases, evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness, and identify the trend of the development of political institutions in china rural community.

5.1 Administrative and participant decision-making

In the first phase of collective decision-making, the village committee tried to make and publicize a complete plan and then persuade the villagers to support and implement the plan; we can call this phase “administrative decision-making”. By contrast, in the second phase, the villagers participated in the process and forced the committee to revise the primary plan to meet their needs; we can call this phase “participant decision-making”.

The administrative decision-making was dominant about twenty years ago, when the state-power intervened in the community affairs completely and deeply. The community members were motivated and persuaded to perform the policy made by the public power. So the collective decision was made from high to low and from inside to outside.

However, after the reform and opening up, the family unity contracted responsible system made the farmers independent participants of economy, which proceeded to incite the farmers’ consciousness of interest. Furthermore, as the diversifying of china society, farmers’ interest differentiated too. They became the participants of both market economy, democratic politics, which was promoted by the performance of villager’s election and autonomy.

There are several forms of villagers’ participations. They can be support, protest and profit participation; they may be individual or group participation. More importantly these participating actions were embedded in the social background. However, the ways to participate indicate the informal nature, such as threatening by not supporting and sending presents.

5.2 The effectiveness and efficiency of collective decision-making

To evaluate the process is a complicated matter. In my opinion, we can use two terms to assess the making and performance of collective decision.

The first is efficiency, which is used to evaluate the input and output of decision-making. For the goal, public decision-making is a process, in which individuals, groups or government solve problems and achieve goals in certain environment. (Friedrich, 1963: p79; Andson, 1990: p4-8) So, we can assess the process by how they achieve the goal using the term of efficiency.

The second one is effectiveness, which is used to describe the performance and support of the decision. Collective decision-making involve several kinds of participants, who may have different goals and interests. How to balance the differentiated interest and perform the decision by various participants can be assessed by the term of effectiveness.

Let’s return to the case. In the phase of administrative decision-making, the decision-making is characterized by high efficient, but in the second phase, the disturbing of the performance of decision indicates the decreased efficiency and low effectiveness.

5.3 Interpretation: Structural intensification and functional weakening

From the description and analysis, we can find that the key factor of the problem is that how to absorb and balance the participants’ interest on certain issue. Furthermore, the decrease of efficiency and low effectiveness in the second phase

was caused by the failure to absorb the villagers' interests in the first phase. Why the committee did not balance the differentiated interests? The answer is the dilemma of structural intensification and functional weakening of political institutions in present China rural area.

At present, the china rural community has all the modern political institutions, including the villager CPC, villagers meeting, villager representatives, village committee, and production teams. All these institutions played important role in the phase of administrative decision-making through supporting and publicizing the decision made by the committee.

However, we also can find that all the institutions did not investigate the common villagers' interests, desire and needs. All the members of these institutions are servant of villagers as the modern political values say. However, the institutions have not changed their values of totalitarian system and developed new values of modern politics. All lead to the functional weakening and confusion of these institutions, which lead to the failure to absorb and balance the differentiated and conflicting interests.

5.4 Policy: Building new consulting rules

The economic and political development of china rural area requires the reform of political institutions, which should include structural and functional change, to balance and absorb the various participants' interests. As the community has owned all the institutions, the key factor becomes how to build new counseling rules to ensure the function of these institutions. The counseling rules indicated in the phase of administrative decision-making can be called "Mobilization and voting" counseling rule. Although the origin of power determines the orientation and style of public authority, the previous situation can influence the present situations. As a matter of fact, the community leaders use the administrative style to deal with lots of community affairs such as taxation. However, as to the collective decision-making, the style cannot adapt to the new situations. The old "mobilization and voting" counseling rule lead to the functional weakening and confusion of political institutions, and thus the failure to absorb the differentiated and conflicting interests.

From the survey, we can find that there are no formal ways for villagers to express their interests. So the solving of the problem requires providing opportunities and means of participation. Then, to change the "mobilization and voting" counseling rule to a new "negotiation and balance" counseling rule is necessary.

The new "negotiation and balance" counseling rule can provide a forum for villagers to express and interpret their interests and viewpoint. Then, the committee or public power can absorb the villagers' advice and make more effective decision.

I think the following points should be taken account into the building of new rules: a) the rules should be universal; b) the rules should be discussed and agreed by all the community members; c) the rules aim at providing ways for villagers to express their interests; d) The rules should absorb, balance and organize the villagers' interests; and e) collective decision should be made on the basis of negotiation among various participants.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to describe and interpret the problems of collective decision-making in china rural area, in the context of villagers' election and autonomy. Because of the dilemma of structural intensification and functional weakening of political institutions, the decision-making is not so efficient and effective as past. So to solve the problem must change the consulting rules to adapt to the new situation.

Firstly, I build a framework for analyzing collective decision-making, which include the process, participants, institutions, mechanisms, social environment and social change. This frame work is used to check the case. The social changes led by economic and political reform have changed china rural society, which requires the change of decision-making rules to ensure its effectiveness and efficiency.

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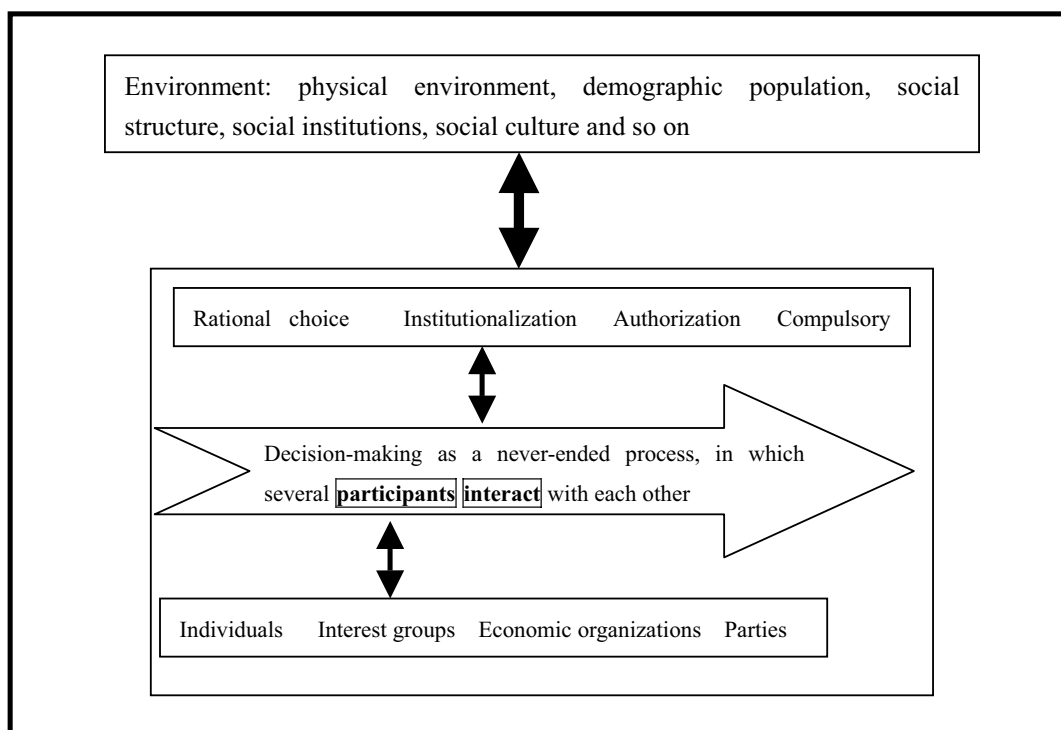


Figure 1. A Framework for Analyzing Collective Decision-making