

## **Comparing Discursive and Performative Contributions to Legitimation of Government: A Study of Municipal Policy Making in Chengdu**

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Research in political science has found that government effectiveness in providing public services can contribute to citizen attributions of legitimacy to government, referred to as legitimation by performance. A communicative line of research expands legitimacy to include procedural elements such as quality of deliberation in decision making, called discursive legitimation. This study incorporates Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action to further the understanding of communication’s role in discursive legitimation of municipal decision making and analyzes this in relation to contributions from performance. The government policy setting was Chengdu, China. The policy issue concerned this city’s plans to increase taxi fares. A sample of 255 adult residents were surveyed. Results indicate that perceived government performance and perceived speech conditions were both positively, and almost equally, associated with attributions of legitimacy to the policy decision. In addition, perceived speech conditions moderated the relationship between the performance evaluation and legitimacy attributions.

*Keywords: communicative action, legitimacy, China, government*

Research on political legitimation can be grouped into two major approaches. The predominant approach in political science maintains that government performance is the key condition for legitimacy. This refers to government stability, economic growth, bureaucratic effectiveness, and efficiency in delivering public services. A more recent line of analysis expands legitimacy conditions to include procedural elements such as fairness of treatment among stakeholders and quality of deliberation in decision-making processes. The current study addresses both of these while incorporating Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action, as a form of proceduralism. It focuses on communication’s role in earning legitimacy for a government’s public policy decisions. More specifically, this study observes how the communication

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environment (or perceived speech conditions in Habermasian terms) may affect the extent to which citizens attribute legitimacy to a decision outcome and, at the same time, may influence the relationship between perceived government performance in a certain public policy sector and the attribution of legitimacy to a decision in that same sector.

The applied setting for the study is in the People's Republic of China. During the past three decades, China, along with the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has taken pride in the country's rapid economic growth. However, this growth has given rise to a considerable variety of social problems—problems that may generate a crisis of legitimacy for the party and the Chinese government. These include a contradiction between the country's socialist ideology and a widening income gap among rich and poor, among others (Zeng, 2016). To address these challenges, the CCP has revised the party's core ideology and launched initiatives to build a "socialist harmonious society" (official political doctrine under Jiang Zemin's leadership) and to embrace a "scientific development concept" (Hu Jintao Thought) in accordance with "rule of law" (Xi Jinping Thought; Cho, 2014; Shambaugh, 2008). Accordingly, the Chinese government has adjusted its governing principles, aiming to improve its governance capability and enabling it to better solve complex social problems as they may arise (Zheng, 2009). The government had previously prioritized economic growth in its political agenda. Today, social issues such as pollution, regional economic imbalances, and social unrest have prompted the government to coordinate the aggregation of diverging interests and to form policies that can more broadly represent and, it is hoped, satisfy public concerns.

Given this situation, grassroots public deliberations such as consultative meetings for public projects, village-level elections, and public hearings and forums have become increasingly common across China, in villages and in major urban cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Fujian, and Hangzhou (Tang, 2015; Tong & He, 2018). As Teets (2014) explained in *Civil Society Under Authoritarianism: The China Model*, the Chinese government now uses certain quasi-democratic practices to obtain citizens' feedback on policies affecting daily life, encouraging them to evaluate the performance of local officials. After conducting the first deliberative poll in China, Fishkin and his colleagues observed that Chinese villagers with various backgrounds can and do participate in deliberative discussions with government about public concerns (Fishkin, He, Luskin, & Siu, 2010). Tong and He (2018) analyzed 393 documented grassroots deliberation experiments in China from 1999 to 2017, finding evidence strongly suggesting that most deliberative experiments exhibit democratic characteristics. They are inclusive, and they affect policy agendas, decision-making procedures, discussion themes, and the public use of the results of deliberation.

Meanwhile, because of an increase in Internet penetration and the rapid adoption of digital services, many Chinese citizens have learned to use various kinds of media and platforms to obtain information regarding public affairs, and they participate in discussion of these affairs (W. Chen, 2014; Zheng, 2007). In some cases, netizen-led discussions on public issues have had a direct impact on laws and policies (Sullivan, 2014).

This trend is no accident. It is the outcome of government legislation. The growing frequency of "public price hearings" is one example. As early as 1997, the People's Congress of China passed the Price Law of the PRC, which required public hearings before new prices were set for public commodities, utilities,

or services. In major cities, more than 100 public hearings were held each year between 1998 and 2001, and more than 1,000 public hearings on prices were held throughout the nation (He & Warren, 2011).

In 2001, “measures” to guide hearings on government price decisions were released—measures that have been revised twice since then to improve openness. The newest version, which took effect January 10, 2019, encourages local governments to use online public hearings to increase public participation. As Horsley (2014) notes, while China’s leaders “have recently tightened up on freedoms of expression, the press, association and assembly, China’s leaders seem increasingly to recognize that government transparency generally and freedom of information—the disclosure of government-held records—specifically help to better govern the country” (para. 2).

A number of scholars, some Chinese among them, argue that to build a more durable basis for legitimacy, some form of democratic speech norms and decision-making processes is needed (Jeffreys, 2009). China watchers will know that the CCP, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, has initiated a crackdown on public speech, especially since Xi’s 2017 reelection as General Secretary of the CCP (Lam, 2015). Control is tighter. Journalists have been more severely controlled, and human rights efforts have been suppressed. However, the trend of broadening public input to governance processes in general has not been reversed. The contradiction between the crackdown and the long-term expansion of deliberation over public policy may be more apparent than real. The crackdown is aimed at direct, perceived threats to political power centralized in the CCP, while the broader expansion of deliberative practices is more focused on governance matters at local levels.

This article reports a study examining the legitimation of a municipal decision regarding taxi fares in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province. Given improvements in people’s living standards, Chengdu’s municipal government proposed in 2010 to raise taxi fares in the main urban areas of the city. They held a public hearing regarding this proposal, and, following public comment, the government approved it. After the new policy was passed, we surveyed Chengdu residents and asked them to evaluate the performance of Chengdu’s municipal government in providing public services. We measured their perceptions of speech conditions during discussions of the policy. Finally, we asked about the level of legitimacy that they attributed to the policy decision. Results indicate that both government performance and speech conditions were significant predictors of legitimacy in Chengdu’s decision to increase taxi fares. Findings also indicate that speech conditions have two kinds of effects: One is a direct effect on legitimacy attributions, and the other is that speech conditions moderate the effect of government performance on legitimacy attributions.

The study’s aim is theoretical, to examine the relative contributions of performance and deliberation in the legitimation process. An auxiliary aim is to contribute to research into the relationship between deliberation and legitimation by employing measures of deliberation drawn from Habermas’s theory of communicative action. In addition, we also want to examine citizens’ expectations for democratic speech norms in China, in relation to government performance and legitimation, at least at the local level. Government performance in economic policy may still be an important source for legitimacy in China today; however, the influence of communication factors related to other governance challenges seems to be increasingly important.

## **Conceptualization and Literature**

### ***Performance Aspects of Legitimacy***

Many conceptualizations of legitimacy can be traced back to Max Weber, who treated legitimacy as the capacity to engender and maintain belief among citizens in the rightness and appropriateness of authority (Weber, 1968). The sense of rightness and appropriateness had for him a number of possible sources. One of these was social rationalization through effective bureaucracy or legality. He believed that instrumental rationality—that is, the use of reason as an instrument to determine the most efficient means for attaining desired ends—was an important source of legitimacy in modern conditions.

Legitimacy studies based on this instrumental line of reasoning have found that one of the main reasons that citizens legitimate decision outcomes is that they might themselves directly benefit from such decisions (e.g., Conlon, 1993; Leventhal, 1976; Lind & Tyler, 1988). A study by Hibbs, Rivers, and Vasilatos (1982) finds that government performance in service delivery directly affects election turnout and approval rates for incumbent authority. Weatherford (1987) provides two justifications of this perspective. First, the efficiency of government agencies tends to have direct, positive effects on the stability of the environment where stakeholders live. Second, government has the power to make collective decisions that will influence individual interests and social life profoundly. Such justifications imply that the self-interest of an individual or a group forms at least part of the basis for citizen evaluations of government (Wilson, 1989).

### ***From Socialism to Performance in China?***

Historically speaking, Chinese governments and the CCP have obtained legitimacy through leadership in revolutionary anticolonial wars, ideological struggle, and the process of modernization (Zheng, 2009). More recently, the primary basis of legitimacy has been evolving to incorporate performance, particularly after the launch of economic reforms (Shambaugh, 2008; D. Zhao, 2009). Under a number of leaders during the period of economic reform, legitimacy justifications have increasingly relied on rapid economic development, improved administrative skill, and technical expertise. Because government performance might directly influence the extent to which citizens justify the legitimacy of government decisions, in this study we hold that:

*H1: Perceived government performance in a certain domain will be positively associated with citizen attributions that a government decision in the same domain is legitimate.*

### ***Procedural Aspects of Legitimacy***

The idea that legitimacy is, at least in part, the outcome of effective administration can be seen across modern societies generally. However, to evaluate whether a government decision is legitimate, justification may be required beyond performance. More recent thinking holds that when stakeholders evaluate decision outcomes, they consider not only whether the decision has produced desired benefits, but also whether the decision-making procedure was itself of a suitable quality (e.g., Alexander & Ruderman, 1987; Folger, 1977; Kernan & Hanges, 2002; Lind & Tyler, 1988; McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992; Tyler, 1994,

2001a, 2001b; Tyler & Blader, 2000). When the decision-making procedure is perceived as fair, people are more likely to see government decisions as legitimate and as deserving of deference (Tyler, 1997, 2000, 2001a, 2006). As Tyler (2000) suggests, the criteria for evaluating fairness include, but are not limited to, "whether there are opportunities to participate, whether the authorities are neutral, the degree to which people trust the motives of the authorities, and whether people are treated with dignity and respect during the process" (p. 117). Even when an outcome is not personally favorable, affected citizens are more likely to accept the result and attribute legitimacy to the decision if they believe that the process is fair (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1994, 2001b; Tyler & Blader, 2000). Using African survey data to test multiple sources of legitimacy, Levi, Sacks, and Tyler (2009) find that procedural justice possesses stronger predictive power than either administrative competence or government performance.

Theorists of deliberative democracy increasingly regard "deliberative procedures as the source of legitimacy" (Cohen, 2003, p. 346). Deliberative procedures basically refer to citizens' discursive participation in deciding public issues (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). According to Gastil (2000), "full deliberation includes a careful examination of a problem or issue, the identification of possible solutions, the establishment or reaffirmation of evaluative criteria, and the use of these criteria in identifying an optimal solution" (p. 22).

The relationship between deliberation and democratic legitimacy has been widely discussed by scholars since the turn toward deliberative theory (e.g., Dryzek, 2000; King, 2003; Lafont, 2015; Peter, 2009; Thompson, 2008). Why is deliberation important for democratic legitimacy? King (2003) analyzes the existing literature and explains that through deliberation, citizens can respect value pluralism and hold authorities accountable to reasonable citizens' arguments. This in turn helps increase the legitimacy of government decisions.

While empirical research has not kept pace with the proliferation of theoretical analyses of deliberation and legitimacy, a research base is growing that attends to purely communicative elements of deliberation. Tyler's (1997, 2000, 2006) research focuses on psychological factors, but he does consider the role of communication. His studies suggest that people view the decisions of authorities and institutions as being more legitimate when they have adequate opportunities to state and discuss issues during the decision-making process. In an online deliberation experiment, Stromer-Galley and Muhlberger (2009) found that expressions of agreement and disagreement during deliberation first influenced evaluations of the deliberation process, and then in turn influenced the perceived legitimacy of a group's decision outcome. They found that positive evaluations of the deliberation process can enhance group decision legitimacy.

### ***Communicative Aspects of Procedural Legitimation: Speech Conditions***

Communicative aspects of deliberation have been conceptualized, and measured, a number of ways (Black, Burkhalter, Gastil, & Stromer-Galley, 2010; Gastil & Black, 2008). One of the more recent research reports including measurement of deliberation is a study by Medaglia and Zhu (2017). Their project did not measure legitimation. However, it did measure public deliberation about government-managed social media. Their measurement of deliberation assessed the "reasonableness of talk," "cross-

opinion interaction," "comprehension of opposing views," "civility," and "clarity of opinion expression" (p. 535) in deliberation processes.

One promising avenue for measurement is found in Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. A leading philosopher of deliberative democracy theory, Habermas also offers in his theory an empirical framework for assessing public deliberation, along with its effects on legitimation. This framework focuses on "speech conditions" and their relationship to legitimation. By deriving empirical measures from this conceptualization of speech conditions, this study evaluates deliberative procedure in terms of whether citizens feel they have been heard, in the sense that the conditions for dialog (speech conditions) are fair and full.

The notion of speech conditions is derived from Habermas's specification of general symmetry conditions, which are part of his conceptual specification of communicative action (Habermas, 1984, 1990, 2002). Communicative action refers to presumptions underlying speech concerning actor orientations toward mutual understanding. Mutual understanding describes a situation in which participants in conversation are mutually oriented toward "the rightness of the utterance in relation to a mutually recognized normative background" (Habermas, 1979, p. 3). What Habermas calls communicative action is interaction that makes good on expectations regarding orientations to mutual understanding by excluding all forces "except the force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1984, p. 25). During communicative action, all participants can raise questions and will provide justifications regarding problematic "validity claims" and then decide whether to reject or accept such claims. There is symmetry in the communicative freedom allowed all participants during discussion.

To be sure, this mutual orientation is not always conscious. It is not even always present. Habermas speaks of an "anticipation" that underlies all speech (as quoted in McCarthy, 1973, p. xviii). Such an anticipation is presumed even during attempts at deception and manipulation, during which a liar preys on the expectations of an interlocutor. These anticipations are built into language when performed as speech.

This account of communicative action underlies the theory of the public sphere. The freedoms accorded in the public sphere can be democratically meaningful only to the extent that political dialog is communicative. This account of communicative action also underlies Habermas's communicative approach to understanding legitimacy. Habermas (1973) maintains that a political order's worthiness to be recognized, or its legitimacy, must be justified through discursive processes. Only dialog in the public sphere that fulfills the conditions of communicative action will create relationships of trust and understanding between citizens and government that are necessary for democratic legitimation. Without such communication, crises of social integration and collective identity will progressively undermine government institutions' capability to maintain legitimacy.

Communication is said to take place when three validity claims of "truth," "appropriateness," and "sincerity" can be mutually raised and accepted through the exchange of reasons in ideal speech conditions (Habermas, 1984, 1989, 1998). To reach mutual understanding in a nonstrategic way, free and equal speech conditions are necessary to ensure that validity claims of theoretical truth, moral appropriateness, and sincere intentions can be negotiated. In cases in which one or more validity claims are challenged and need

further deliberation, sound speech conditions serve as a set of rules to facilitate full resolution of validity claims. Townley, Cooper, and Oakes (2003) considered a case in which validity dimensions of communicative actions were engaged as primary methods for decision making regarding government performance in the province of Alberta, Canada. Their results suggest that when speech conditions are not protected, instrumental rationalization will erode reasoned justification or communicative rationalization. As a result, technical reasoning will prevent or close off open debate.

Habermas's theory identifies a considerable number of empirical markers of speech conditions. This study uses three of these: (1) symmetric opportunities (participants' perception of whether opportunities for them and others to raise questions are equal); (2) freedom to raise any proposition (participants' perception of whether they feel free to raise any and all questions of importance to them); and (3) full treatment of every proposition (participants' perception of whether their propositions are treated fully and with equal fairness).

In ongoing behavior, decision making is rarely based on a fully power-free environment. Even as expectations, speech conditions are ideal and may seldom be fully achievable. Therefore, the theory argues for an orientation toward mutual understanding and observes communication in terms of levels of fulfillment of sound speech conditions rather than in terms of a binary condition (e.g., free vs. not free, equal vs. unequal).

### ***From Performance to Communicative Proceduralism in China?***

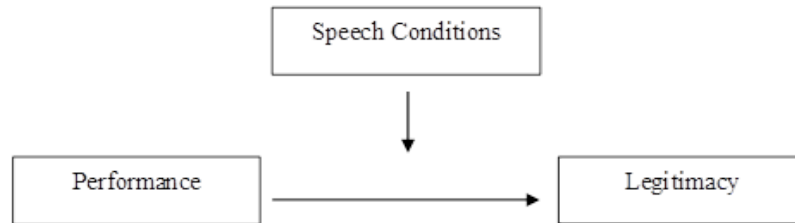
Despite developments over the past few years, deliberative practices emerging in China suggest the prospect that democratic speech norms and decision-making processes are an emerging expectation among the Chinese people. We believe this emerging expectation may mean that citizens expect speech conditions to be communicative during processes of public deliberation over policies. Thus, we expect that:

*H2: The perception of the decision-making process as communicative in terms of speech conditions will be positively associated with citizen attributions that a government decision is legitimate.*

### ***An Integrated Model***

Previous research has evaluated the legitimacy of government decision outcomes through either performative or procedural aspects separately. Very few bring the two together and investigate the relationship between them, especially in a Chinese context. Even fewer studies have examined the specific communication environment for the decision-making process. So, this study integrates performative and communicative assessments of legitimacy together and aims to offer an integrated model. Built on previous theories and research about legitimacy, deliberation, and communicative action, this study proposes that:

*H3: During decision-making, speech conditions that are perceived as communicative will moderate the relation between perceived government performance in a certain domain and legitimacy attributed to government decisions in the same domain (see Figure 1).*



*Figure 1. Theoretical model.*

## **Methods**

### ***A Case in China***

The applied setting for this study was a municipal government policy decision on taxi fares in Chengdu City. The study observed Chengdu residents' attitudes toward, and acceptance of, a 2010 decision by the municipal government to increase taxi fares—an important decision about a public transportation service that impacted the lives of a great many Chengdu citizens on a daily basis.

The Chengdu case was selected for a number of reasons. First, the taxi fare policy proposal was known to the majority of Chengdu residents. Rapid urbanization and increasing automobile ownership had increased citizens' interest in issues regarding road conditions and urban transportation services in Chengdu. Taxis are an important part of the public transportation system in the city. Thus, the proposed increase in fares stimulated heated public debate. Second, as the municipal government proposed the fare increase, it sponsored a public price hearing to discuss this proposal. This public hearing itself also gained a lot of attention and spurred discussion. Third, the fare change received significant amounts of press coverage. Two major local newspapers, *Chengdu Business News* and *Chengdu Evening News*, and one major local TV station, Chengdu TV Station, reported the proposed increase. On the websites of these local news outlets, citizens exchanged opinions under news threads about the proposed changes. These represented views from diverse residents, including local government officials, taxi drivers, and university professors, as well as average citizens. One popular local news website conducted five online public opinion polls on the taxi fare increase over the course of three months. On average, each of the surveys received 54,000 responses. The website also devoted a special section to public debate on the increase. News articles and in-depth analyses were found on a number of other websites, with citizens expressing both approval and disapproval of the proposed fare changes. Finally, Chengdu residents knew the taxi service price decision to be a municipal initiative, primarily the responsibility of two government departments. The Pricing Administration Bureau of Chengdu is responsible for proposing plans for taxi fare increases and making final decisions, while the Transport Committee of Chengdu is responsible for regulating taxi service operations in general.



### ***Sampling and Sample Profile***

The taxi fare increase applied to six central urban districts of Chengdu: Gaoxin, Wuhou, Jinjiang, Jinniu, Chenghua, and Qingyang. Thus, six volunteers were recruited, and each went to one district to collect in-person surveys in September 2011. Respondents were approached at their workplaces in neighborhoods randomly selected within each district. A total of 300 survey questionnaires were delivered, and 260 of them were returned.

After five cases were removed because of either excessive missing data or invalid demographic information, the size of the final sample was 255, resulting in a response rate of 85%. Residents of all six urban districts were represented in the sample, with the Gaoxin district having the lowest proportion of total responses received (3.6%), and the Jinjiang district having the highest proportion of responses (38.5%). Sixty-two percent of the respondents were female; 38% were male. Their ages ranged from 18 to 76 years ( $M = 35.66$ ,  $SD = 10.41$ ). In terms of educational backgrounds, 2.4% of the respondents had completed elementary school, 10.6% middle school, 35% high school, 47.6% college, and 4.3% graduate school. Members of the CCP were 19.3% of the sample, while 80.7% were non-party members. The distribution of monthly income for the participants, in RMB (1 US dollar equals approximately 6.5 RMB), was: under 2,499 (51.6%); 2,500–4,999 (37.3%); 5,000–7,499 (7.5%); 7,500–9,999 (2.0%); 10,000 and above (1.6%); and missing (1.2%). In terms of residency, 82% of the respondents were Chengdu residents, while 18% were not.

### ***Translation of the Survey Questionnaire***

The survey questionnaire was originally designed and written in English. Then the English version was translated into Chinese by two social science scholars competent in both English and Chinese; each scholar did an independent translation. After that, differences in the two Chinese versions were resolved to produce a final Chinese version used in the survey.

### ***Measures***

#### ***Perceived Speech Conditions***

The concept of perceived speech conditions in communicative action theory has three dimensions: (1) symmetrical opportunities to contribute to discussion; (2) freedom to raise any propositions; and (3) full and equal treatment of propositions. Respectively, "symmetric opportunities" refers to respondents' perception of the sufficiency of opportunities for them and other citizens to raise questions of, and to, government during the policy-making process. "Freedom to raise any proposition" is defined as respondents' perception of citizens' freedom to raise a proposal or idea they wish to discuss. "Equal treatment of propositions" refers to respondents' perception of the government's fair and full consideration of every proposal raised by citizens. In studies concerning support for government policies on smoking (Chang & Jacobson, 2010; Chang, Jacobson, & Zhang, 2013), communicative action variables—both validity claims and speech conditions—have been operationalized and used as independent variables to predict perceived legitimacy. Results from these studies indicate that communicative action variables (validity claims and

speech conditions) can account for variance in dependent variables of legitimacy ranging from .15 to .55 (multiple  $R^2$  change after controlling for demographics).

Measures for speech conditions in this study were developed from Habermas's theory and the research mentioned earlier. The survey included three items for each dimension of speech conditions. Thus, the total number of speech conditions items was nine. All the items were placed in the specific context of the Chengdu setting and were measured on a 7-point scale, with 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree* (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 3.42$ ;  $SD = 1.45$ ). Example questions include: "Last year, Chengdu residents all had equal opportunities to express how the municipal government should make adjustments to taxi fares," "I think every Chengdu resident felt free last year to raise any questions or to make any suggestions concerning how the government might change the taxi fare," and "I think the government gave full consideration to what Chengdu residents said they needed when making the decision to increase taxi fares last year."<sup>1</sup>

#### *Perceived Government Performance*

People's evaluation of the output of public services and goods offered by the government has been recognized as a focus of government performance evaluation (Melkers & Willoughby, 2005). In this particular research setting, performance was measured by citizen assessments of the taxi service in Chengdu city. Wording for these measures was borrowed from the Eurobarometer 62.1 (2004), which gathered public opinion data on many issues, including assessments of the transportation services across member states of the European Union. Eight questions were employed to ask about Chengdu residents' opinions of the convenience, affordability, safety, customer service, and overall quality of the taxi service in Chengdu (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ). Each item was measured by a 7-point scale, with 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*.

#### *Legitimacy Attributions*

The attribution of legitimacy to government decisions in this research setting refers to people's willingness to support and accept the government decision to increase taxi fares. The measures of outcome legitimacy were guided by Suchman's (1995) summary of types of legitimacy, Tyler's (2006) conceptualization of legitimacy from the social-psychological perspective, and J. Chen's (2004) study of political legitimacy in Beijing.

Respondents were asked about their attitude toward statements regarding the Chengdu municipal government's final decision to increase taxi fares: "The municipal government's decision to increase the taxi fare is appropriate," "The decision to increase the taxi fare is fair to all residents," "I support the decision to increase the taxi fare by the municipal government," and "I am willing to accept the decision to increase the taxi fare, though I disagree with it." All items were measured on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates strong disagreement, and 7 indicates strong agreement (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 3.21$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ).

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<sup>1</sup> The full list of the survey items is available from the authors on request.

### *Control Variables*

Participants were asked to provide standard demographic information, including age, gender, education level, income level, party affiliation, urban district, and residency. In addition, the survey asked questions related to the specific research setting. First, participants were asked to report their level of interest in Chengdu local affairs: "I am very interested in Chengdu's local affairs." They were also asked to evaluate two statements about their awareness of and interest in the taxi fare change issue: "I have heard about Chengdu's taxi fare change," and "I am very interested in the issue of Chengdu's taxi fare change." Third, participants were asked to evaluate a statement about their frequency of taxi use: "I use taxi services very often in Chengdu." Finally, the study sought information about respondents' media use to obtain local news by asking participants to evaluate four statements about how often they used the Internet, newspapers, television, and radio to get information related to local affairs.

Except for the item asking about the participants' awareness of the proposed taxi fare increase, which was a yes-or-no question, all other items were measured on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates strong disagreement, and 7 indicates strong agreement with the statements.

Standard linear regression was employed to filter nonsignificant predictors of legitimacy attributions from the 15 demographic and control variables. A total of 25% of the variance in legitimacy attributions was explained by the control variables alone (adjusted  $R^2 = .25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Among these, four variables served as statistically significant predictors: "interest in local affairs" ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $p < .001$ ), "newspaper reading" ( $\beta = .28$ ,  $p < .001$ ), "frequency of taxi use" ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and "interest in taxi fare change" ( $\beta = -.15$ ,  $p < .05$ ). All other demographic and controls, listed earlier, were nonsignificant.

The final model included these four statistically significant predictors. In addition, the three variables gender, educational level, and urban district were included in the model to control for possible sampling effects of overrepresentation of females, college graduates, and Jinjiang residents in the sample.<sup>2</sup>

### **Findings**

Following Baron and Kenny (1986), a hierarchical moderated regression model was used to test the influence of perceived government performance, perceived speech conditions, and their interaction term on legitimacy attributions. First, seven control variables were entered into the model; the main and independent effects of perceived performance and perceived speech conditions were then tested; and, finally, the moderating effect of the speech conditions was tested.

The results of hierarchical regression are presented in Table 1. Multiple correlation coefficients were significantly different from zero at the end of each step, with Step 1 having  $R = .46$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Step 2 having  $R = .75$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and Step 3 having  $R = .76$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Table 1). Because the test of the moderating effect in the regression model involved some risk of multicollinearity among the independent variables and the interaction term, the study used a residual centering technique to reduce the effects of this problem and

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<sup>2</sup> A methodological note on selection of the control variables is available from the authors on request.

ensure that the estimates reflected a genuine predictive power of each variable and the interaction term (Lance, 1988). The variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics of the independent variables and interaction term in the final analysis fell within the limits of a relatively strong model (VIF < 5).

**Table 1. Direct and Moderated Effects of Government Performance and Speech Conditions on Legitimacy Attributions.**

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Controls			
Interest in local affairs	.32 ***	.16 **	.20 ***
Interest in taxi fare change	-.15 *	-.06	-.10
Frequency of taxi use	.18 **	.04	-.01
Newspaper reading	.28 ***	.10	.04
Gender	.03	.04	.04
Education level	-.11	-.07	-.05
District	.17	.12 **	.12*
Main effects			
Performance		.35 ***	.37 ***
Speech		.38 ***	.36 ***
Moderating effects			
Performance × speech			.16 ***
Adjusted $R^2$	.22 ***	.55 ***	.57 ***
$\Delta R^2$	.24 ***	.33 ***	.02 ***

Note.  $N = 255$ .

All coefficients are standardized.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

In the first step, variables entered included respondents' interest in local affairs, interest in taxi fare change, frequency of taxi use, newspaper reading, gender, education level, and district to test their predictability of legitimacy. The findings indicate that the seven control variables jointly accounted for 22% of the variance in legitimacy (adjusted  $R^2 = .22$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Except for gender, education level, and district, the association between decision legitimacy and all other four control variables was statistically significant at .05 or better. Among them, interest in local affairs ( $p < .001$ ), frequency of taxi use ( $p < .01$ ), and newspaper reading ( $p < .001$ ) were positively related to legitimacy, whereas interest in taxi fare change ( $p < .05$ ) was negatively related to legitimacy.

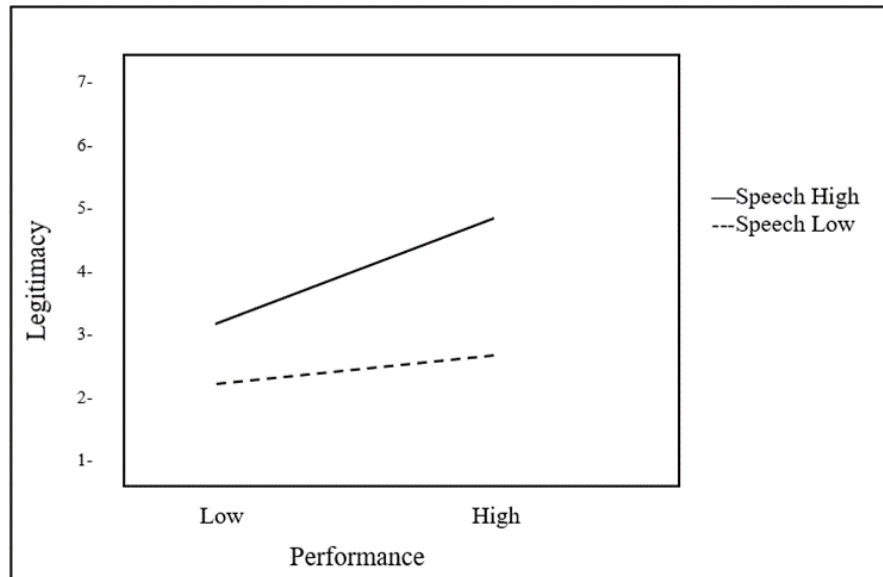
In the second step of the hierarchical regression model, the variables of perceived government performance and perceived speech conditions were entered to examine how much variance in legitimacy could be explained in addition to the portion predicted by the seven control variables. Results indicate that the performance and speech conditions variables, together with the control variables, jointly accounted for 55% of the variance in legitimacy of the decision and was significant (adjusted  $R^2 = .55$ ,  $p < .001$ ). More than half of this variance in legitimacy could be jointly explained by participants' evaluation of the municipal government's performance in taxi service, together with their perceived soundness of the speech conditions when communicating with the government about the taxi fare increase issue. Combined, the two

independent variables explain 33% of the change in variance in decision legitimacy ( $\Delta R^2 = .33$ ). In addition, the standardized coefficients for perceived government performance ( $\beta = .35, p < .001$ ) and speech conditions ( $\beta = .38, p < .001$ ) were very similar, suggesting that the two shared almost equal power in predicting legitimacy attributions. The results imply that if the respondents were satisfied with the taxi service or if they felt that they had free and equal opportunities to speak on the issue and be listened to, they were considerably more likely to recognize the legitimacy of the taxi fare increase decision. Thus, H1 and H2 were supported by the model.

In the third step, the model added an interaction term formed by multiplying perceived government performance with perceived speech conditions. This tested the third hypothesis, which held that speech conditions, when perceived as communicative, will moderate the relation between perceived government performance and legitimacy attributed to government decisions. In these data, the interaction between perceived government performance and perceived speech conditions was positive and significant ( $\beta = .16, p < .001$ ), indicating that the healthier the speech conditions were, the higher the government performance was perceived to be, leading to higher attributions of legitimacy regarding the policy decision. The interaction term, together with the control variables and two independent variables, accounted for 57% of the total variance ( $R^2 = .57, p < .001$ ); the incremental  $R^2$  was also significant ( $\Delta R^2 = .02, p < .001$ ).

According to Cohen (1992) and Frazier, Tix, and Barron (2004), the value of sequential  $R^2$  in a regression model with an interaction term is generally small, and  $\Delta R^2 = .02$  represents a small but meaningful effect. A large sample size is needed to detect a small interaction effect, or (and) the number of the items measuring the outcome variable will have to be equal or close to the product of the number of the items measuring the independent variable and the number of items measuring the moderator. In this study, the total number of items measuring the outcome variable should be 72 ( $8 \times 9$ ), which is much greater than the total number of outcome measures used in this study. Given the small sample size and small  $N$  of the items measuring the outcome variable, the model still detected a significant effect from the interaction term.

To further explore interaction effects in a moderated effects model, a common practice is to plot the predicted value for the outcome variable. Figure 2 is a plot of the interaction effect between perceived government performance and perceived speech conditions. The high and low values for perceived speech conditions are identified and then entered into the equation along with the range of values for perceived government performance.



*Figure 2. Performance x speech conditions.*

Figure 2 reveals that the pattern of interaction in this study is to enhance interactions where the independent variable perceived government performance and moderator perceived speech conditions affect the legitimacy outcome variable in the same direction and together have a stronger effect. In other words, the unit change of decision legitimacy produced by perceived government performance is greater when speech conditions are perceived to be high than when they are perceived to be low (see Figure 2).

### **Conclusion**

#### ***Discussion and Implications***

Using a sample of 255 adult residents in Chengdu, China, the study finds that both perceived government performance and perceived speech conditions are significantly and positively related to legitimacy attributions regarding the government policy decision. Furthermore, perceived speech conditions moderate the relationship between the government performance evaluation and legitimacy attributions of the policy decision.

This study may have significant implications for research on legitimacy and practices of decision making. First, previous studies have not adequately examined the joint effect of both the outcome-based factor and communication factor on stakeholder legitimacy attributions. This study has integrated the two approaches and tested their relationship empirically for the first time. This suggests that the government's

ability to serve the public well must be supplemented with a communicative speech environment in order to increase the legitimacy of its decisions.

This study also deepens our understanding of the role of communication in legitimation. As in previous studies by other scholars, results of this study indicate a significant positive association between deliberation and decision legitimacy. Uniquely, this study tests the idea of deliberation using Habermas's conceptualization of communicative action, with a focus on speech conditions. Habermas's communicative action theory offers a theoretical foundation for our research, and we believe that this unique use of Habermas's theory can open new avenues for productive empirical research. For example, the theory of communicative action underlies not only Habermas's theory of politics, but also his theory of law and justice, expanding communicatively related research opportunities into these subjects, as related to deliberation.

Finally, this study helps improve our understanding of communicative expectations among Chinese citizens in the context of historical trends. Our findings support the findings of other China scholars indicating that speech norms are evolving in China despite recent setbacks and that communicative expectations are also evolving, at least at local levels. It is difficult to know exactly what is driving this change. Improved living standards for many, a more open flow of news and information, and a growing awareness of economic and political rights are all possible factors leading to changes. Our findings indicate that achieving a higher degree of speech conditions that are communicative is desirable for achieving the legitimacy of municipal decisions.

Whether deliberative practices will eventually bring democracy to China is an open question. He and Warren (2011) have made the interesting argument that deliberation in China could possibly increase even when authoritarian rule is being consolidated. For them, deliberation in China has two possible futures. First, deliberative practices will be a catalyst for democracy. Second, increasing deliberative practices could help to consolidate authoritarian rule. In any case, we cannot predict which future is more likely given the information available today.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, the most obvious limitation was sample size. Even though statistical significance was achieved in all hypothesized relationships, a larger and fully random Chengdu sample would support more confidence in the findings, and it would also then be possible to break down findings by demographic groups within the city. Second, the taxi fare case we examined took place in 2010. With the passage of time, speech conditions in Chengdu may have changed, particularly on politically charged issues that might threaten the CCP. However, we do believe that, despite such changes, the relationship among government performance, speech conditions, and legitimacy we observe in our model should still hold true today in Chengdu and elsewhere at local levels in China. Future research can be conducted to test the model using more recent cases.

Third, the research included perceived government performance and perceived speech conditions as two major factors in predicting stakeholders' attributions of legitimacy of a decision outcome. In addition to these two factors, Geddes and Zaller (1989) suggest that in authoritarian countries, the attempt of the

government to control the flow of news and information can be an effective tool in making citizens believe in the legitimacy of decisions. In contemporary China, official communication, or propaganda, is likely to provide an additional explanation for legitimacy attributions (Brady, 2009; Holbig & Gilley, 2010). The media are still controlled to a large degree by the government and thus may represent official ideologies (Dong, Chang, & Chen, 2008; Huang, 2001; Y. Zhao, 2000).

Such propaganda may influence people's attributions of legitimacy to a decision made by the government in at least two ways. On one hand, official propaganda may persuade people to believe that a specific policy decision is legitimate. On the other hand, it may increase the legitimacy of the decision by making people believe in the legitimacy of the government itself. Gibson, Caldeira, and Spence (2005) tested the idea that institutional legitimacy may be related to acceptance of a decision. For future studies, it might be fruitful to include ideology as a predictor of political legitimacy or to treat the influence of ideology or propaganda as a control variable for both procedural variables (e.g., speech conditions) and substantive variables (e.g., performance), and again investigate their individual and interaction effects on political legitimacy.

More research is needed to test whether the findings in this study can be applied to other settings—for example, different cities in China—or to different policy issues. Future studies might also comparatively analyze the individual effects of the three speech conditions (symmetric opportunities, freedom to raise propositions, and equal treatment of propositions) on attributions of legitimacy.

Finally, in Habermas's theory of communicative action, the concept of speech conditions is related to the idea of validity claims. Townley et al. (2003) suggest that speech conditions may differentially influence the fulfillment of various validity claims. Coercive speech conditions will steer the exchange of validity claims toward those that are more instrumental or strategic in nature. Therefore, future studies might usefully test the overall contextual effect of speech conditions on the relation between validity claims and political legitimacy or set up a more sophisticated model to explore the contextual effects among individual dimensions of speech conditions and validity claims.

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