

A Study of Existing Public Opinion Survey Models Used by Statistic Authority
- Based on empirical statistic surveys by Beijing Xicheng District Government

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Abstracts

Government statistics is to monitor social and economic development. As people's well being increasingly becomes a top priority in national development, it is pressing that the original singular economic statistic pattern in government statistics should be reformed and the function of social statistics should be enhanced at faster pace. Public opinion survey or opinion poll – essential part of social statistics – matters a great deal in the construction of social statistic system. With this as the starting point, this paper lists existing models of public opinion surveys at home and abroad, and makes empirical analysis with a focus on the opinion survey model adopted by Beijing Xicheng District Government in the work of statistics. By revealing the running model and its application, learning from successful practices and analyzing the flaws, the paper aims to present the Xicheng Model across the board, extracts meaningful lessons for grass-root level statistic departments to learn from, and provides reference for China to establish as soon as possible a top-down social survey system in its government statistics.

Keywords: social statistic function, community statistics, empirical study

1. Background

The significance of people's livelihood construction in China has been growing day by day and correspondingly, information of public opinion gradually permeates through local governments' consulting and decision-making processes. Therefore, it is a significant influence in China's course of improving people's livelihood to optimize public opinion surveys and to give full play to the social statistic function of government statistic authority. The establishment of government's public opinion survey system will be an essential tool to serve this purpose. This study hinges on this point, sorts out the public opinion survey models at home and abroad, and makes an empirical study over the Xicheng District Model in Beijing, aiming to explore a government-organized public opinion survey model that works well in China.

2. Major Models of Public Opinion Survey in current China and abroad

2.1 Domestic Models

Government's official or semi-official public opinion survey institutions are the main implementer of public opinion surveys on behalf of government, with Beijing's, Guangzhou's and Chengdu City's being the most representative in this aspect.

2.1.1 Beijing

In 2004, Beijing Municipal Bureau of Statistics set up Beijing Survey Center of Social Conditions and Public Opinions in order to reflect timely the public's opinions and suggestions about hotspot issues in the society. Surveys are mainly carried out through telephone calls, and the Center has so far completed many surveys on hotspot issues like Beijing's application for hosting Olympic Games, China's entrance into WTO and consumer confidence index. Beijing Model is based on communication technology, widely applicable and very common across China.

2.1.2 Guangzhou

Canton Public Opinion Research Center, founded in 1988, is one of the earliest public opinion research institutions in China, including: a large-scale telephone survey system with an annual capacity of surveying millions of primary data; a management system of telephone interviews, door-to-door interviews and special interviews in support of mountainous persistent survey work; a unique digital coding system that can carry out sampling work with accuracy and build up large-capacity and multiple-layer data space.

2.1.3 Chengdu

Chengdu Social Situation Investigating Center, founded in September 2009, is a third-party investigation institution managed by Chengdu Municipal Bureau of Statistics, meeting the social situation and public opinion survey needs from all circles of the society including all levels of party and government organs, enterprises and public institutions, and providing other services such as market research, evaluation and rating, regional economic research, industrial analysis, public opinion monitoring and consultancy.

2.2 Models in the rest of China and overseas

2.2.1 America

America's public opinion surveys can be split into three categories based on the nature of the survey organizations: government authority's public opinion surveys, media entities' public opinion surveys and those done by specialized survey institutions. As far as the first category is concerned, it is normally aiming to improve the work of government, and generally covers two aspects: one is the public opinions about certain policies government implement, and the other is the degree of satisfaction the public has about the work of government. Other important surveys government carries out normally collect data through relevant comprehensive institutions, avoiding targeting individuals to the best.

2.2.2 Germany

Germany has 15 specialized public opinion survey institutions – with 6 federal level ones, including multinational survey companies and public political opinion survey departments. In light of scale, there are small size public opinion polls and large strategic public opinion polls, with the former normally done by newspapers, and the later, including large sample public opinion polls, tentative public opinion poll and fixed sample public opinion polls, done through various ways like questionnaires, telephone calls, face-to-face interviews and group investigations – telephone call is the most common way and then face-to-face interviews.

2.2.3 Taiwan

The earliest public opinion survey in Taiwan appeared in newspaper in 1952. Currently, besides mass media, public opinion survey organizations in Taiwan also include party establishments, academic institutions, government entities and public opinion survey companies. In terms of survey contents, there are commercial survey, mass media's survey, political survey and academic survey. In terms of survey method, there are qualitative research method and quantitative research method, with the former including focused group forums and in-depth interviews, and the latter including telephone interviews, door-to-door interviews or mailed questionnaires, and Internet surveys – a very popular means nowadays.

3. Beijing Xicheng District Government's Public Opinion Survey Organizing Model and Operating System

3.1 Origin and Establishment of the Xicheng Model

In recent years, government statistics plays an increasingly more essential role in decision making about service provision, and at the meantime, there is an increasingly striking contradiction between insufficient output of public opinion surveys and growing needs from government and the public. On one hand, various periodic census

and regular surveys often are large in scale and lengthy in duration; on the other hand, all sorts of ad hoc surveys are growing year by year, which wears down grass-root government statistic departments. Meanwhile, stronger awareness of self-protection among surveyed targets has also added to the difficulty of survey. Facing these problems, it is increasingly imperious for China to innovate its government statistic system and methodology.

To cope with the above-mentioned problems, Beijing Xicheng District Bureau of Statistics and Xicheng District Economic and Social Investigation Brigade (briefly referred to as “the District Stats-Bureau” and “the Investigation Brigade” below) has gradually reached a breakthrough point for tackling the contradictory supply and demand issue of statistic services, that is, community statistics. Community is a basic unit that constitutes urban cities, but for a long time, the government statistic system has extended only to the township level government, with staff allocation in street level administration at most and thus community statistics is almost a blank area, and a blind spot in government statistics. In contrast, plenty censuses, social situation and public opinion surveys and ad hoc surveys all require in-depth exploration into communities to collect data and information. Hence, after the first economic census in 2004, the District Stats-Bureau and the Investigation Brigade started to enhance primary community statistic work in hope of breaking the gridlock through setting up a community statistic work force. In July 2007, after several feasibility studies and coordination between multiple parties, Beijing Xicheng District (Community) Statistic Investigation Squad was formed (hereafter referred to as “the Community Investigation Squad”), which has become a core force in Xicheng District’s public opinion survey organization model.

3.2 The Operating System of the Xicheng Model

3.2.1 Nature of Organization

The Community Investigation Squad is a civil society organization that registers in the Xicheng District Civil Affairs Bureau, in a half philanthropic and half loose status. It mainly assumes the social situation and public opinion survey work assigned by the District Stats-Bureau and the Investigation Brigade. Its founding is a timely and effective supplement for filling in the gap in the onerous, urgent and insufficiently staffed government statistic survey work.

3.2.2 Staffing

The composition of the Community Investigation Squad comes mainly from communities and is formed on the basis of recruitment through interviews and written examinations – mostly retirees and a few other types of personnel, who once worked as statisticians, accountants, teachers and civil servants and have very sound basic qualifications for carrying out statistic surveys. Members of the Community Investigation Squad are not employed officially in the conventional way. Work arrangements are made in light of the duration of the survey task, and remuneration is paid per the amount of the work done. Any personnel can leave the Squad voluntarily. As to the specific staffing, each street has 1 captain, 1 assistant captain, 1 liaison person, several in-charge persons; and each community has 2 investigators. Right now, the Community Investigation Squad covers all 15 streets of Xicheng District of Beijing, and boasts more than 500 investigators.

3.2.3 Management System

The Community Investigation Squad has a management system featured by “uniform management and three-level accountability”.

“Uniform management” means the daily management of the Community Investigation Squad falls solely on the Community Statistic Work Management Office (hereafter referred to as “the Community Office”), which is set up in the District Stats-Bureau and the Investigation Brigade. In its daily management, the Community Investigation Squad has independent articles of association and institutional system; each year, it carries out various sorts of business trainings and implement work deployments when

needed; and in the meantime it always strives to enhance the core of culture and strengthen organizational cohesion through various means like cultural activities and awards & commendation.

“Three-level accountability” means the Community Investigation Squad adopts an accountability system of three levels – district, street and squad. The level of “district” refers to the overall arrangements of survey tasks made by the District Stats-Bureau and the Investigation Brigade; the level of “street” means that the street office of statistics should be responsible for direct management of the Community Investigation Squad under its jurisdiction, for the recruiting, performance review and training of its squad members, and for ensuring orderly implementation of survey work; the Community Investigation Squad is responsible for implementation of survey tasks.

3.2.4 Tasks

The Community Investigation Squad’s mission lies in three major aspects, including: First, to coordinate government statistic departments in carrying out the survey work of public opinions about local economic and social development, people’s livelihood and the degree of satisfaction about government services in this regard, social environment and urban management, etc., a major task of the Squad.

Secondly, while implementing various surveys, to assume the responsibility of promoting and spread knowledge about government guidelines and policies, industrial plans, people’s livelihood plans, urban construction, government’s measures for the public good, laws and regulations about statistics among entities and residents under its jurisdiction. The investigators are often from local communities and thus they know very well about the targeted communities, and have a natural advantage in propaganda and communication work.

Thirdly, to serve as bridge between government and the public by investigating and collecting information about public opinions, and revealing the needs of the mass timely to government.

Since inception, the Community Investigation Squad has completed successively many survey tasks of different sizes and different types on different levels, including public sense of security sampling survey, labor force survey, survey on the degree of satisfaction about Xicheng District’s urban environment and order, 1st national pollution source census, 2nd national economic census and 6th national population census.

3.3 Visionary Goals in the Construction of the Xicheng Model

After over five years’ investigation and practice, the Community Investigation Squad has accumulated very rich experience in statistic surveys and has become an elite force at the leading edge of statistic surveys. In following years, Xicheng District government’s public opinion survey model will be more standard, professional and seamless.

4. Application of Xicheng District Government’s System of Public Opinion Statistical Survey

4.1 Household Survey

4.1.1 Types and Targets of Household Survey

Household survey is a significant part of the statistical survey system and there are two categories: economic surveys and non-economic surveys, with the former mainly focusing on residents’ income and consumption and using sampling survey method, and the latter focusing on residents’ housing, education, health, safety, entertainment as well as public opinions about urban management, social and natural environment, and using ad hoc survey method. This part of paper discusses statistical surveys that focus on the economic factors concerning residents.

4.1.2 Practice of Household Survey

Nowadays, residents’ awareness of self-protection is growing increasingly stronger, and it is a striking issue in carrying out household surveys for investigators to get into

households. Therefore, household survey requires very stable investigation performance and strong skills of getting oneself into each household from investigators.

After recruitment, statistical management authority needs to provide precise business trainings to newly recruited investigators to ensure they are equipped with proper qualifications and skills for household survey. Investigators need to spread the word about survey goals and meanings among surveyed households, provide guidance to them about book keeping, collect and review records, understand the incomes and expenditures of the surveyed household, and maintain routine communication with surveyed households.

4.2 Ad Hoc Survey

4.2.1 Types of Ad Hoc Survey

Among public opinion surveys, ad hoc survey includes above-mentioned ad hoc surveys targeting residents as well as ad hoc surveys targeting social entities.

4.2.2 Practice of Ad Hoc Survey

The establishment of the Community Investigation Squad provides guarantee for implementing various kinds of ad hoc surveys and make it possible to enhance the social statistical function of government statistics. Unlike household survey, ad hoc surveys are mostly one-off events, so the requirements for management of investigators are more demanding – on one hand, it calls for stronger ability of the management to provide guidance, and on the other hand, it asks for stronger comprehensive caliber and immediate responding ability from investigators.

4.3 Population Census

4.3.1 The Meaning and Feature of Population Census

Population census is a survey about the most fundamental national conditions and national strength of China, with very distinct features such as widest coverage of social mobilization, stringently unified organization and highly concentrated investigations. The 6th population census in China lasted three years and could be split into 20 periodic missions including establishment of a census organization; formulation of census plan; registration; data processing; etc.

4.3.2 Practice of Population Census

Xicheng District public opinion survey system also made its due part of contribution to the 6th population census in Xicheng District, Beijing. In 14 intermediate links from the pilot stage of census in July 2009 to data processing in December 2011, the Community Investigation Squad members assumed the role of census instructors, a core force in the census work, and formed an investigation team with supplementary recruitment of census enumerators to complete the specific work. According to statistics, Xicheng District sent 1443 census instructors and transferred 6211 census enumerators successively to join the 6th population census, which was the largest survey success pulled off by Xicheng District Public Opinion Survey System.

5. Pros and Cons of Xicheng Model and Its Significance

5.1 Pros

- 1) An independent community statistic survey team is the organizational base for carrying out public opinion surveys.
- 2) Institutionalized management style ensures that the survey organizing model is standard and rigorous.
- 3) Flattened management hierarchy structure facilitates conveyance of commands, flexibility in responding to unexpected situations, and ensures the force of execution.
- 4) Work allocation is directly made to investigators and the responsibility of each is very clear-cut.
- 5) Training catches up in time, which effectively guarantees the perfect matching

between investigation ability and task.

6) The staffing composition is relatively stable, which helps build a relation of mutual trust with the surveyed targets.

7) The model is well accommodated to the real situation in Xicheng District, and basically meets the development needs of current public opinion survey.

5.2 Cons

1) Unofficial employment poses the potential risk of personnel losses;

2) Right now most surveys are contracted work, and it still lacks of initiative, width and depth in its survey.

3) There is still room for it to improve survey professionalism, skills and means of investigation.

4) With survey work mounting up, investigators might need to complete multiple survey projects at the same time. And such overload of work will indirectly impair the data quality and survey results.

5) Survey results mostly serve government departments; lack of openness and insufficiency in serving the public are the main issues.

5.3 Significance

1) With the social survey function is constantly enhanced further, it is inevitable for China to develop a mature public opinion survey system in its statistic course.

2) In contrast to the onerous statistic work, lack of government statistic personnel is a universal issue, which must be tackled by innovating work methodology.

3) It is a universal phenomenon that the government statistic system often only reaches the street level administration at lowest, and community statistics is almost a blank area, which is a very common problem existing in all statistic systems across China.

4) After five years' continuous improvement and practice, it is proven that the above Xicheng Model is applicable to urban central districts of which communities are their basic composing unit.

6. Conclusion

In future, the improvement in government's statistics of public opinion survey will inevitably be the main representation of enhancement in the social survey function of government statistics. For grass-root statistic departments, proactive establishment of a public opinion survey system that matches its own development will mean a leading edge in the rapid development of public opinion surveys in future. It is hoped that the Xicheng Model will serve as an alternative road for China to build its public opinion survey system.

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