

Beyond Conventions: Alternative Logics of Campaign-Style Governance from the Perspective of Sovereign Decision-Making

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Abstract

Campaign-style governance, as a distinctive national governance mechanism in China, constitutes a pivotal research topic in the field of public administration. Current research, whose theoretical framework is rooted in the practices of the country's transitional period, confronts challenges including ambiguous triggering factors and the tension between "transcendence" (breaking bureaucratic norms) and "normalization" (long-term effectiveness and institutionalization) amid deepening legal development. This paper introduces the theory of sovereign decision-making proposed by Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, arguing that campaign-style governance is essentially a national movement initiated by the sovereign to suspend laws and integrate the bureaucratic system under a state of exception (SOE). Its "normalization" essentially denotes a process wherein the state addresses institutional gaps via extraordinary measures, thereby converting the state of exception into a new norm—rather than a process of self-normalization or ritualization. This framework not only accounts for the survival logic of campaign-style governance in the era of advanced legalization but also offers a cross-institutional comparative theoretical perspective for understanding the "normalization of states of exception" in contemporary nations.

Keywords

Campaign-style governance; State campaign; Sovereign decision-making; state of exception.

1. Introduction: The Tension Between "Transcendence" and "Routine" in Campaign-Style Governance

Campaign-style governance is a core concept in China's public administration research. Scholars have categorized it into two perspectives based on its underlying motivations. Some scholars attribute campaign-style governance to bureaucratic failure resulting from the accumulation of internal government issues. Zhou Xueguang (2017) conceptualizes it as a logic of internal government interaction, referring to internal problems as "operational costs." This analysis dismantles the binary opposition between campaign-style governance and conventional bureaucracy, positing that bureaucratic failure arises from the disruption of normal operational mechanisms, and that campaign-style governance targets informal power rather than the bureaucracy itself. However, this gives rise to a paradox: campaign-style governance grants legitimacy to informal power that undermines the bureaucracy, becoming a process of self-justification. Consequently, its explanatory power is compromised, failing to genuinely elucidate the root causes of bureaucratic failure.

Another group of scholars focuses on external triggers, framing campaign-style governance as a holistic movement and exploring its interaction with society. Feng Shizheng (2011) incorporates it into the concept of "national movement," emphasizing that social factors serve as crucial triggers and that such governance tends to diminish over time. This stands in contradiction to the reality of the "routinization of campaign-style governance" (Xiang Miao,

2024). Jiang Ziyang and Feng Kaidong (2024) propose that risks and challenges often trigger campaign-style governance, but this conclusion lacks universality—it fails to clarify whether risks and challenges are fundamental triggers or incidental factors, nor does it confirm the existence of universal triggering conditions. Campaign-style governance is not purely a passive stress response; it manifests both in large-scale political mobilization and in micro-level matters such as village elections and urban stability maintenance (Zhou Xueguang, 2017). Thus, a purely external perspective struggles to transcend the limitations of specific scenarios and fails to provide a universal summary of its triggering factors.

Furthermore, from an external viewpoint, campaign-style governance is regarded as a quantifiable, "routine" governance model that temporarily operates outside conventional norms. Liu Ji and Xiong Cai (2015) argue that after the Deng Xiaoping era, "campaign-style governance was incorporated into the bureaucratic system." Zhou Xueguang (2017) points out that when campaign-style governance becomes "long-term"—i.e., routine—political mobilization turns ritualistic and its effectiveness wanes. Xiang Miao (2024) contends that campaign-style governance can achieve routinization (Ni Xing & Yuan Chao, 2014), institutionalization, and legalization (Xiang Miao & Yu Jianxing, 2020) as well as long-term effectiveness through administrative absorption. Paradoxically, however, even after being routinized and integrated into the bureaucratic system, campaign-style governance must still fulfill a mobilization function that transcends bureaucratic norms. Whether the mechanism post-routinization can still be deemed campaign-style governance itself remains debatable.

The core limitation of existing research on campaign-style governance lies in its inability to explain the governance's triggering factors and the tension between "normalization" and "transcendence." The fundamental cause is that current studies focus on macro-social variables, failing to illuminate the mobilization mechanisms of contemporary state governance (Peng Bo & Zhang Zhenyang, 2015). Most research remains confined to descriptive analyses of characteristics and functions, without delving into its power essence and underlying logic. To resolve this theoretical dilemma, the key is to find an analytical perspective that simultaneously encompasses its "transcendence" (breaking conventions) and "routinization" (reproducing conventions). Although scholars such as Tang Huangfeng (2007) explained the campaign-style governance mechanism as a form of power legitimation and reproduction—using the "Strike Hard" campaign as a case study to explore how the state, as a transcendent power, achieves effective social governance with limited judicial resources—this early study could not address the persistence of campaign-style governance in modern states due to its publication date. The classic Western political philosophical study of the "state of exception" provides a mature theoretical tool for understanding this "extra-legal power" and "governance by exception" in modern states. The theory of sovereign decision-making in Western political philosophy—proposed by Schmitt and developed by Agamben—highlights that the supreme power of sovereignty is manifested in the paradoxical act of determining exceptions and suspending laws to safeguard the legal order. This provides an effective tool for transcending the internal-external dichotomy and reconstructing the theoretical understanding of campaign-style governance.

This paper introduces the theory of sovereign decision-making not as a simplistic application of Western theories, but as an attempt to re-examine the deep-seated logic of campaign-style governance within a more universal political philosophy framework. It seeks to resolve the inherent tension between "transcendence" and "routine" and provide a coherent explanation for the governance's enduring presence in modern states.

2. Theory: "Bureaucratic Integration" and "State CAMPAIGN Models" from the Perspective of Sovereign Decision-Making

The theory of sovereign decision-making, approached from a legal perspective, analyzes how sovereignty influences society through legal mechanisms during states of emergency. Its core revolves around Schmitt's concepts of "bureaucratic integration" and "state campaign." A reanalysis of the suspension and reconstruction of the legal system under states of emergency within this theoretical framework is therefore necessary. On one hand, emergency practices should be integrated into the framework of bureaucratic operations to explore the internal motivations for integration; on the other hand, they should be contextualized within state movements to clarify the specific manifestations of universal triggering factors.

2.1. Bureaucratic Integration: The Operational Mechanism of Sovereign Decision-Making Under a state of exception

The "theory of sovereign decision-making" was systematically elaborated by Carl Schmitt in *Political Theology*, centered on the concept of "state of exception," and was later further developed by Agamben and others. The "state of exception" is the core concept of this theory. In Schmitt's context, it is not entirely a factual condition in politics; nor is it entirely a manageable situation within a legal framework. It refers to an extremely dangerous situation that is difficult to define concretely and cannot be covered by legal norms. It is such that "they find themselves in the paradoxical position of being juridical measures that cannot be understood in legal terms," and it is "this no-man's-land between public law and political fact, and between the juridical order and life" (Agamben, 2005). Importantly, it is independent of the severity of specific social events—everything from village elections and urban stability maintenance to national mobilization can constitute a state of exception.

Under a state of exception, the *iustitium* occurs. This concept originates from Roman law, literally meaning "standstill" or "suspension of the law." Citing Bodin's view, Schmitt (2005) explains that "commitments are binding because they rest on natural law; but in emergencies the tie to general natural principles ceases." This state creates a legal vacuum and stagnation, providing space for the exercise of sovereignty. Moreover, the state of exception and the *iustitium* are mutually reinforcing, with the latter regarded as a "miniature model" of the former (Agamben, 2005).

Following the "suspension of law," the essence of sovereignty is revealed: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception" (Schmitt, 2005). Sovereign is about "who decides in a situation of conflict what constitutes the public interest or interest of the state, public safety and order, *le salut public*, and so on." (Schmitt, 2005). Under the state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*), sovereignty (or the state itself) determines what constitutes public order and security, as well as when to disrupt such order. Consequently, the foundation of law rests upon decision rather than norms. In *State, Movement, People*, Schmitt divides political unity into a three-tiered structure: the state bureaucracy and officialdom, political parties embodying the state and the people, and the autonomous sphere of the people (Schmitt, 1933). The state is the static component, movement the dynamic element, and the people the non-political component. Existing procedural laws are suspended, the state continues to movement under the leadership of political parties, and movement acts as the intermediary between the state and the people. Decisions (orders) emerge within this movement, and the political system thereby gains its legitimacy.

The relationship between the "state bureaucracy and officialdom" and the law under a state of exception manifests in two aspects. First, a state of exception depends on the breakdown of the normal state. Under normal circumstances, the legal system serves as "the norms that bind the state bureaucracy" (Schmitt, 1933). Although Schmitt criticized liberal normativism, his

reconstruction of the bureaucratic system under a state of exception implicitly acknowledges that, under normal conditions, the bureaucracy operates in accordance with "law." Second, once a state of exception is declared, the bureaucratic system is reintegrated into the national movement. When a prolonged state of exception is established, the bureaucracy discards its normativist facade and becomes integrated into the political whole embodied by the movement. When the normal state collapses and an emergency arises, the sovereign (state) seizes absolute power through emergency legislation, suspends legal regulations to make direct decisions, and integrates the bureaucratic system into the national movement. Agamben critically inherits Schmitt's theory, arguing that in contemporary Western governance, "the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics." and that "the voluntary creation of a permanent state of exception (though perhaps not declared in the technical sense)" (Agamben, 2005). The state of exception has become normalized, and "lawlessness" constitutes a key characteristic of contemporary Western capitalist governance (Guo Weifeng, 2024). It is crucial to clarify that the normalized "governance techniques" described by Agamben are fundamentally distinct from the "routinization, legalization, institutionalization, and long-term effectiveness" of campaign-style governance discussed in existing research (Ni Xing & Yuan Chao, 2014; Xiang Miao & Yu Jianxing, 2020; Xiang Miao, 2024). That is to say, he acknowledges the role of "lawlessness" within the system. Here, lawlessness refers to a dynamic governance technique that transcends the operational logic of the old legal and bureaucratic institutions by forming new laws and regulations. Existing studies have equated the institutionalized outcome of campaign-style governance with campaign-style governance itself. Yet in Agamben's context, new laws and regulations—namely, their realization as routinized, legalized, institutionalized, and long-term mechanisms—are the result of extraordinary governance, not governance itself, and are products of the reproduction of power. In other words, the normalized "governance technique" essentially refers to maintaining a capacity for "non-routine, non-institutionalized, non-long-term, and non-legalized" action. Only when the configuration of the state of exception becomes a normalized form will the new process of legal suspension continue to occur.

In summary, the basic operational logic of the theory of sovereign decision-making is as follows: emergence of an emergency (external) → suspension of law (internal) → bureaucratic integration (practice) → sovereign decision-making (movement) → normalization of the state of exception (institutionalization of the suspended law).

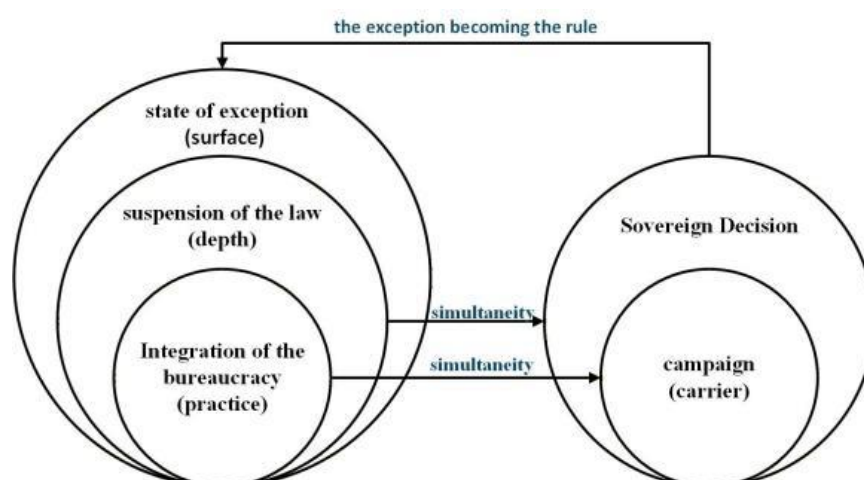


Figure 1. Logic diagram of sovereign decision-making operation

2.2. State Movement: The Interaction Between the State, Bureaucracy, and Society in Sovereign Decision-Making

The operational logic of the theory of sovereign decision-making indicates that under a state of exception, bureaucracies will be reorganized to adapt to the needs of the national movement—a dynamic highly consistent with the definition of campaign-style governance.

Regarding the functions and attributes of campaign-style governance, Zhou Xueguang notes that it "(temporarily) interrupts and halts the routine operation of the bureaucratic system, where each actor occupies a fixed position and follows established procedures," aiming to "replace, break through, or rectify the original bureaucratic system and its routine mechanisms" (Zhou Xueguang, 2017). Feng Shizheng classifies it under the category of "national campaigns," emphasizing that such campaigns are "all initiated by the state and operate with distinct non-institutionalized, unconventional, and unprofessional characteristics" (Feng Shizheng, 2011). Two core characteristics can thus be summarized: first, it disrupts the original bureaucratic system and routine mechanisms; second, it constitutes a holistic national movement. The "movements" described by Schmitt—while functioning to rectify bureaucratic institutions—are also regarded as the dynamic essence of the state in a broad sense (Schmitt, 1933), and are essentially "national campaigns."

Regarding the external orientation of "movements," Feng Shizheng argues that "the state is in motion, while the masses and society are the objects of the movement" (Feng Shizheng, 2011). Although "state movements" are sometimes referred to as "social movements" or "people's movements," they are in fact led by the state, integrating the people and society into a unified political entity rather than constructing an antagonistic relationship. This aligns closely with Schmitt's (1933) view that "the movement is both the state and the people." Based on this, campaign-style governance can be defined as: an unconventional, dynamic mobilization model initiated by the state, aimed at replacing, breaking through, or rectifying the existing bureaucratic system and conventional mechanisms, ultimately acting on society or the people. Schmitt's theory of sovereign decision-making does, however, differ from domestic research on campaign-style governance in certain aspects. Scholars like Feng Shizheng and Zhou Xueguang fundamentally frame campaign-style governance as a governance model from China's transitional period. Although subsequent scholars have attempted to incorporate it into a "normalized framework," they have struggled to resolve the tension between its "extraordinary" and "normalized" features. In contrast, Schmitt's discussion of movements originated in the Weimar Republic, a context characterized by deep legal integration—aligning with China's reality after the deepening of legalization.

At the same time, Xiang Miao (2024) proposes that campaign-style governance can serve as "universal knowledge", meaning that the concept of campaign-style governance is applicable not only to developing countries but also to developed nations that have completed state building and possess mature administrative theories, thus providing theoretical support for its logical rationality. Incorporating the "bureaucratic integration" and "national movement model" of campaign-style governance into the framework of sovereign decision-making can clarify the impact of legal regulatory failures on bureaucracies under states of emergency, as well as the connection between state power reproduction following sovereign decisions and the normalization of campaign-style governance—thus addressing the limitations of transitional-period analytical frameworks.

3. Summary

As a transcendent governance mechanism, campaign-style governance cannot be replaced by conventional mechanisms. Yet it persists in modern state governance, with the tension between

the "ritualization of political mobilization" (Zhou Xueguang, 2017) and its "transcendence" remaining unresolved.

This paper introduces the theory of sovereign decision-making—a tool for studying informal approaches within the context of improved conventional institutions—to expand the boundaries of thinking about campaign-style governance.

From the perspective of the theory of sovereign decision-making, the triple-nested model of "state of exception (context) → suspension of law (substance) → bureaucratic integration (practice)" can explain the triggering factors of campaign-style governance under conditions of a sound conventional system. Meanwhile, the realization of sovereign decision-making promotes the reproduction of state power and drives the normalization of the state of exception. This process explains the paradox of the normalization of campaign-style governance and reflects the state's logic of achieving institutional renewal and bureaucratic integration through the normalization of addressing extraordinary events.

Approaching campaign-style governance from the perspective of the theory of sovereign decision-making helps resolve the tension between extraordinary and routine governance, and mitigates the apparent opposition between the development of campaign-style governance and the process of legalization. In essence, as a national movement, campaign-style governance—while operating with a transcendent nature—addresses institutional gaps through unconventional means, thereby effectively promoting the normalization and legalization of national institutions.

This study also has limitations. The discussion on state power reproduction does not sufficiently address the issue of power legitimacy. Western scholars represented by Agamben tend to criticize capitalist states for implicitly exploiting citizens through sovereign decision-making, but fail to account for specific state actions aimed at protecting citizens' rights (such as the Chinese government's mandatory protective measures during the COVID-19 pandemic). China's positive practices of campaign-style governance may provide a new breakthrough for Western theories of sovereign decision-making, advancing further theoretical development.

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