De-ideologized Mass Line, Regime Responsiveness, and State-Society Relations*

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Abstract

Once the primary method of revolutionary leadership, the “mass line” has reemerged in today’s China as a method of public policy making. This study explores and theorizes the implications of mass-line tactics in policy making and state-society relations in contemporary China. At the theoretical level, it argues that the de-ideologized mass line in combination with traditional forms of nonmobilized participation can enhance government responsiveness to the broader public interest. The mass line can complement traditional forms of voluntary participation in that it can allow better representation of social groups who regularly fail to articulate their needs through the existing participation mechanisms and who therefore remain outside of the policy-making process. Empirically, the paper draws on existing Chinese studies, official document analysis, and unstructured interviews with Chinese academics to provide examples for the theoretical argument. This study analyzes the workings of the mass-line tactics in China during the New Healthcare Reform and the formation of the 12th Five-Year Plan. If implemented not as a propaganda tool but as a mechanism of interest articulation and aggregation, the mass line has the potential to offer China alternative routes of democratization.

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