

## Article

# Who Is Willing to Participate in Local Governance? Modernization of Shared Governance in China

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**Abstract:** Citizens' willingness to participate serves as the endogenous driver of shared governance. During governance modernization in China, shared governance was extensively promoted through various policy agendas. However, few studies have revealed citizens' attitude toward shared governance in China, which leads to a question: Who is willing to participate in local governance? Based on a large-scale survey in China, this study revealed a high proportion of respondents willing to participate in local governance with certain regional differences, and the willingness was significantly affected by respondents' age, educational level, CPC membership, and income level. The findings help to identify and incentivize those unwilling to participate in local governance. This study has important implications for the modernization of shared governance both nationally and internationally, and helps enrich the experiences of democratic sustainability beyond the Western context.

**Keywords:** shared governance; citizen participation; willingness; sustainability



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## 1. Introduction

The United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit on 25 September 2015. To implement this agenda, it brings together governments, the private sector, civil society, and individuals and mobilizes all available resources. It promotes shared governance and also contributes to democratic sustainability. The core of shared governance is collaborative decision-making, and the best public goods should be provided by the government and the public together [1–3]. This process involves multiple stakeholders, empowers citizens, and strengthens public trust in government [4–6]. Scholars have pointed out that shared governance should be “citizen centered” instead of “bureaucratic centered”, of which the key is citizen participation [7]. Citizen participation helps to promote good governance, especially during marketization and urbanization [8–10]. In most Western countries, shared governance has a solid foundation with a long history of democracy. Is there any evidence from different context contributing to the innovation of shared governance and citizen participation for sustainable local development?

China provides an ideal case to elaborate the development of shared governance at the local level. The traditional system of governance in China—often called “social management”—was formed following the logic of “no accident”, emphasizing economic development while neglecting social development [11]. Control and rules were often used as key techniques of governance, and social stability was the primary goal [12]. Since the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2013, promoting the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity (guojia zhili tixi he zhili nengli xiandaihua) has been emphasized. Then, “social governance” was first proposed and constructed following the logic of “service for people”. Citizens have been encouraged to participate in local governance, in terms of providing public service and improving the quality of life in their local communities. The ways of citizen participation include public hearings, polls, advisory committees, public and

private co-production, and interest groups [13]. Under the UN's 2030 Agenda, collaborative efforts for social development have been highly valued. China has adopted the vision of innovative, coordinated, green, and open development that is for everyone. Since the Fourth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the CPC in 2019, the importance of shared governance has been further underlined. The central government is clearly required to maintain and improve a social governance system based on collaboration and broad participation with the goal to bring benefits to all (*gongjian-gongzhi-gongxiang*).

Citizens play crucial roles in the implementation and innovation of shared governance. Shared governance is heavily dependent on individuals' willingness to participate [14]. Only if the citizens are willing to participate in governance, can shared governance with the goal to bring benefits to all be truly achieved. It is especially true in China. There used to be limited space for citizens to participate in local governance for a long time under the traditional system of governance in the era of "social management". People may become used to being "controlled" or "ruled". For example, the level of voluntarism in China remains low in contrast with the counterparts such as the USA and the UK. Civic consciousness is difficult to increase due to the traditional political thoughts guiding citizens regarding the government as *Fu Mu Guan* (parent-like officials) as well as the only legitimate provider of public services [15]. Although the central government and local governments have proposed many policy agendas to promote shared governance since 2013, these could not work without the efforts from citizens.

Consequently, citizens' willingness to participate serves as the endogenous driver of shared governance in contemporary China. However, existing studies focus on citizens' actions of participation rather than attitudes toward participation. The demographic and regional differences in these attitudes have not yet been thoroughly discussed. It hinders the understanding of shared governance in contemporary China. Are the citizens willing to participate in local governance? Who are more or less willing to participate? Are there any regional differences considering the huge gap of modernization within China? Using first-hand survey data, this study fills the research gap by adopting statistical models to answer the above questions. This study helps to investigate the effectiveness of the policies advancing shared governance in contemporary China, and sheds light on the direction of the modernization of shared governance through the stimulation of citizens' willingness to participate. Meanwhile, this study contributes to enriching the experiences of democratic sustainability beyond the Western context.

## 2. Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, and Hypotheses

### 2.1. Existing Studies and Research Gap

In China, shared governance was formally proposed primarily in terms of "social governance" in 2013. The kernel of social governance is "party leadership, government accountability, social coordination, citizen participation, and legal protection". Social governance includes issues related to social welfare, social security, and public services. The common forms of such participation include consultation, "one-case-one-discussion" (*yi shi yi yi*), hearings, mayor's hotline, mayor's mailbox, and participation in public welfare projects. It profoundly reflects the positive interaction among public administration, social self-regulation, and resident autonomy. Although partly in line with the international connotation of shared governance of which the foundations are civil society, citizen participation, and localism [16], social governance in China is featured by a state-led social pluralism.

Existing studies have pointed out the importance of shared governance, and highly valued the roles of citizens. Scholars have explored the process and actions of citizen participation in certain area of local governance in contemporary China, such as environmental governance, philanthropic activities, smart-city governance, and self-governance in communities [17–22]. Previous studies also discussed public participation of certain groups of people, such as the elderly [23] and city dwellers [17]. Regarding who is more likely to

participate in local governance, previous studies focused on the topics of environmental protection, social security, green transportation promotion, and medical services [24–27].

The existing research is limited with the following gaps. First, previous studies focused on the activities and process of shared governance, particularly from the perspective of citizens' actions. Few studies explored the attitudes and willingness of citizens' participation. Second, existing studies investigated certain groups of people regarding their public participation, instead of comparing different groups of people, especially regarding their attitudes and willingness to participate. Third, previous studies have not explored the regional differences in citizens' attributes regarding their willingness to participate in local governance given the huge gap of economic and political modernization within China.

This study aims to remedy the above limitations. First, citizens' willingness to participate in local governance is investigated. It helps to examine the feasibility of shared governance in contemporary China. Second, this study compares the willingness to participate among different groups of people. It is beneficial for the government to accurately locate the groups of people with positive or negative attitude toward public participation. Third, this study also investigates the regional differences in citizens' attributes regarding their willingness to participate in local governance. It helps to identify targeted techniques of promoting citizens to play a more active role in the process of shared governance for the jurisdictions' sustainable development goals.

## 2.2. Theoretical Framework

Citizens' willingness to participate in local governance can be explained based on the theoretical framework of the state–society relationship. The government and society can mutually empower each other during interaction under specific circumstances [28]. From the perspective of the relationship between the government and society, citizens' willingness to participate in local governance could be diverse. The relationship between the government and society is defined based on two dimensions—one is the power of the government, and the other is the power of the society. According to the theoretical framework of the state–society relationship, there are three forms of relationship structure—"strong government–weak society", "weak government–strong society", and "strong government–strong society" [29].

Firstly, for the relationship structure of "strong government–weak society", there is no certain boundary between the government and society. The government is dominant in governance, while the society totally depends on the government, forming an asymmetric dependency relationship. [30]. Under this circumstance, the government is the only subject of governance, bearing the vast majority of functions and responsibilities. The government penetrates into every aspect of the society. Citizen participation, if allowed, is limited to the space and field set by the government in advance. It denotes formalism. Through time, under the dual influence of behavioral inertia and thinking inertia, the awareness of citizen participation can hardly be formed, and citizens are unlikely to be willing to participate in governance [31].

Secondly, the relationship structure of "weak government–strong society" emphasizes that the government fully withdraw and return power to the society. It focuses on the self-governance of society. Under this circumstance, the dominant position of the government in governance is greatly impaired, while the public is promoted to a rather central position. Effective government intervention can create a good environment for citizen participation [32]. However, without the organization and guidance of the government, citizen participation in governance often shows disorder and inefficiency, and even leads to the destruction of democracy and fairness [33]. In this case, citizen participation is led by opinion leaders or elite organizations. The real wills and needs of the public are unlikely to be met under anarchism. Thus, citizens may not be willing to be fully engaged in governance.

Thirdly, in the relationship structure of "strong government–strong society", the cooperation between the government and the public is underlined, and the important roles

of the public in cooperative governance are highlighted. On one hand, citizen participation greatly contributes to good governance through cooperative provision of public services, advancing effective decision-making process, reducing the cost of administration, and promoting social autonomy [34]. On the other hand, governmental regulation helps to avoid disordered citizen participation. The growth of social power does not weaken the power of the government. In many cases, social development is helpful to improve the capacity of the government, and promote the realization of broader social goals [35,36]. Under this circumstance, citizens' needs are truly considered in the policy agenda and easily met. Therefore, citizens' awareness of active participation is formed, and they are likely to be willing to participate in governance.

### *2.3. Citizens' Willingness to Participate in Local Governance*

In China, the ongoing reform of the governance system and governance capacity modernization is promoting the relationship structure of "strong government–strong society". The government has constantly empowered the public and mobilized citizens to participate extensively in public services and grassroots governance. With the decentralization of the government, the power of the society has been continuously strengthened. The breadth and depth of citizen participation in governance have been greatly improved, and the scale of the public willing to participate in governance has gradually expanded [37,38]. For instance, the amount of charitable donation and the number of volunteers keeps on growing since 2008, when the Wenchuan Earthquake and Beijing Olympic Games took place [15]. The number of cases of public participation in public welfare projects is also growing. We assume that citizens are likely to be willing to participate in local governance in contemporary China. Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forward.

**H1.** *There is a high proportion of citizens willing to participate in local governance in contemporary China.*

### *2.4. Demographic Differences in Citizens' Willingness to Participate in Local Governance*

The theoretical framework of the state–society relationship implies that a variety of people would like to participate in local governance under the relationship structure of "strong government–strong society". Previous studies related to the factors of citizen participation in local governance were focused on two perspectives. One is about the external factors, such as bureaucratic responsiveness, community interaction (such as the interaction of informal groups), social capital, social networks, and new information technology [39–41]. The second perspective is about the set of factors related to citizens' attributes. For example, common interests can promote citizens to reach an agreement on collective action to solve common problems [42]; individual factors or personal characteristics such as age, gender, education, political status, socioeconomic status, attitude, expectation, and ability also have impact on citizen participation [14,41,43].

In order to identify who is willing or unwilling to participate in local governance, this study considers citizens' gender, age, education level, political status, income, and residence status based on related studies on citizens' attributes of public participation in local governance, as mentioned above.

Gender differences may lead to different priority of needs and different degrees of participation willingness in public affairs. Previous empirical studies show that men are generally recognized as more actively participating in public affairs [44–46]. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed.

**H2.** *Men are more willing to participate in local governance.*

It is also revealed that there are significant differences in participation attitude and behavior among citizens of different age [47–49]. Most studies indicate that the older the individuals, the more active their participation [50]. As social and political experiences increase with age, it leads to a higher level of rational cognition on the importance and necessity of participation in governance. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed.

**H3.** *With increasing age, citizens' willingness to participate in governance grows.*

Citizens' willingness to participate in governance could be related to their educational level. The more highly educated a person is, the more responsibly s/he behaves, the deeper his/her understanding of public affairs, especially about political ideology, and the more motivated s/he is to intervene in public affairs. [51–53]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

**H4.** *The higher their education level, the more willing citizens are to participate in governance.*

Party membership could also affect the participation willingness in governance, especially in China [54,55]. In comparison with nonparty members, members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) have more opportunities to participate in various political activities initiated by the Party organization regularly or irregularly. These activities can improve their awareness of the importance of shared governance and strengthen their ability in civic engagement, so as to significantly raise people's willingness to participate. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed.

**H5.** *CPC members are more willing to participate in governance than nonmembers.*

Employment status may affect the participation willingness. In China, citizens who work within the system (government or public institutions) have more opportunities for participation, and they are more capable of participating [56]. As a result, their willingness to participate could be stronger than those who work out of the system. Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forward.

**H6.** *Citizens who work within the system are more willing to participate in governance.*

Income inequality will also affect the participation willingness. Generally speaking, the higher the income level is and the more wealth and resources people have, the more attention they would give to relevant government policies, such as fiscal and tax policies, and the more motivated they will be to participate in public affairs [57–59]. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed.

**H7.** *The higher their income level, the more willing citizens are to participate in governance.*

Citizens' participation willingness may vary by their residence status. Important policies promoting citizen participation are often initiated in urban areas rather than rural areas in China. Urban life experience helps to improve the ideological modernization and self-efficiency of the citizens, and enhances their intrinsic motivation and subjective consciousness of social participation [60]. Urban dwellers that have lived in cities for a period of time also have stronger participation ability and higher awareness of participation in public affairs than their rural counterparts [61,62]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is put forward.

**H8.** *Urban residents are more willing to participate in governance.*

### *2.5. Regional Differences in Citizens' Attributes Regarding Willingness to Participate in Local Governance*

In China, the three regions, east, central, and west, are divided not only by geographical standard, but also by the levels of economic development [41]. The level of regional economic development may be closely related to citizen participation, and the attributes of citizens who are more or less willing to participate. Economy serves as the basis of social development. Economic inequality poses different impact on various social and economic groups, and would also directly determine their actions, attitudes, and level of participation in local governance [56,63]. Under this circumstance, the following hypothesis is put forward.

**H9.** *There are regional differences in the attributes of citizens who are more or less willing to participate.*

### 3. Research Methods

#### 3.1. Survey and Data

The questionnaire was self-designed and developed (Appendix B). The reliability and validity of the questionnaire were examined before the formal survey. Test–retest reliability of the questionnaire was examined. The correlation coefficients of both tests based on 50 respondents were over 0.7, indicating a high reliability. Additionally, expert analysis demonstrated good content validity and structural validity of the questionnaire.

This study adopted stratified sampling in the survey. The total population of eastern, central, and western China (with five provinces in each region) was the sample frame. Then, the sample was randomly selected according to the proportion of the population of each region as well as the gender ratio (the proportion of men and women is roughly equal). Firstly, this study selected Beijing, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Shandong, and Fujian in the east; Hubei, Anhui, Henan, Hunan, and Jilin in the central region; and Yunnan, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Inner Mongolia, and Gansu in the west as samples for online research. There were 1037 questionnaires with 773 valid cases (74.54%) were obtained in the first stage. Secondly, this study conducted an offline survey on seven provinces and cities in the three regions, including Beijing, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Hubei, Anhui, Yunnan, and Shaanxi. We obtained 250 questionnaires with 232 valid cases (92.80%). The total number of valid cases was 1005. Respondents aged between 18 to 65 years old were retained.

#### 3.2. Variables

The dependent variable is “willingness to participate”, which is measured with the item “Are you willing to participate in social governance” (1 = yes, 0 = no). Independent variables are as follows: x1: gender; x2: age; x3: education; x4: party membership; x5: employment; x6: income; x7: residence; x8: region (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Variables (N = 1005).

	Variables	Value	N	%		Variables	Value	N	%
gender	male	0	536	53.33	employment	enterprise	2	394	39.20
	female	1	469	46.67		farming	3	117	11.64
age	18–29	1	427	42.49		other	4	221	21.99
	30–39	2	295	29.35	below 3000	1	369	36.72	
	40–49	3	220	21.89	3000–4499	2	230	22.89	
	50 and above	4	63	6.27	4500–8999	3	266	26.47	
education	junior high school and below	1	206	20.50	9000 and above	4	140	13.93	
	senior high school	2	272	27.06	urban	0	709	70.55	
	college and above	3	527	52.44	rural	1	296	29.45	
Party membership	CPC members	1	326	32.44	region	east	1	436	43.38
	non-CPC members	0	679	67.56		central	2	362	36.02
employment	government or public institutions	1	273	27.16		west	3	207	20.60

#### 3.3. Analysis Methods

First, descriptive analyses were undertaken to investigate the overall level of citizens’ willingness to participate in local governance, together with its regional differences. Different groups of people were also compared regarding their willingness to participate. It helps to reveal who is relatively more or less willing to participate in local governance straightforwardly.

Second, as the dependent variable “willingness to participate” is a dummy variable; binary logistic regression models were adopted to investigate the demographic factors of the willingness to participate in local governance. In the model, the dependent variable  $y$  is whether the respondent is willing to participate in local governance: “ $y = 0$ ” indicates that

the respondent is not willing to participate in local governance; “ $y = 1$ ” indicates that the respondent is willing to participate in local governance.

The logistic distribution function is as follows.

$$f(y) = p^y(1 - p)^y \quad (1)$$

The basic form of logistic regression model is as follows.

$$p_i = F(\alpha + \sum_{j=1}^n \beta_j X_j) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\alpha + \sum_{j=1}^n \beta_j X_j)}} \quad (2)$$

If Formula (2) is logarithmized, the mathematical expression of the linear logistic model is as follows.

$$\text{Logit}(p) = \ln\left(\frac{p}{1 - p}\right) = \alpha + \sum_{j=1}^n \beta_j X_j \quad (3)$$

In Formula (3),  $p$  is the dependent variable, indicating the probability of citizens' willingness to participate in governance;  $X_j$  represents the independent variables, indicating the factors of such willingness;  $\alpha$  is a constant;  $\beta_j$  is the regression coefficient, indicating the direction and the degree of the impact of explanatory variables on citizens' willingness to participate in local governance.

## 4. Results and Analysis

### 4.1. Descriptive Analysis

Table 2 shows that 63.18% of respondents were willing to participate in governance, which indicated a relatively high proportion of citizens willing to participate. Therefore, H1 was valid. In addition, the proportion of respondents in the east who were willing to participate was much higher than that in the central region, which was slightly higher than that in the west.

**Table 2.** Overall descriptive analysis on citizens' willingness to participate in governance (N = 1005).

Region	Sample	Willingness of Citizen Participation			
		Yes		No	
		N	%	N	%
nationwide	1005	635	63.18	370	36.82
east	436	334	76.61	102	23.39
central	362	199	54.97	163	45.03
west	207	102	49.28	105	50.72

In Table 3, the descriptive analyses reveal the demographic differences in citizens' willingness to participate in governance.

- (1) Gender. The gender difference regarding the proportion of citizens willing to participate in governance was slight (67.16% vs. 58.64%) in the sample. In contrast, for both male and female respondents, there was a higher proportion of respondents in the east willing to participate than that in the central and western regions. The proportion of respondents willing to participate was the lowest in the west, whereas for female respondents, it was lowest in the central region.
- (2) Age. The proportion of respondents who were willing to participate in governance was the highest for the age group 30–39 years (67.46%), followed by those aged 18–29 and 40–49 (62.30% and 61.36%, respectively). Citizens aged above 50 had the lowest proportion of respondents willing to participate (55.56%). Across all age groups, the proportion of respondents who were willing to participate was highest in the east,

- whereas that in the west was the lowest. The proportion of respondents willing to participate among citizens aged over 50 years old was highest in the west.
- (3) Education. The proportion of respondents who were willing to participate in governance was the highest for citizens with a college degree or above (75.14%), followed by those with a high school degree (including secondary school) (51.84%), whereas citizens with a junior high school degree or below had the lowest proportion (47.57%). The proportion of respondents in the east willing to participate was the highest regardless of their education level (61.7%, 70.37%, and 84.21%, respectively). Among citizens with high education level (junior college and above) and junior high school degree or below, those from the west had the lowest proportion of respondents willing to participate. Among citizens with senior high school degree (including technical secondary school), those from the central region had the lowest proportion.
  - (4) Party membership. There was a higher proportion of respondents willing to participate among CPC members (71.78%) than that of non-CPC members (59.06%). Regardless of region, the proportion of respondents willing to participate was higher for CPC members than that of non-CPC members. For both CPC members and non-CPC members, those from the west had the lowest proportion of respondents willing to participate.
  - (5) Employment. The proportion of respondents who were willing to participate in governance was the highest for citizens who work within the “system” (the government or public institutions) (67.03%), which was followed by citizens employed by enterprises (64.21%), and those engaged in agriculture (50.43%). The proportion of respondents willing to participate was the highest in the east regardless of their employment status. By contrast, citizens from the west had the lowest proportion of respondents willing to participate, regardless of their employment status.
  - (6) Income. Interestingly, the proportion of respondents who were willing to participate in governance was the highest for citizens with middle-level income (3000–4499 and 4500–8999 yuan (CNY)) (64.78% and 69.55%, respectively), which was followed by citizens with low-level income (less than 3000 yuan) and high-level income (9000 yuan and above) (59.62% and 57.86%, respectively). The proportion of respondents willing to participate was the highest among citizens from the east and the lowest among those from the west, overall. However, among citizens with an income level of 4500–8999 yuan, those from the central region had the lowest proportion of respondents willing to participate.
  - (7) Residence. The proportion of respondents who were willing to participate in governance was higher in urban areas (65.44%) than in rural areas (57.77%). Regardless of area, the proportion of respondents willing to participate was highest in the east and lowest in the west.

**Table 3.** Detailed descriptive analysis on citizens’ willingness to participate in governance (N = 1005).

Variables	Value	Nationwide		East		Central		West	
		Participation Willingness (%)							
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
gender	male	67.16	32.84	80.51	19.49	62.01	37.99	48.76	51.24
	female	58.64	41.36	72.00	28.00	48.09	51.91	50.00	50.00
age	18–29	62.30	37.70	74.86	25.14	57.86	42.14	46.24	53.76
	30–39	67.46	32.54	76.64	23.36	61.22	38.78	56.67	43.33
	40–49	61.36	38.64	80.00	20.00	53.09	46.91	52.27	47.73
	50 and above	55.56	44.44	75.86	24.14	37.50	62.50	40.00	60.00



Table 3. Cont.

Variables	Value	Nationwide		East		Central		West	
		Participation Willingness (%)							
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
education	junior high school and below	47.57	52.43	61.73	38.27	42.50	57.50	31.11	68.89
	senior high school	51.84	48.16	70.37	29.63	36.19	63.81	45.76	54.24
	college and above	75.14	24.86	84.21	15.79	71.75	28.25	59.22	40.78
Party membership	CPC members	71.78	28.22	85.62	14.38	65.79	34.21	51.52	48.48
	non-CPC members	59.06	40.94	72.07	27.93	50.00	50.00	48.23	51.77
employment	government or public institutions	67.03	32.97	80.17	19.83	55.91	44.09	57.63	42.37
	enterprise	64.21	35.79	75.96	24.04	58.14	41.86	47.56	52.44
	farming	50.43	49.57	66.67	33.33	47.83	52.17	34.38	65.63
	other	63.35	36.65	77.42	22.58	53.19	46.81	52.94	47.06
income	below 3000	59.62	40.38	75.50	24.50	54.23	45.77	38.16	61.84
	3000–4499	64.78	35.22	78.02	21.98	61.73	38.27	48.28	51.72
	4500–8999	69.55	30.45	81.90	18.10	54.08	45.92	71.15	28.85
	9000 and above	57.86	42.14	69.23	30.77	46.34	53.66	38.10	61.90
residence	urban	65.44	34.56	77.08	22.92	57.20	42.80	51.09	48.91
	rural	57.77	42.23	75.00	25.00	50.79	49.21	45.71	54.29

#### 4.2. Regression Analysis

This study applied variance inflation factor (VIF) values to test the multicollinearity of the independent variables (Table 4). The test results show that the VIF values for the independent variables were much less than the critical value of 10, indicating that there was no multicollinearity among the independent variables, which will not affect the model results.

Table 4. Test for multicollinearity of independent variables.

Variables	VIF	Variables	VIF
gender	1.022	employment	1.268
age	1.035	income	1.095
education	1.033	residence status	1.245
Party membership	1.070	region	1.021

This study further employed binary logistic regression analysis to examine the multi-variate relationship between participation willingness and citizens' attributes (Table 5).

- (1) Gender and participation willingness. With a probability of 51.8% ( $e^{0.417} - 1 = 0.518$ ) higher, male respondents were significantly more likely to be willing to participate in governance than female respondents. Therefore, H2 was valid overall. Gender was also an important factor affecting the willingness of citizen participation in governance in the eastern and central regions. However, the impact of gender was not significant in western China. In other words, compared with women, men in the eastern and the central regions were more likely to be willing to participate in governance, whereas such was not the case in the west.
- (2) Age and participation willingness. The influence of age on citizens' willingness to participate in governance was partly significant. The probability of willingness to participate for citizens aged between 30 and 39 years was 93.10% ( $e^{0.658} - 1 = 0.931$ ), higher than that for citizens aged over 50 years. Additionally, it is statistically significant. Therefore, H3 was invalid. Age had no significant impact on the participation

willingness in the east and the west. By contrast, in the central region, the probability of willingness of citizens aged 18 to 29 and aged 30 to 39 was, respectively, 195.9% ( $e^{1.085} - 1 = 1.959$ ) and 286.0% ( $e^{1.351} - 1 = 2.860$ ) higher than that for citizens more than 50 years old. Thus, citizens under 40 years old in the central region were more likely to be willing to participate in governance. It indicates that young and middle-aged citizens are overall more willing to participate in local governance, as they may better understand the importance of shared governance with the promotion of governance modernization.

- (3) Education and participation willingness. Citizens with a higher education level (college or above) are more likely to be willing to participate in governance than other groups. Compared with citizens with higher education level, the probability among who only graduated from junior high school and below was 28.6% ( $e^{-1.251} = 0.286$ ) lower. The gap was even greater among citizens who graduated from senior high school, with the probability of 33.3% ( $e^{-1.100} = 0.333$ ) lower. Therefore, H4 was valid. In the three regions, education level remained an important factor affecting the participation willingness in governance. Highly educated citizens in all regions were more likely to be willing to participate in governance than those with lower education levels.
- (4) Party membership and participation willingness. CPC members were more likely to be willing to participate in governance than nonmembers. Compared with CPC members, the probability among non-CPC members was 65.0% ( $e^{-0.430} = 0.650$ ) lower. Thus, H5 was valid. As for the regional differences, compared with CPC members, the probability for non-CPC members in the central and eastern regions of China was 44.0% ( $e^{-0.822} = 0.440$ ) and 58.3% ( $e^{-0.540} = 0.583$ ) lower, respectively. However, the impact of Party membership was not significant in the west.
- (5) Employment and participation willingness. Working within or without the “system” had no significant difference regarding the impact on respondents’ willingness to participate in governance, which is inconsistent with the hypothesis. In other words, H6 was invalid. Further, in the three regions, the impact of employment status on respondents’ participation willingness in governance was not significant. It indicates that the content of local governance in contemporary China is so abundant that citizens’ willingness to participate exceeds the influence of the field of work place or the limits of employment.
- (6) Income and participation willingness. Citizens with medium income level (CNY 4500–8999 (yuan)) were most likely to be willing to participate in governance. In comparison with citizens with monthly income of “9000 yuan and above”, the probability of participation willingness for citizens with a monthly income of “less than 3000 yuan”, “3000–4499 yuan”, and “4500–8999 yuan” was 51.7% ( $e^{0.417} - 1 = 0.517$ ), 57.6% ( $e^{0.455} - 1 = 0.576$ ), and 88.7% ( $e^{0.635} - 1 = 0.887$ ) higher, respectively. Thus, H7 was invalid. Income had a significant impact only in the east, whereas the impact was not significant in the central or western regions. Specifically, among citizens in the east with a monthly income of “less than 3000 yuan”, “3000–4499 yuan”, and “4500–8999 yuan”, the probability of their participation willingness in governance was 138.2% ( $e^{0.868} - 1 = 1.382$ ), 101.1% ( $e^{0.699} - 1 = 1.011$ ), and 129.9% ( $e^{0.833} - 1 = 1.299$ ) higher, respectively, than that of citizens with high-income level. Overall, citizens with a lower level of income were more likely to engage in local governance. It indicates that local governance in contemporary China is so closely related to people’s livelihood that involvement in local governance attracts not just a small number of the wealthy citizens.
- (7) Residence and participation willingness. The impact of urban and rural residence on the willingness of citizen participation in governance was not significant, which is inconsistent with the hypothesis. Thus, H8 was invalid. Further, in the three regions, the impact of urban vs. rural residence was not significant. It indicates that, along with the modernization of shared governance, the policies and agendas of shared

governance have been comprehensively implemented in both urban and rural areas. Thus, people living in urban or rural areas did not show significant difference in their willingness to participate.

- (8) Regional difference in citizens' attributes. Overall, in the three regions, highly educated citizens were more likely to be willing to participate in governance than those with lower education levels; the impact of employment status and urban vs. rural residence on respondents' participation willingness in governance were not significant across the regions. Regarding regional differences, male residents, the highly educated, Party members, and people with low- and middle-level income in the east were more willing to participate; male residents, Party members, the highly educated, and people aged below 40 in the central region were more willing to participate; the highly educated and people with middle-level income in the west were more willing to participate. Thus, H9 was partly valid.

**Table 5.** Demographic factors of citizens' willingness to participate in governance (N = 1005).

Variables	National Sample		East		Central		West	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
male	0.417 ***	0.141	0.600 **	0.252	0.766 ***	0.243	0.058	0.318
age (50 and above)								
18–29	0.301	0.291	−0.024	0.508	1.085 **	0.507	0.493	0.743
30–39	0.658 **	0.302	0.296	0.516	1.351 **	0.532	0.915	0.761
40–49	0.391	0.306	0.428	0.534	0.877	0.537	0.766	0.782
education (college and above)								
junior high school and below	−1.251 ***	0.182	−1.352 ***	0.312	−1.440 ***	0.314	−1.258 ***	0.423
senior high school	−1.100 ***	0.166	−0.922 ***	0.294	−1.762 ***	0.296	−0.626 ***	0.367
non-CPC members	−0.430 ***	0.159	−0.822 **	0.296	−0.540 **	0.263	0.238	0.356
employment (other)								
government or public institutions	−0.351	0.221	−0.259	0.377	−0.436	0.380	−0.596	0.577
enterprise	−0.168	0.206	−0.270	0.349	0.077	0.367	−0.393	0.504
farming	−0.391	0.261	−0.843	0.498	0.357	0.428	−0.698	0.572
income (9000 and above)								
3000 and below	0.417 *	0.236	0.868 **	0.386	0.326	0.425	0.256	0.592
3000–4499	0.455 *	0.237	0.699 ***	0.387	0.567	0.437	0.564	0.581
4500–8999	0.635 *	0.231	0.833 **	0.373	0.304	0.417	1.598 ***	0.610
urban residence	0.142	0.179	−0.216	0.325	0.259	0.313	−0.008	0.384
constant	0.503	0.389	1.631	0.674	−0.437	0.657	−0.640	1.013
Cox and Snell R square		0.101		0.098		0.176		0.126
Nagelkerke R square		0.138		0.147		0.235		0.169
numbers of observations		1005		436		362		207

Note: \*  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq 0.001$ .

## 5. Conclusions and Discussions

As stressed, citizens' willingness to participate has become an indispensable part of shared governance. The findings of this study showed a high proportion of respondents willing to participate in local governance, which implies that shared governance works in contemporary China. Meanwhile, demographic factors significantly affecting participation willingness include respondents' age, educational level, political party membership, and income level, while employment status did not significantly affect the willingness. Additionally, there existed regional differences regarding who are more willing to participate in local governance. However, there was no significant difference in terms of urban and rural residence.

This study has important implications for understanding and promoting active public participation in local governance. For the theoretical implications, the findings support the theoretical relationship structure of "strong government–strong society" in China. China is undergoing tremendous transformation from traditional "social management" to modern "social governance". It promotes a shift from "deciding for the people" to "deciding with the people" and "decided by the people" [64]. Findings also provide strong theoretical basis for predicting a favorable trend of shared governance in China.

For example, although the regional differences in the willingness of citizen participation reflect unbalanced development of governance in China, this study did not find significant differences in willingness toward civic participation between people living in urban and rural areas and between those working within the “system” and those who were not. Unlike shared governance in the early stage that was primarily implemented in urban areas and limited fields, the current governance is more comprehensive and inclusive, covering both urban and rural areas and extending to various aspects of public life and work. Thus, although the modernization of governance in developing countries such as China is beset by many quandaries, the findings indicate progress in shared governance along with social development in China.

For the practical implications, this study suggests a refined technique to incentivize those with low willingness to participate in local governance. Firstly, the government, policy makers, and advocacy organizations should identify the groups with weak willingness to participate. As revealed in the findings, it is suggested to encourage female citizens, non-CPC members, the elderly, and citizens with low educational level and polarized income levels to participate in governance. Secondly, individualized and multiple strategies are necessary to be adopted to motivate these citizens to become involved in governance. For example, besides protecting basic rights and interests, the subjective initiative of the female citizens, non-CPC members, the elderly, and people with a low level of income and education should be stimulated. Based on the behavior logic of individuals in Chinese society, the function of family and social network should also be emphasized in promoting these groups of people to participate. Thirdly, as there are regional differences regarding who is more or less willing to participate in local governance, the local government should encourage those with high willingness to play a leading role and mobilize other citizens to become involved. The local government is also suggested to advocate the sinking of Governance Center, promote digital technology, diversify participation channels, and improve legal and institutional systems for citizens’ participation in local governance for sustainable development goals of jurisdictions [13,65].

China’s experience helps enrich the connotation and localism of shared governance. For example, as the kernel of the Chinese political system, the CPC has an important impact on citizens’ willingness to participate in governance. The Party system indicates the dual roles of the authority in the control and cultivation of citizen participation. On the one hand, governance is always carried out under the leadership of the government and the political party, which to a certain extent prevents the disorder and political risks of citizen participation. On the other hand, the institutional arrangements are indeed helpful for cultivating the sense of participation and social responsibility of citizens. Such “Chinese characteristics” imply that findings relevant to citizen participation in Western societies cannot be simply applied to analyze the situation of citizen participation in China.

The modernization of shared governance at the local level in China establishes an important basis for shared governance internationally for sustainable development. Under the UN’s 2030 Agenda, shared governance is especially indispensable for achieving the goals of sustainable development. For developing countries such as China, governments must collaborate with nonstate actors and individuals to contribute to changing unsustainable patterns, including through the mobilization, from all sources, of financial and technical assistance to strengthen scientific, technological, and innovative capacities to move toward more sustainable patterns of life. Beyond promoting shared governance at local or national level, the UN’s 2030 Agenda advocates that governments work closely on its implementation with international institutions, academia, philanthropic organizations, volunteer groups, and others. It proposes a higher requirement of international shared governance. China’s experience implies improvement of democratic sustainability following the global trend.

Although this study helps to fill gaps in the existing research in the field, as a preliminary study, it has limitations. Firstly, the regional representativeness is not flawless due to the limitations of sampling methods and research budgets. Secondly, besides demo-

graphic factors, other variables, such as individual social capital, may also affect citizens' willingness to participate in governance. Meanwhile, macroinstitutional factors, such as organizational mobilization, along with causal mechanism are also suggested to be considered. Relevant variables can also be included in the survey as instrumental variables to reduce the bias of omitted variables. Furthermore, to remedy these limitations would reveal a complete picture of citizens' willingness to participate in governance in China, and promote a more comprehensive international dialogue.

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## Appendix A

1. Eastern China includes Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Liaoning, Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Shandong, Guangdong, and Hainan. Central China: Heilongjiang, Jilin, Shanxi, Anhui, Jiangxi, Henan, Hubei, and Hunan. Western China: Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Sichuan, Chongqing, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet, Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, and Xinjiang.

2. This paper adopts the standard of the China Youth Federation to define middle-aged and young people, in which 18 to 40 year-old people are regarded as young people.

3. This paper divides personal income level according to the M2 per capita and GDP per capita in the year of the research. In the year of data collection, the M2 per capita and GDP per capita in China are 9360.5 yuan (CNY) and 4493.5 yuan, respectively. Therefore, in this study, low-level income is below 3000 yuan, low- and medium-level income is between 3000 yuan and 4499 yuan, middle-level income is between 4500 yuan and 8999 yuan, and high-level income is above 8999 yuan.

## Appendix B

Investigation on the Cognition and Behavior of Citizen Participation in Social Governance  
Dear man/woman:

This survey aims to understand personal views on public participation in social governance, and your participation is very important for the research. The questionnaire is completely anonymous, please answer it according to your idea. All questionnaires are guaranteed to be used only for research. Thank you very much for your support!

CUMTB Research Team

Please complete the questionnaire after reading carefully the following information:

Social governance is an activity that solves social problems, resolves social conflicts, maintains social order and responds to social risks through government-led and multi-party participation. It is also the activity of managing public affairs, which is all around us. It is mainly divided into four types of governance activities: social security, social security, public services, and social participation. The forms of participation include consultation, one matter one discussion, hearings, mayor's hotline, mayor's mailbox, people's livelihood projects, public welfare projects.

Please note: The following questions are single choice and compulsory.

1. Province (city, autonomous region) where you live: \_\_\_\_\_

Note: It mainly refers to the place where you have lived continuously for more than three months, or your hometown (if you have multiple choices, you can choose one of the identities).

2. Gender:  male  female
3. Age:  18–29  30–39  40–49  50 and above

Note: Only people aged 18 and above were surveyed.

4. Education:  junior high school and below  senior high school  college and above
5. Party membership:  CPC members (Communist Party of China)  none/other
6. Employment:  government or public institutions  enterprise  farming  other
7. Monthly income:  below 3000 yuan  3000–4499 yuan  4500–8999 yuan  9000 and above
8. Residence:  urban residence  rural residence
9. Are you willing to participate in social governance:  yes  no

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