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The Manifestations, Causes, and Remedies of "Documentation-Driven Governance" in Grassroots Administration—From the Perspective of Rational Choice Institutionalism

Zhiyang Liu

School of International Affairs and Public Administration, Ocean University of China, Qingdao, China
2133290596@qq.com

Abstract. Trace management was originally formulated as a practical and vital tool for promoting the modernization of national governance. It was intended to standardize daily operations, strengthen process supervision, and ensure the full implementation of policies in grassroots governance. However, in long-term practical operation, it has gradually strayed from its original purpose and evolved into trace-oriented formalism, a typical bureaucratic tendency that values documentary traces over real governance performance. From the analytical perspective of rational choice institutionalism, trace-oriented formalism is never the result of individual dereliction or passive work attitude of grassroots actors. Instead, it is a strategic rational choice made by grassroots actors under multiple institutional constraints, including the serious imbalance between power and responsibility, the biased orientation of performance assessment, the constraints of the pressure-driven system, and the disordered application of digital technology in governance. This study finds that the rectification of trace-oriented formalism should focus on optimizing institutional structure and reshaping incentive and restraint mechanisms. By correcting the risk-averse rational choices of grassroots actors, transforming their behavioral motivations and work expectations, we can guide them to shift their focus from formal record-keeping to substantive governance, so as to realize the organic unity of individual rationality and collective rationality and continuously improve the efficiency and credibility of grassroots governance.

Keywords: grassroots governance, trace-based governance, rational choice institutionalism, formalism, modernization of governance

1. Introduction

Trace management is a standardized approach to governance in which grassroots governance entities rely on written records, audiovisual materials, data platforms, and work ledgers to preserve, document, and trace governance processes and outcomes. "Since the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee proposed the principle of 'leaving a mark wherever iron is grasped and

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an imprint wherever a stone is stepped on,' 'trace management' has gradually become an important method for advancing policy implementation, tracking governance activities, and supporting the evaluation of officials, and it is widely applied, particularly in grassroots governance. Modern scientific and technological methods have advanced archival management practices, providing more convenient tools for organizational oversight and official performance evaluations." [1] Over time, amid mounting pressure and an environment of strict oversight, "trace-ism" has gradually deviated from the original intent of trace management, giving rise to a tendency to prioritize documentation over implementation and materials over results, thereby obscuring the actual effectiveness of governance [2]. During the 10th collective study session of the 19th Central Political Bureau, Xi Jinping pointed out that while trace-based management is currently widespread, the practice of prioritizing "traces" over "achievements" and leaving "traces" without "substance" not only consumes a significant amount of officials' time and energy but also fosters formalism and bureaucratism [3]. Therefore, conducting a systematic analysis of the logic behind the emergence of "trace-ism" and the pathways to its resolution is not only a practical necessity to address the real-world challenges of grassroots governance and continue to alleviate the burden on the grassroots level, but also an academic proposition and practical requirement for improving grassroots governance structures and enhancing overall governance effectiveness.

2. The practical manifestations of "documentation-centricism" in grassroots governance

Trace management is a normal working method that keeps records for inspection and regulates performance. Trace-oriented formalism is an alienated practice that treats record-keeping as an end in itself, emphasizing procedures over real results. It is a typical form of formalism in assessment and supervision.

2.1. "Prioritizing documentation over substance": accumulating paperwork replaces tangible results

The most striking feature of trace-oriented formalism is that grassroots governance shifts its focus from solving problems to producing documents. In a properly functioning system, governments should address public opinions, conflict resolution and livelihood services. Yet under trace-oriented formalism, many practices only emphasize procedural work such as filling ledgers, holding meetings, taking photos and organizing files. Visits, publicity and mediation are often considered complete once photos are taken and materials are filed. Cadres spend large amounts of time polishing documents instead of serving the people. Governance effectiveness is replaced by textual performance, leaving grassroots work in an empty cycle of formal procedures. This is a strategic choice made by grassroots actors under institutional constraints of visual assessment and information asymmetry to achieve procedural compliance at the lowest visible cost for definite benefits.

2.2. "Action follows documentation": overlapping tasks lead to fabricated records

Under the pressure-driven system, higher-level authorities assign intensive tasks with frequent inspections and tight deadlines. Grassroots units generally face structural contradictions of overloaded tasks and insufficient resources. When governance capacity cannot meet assessment requirements, some grassroots authorities supplement, fabricate and beautify records to pass inspections. For example, during rural toilet renovation in Bijie City, Guizhou Province, grassroots

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staff were forced to take staged photos and fill in numerous forms to meet targets. In some cases, complete files are prepared in advance even before tasks are finished. Trace management has thus turned from a supervision tool into a "fig leaf" that covers governance weaknesses. This is a rational choice for grassroots units to avoid accountability and risks under the strong constraints of unbalanced power and excessive workload.

2.3. "Trace-centric approach": performance evaluations distort work priorities

"In grassroots governance, the direct cause of the spread of 'trace-centricism' lies in the preference for traceable indicators in performance evaluations," [4] The "baton" of assessment directly shapes grassroots behavior. Current evaluation systems value quantifiable, checkable and comparable indicators based on records. Completeness and neatness of files are often equated with work quality. In some regions, assessments in safety, education and livelihood services attach great weight to documentary materials while ignoring public satisfaction and problem-solving rates. Grassroots workers are forced to work for records rather than real needs. Issues that are hard to document but closely related to people's interests are neglected. Governance goals shift from "people-centered" to "assessment-centered", causing a structural deviation of public value. This is a direct result of distorted incentive structure: grassroots actors prioritize high-authority, low-risk, highly certain record-making to maximize utility.

3. An analysis of the causes of "trace-ism" in grassroots governance: a rational-choice institutionalist perspective

Rational Choice Institutionalism is an important school of neo-institutional political science. It essentially explains political phenomena with economic approaches and takes institutional factors as core analytical variables. The theory assumes that individuals are rational actors whose behaviors aim to maximize self-interest under given institutional arrangements. From this perspective, trace-oriented formalism emerges and spreads because grassroots actors make rational risk-averse responses under multiple institutional constraints: unbalanced power and responsibility, distorted assessment, pressure transmission and technological alienation.

3.1. Imbalance in the allocation of authority and responsibility: the passive choice to leave a paper trail amid disproportionate responsibilities

Rational Choice Institutionalism is an important school of neo-institutional political science.Its essence lies in applying economic methods to explain political phenomena, treating institutional factors as the core elements in the analysis of political phenomena [5].The theory assumes that individuals are rational actors whose behaviors aim to maximize self-interest under given institutional arrangements. From this perspective, trace-oriented formalism emerges and spreads because grassroots actors make rational risk-averse responses under multiple institutional constraints: unbalanced power and responsibility, distorted assessment, pressure transmission and technological alienation.

3.2. Deviations in the performance evaluation system: a quantification-oriented approach leads to rational choices driven by formality

The performance evaluation system serves as the most direct incentive structure for grassroots actors. Existing evaluation mechanisms tend to favor standardized, visual, and verifiable indicator

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systems; because such documentation is easy to verify, archive, and compare, it is widely used. For grassroots actors, completing tasks that leave a paper trail involves low costs, high certainty, and quick results, yielding positive outcomes such as passing evaluations and receiving performance recognition. In contrast, delving deeply into practical issues and resolving complex conflicts requires significant investment, takes a long time, and yields uncertain results. Under rational constraints, actors will prioritize meeting the requirements for leaving a paper trail, thereby creating a stable, formalized pattern of such behavior.

3.3. Rational risk avoidance under a pressure-driven system: strategic choices for risk minimization

In a context of regular accountability and frequent inspections, grassroots actors mostly take risk avoidance as their fundamental guideline, forming a rationality of accountability evasion. As the end of the administrative contracting system, grassroots organizations must fulfill tasks assigned by higher-level departments, which monitor implementation through supervision, inspection and evaluation. For self-protection, grassroots units adopt extensive record-keeping such as repeated meetings, massive document compilation and mechanical publicity. They also use goal displacement and selective implementation to avoid risks, focusing on ambiguous and less quantifiable tasks to create an image of "fake busyness" and "fake innovation". Stability becomes the top priority. Written records serve as evidence of duty performance with obvious liability-exempt effects, reducing individual risks in inspections. Thus, trace-oriented formalism becomes an institutionalized self-protection tool for grassroots actors under pressure.As the saying "creating a façade of 'pseudo-busyness' and 'pseudo-innovation' to cope with inspections from higher authorities, striving to make 'stability' the primary objective of their work." [6]

3.4. Lack of systems for technology application: digital governance has devolved into a new form of trace-generating mechanism

"In the digital age, the amplifying effects of information technology—such as the convenience, quantifiability, and visualizability it brings to grassroots work—have caused 'digital traceism' to escalate." [7] Digital governance platforms should serve to integrate information, improve efficiency, and alleviate the burden on grassroots officials; however, in the absence of top-level coordination, unified standards, and data-sharing mechanisms, some digital platforms have been distorted into new tools for generating administrative records. With multi-departmental platforms operating in isolation, data remaining incompatible, and reports unable to be shared across systems, frontline workers are forced to repeatedly fill out forms and leave digital traces. Some systems evaluate performance using abstract quantitative metrics—such as time spent online, number of check-ins, or number of documents uploaded—which further reinforces the preference for digital documentation. As a result, technological empowerment has turned into a technological burden, and digital governance has, to some extent, become digital bureaucracy.

Trace-oriented formalism is jointly shaped by structural, incentive, behavioral and technological logics. Imbalanced power and responsibility provide the structural premise for passive record-keeping; biased assessment offers direct incentives for formal rational choices; pressure-driven system creates situational constraints for strategic documentation; and technological alienation consolidates record production. These four factors interact and reinforce each other, forming a complete formation mechanism.

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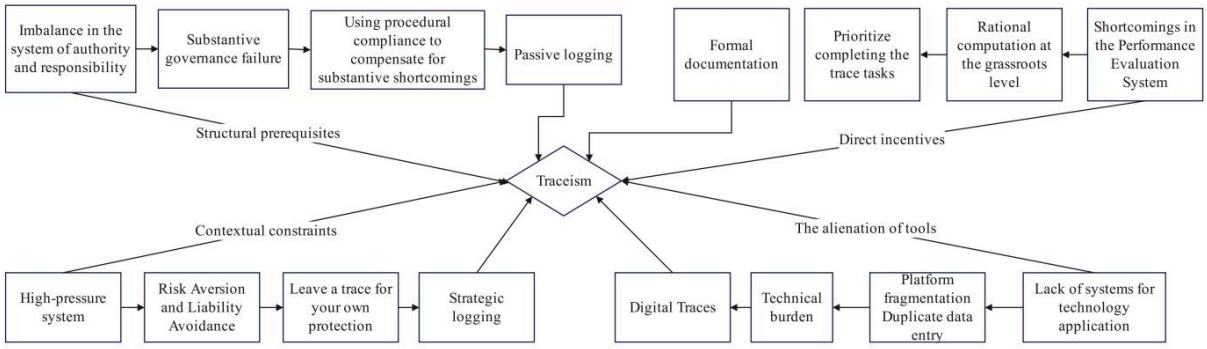


Figure 1. Diagram of the "institution-behavior" analytical model

4. Pathways to correcting "trace-oriented governance" in grassroots administration

From the analytical framework of rational choice institutionalism, correcting the tendency toward "trace-oriented governance" at the grassroots level cannot be achieved solely through public education or special rectification campaigns. Instead, the focus must be on improving institutional structures and reshaping incentive and constraint mechanisms. This requires a thorough analysis of the four primary contributing factors: the imbalance in the allocation of powers and responsibilities, flaws in the performance evaluation system, the emergence of a rationality of responsibility avoidance at the grassroots level, and the misuse of digital technology. We must meticulously deconstruct the risk-averse rational choice logic of grassroots governance actors, reshape their behavioral motivations and expectations, and shift the focus of governance from formal documentation to substantive governance, thereby aligning individual and collective rationality.

4.1. Restructuring the system of authority and responsibility allocation to ensure the equivalent decentralization of authority, responsibility, and resources

Imbalanced power and responsibility allocation is the root cause of passive and perfunctory record-keeping by grassroots governance subjects. When undertaking governance tasks transferred layer by layer from higher authorities, grassroots units lack matching administrative authorization, financial resources, manpower and technical support, and have to rely on formal record-keeping to make up for insufficient substantive governance capacity. Therefore, the primary task of rectifying trace-oriented formalism is to solve the governance dilemma of unbalanced power, responsibility and resources at the grassroots level, and realize the synchronous downward transfer of power, responsibility and supporting resources.

First, detailed power and responsibility lists for governments at all levels and functional departments should be formulated in accordance with the principle of consistency between power and responsibility, and matching financial power and administrative power. The boundaries of power and responsibility between grassroots and higher departments should be clarified to prevent structural imbalance of "tasks assigned layer by layer, responsibilities shirked step by step, and power continuously centralized". The focus of administrative power, financial power, human resources and public service supply should be shifted to the grassroots to ensure that grassroots units have sufficient decision-making power, financial support and manpower when undertaking

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governance tasks, fundamentally resolving the conflict between limited governance capacity and heavy tasks at the grassroots level.

Second, a whole-process review, evaluation and feedback mechanism for the transfer of administrative power should be established. A special evaluation team led by higher governments and composed of grassroots governance subjects should be set up to demonstrate the feasibility of administrative power to be transferred to the grassroots, avoiding governance chaos such as nominal transfer, actual shirking and unconditional undertaking by grassroots units. A regular communication and feedback channel should be built to collect practical difficulties in undertaking administrative power, so as to realize dynamic adjustment of power and responsibility arrangements.

4.2. Optimizing the performance evaluation system and establishing an incentive mechanism focused on actual achievements

The current assessment and evaluation system has an obvious systematic bias of "quantitative preference and prioritizing records over effects". Trace materials have become the main assessment content due to convenient verification and strong comparability. Such an institutional arrangement makes grassroots governance subjects more inclined to choose low-cost and quick-return record-keeping forms out of rational calculation, thus weakening attention to actual governance effects.

To this end, rectifying trace-oriented formalism requires the reform of the assessment and evaluation system as the main measure, breaking the assessment orientation of judging merits by records, and establishing an incentive mechanism based on governance effectiveness.

First, the quantitative assessment model centered on formal records should be comprehensively innovated, and a result-oriented assessment system focusing on governance performance, public evaluation, multi-dimensional evaluation and dynamic management should be built. Differentiated assessment should be implemented according to the attributes and types of grassroots posts, abandoning the "one-size-fits-all" model. Livelihood service windows take public satisfaction as the core assessment, and conflict mediation posts focus on conflict resolution effects and recurrence control.

Second, the weight distribution of assessment indicators should be improved. The proportion of formal indicators such as ledgers, photographic materials and meeting records should be greatly reduced, while the weight of substantive governance indicators such as public satisfaction, problem settlement rate, conflict resolution rate and livelihood improvement effects should be increased, putting governance performance at the center of the assessment system.

Third, assessment implementation methods should be innovated by integrating on-site verification, random sampling, third-party independent evaluation and public appraisal to avoid the drawbacks of "paper assessment and material supremacy". A single written material review model should be replaced by grassroots livelihood service assessment.

Fourth, the rigid binding force of public evaluation should be strengthened by linking public appraisal results with performance pay, promotion and awards of grassroots cadres. "By achieving an organic integration of accountability to higher authorities and to the public, we can compel grassroots officials to shift their focus from 'documentation' to 'service,' making pragmatic action and the delivery of tangible results the more rational priority for those in these roles." [8]

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4.3. Improving behavioral guidance systems to dismantle the rational logic of responsibility avoidance at the grassroots level

Under a high-pressure system characterized by routine accountability and frequent inspections, grassroots governance actors have developed a rational behavioral logic centered on evading responsibility, with the creation of formal records serving as a proactive means of avoiding accountability. Such record-keeping has become their primary method for mitigating governance risks and ensuring self-protection, even giving rise to accountability-evading behaviors such as going through the motions and superficial innovations. Therefore, correcting "trace-ism" requires improving systems that guide behavior, dismantling the core of this rationality for avoiding responsibility at the grassroots level, and mobilizing the intrinsic motivation for active duty performance. Specifically, this should be advanced through two aspects: improving mechanisms for error tolerance and correction, as well as exemption from liability for due diligence; and removing the action barriers of "shying away from difficulties and fearing mistakes" among grassroots governance entities by clarifying the entities responsible for determining error tolerance and correction, the evaluation criteria, implementation procedures, and supporting safeguards. On this basis, incentive resources—such as promotions, awards, and performance-based compensation—should be prioritized for frontline cadres who demonstrate practical action and tangible results. The proportion of frontline cadres selected in annual commendation programs should be increased, and performance-based pay should be allocated toward frontline positions that shoulder heavy governance responsibilities and achieve outstanding results; Establish a specialized commendation system for practical achievements. Publicly recognize and award commendations to governance entities that demonstrate excellence in resolving complex conflicts, addressing public welfare challenges, and advancing grassroots development. Establish a governance orientation where "those who achieve results are promoted, and those who work diligently are rewarded," thereby driving a shift among grassroots officials from a mindset of "seeking stability and avoiding mistakes" to one of "taking responsibility and acting effectively."

4.4. Improving systems for technology application to promote a transition toward "light-trace" digital governance

The lack of top-level design in digital governance platform construction, unbroken data barriers and inconsistent application standards have led to independent operations and repeated platform construction of various departments. Grassroots governance subjects have to fill in data repeatedly and keep records in multiple ways. Digital technology has thus been alienated into a carrier of "digital trace-oriented formalism", increasing the burden of grassroots governance.

Rectifying trace-oriented formalism requires improving the digital technology application system, returning digital governance to its essential attribute of "empowering grassroots and improving governance efficiency", and realizing the light-trace transformation of grassroots governance.

First, top-level design and overall management of digital governance platforms should be strengthened. A special digital governance coordination agency should be set up at the government level to uniformly plan and integrate digital governance platforms of various departments, break information barriers and data silos between departments, and build an integrated grassroots governance digital platform and data sharing mechanism, achieving the governance goal of "one-time collection, multi-party reuse, interconnection and simplicity and efficiency". All kinds of governance data such as grassroots Party building, livelihood services, conflict mediation and safe

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production should be integrated into one platform, so that grassroots staff only need to fill in data once for use by relevant departments, fundamentally eliminating repeated filling and multi-party record-keeping.

Second, a classified and precise record-keeping management model should be implemented. Record-keeping requirements should be determined according to the nature and importance of work. Light-trace management should be adopted for high-frequency routine work such as daily inspections and policy publicity, without repeated preservation of photographic materials and ledger records, only keeping key work traces. For important governance matters such as key project promotion and emergency response, performance verification should be taken as the core, focusing on preserving key node traces and actual governance results in the governance process, and abandoning formal record-keeping.

Finally, the assessment and evaluation indicator system of digital platforms should be standardized. Formal indicators irrelevant to governance effectiveness such as online duration, check-in frequency and material upload quantity should be removed, and work completion quality, governance efficiency and public feedback should be taken as the main dimensions of digital platform evaluation. A digital platform use feedback mechanism should be established simultaneously to regularly collect feedback and opinions from grassroots staff on platform application, timely revise and optimize platform functions, reduce operation procedures, and make digital technology a real driving force for grassroots governance rather than cumbersome record management.

5. Conclusion

At present, the focus of China's grassroots governance is constantly shifting downward, and tasks are becoming more specific and detailed. Grassroots units have become important places for policy implementation, public service and conflict resolution. However, the problem of trace-oriented formalism in grassroots governance remains severe, which not only increases grassroots burdens and wastes administrative resources, but also weakens policy effectiveness and governance credibility, becoming an obstacle to the modernization of grassroots governance.

From the perspective of Rational Choice Institutionalism, based on the interactive logic between institutional structure and individual rational behavior, this paper holds that trace-oriented formalism is not caused by the subjective inaction of grassroots actors, but a rational response of grassroots units to minimize costs and avoid risks under multiple institutional pressures such as unbalanced power and responsibility, unreasonable assessment, strict accountability and technological alienation. The key to solving trace-oriented formalism lies in systematic institutional reconstruction. On the basis of straightening out the relationship between power, responsibility and interests, efforts should be made to reform assessment methods, innovate incentive and accountability mechanisms, and strengthen digital regulation, so as to truly influence the choice preferences and interest pursuit of grassroots actors and guide grassroots practice toward practical effects.

Follow-up research can further compare phenomena in different fields and types to form an evolving solution, providing theoretical basis and practical support for burden reduction, system construction and capacity improvement.

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