

# A Study on the Mechanisms of American Students' Participation in University Governance

Wang Zhiqiang, Zhang Ruizhong

Tianjin University Education Science Research Center, School of Education, Tianjin University  
Tianjin 300350, China

**Abstract**—By analyzing the constitutional texts of several American universities, this paper finds that the mechanisms of American students' participation in university governance including financial independence mechanism, personnel independence mechanism, information disclosure mechanism, information exchange mechanism, power balance mechanism and representative participation mechanism. The coordinated operation of the above-mentioned mechanisms strongly supports and guarantees the participation of American college students in University governance. Although American students have rich experience in university governance, there are still some problems, such as whether students enjoy decision-making power, the implementation effect is not obvious, and system model is not uniform. Thus, American students' participation in university governance still further needs to be explored and practiced.

**Keywords**—University governance; Student participation; American universities; Student government

## I. INTRODUCTION

Students' participation in university governance refers to the process in which students, as stakeholders of universities, participate equally in all aspects of university governance according to certain policy basis. The concept of University co-governance in the United States was established in the 1960s, but at that time the main body of University co-governance did not include students. It was not until the 1990s that American college students were formally incorporated into the university governance system [1-3]. They are regarded as equally important subjects of governance as university boards, administrators and teachers. After half a century of reform and practice, American colleges and universities have gradually established a relatively perfect system of student participation in university governance with student government organizations as the core.

At present, under the background of "double first-class" university construction in our country, students' participation in university governance has become the consensus of higher education reform. For this reason, Chinese universities have made many attempts and explorations beneficial to students' participation in University governance, which includes not only the reform of student government organization, but also other forms of student participation [4-5], such as assistant principal. However, as a key link of students' participation in University governance, how to effectively participate in university governance by student government organizations is still a problem of the system. In this respect, the experience of

student government system construction in American universities deserves our reference and consideration. The author tries to analyze the constitutions of student associations of 10 universities, including Duke University, Cornell University, Buffalo University of New York, University of Pennsylvania, Brown University, University of Virginia, Harvard University, University of California, Los Angeles, Ann Arbor University of Michigan and Madison University of Wisconsin, in order to reveal the participation of American students in University governance.

## II. OVERVIEW OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION MECHANISMS

Mechanisms generally refer to the interaction, function and influence between the system and external environment and internal factors. According to the governance structure of American universities, American universities are regarded as an organizational system, board of directors, president, Academic Council and student government are regarded as internal subsystems, and students are regarded as external elements of student government system. Therefore, the author believes that the student participation mechanism in the United States refers to the objective relationship between the various elements of the student government organization system and other university systems, which determines the function and operation process, mode and mechanism of the organization.

For the sake of comprehensiveness and systematicness of reader's understanding and analysis, the author summarizes the basic model of student participation mechanism in American universities according to the text content of the Constitution of the sample university student association. According to the stakeholder theory, the starting point of American student participation mechanism is to establish the interest-related relationship between students and student governments and universities by paying the fees and fees for activities. After that, students communicate and interact with the student government by means of payment, election, referendum, representative and consultation; the student government guarantees democracy and fairness through power checks and balances of legislation, administration and justice, relies on websites and e-mail, meetings and other means, and appoints student representatives to participate in various university committees, and submits periodic reports to other governing bodies. In order to achieve information communication with other governance subjects. Based on information disclosure and information communication mechanism, other governance

subjects require students to obey the policy of co-governance in student affairs and academic affairs.

Generally speaking, the basic mode of student participation mechanism involves six mechanisms: information disclosure, information communication, power checks and balances, personnel autonomy, financial independence and representative participation. Among them, financial independence mechanism and personnel independence mechanism together lay the foundation for the independent operation of the organization; information disclosure mechanism is the guarantee of students' equal participation, and information communication mechanism effectively guarantees the dynamic flow of information, which constitute the premise of students' effective participation; power balance mechanism clarifies the power-responsibility relationship within the student government organization, and representative participation mechanism guarantees learning [6-8]. The smooth channel of students' interest expression constitutes the core of the system of students' effective participation in University governance. These six mechanisms interact with each other, describing the operational mechanism of American college students' effective participation in University governance. Next, this paper will give a detailed and comprehensive interpretation of these mechanisms.

### III. THE BASIC MECHANISM: FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE AND PERSONNEL INDEPENDENCE

The biggest difference between American College Student government and Chinese College Student government lies in the degree of independence and the actual source of its authority. Specifically, the American College Students' Association enjoys an independent governance status in University governance, in addition to obeying the overall institutional arrangements of the state and universities. According to Barnard's "Authoritative Acceptance Theory", the author believes that the authority of American college student government organizations comes more from students' identification and acceptance than administrative authorization. From the perspective of the constitution [9], the institutional factors of the autonomy of the American College Student government are the financial independence mechanism and the personnel independence mechanism. Both of them maintain the independent operation of the American College Student government and form the organizational basis for students' participation in University governance.

Financial independence mechanism refers to the process in which the American College Students' Government obtains funds for the operation of the organization through specific channels and allocates funds and preserves value by special financial departments. Financial independence mechanism guarantees a certain share of the financial funds to enter the student government accounts, and the student government has absolute power to distribute these funds, thus avoiding the interference of other governing bodies of the university. The main source of funding for student government organizations in American universities is the fixed annual student activity Fee paid by each registered student, including other income such as university grants and investment income, and all student governments have a strict financial system under the

management of the financial department. There are also differences in the form of financial departments in different university student associations. In terms of the number of financial management departments, some are in charge of one financial department, such as Brown University, while others are in charge of two [10], such as Duke University. In terms of the relationship between financial management and student governments, there are not only internal financial committees within student governments, which account for the majority, but also external non-profit financial management companies, such as financial agency companies of the student government of New York State University at Buffalo.

It is worth emphasizing that the American College Student government did not enjoy financial independence at the beginning, but in the social turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, students got the right of student activity fee and separated from tuition fee, which effectively improved students' decision-making ability outside the direct control of the government. From the perspective of stakeholders and consumers, compulsory student activity fees have established the interest relationship between students and student associations, which makes student associations have the natural obligation and responsibility to safeguard the interests of students, and students also have the natural right to participate in the management of student associations. Financial independence mechanism not only encourages students to actively participate in student governments and University governance, but also makes it possible for students' government to operate legally and independently.

Personnel autonomy mechanism includes open election and democratic appointment. It means that the student union has basic autonomous power in personnel appointment and removal [11-12]. It is neither interfered by the leadership of the previous student union nor restricted by other governing bodies. Open elections refer to the process in which American college students obtain relevant seats (mainly student presidents, vice-presidents and representatives of student unions) through the confirmation of the qualifications of election committees, open elections and democratic voting. They involve not only term of office, election procedures, election scope, but also election institutions, handling of election irregularities and financial security. Content. Democratic appointment refers to the process of appointment and removal of non-elective Posts stipulated in the Constitution by the Student Union in accordance with the prescribed procedures, such as individual application, interview, democratic nomination, approval by the General Assembly, formal appointment and dismissal.

The Constitution of the American College Student Union has the same content on personnel autonomy mechanism. Firstly, the election committee is responsible for the electoral activities. Generally, the electoral fund is stable, which can guarantee the autonomy of the electoral process to the greatest extent. Secondly, voters can fully understand the candidates by participating in the process of candidates' open competition, thus guaranteeing the democracy and representativeness of the election. Lastly, the students can strictly supervise the illegal election procedures, strictly prohibit all illegal election activities, and ensure the fairness and fairness of the election. The independence, science, democracy and justice of the whole

election process mean the representative and authority of the members of the leadership of the student union, which is conducive to the independent operation of the student union in the process of participating in University governance, thus fulfilling the mission of indirect participation of students in University governance.

Taking the student union of Brown University as an example, its constitution lists elections as separate chapters. It details the elections, including the Election Schedule, the Electoral Commission and the legitimacy of elections, the preparations for elections, electoral rules, irregularities and identification, the support of candidates, electoral procedures and results, special elections, revocation of elections, etc. Overall, the Student Union of Brown University provides a fair and effective personnel autonomy mechanism for undergraduates. Firstly, the Constitution stipulates that six of the 10 members of the Electoral Commission, who are not members of the Council, should be widely publicized to students and strive to form a diverse and diverse group of student representatives from different communities. Secondly, the Council should set up an account in the Student Activities Office and provide sufficient funds to cover all the expenses anticipated by the Electoral Commission and provide material security for the independent elections. Thirdly, except for special instructions, all Electoral Commission meetings should be open to the public, and the Electoral Commission should keep and publish the detailed records of all meetings in a timely manner, clarify the information disclosure and pave the way for students' participation. Fourthly, the Electoral Commission notifies the electoral calendar at least 15 days in advance and provides a code of conduct for the elections so that students can understand the electoral rules. Fifthly, the articles of association stipulate in detail the procedures and results for the determination and treatment of violations, strictly supervise elections and maintain fair procedures. Sixth, a complete and formal electoral process includes signing petitions, determining candidates' qualifications, applying for funds, obtaining support from student groups or individuals, public campaigning and voting, counting votes and publishing the results, etc. These detailed provisions reflect the perfection of the election mechanism of Brown University Student Union, lay the foundation for its independent operation, and help mobilize the enthusiasm of students to participate.

#### IV. THE PREREQUISITE MECHANISM: INFORMATION DISCLOSURE AND COMMUNICATION

The full process and all-round information disclosure of the American College Student government fully guarantees the students' and other governing bodies' right to know, and provides the precondition for students' full and effective participation and University co-governance. The multi-normalized information communication mechanism fully embodies the concept of "student-centered" service. Through the multi-normalized communication among students, student governments and other governing bodies of universities, it is conducive to safeguarding students' interests and guaranteeing students' enthusiasm for participation. The two mechanisms cooperate with each other and act together on the information flow with transparent process, fair procedure and clear rights

and responsibilities, which constitutes the necessary prerequisite for students to participate in University governance.

The American College Student government has strong internal operation independence, but its essence is an open organization in the University system, which needs frequent information communication with the outside world. Any information asymmetry will lead to poor communication or wrong transmission of information, easy to lead to contradictions, so the disclosure of information is particularly important. The author believes that the information disclosure mechanism mainly refers to the process in which the American College Student government publishes the relevant information about the organization and operation of student governments, such as system documents, elections, meetings, finance, judicial activities, and personal information led by student governments, in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution and relying on websites.

The Constitution of the American Student government does not elaborate the mechanism of information disclosure separately, but the author summarizes and summarizes the relevant contents. Generally speaking, information disclosure is one of the basic principles and common mechanisms of American University Students' participation in University governance, and it is the premise of effective participation of students in University governance. Although the descriptions of information publicity in schools are different and lack of systematicness, they basically involve the publicity of election process, daily meetings of student governments, budget meetings and hearings. The main ways of publicity are mail push, website publicity and on-site meetings. The process of publicity includes pre-publicity, meeting publicity and post-publicity. In order to guarantee the students' right to know, we should publicly give them enough time to publicize in advance.

The information communication mechanism of pluralistic normalization mainly refers to the process of information communication and communication between different governance subjects such as student voters, boards of directors, principals and professors through the chairman of student governments or communication committees. This mechanism and representative participation mechanism together constitute the core link of American students' participation in University governance. Generally speaking, the entrance to the information communication mechanism of the American College Student government can be divided into three forms: first, students' proposal that students can communicate information through the website of the student government or the mail of the person in charge; second, internal motions of the student government, members of the student government, especially the board of directors, can request discussion at the meeting of the student council through the form of proposals. Third, the indirect feedback of student representatives, which collect and feedback information through their seats on the committees. There are also three outlets for the student government's information communication mechanism: first, to communicate with students through information disclosure; secondly, to communicate with other governing bodies through the university committee where the student representatives are located; and thirdly, to communicate directly with other university subjects through the relevant departments of the



student government, such as the periodic reports submitted by the president to the president of the university, and to ask for answers.

#### V. THE CORE MECHANISM: POWER BALANCE AND REPRESENTATIVE PARTICIPATION

The democratic power balance mechanism embodies the restriction and balance of power within the student government organization. Although the mechanism inevitably results in a certain degree of efficiency reduction, it generally maintains the democracy and justice of the student government and avoids the bureaucratic tendency caused by the over-centralization of power. The representative participation mechanism mainly reflects that the student government uniformly appoints student representatives to the committees under the various governing bodies of the university. Like other members of the committees, the student government basically enjoys equal representation status, which is mainly manifested in the right to vote. The two mechanisms of power checks and balances and representative participation have jointly maintained a fair, balanced, unblocked and "powerful" channel of representative democracy. Students can rely on the channel of representative democracy to participate in all aspects of University governance.

The power checks and balances mechanism refers to the situation in which the American College Student government maintains a balance through the system design, so that the power of its internal organization is reasonably restricted. The organizational structure of American College Student government shows the characteristics of power checks and balances mechanism, but there are differences among the organizational structure modes of different American College Student government. Among them, the typical mode of checks and balances of power is the separation of legislative, administrative and judicial powers. Due to the influence of political environment, this mode accounts for the majority of American college student governments, such as the Central Student government of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and so on. Of course, not all American college student governments are typical of the separation of powers. There are also atypical models of decentralization, such as the student governments of Brown University and the University of Pennsylvania. In this part, the author will further analyze and understand the mechanism of power checks and balances with examples.

The organizational structure of the Central Student Government at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, is a typical three-power separation model, namely, executive Branch, Legislative Branch and Judicial Branch, which share executive, legislative and judicial powers and balance each other. Specifically, the legislature is composed of the Student Assembly and the University Council. The former is the center of the legislature. There are two sub-committees, Rules and Finance, which are responsible for the legislation and financial management of the whole organization respectively. The latter is actually a platform for open exchange and cooperation between student government at all levels of the University and between student organizations. The resolution of the board of physiology will not come into effect until it is discussed and

voted by the student assembly. According to the regulations, the appointment and removal of personnel and the financial budget of the administrative and judicial organs need to be approved and examined by the students' congress, and both of them should accept and implement the resolutions of the students' congress. The Executive Committee and executive committees are the core of the executive body, which is composed of the chairman of the student government. The executive body should accept and implement the resolution of the student assembly, but the president has the veto power of the resolution. Of course, the General Assembly can overthrow the veto power of the president by a two-thirds majority. The President and Vice-President are ex officio members of the General Assembly without the right to vote, but the President has the right to convene the General Assembly or the Council as required, and both the President and the Vice-President have the right to propose proposals to the Assembly. The Executive Body shall submit periodic written reports to the General Assembly listing the actions of the Executive Committee since the last report. Any official of the Central Student Government may be removed from office by judicial review for violation of law, corruption or other dereliction of duty. The central judiciary consists of nine justices, including a Chief Justice, a Deputy Chief Justice and an Executive Judge. Appointment of judges must be nominated by the President, with the concurrence of a simple majority of the General Assembly, but once appointed, judges will remain in office until they complete their degree courses, which objectively guarantees judicial independence. Judicial organs enjoy the power of judicial review and have the power to formulate rules of judicial procedure within the scope of judicial powers and responsibilities, but they need to accept the resolutions of legislative organs. The judiciary has the power to impeach, hear and try any administrative officer who violates the regulations.

Delegate participation mechanism mainly refers to the indirect participation of student governments in university governance by appointing a certain number of student government members to the University-Wide Committees. Student participation in university governance is fundamentally embodied by representative participation mechanism. Student representatives have the right to express their opinions and suggestions on all aspects of university governance through fixed seats, and even participate in resolutions. Participation mechanism actually runs through the channel of students' participation. It is the core mechanism of students' effective participation that effectively links students, student governments and other governing bodies of universities. According to the mechanism of constitutional synthesis and the level of participation of representatives, student representatives can be divided into student directors, representatives of co-governance bodies and student representatives of specific university committees, and enjoy the rights of free expression and voting. Firstly, three universities such as Duke University, Cornell University and Madison University of Wisconsin have clearly established student directors. The statute of Duke University Student government clearly defines the mode of formation, term of office and rights of student directors, but the latter does not elaborate. Secondly, there are Cornell University, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of

Wisconsin Madison, which have clear typical governing bodies. These three universities have different forms of University congresses, University councils, and co-governance committees. Student representatives can rely on this organization to participate in University governance. Finally, student representatives on University committees are the most common form, which is generally established in American universities. It is worth pointing out that all student representatives are appointed or dismissed by the student government organization except for those who elect or retain fixed seats, which reflects the authority of the student government organization and the unity of participation mechanism.

## VI. DISCUSSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Although "the role of governance in research universities and other types of universities in the United States is different and it is difficult to generalize", the provisions of the Constitution of the American Student government cover all aspects of the organization's operation process and basically cover the relevant content of the six mechanisms mentioned above. They are detailed, detail-oriented and operable. Generally speaking, they are formulated by the Student government. All Joint Regulations should be compiled in the constitution, which reflects the completeness and unity of the Constitution of the American College Student government.

In addition to recognizing the experience and value of the student participation mechanism in American universities, we should also recognize that there are some controversies and shortcomings in the process of its development, mainly reflected in three points: first, whether students should enjoy decision-making power in the process of participating in University governance. The university board of directors is the core of University governance. Participation in the board of directors is the highest form for students to have decision-making power. However, in the Constitution of the American College Student government, there are few proposals concerning the student board of directors. Even if a student board of directors is established, it only involves the right of suggestion and consultation, and often does not have the right to vote on decision-making. Based on this, Philip Atbach believes that university governance "does not mean that all stakeholders have the same status and power in the governance structure and play the same role, let alone that university decision-making should adopt democratic voting by all stakeholders". Scholars who hold this view often think that students lack experience, their ability is not tested, and their college life is short, which leads to students' participation without considering the follow-up responsibility, and there are great drawbacks. Secondly, American student participation mechanism is only relatively perfect, which does not mean perfect, nor does it mean that the implementation effect is the best. In the practice of American students' participation in University governance, the opportunities and depth of students' participation in university governance through student government organizations are not satisfactory. Thirdly, although the concept of American students' participation in university governance has been agreed upon, it has not formed a unified and widely accepted model of students' participation

in university governance in practice. On the one hand, the lack of in-depth and extensive research on the status of American students may violate fairness, on the other hand, blind unification may violate fairness. On the other hand, it is because the current University Students' participation in university governance is not significant. Voice. It is inappropriate to conceal superficial equality as a serious lag, which may lead to independent and complete confrontation. All these indicate that student participation in American university governance needs further exploration and practice.

## VII. CONCLUSION

To sum up, although we cannot determine the effectiveness of American college students' participation in university governance by the Constitution text, we can be sure that the experience of building the basic mechanism of students' participation in university governance is reasonable. It should be pointed out that we should not simply copy the mechanism of students' participation in University governance, but should innovate the long-term mechanism of students' government organizations' participation in university governance with the core of student congresses in the light of the political nature of the Party and League system in the university governance structure of our country, which still needs the common practice of the higher education circles, especially the multi-subjects of University governance.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities [EB/OL]. [2019-3-14]. <https://www.aaup.org/report/statement-government-colleges-and-universities>.
- [2] Zhou Wei. Student Participation Mechanism in University Governance [D]. Hunan University, 2015. (In Chinese)
- [3] SA Finance [EB/OL]. [2019-3-14]. <https://www.sa.buffalo.edu/sa-finance>.
- [4] UCS Constitution [EB/OL]. [2019-3-14]. <http://www.brownuocs.org/constitution-and-bylaws>.
- [5] CSG Governing Docs [EB/OL]. [2019-3-14]. [https://umcsg.files.wordpress.com/2018/04/constitution\\_april-2017.pdf](https://umcsg.files.wordpress.com/2018/04/constitution_april-2017.pdf).
- [6] Bied dunrong, Philip Atbach. A Dialogue on University Governance between China and the United States [J]. Tsinghua Journal of Education, 2016 (04): 36-45.
- [7] Documents—Penn Student Government [EB/OL]. [2019-3-14]. <http://pennstudgov.com/documents>.
- [8] Ma Peipei, On Student Participation in American University Governance [J]. Higher Education Research, 2016 (02): 104-109. (In Chinese)
- [9] Bied dunrong, Philip Atbach. A Dialogue on University Governance between China and the United States [J]. Tsinghua Journal of Education, 2016 (04): 36-45. (In Chinese)
- [10] Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities [EB/OL]. [2019-3-14]. <https://www.aaup.org/report/statement-government-colleges-and-universities>.
- [11] Yu Yang. An Analysis of the Student Council System in American Universities [J]. Foreign Education Studies, 2014 (03): 73-81. (In Chinese)
- [12] Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities [EB/OL]. [2019-3-14]. <https://www.aaup.org/report/statement-government-colleges-and-universities>.