Origins of Anti-Partyism in Hong Kong

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Introduction

In many new and well-established democracies, the thesis of “crisis of parties” has been raised and vigorously debated over the last two decades. Proponents of this thesis argue that there is a sweeping lack of confidence among the public towards political parties. Evidence concerning the crisis of parties partly rests on the presence of “anti-partyism”, i.e., overt generalized mass-level disaffection or rejection of political institutions.

Anti-partyism is significant in that it can be a negative force threatening democratic institutions or a major positive force triggering political reform as it mobilizes diffuse disaffection. Despite the importance of anti-partyism and the sense of its presence, one surprising observation has been that empirical investigation of the origins of anti-partyism at the mass attitudinal level remains sketchy. The lacuna in our knowledge of it around the world persists, in spite of increasing research of it on advanced industrial democracies in Europe, Oceania and North America since 1996. In new democracies or re-democratized polities, studies of anti-partyism are even scarcer. Even rarer has been research on anti-partyism in semi-democracies.

Against this context, this paper endeavors to explain the origins of anti-partyism in Hong Kong, and why its anti-partyism was higher in 2000 than in 1998. How is anti-partyism defined here? Following its conventional meaning, it refers to the generalized mass-level disaffection or rejection of political parties. To gauge anti-partyism, the scores of two general questions on political parties are used here and added together to operationalize the concept. The two questions measure the respondents’ opinions on whether they believe “parties are necessary to make our political system work”, and “parties care what ordinary people think” (see Appendix).

The current study on Hong Kong’s anti-partyism departs from previous studies in two ways. First, it targets a semi-democracy in East Asia, instead of a new or well-established democracy as is usually pursued in previous research. The inclusion of a semi-democracy can put some alleged causes of
anti-partyism established in previous research and full democracies to a more rigorous test. Second, this research uses data from the international project—Comparative Study of Electoral System (CSES)—to measure anti-partyism and the independent variables, which includes 33 various societies spread in different regions. This research serves as an initial step for future cross-national research exploring anti-partyism across different regions using more detailed and comparative data. Particularly, Hong Kong’s anti-partyism has been comparatively slightly higher vis-à-vis the average level of 32 other societies in 2000. This study may thus provide insights into the origins of anti-partyism, particularly in those places with relatively higher levels of it.

In terms of practical implication, it will be shown that the structurally built-in constraint for parties in Hong Kong to shape policy-making process has depressed parties’ capacity to be effective political actors, thus inducing greater anti-partyism there. Anti-partyism in Hong Kong lowers the ability of parties to aggregate and articulate interests. This inability may worsen the communication gap between state and society, as well as aid political instability. The widely reported rally on 1 July, 2003 joined by half a million of Hong Kong people against the poor governance of the post-handover Hong Kong government has epitomized the depth of its political crisis. The crisis has only made the study of its anti-partyism all the more important.

The Explanations of Anti-Partyism

Past research in new and consolidated democracies, though limited in quantity, have found various causes of this phenomenon.  

A. Social Background

The effects of social background are only dealt with in a small number of quantitative research studies. Being unemployed explains in part the hostility towards major parties. Regarding education, some scholars regard those with higher education would hold higher expectations concerning the performance of political parties. The more educated are thus more likely than the less educated to get frustrated with the machinations of politicians and parties, and harbor anti-party sentiments.

As for age, in advanced democracies, older people were found to have a lesser tendency to hold anti-party feelings, given their primary socialization experiences at times when parties were still legitimate institutions. Conversely, younger citizens are thought to have less time to build up strong identification with parties in general. However, in the less well-established democratic regimes of southern Europe that have undergone prolonged periods of authoritarian rule, a specific kind of anti-partyism was associated with lower education.

Little consensus has been reached regarding the impact of social background on anti-partyism among the limited number of quantitative research studies undertaken so far. Despite this, research already done in Britain and Canada does not explain strongly how social background factors as a whole