

# **The Impact of Political Institutions on Public Opinion-Policy Linkages: A Case Study of the Legislators in Hong Kong**

Bing-Kwan Chan

Chu Hai College of Higher Education, Hong Kong

Correspondence: bkchan@chuhai.edu.hk

This extended summary is a short version of a paper presented at the WAPOR Annual Conference in 14-16 June 2012 in Hong Kong

## **Introduction**

Numerous studies of the impact of public opinion on public policy employ a macro-level aggregation design based on the statistical relationships between the changes in policy and public preferences measured by opinion polls (e.g. Page and Shapiro, 1983; Hill, 1995; John 2006). These researches are usually based on an assumption that policymakers' perceptions of public opinion are consistent with opinion polls.

However, some studies find that politicians intend to serve the interests of their supporters rather than those of the general public (e.g. Aldrich, 1995). Some interview based researches also show that policymakers do not simply view survey results as public opinion. For example, Jacobs and Shapiro's (1997) found that members of Congress were not addicted to polls as they did not trust them. Rather, members monitored public opinion through face-to-face meetings, mail and phone calls. The authors also found that congressional members' policy positions were mainly guided by their personal beliefs, ideology and judgments rather than public opinion. In her semi-structured interview based study, Herbst (1998) also found that legislative staff members paid little attention to opinion polls. Rather, staffers considered interest groups activities and media content to be the major indicators of public opinion meaningful to their work. In addition, political actors at different positions of social matrix had different conception of public opinion. Thus, Herbst argues that public opinion is a "contested and malleable concept" and that one's conception of democratic process is related to one's position in the social context.

From this perspective, neither the interests of the general mass nor the general of opinion polls is the chief consideration of policymakers. Rather, there is a possibility that policymakers intend to serve their supporters' interests and learn about the supporters' preferences through the channels other than polls. Also, policymakers' conception of public opinion may be associated with their institutional positions.

On the basis of these arguments, the papers, through a case study of the legislators in Hong Kong, examine how elected policymakers conceptualize and respond to public opinion under the existing institutional arrangements. The findings are analyzed by institutional rational choice account which suggests that political actors always try to maximize their advantages within existing institutional setting.

## **Composition of the Legislative Council in Hong Kong**

The methods for forming the Legislative Council (Legco) in Hong Kong after 1997 are stated in the Basic Law of Hong Kong SAR. Before 2007, the 60 Legco members were returned by three

types of constituency, namely, geographic constituencies (GCs), functional constituencies (FCs) and the Election Committee (EC). Since 2004, all the seats of EC have been replaced by those of the GCs. Thus, in the two terms of the Legco elected in 2004 and 2008, 30 legislators were returned GCs, while the remaining 30 were returned by FCs.

The FCs are mainly business and professional sectors, each consists limited number of corporate and individual voters, ranging from less than 200 to over ten thousands. In GC election, close-list proportional representation (PR) system has been adapted since 1998. Under this system, Hong Kong is divided into five large GCs, each with a few hundred thousand voters. The rank order of candidates on a list would determine their chance of getting elected. Since Hare Quota and Largest Remainder method are used, some candidates may win the last seat with less than 10% of votes (Ma and Choy, 2003).

### **Methods**

The data of this study was derived from the semi-structured in-depth interviews with incumbent and former legislators in Hong Kong. The function of elite interview is to explore the policymaker's mind-set, including perceptions, beliefs and ideologies in decision making (Richards, 1996) Meanwhile, cross-case comparability can be ensured by a semi-structured interview guide with a series of open-ended questions. These questions cover the issues regarding policy making and public opinions, including the considerations during policy making, understanding and consideration of public opinion, and the way to learn about public opinion.

As policy decision of political party is usually made a highly hierarchical community, my sample of informants was purposive in nature. Only core party members such as party leaders and spokespersons were invited to participate in the interviews. Of the seventeen legislators interviewed, three were independent politicians while fourteen came from seven parties. Twelve informants were returned by GCs while four came from FCs with various sizes, ranging from 144 to over ten thousand constituents. The other one has experience in serving both FC (before 2004) and GC (2004-2008).

### **Results**

All the seventeen legislators interviewed claimed that many factors were taken into account during policy making. These factors included overall interests within society and the feasibility of proposals. However, fifteen informants claimed that their chief considerations were associated with their belief systems such as the attitudes towards the Chinese Government, values of democracy, human rights and rule of law.

The other consideration highlighted by the legislators is public opinion. However, informants were particularly concerned with their supporters' views. All the five FC legislators claimed that they would take the side of their supporters when there were conflicts between the preferences of their voters and those of the general mass. Of the thirteen GC legislators, ten also claimed that they should consider their supporters' views.

Regarding the method monitoring their voters' views, all informants claimed that they took account of the public opinion polls, particularly those conducted by academic institutes. However, most informants had some reservations about natures of opinion polls and public

opinion such as composition of respondents, design of questions, people's knowledge of and inconsistency attitudes towards policy issues.

More importantly, all legislators interviewed stressed the importance of networks and face-to-face contacts with their voters. In the Insurance sector, the smallest FC with less than 200 voters, direct communication with voters was facilitated by regular luncheons. For the other larger FCs with more than a few thousand voters, direct communication and consultation was also achieved through active email or phone calls. In addition, all these five FC legislators claimed that they had their networks composed of professional bodies, trade unions and chambers of commerce. Through regular meetings and consultation with their network members, legislators learned about their constituents' preferences.

Networking and direct contacts with voters are also useful to GC legislators despite the wide geographical coverage of constituencies and large number of voters. Ten of thirteen GC legislators from five parties claimed that their parties had local community networks, getting a sense of voters' views through various activities. Nine of the thirteen GC legislators also claimed that they spent great deal of time their own constituencies, communicating with their voters. Although the Democratic Party conducted regular survey on public attitudes toward the party and specific policy issues, the party's legislators all stressed the importance of face-to-face contacts with voters and the networks.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Future Research**

In sum, legislators in Hong Kong are not addicted to general public opinion. Neither do they get a sense of public views mainly from polls. Rather, policy position is determined not only by legislators' beliefs but also by their conceptualization of their own supporters' opinions which is assessed through networking and direct contacts with voters. In this sense, there is no direct linkage between legislators' policy positions and the general public opinion measured by polls.

The findings of this study are similar to those of some studies in the US which has electoral system. Thus, it is hard to imagine that these findings are solely caused by the institutional setting in Hong Kong. In order to further verify the institutional impacts on public opinion-policy linkages, it is necessary to carry out larger scale research, including systematic comparison across the cases of different countries and different groups of policymakers. Nevertheless, on the basis of institutional rational choice account, this paper argues that legislators' responsiveness to public opinion is, at least partially, associated with the unique institutional arrangements in Hong Kong for two reasons.

Firstly, in most FCs, the number of constituents is small while voters' interests are sector specific. These arrangements not only facilitate direct communication between constituents and representative, but also enable FC legislators to serve their sectoral interests to re-elected (Ma and Choy, 2003). This argument is supported by the finding that all the five FC legislators intend to take the side of their voters, particularly when there are conflicts between their sectors and the general mass

Secondly, for the GC election, under the PR system and Hare Quota and Largest Remainder method, some candidates may get the last seat with less than 10% of votes. Consequently, large

parties adopt the strategy of vote division or strategic voting, splitting into more than one lists which work on different regions and highlight the different local issues of the same GC (*ibid.*). This strategy of regional partition, together with the extremely compact living environment in Hong Kong, facilitates the development of community network and direct contacts with voters. In addition, small and medium size parties focus on the interests of specific groups or classes. For example, People Power's supporters are mainly radical democrats and disadvantage groups while Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood serves the interests of grassroots population in Kowloon West. From these perspectives, under the existing electoral system, GC legislators serve the interests of voters from specific regions and specific classes rather than the general public in order to maximize the chance for getting the last seat in their constituencies.

Taking all these aspects into account, the case study of the legislators in Hong Kong shows that elected policymakers' conceptualization of and responsiveness to public opinion are associated with the institutional setting. Thus, this paper suggests that in the research design of public opinion-policy linkages, institutional impact should be taken into account.

### References

- Aldrich, J.H. (1995) *Why Parties? The Origin and Transformation of Party Politics in America*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press
- Herbst, S. (1998) *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hill, K.Q. (1995) "Pathways of Representation: A Casual Analysis of Public Opinion-Policy Linkages." *American Journal of Political Science* 39 (4): 924-35.
- Jacobs, L.R and Shapiro, R.Y. (1997) "Debunking the Pandering Politician Myth." *The Public Perspective* 8 (3): 3-5
- John, P. (2006) "Explaining Policy Change: the Impact of the Media, Public Opinion and Political Violence on Urban Budgets in England." *Journal of European Public Policy* 13 (7): 1053-1068
- Ma, N. and Choy, C. (2003) *Political Consequences of Electoral Systems: The Hong Kong Proportional Representation System*. Hong Kong: City University Press (in Chinese).
- Page, B.I. and Shapiro, R.Y. (1983) "Effects of Public Opinion on Policy." *The American Political Science Review* 77 (1): 175-190.
- Richards, D. (1996) 'Elite Interviewing: Approaches and Pitfalls.' *Politics* 16 (3): 199-204.