



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### Harmony and discord

#### Citation for published version:

Yu, A 2019, 'Harmony and discord: Development of political parties and social fragmentation in Hong Kong, 1980-2017', *Open Political Science*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 53-63. <https://doi.org/10.1515/openps-2019-0006>

#### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1515/openps-2019-0006](https://doi.org/10.1515/openps-2019-0006)

#### Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

#### Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

#### Published In:

Open Political Science

#### General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

#### Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## Research Article

Andrew Chun Kit Yu\*

# Harmony and Discord: Development of Political Parties and Social Fragmentation in Hong Kong, 1980-2017

<https://doi.org/10.1515/openps-2019-0006>

received June 4, 2019; accepted June 21, 2019.

**Abstract:** This paper seeks to examine why political parties in Hong Kong are fragmented and how the development of political parties in Hong Kong leads to social discord. Political parties started to emerge in Hong Kong in the 1980s. They had a golden opportunity to develop in the 1990s due to political reform, but why are political parties in Hong Kong still small, weak, with poor reputations and weak support? The author points out five factors that lead to the malfunction of political parties in Hong Kong. Although some factors are caused by the political parties themselves, the author argues that they are, all in all, constitutional or institutional factors, as they are long-term restraints directly set by the government since the colonial era. Due to the failure of party development in Hong Kong caused by constitutional and institutional restraints, the author will also discuss how this failure has led to the political and social discord in the past two decades since the handover and the future.

**Keywords:** Political Party; Hong Kong Society; social discord; social fragmentation; election; history of political development in Hong Kong.

## 1 Introduction

This paper seeks to examine why political parties in Hong Kong are fragmented and how the development of political parties in Hong Kong has led to social discord. The development of political parties and the political system since the 1980s is first discussed in this paper. Then, the author will examine five constitutional and institutional factors that lead to the malfunction and fragmentation of political parties in Hong Kong. This paper shall also examine whether the situation and the condition of political parties in Hong Kong are beneficial to governance in Hong Kong.

Political parties play an essential role in modern society (Schattschneider, 1942: 1). Political parties have significant functions in a democratic society, and they are essential to the governance of a state. In general, political parties always represent a voice and ideology for citizens in an election: they represent a group of people with the same idea and belief; they usually can form a government once they win the majority in a presidential or parliamentary election, as well as maintain cohesion and solidity by making and implementing policies. Political parties should also be able to mobilise people to participate in social affairs and to recruit political elites. According to Gunther and Diamond (2003: 3-39), political parties have seven functions, which are 1) candidate nomination, 2) electoral mobilisation, 3) issue structuring, 4) societal representation, 5) interest aggregation, 6) forming and sustaining governments, and 7) social integration. In Hong Kong, unfortunately, some of these functions cannot be achieved due to the underdevelopment of political parties.

---

\*Corresponding author: Andrew Chun Kit Yu, The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom, E-mail: Andrew.ck.yu@ed.ac.uk

Political parties in Hong Kong, usually, do not have enough resources to mobilise people and to recruit political talent (Ma, 2007: 208, 119). They also have low support from the public due to the current political system (Ma, 2007: 148-151). For example, the existence of a ruling party is not possible under the current executive-dominant system. In recent years, the fragmentation of political parties can be observed. Some traditional parties were broken up in the past few years due to conflicts of interests and resources among party members; these members left their old party and formed a new one. This fragmentation also leads to the instability of the political development in Hong Kong.

Furthermore, political parties are not legally entitled or defined in Hong Kong due to the lack of a Political Parties Ordinance in Hong Kong. In general, political parties in Hong Kong exist in two ways: either registered under the Societies Ordinance or registered under the Companies Ordinance (Chung, 2014). Hence, technically speaking, political parties in Hong Kong are either societies or companies. Although there is no legal basis to define political parties, there are some standard definitions to define a political party. For instance, Raiklin (2012: 76) defined a political party as 'A group of persons organised to acquire and exercise political power'. In Hong Kong, Chung (2014) suggested that the public or the organisations themselves can define political parties. If the public recognises an organisation as a political party, then this organisation is a political party; If an organisation defines themselves as a political party, then it should also be counted as a political party. The term of a political party, in this paper, is defined as an organisation which shares the same view or ideology and can mobilise citizens to acquire and exercise political power through a political platform.

Although some political science scholars in Hong Kong (e.g. Lo, 1997: 184; Ma, 2007: 141; Ma, 2012: 159-177) think that political parties in Hong Kong are small, weak, fragmented, and have low support rate from the public, political parties in Hong Kong had a vivid opportunity and environment to develop between the late 1980s and 1990s. Before the late 1980s, excluding those organisations related to the Chinese Communist Party or Kuomintang, there was no formal political party in Hong Kong. There were only several political groups at that time, such as Reform Club, Civic Group, the Hong Kong Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood, and the Meeting Point. However, these political groups did not have a clear party structure and an ability to mobilise masses of people in society at that time due to limited resources, membership and recognition. Therefore, these groups were commonly regarded as pressure groups rather than political parties at that time (Ma, 2007: 136; Lo, 1997: 145; Tsang, 1995: 225; Lam, 2004: 11).

In the 1980s, the Government of Hong Kong started to develop a representative democracy by establishing District Boards, introducing direct election to the Urban Council in 1982, establishing the Regional Council in 1986 and introducing a direct election in the Legislative Council in 1991.<sup>1</sup> Although it is generally believed that the political reform was a response to the change of sovereignty in 1997, the introduction of democratisation encouraged the development of political parties in the 1990s (Butenhoff, 1999: 37-41; Fong, 2014: 110). In 1990, the Hong Kong Affairs Society, the Hong Kong Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood, and the Meeting Point, which were three major pro-democracy groups in Hong Kong at that time, combined as the United Democrats of Hong Kong. The United Democrats of Hong Kong should be regarded as the first political party in Hong Kong, as it aimed to run for the first direct election in the Legislative Council in 1991, when it enjoyed a tremendous victory (Ma, 2012: 160; Chan, 1997: 58).

Political parties had a positive development between 1991 and 1997. Ma (2012: 160) believed that it was because the people of Hong Kong did not become afraid of party politics after they enjoyed the first direct election in 1991. Furthermore, the Government of Hong Kong abolished all appointed seats in 1995, for those appointed councillors who wanted to keep their seats after 1995, they had to establish a party to run for elections (Choy and Lau, 1996: 237-266). The Liberal Party was an example at that time, as most of the founding members were appointed members of the Legislative Council. The emergence of these new political parties also contributed to the development of political parties in the 1990s.

The development and combination of political parties were rapid between 1991 and 1997. For example, the Meeting Point merged with the United Democrats of Hong Kong as the Democratic Party in 1994; some Democrats such as Emily Lau and Lee Cheuk-yan set up the Frontier in 1996. The Democrats' victory in the 1991 Legislative Council election was a severe alarm for pro-Beijing and business camps; they realised that their interests would be damaged if too many pro-democrats entered the Legislative Council (Li, 1997: 48; Loh, 2010: 197). As a result, some pro-business members of the Legislative Council, including Allen Lee and James Tien, formed the Cooperative Resource Centre in 1992 and it later became the Liberal Party in 1994 (Fong, 2014: 135). Furthermore, some people from the pro-Beijing camp, including members of the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, established the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB) in 1992, and ran for its first election in 1995 (Fong, 2014: 135; Li, 1997: 48).

The Democratic Party, the DAB, and the Liberal Party were three major parties in the 1990s. They, until now, are still dominating the Legislative Council as major political parties. Although these parties are still dominating the Legislative Council, they have now failed to perform well and achieve the seven functions of political parties suggested by Gunther and Diamond (2003). Why do political parties in Hong Kong develop disappointingly, or even fragmentise nowadays, despite there being a golden opportunity between the late 1980s and 1990s? In this paper, the author will examine the obstacles to party development in Hong Kong. The author argues that there are five influential and destructive factors, which are also institutional or constitutional restraints set by the government, that lead to the malfunction of political parties in Hong Kong. This paper shall also discuss whether the situation and the condition of political parties in Hong Kong are beneficial to governance in Hong Kong.

Beforehand, the author would like to point out there are other factors have negative influences on the party development and society in Hong Kong, such as the collusion between the pro-establishment, business sectors and the government, as well as the influence of China in the post-colonial era. The author will not go into these issues as the aim of this paper is to review how political party development has been affected due to historical and institutional factors.

## 2 The development of political parties after 1997

Political parties in Hong Kong enjoyed a short-term developing opportunity between 1991 and 1997 (Ma, 2007: 135). However, the good days did not last long. After the sovereignty of Hong Kong returned to the People's Republic of China in 1997, the positive development of political parties could not be upheld. Nowadays, political parties in Hong Kong remain weak with insufficient resources, including money, public support, and the ability to mobilise. The following reasons can be used to understand this unfavourable situation.

### 2.1 EXECUTIVE-DOMINANT SYSTEM

Administrative dominance is a feature of Hong Kong's political system. Regardless of the colonial era or the postcolonial era, the legislature in Hong Kong only has limited powers (Leung and Cheung, 1997: 277). In the colonial era, since most of the seats in all councils, including the Legislative Council, the Urban Council and the Regional Council, were appointed by the Governor of Hong Kong, political groups or parties could only play a limited role in the administration and the governance of Hong Kong. The colonial government only treated the Legislative Council as a consultative body, and most of the seats were given to British businessmen, members of the chamber of commerce, and Chinese elites, while some seats were ex-officio seats (Wong, 2002: 110). Although the last Hong Kong Governor Christopher Patten abolished all the appointed seats in all councils in 1995, the political influence of political parties was still weak. Political parties could not form a cabinet and control the government under the executive-dominant system even if they won in an election.

The problem mentioned above still exists after 1997. Political parties still share little power in administration and cannot form a government after 1997, regardless of the number of seats they get in the Legislative Council. For example, under section 31 of the Chief Executive Election Ordinance, the Chief Executive cannot have a political background. This hint suggests that the presence of a ruling party is impossible in Hong Kong.

By convention, the Chief Executive rarely appoints a person with party background as a government official. Although there are some exceptional cases – Gregory So from the DAB was appointed as the Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development in 2011 – these exceptions were rare, as most of the principal officials are not members of political parties. The unlikelihood of a party member to become a government official makes political parties have insufficient influence and power in a society as they cannot influence the executive branch.

Besides the restrictions on party connection for the Chief Executive and the ruling party, it is difficult for legislative councillors to influence and override the government's decision by proposing bills under the executive-dominant system, as there are strict limitations on councillors proposing bills. For example, they cannot propose bills which are related to the budget and the operation of the government, according to Article 74 of the Basic Law. As the influence of political parties is minimised, the people of Hong Kong understand that no political party can become a ruling party.

Therefore, Hong Kong people have even less concern about the movements of political parties, compared with western countries (Ma and Choy, 2003: 343-367). Wong (2015: 158) even suggested that ‘Hong Kong people are less concerned political parties. Hong Kong people find the police and the court more trustworthy than parties and the legislature’.

## 2.2 Functional Constituencies system and resource allocation

In the political systems of Hong Kong, a functional constituency is a professional or particular interest group involved in the electoral process. The functional constituency was first suggested in 1984 when the government released ‘Green Paper: A Pattern of District Administration in Hong Kong’ and introduced indirect election. After 1997, half of the seats in the Legislative Council are Functional Constituency seats.

Functional Constituencies, to some extent, damage the development of political parties. First, it is difficult for political parties to run a campaign in Functional Constituencies as the number of registered electors in some Functional Constituencies is too small. For example, there were only 130 registered electors in Insurance Constituency, and 125 registered electors in the Finance Constituency in 2013 (Voter Registration, 2013).

The ballot papers of these Functional Constituencies are usually given the candidates who voice for the industry in an election, rather than to the candidates with party background. In some cases, candidates of the Functional Constituencies are uncontested due to small competition and electoral base in the constituencies. For instance, Lau Wong-fat was automatically elected in the Heung Yee Kuk Constituency in 2012 due to no competitors. Political parties usually cannot win seats easily in Functional Constituencies. Table 1 shows the number of uncontested and independent councillors in Functional Constituencies from 2004 to 2016; nearly half of the Functional Constituency councillors claim themselves as independents since 1998, although they are intimately connected with pro-Beijing groups.

**Table 1:** The number of uncontested and independent councillors in Functional Constituency from 2004 to 2016.

	2004-2008	2008-2012	2012-2016
Uncontested	11	14	13
Independent	11	12	9

Note. Total number of seats in Functional Constituency increased from 30 to 35 starting from 2012

Second, the existence of Functional Constituencies undermines the party discipline of political parties. By convention, functional constituency councillors need to protect the interests of their constituencies and professions. As a result, some political parties, such as the Liberal Party, allow their members to vote in the council without following the party line, in order to maintain the interests of councillors’ sectors. However, it creates a negative impact on the discipline of these political parties. In 2008, the Liberal Party triggered a crisis because of this problem. Some functional constituency members of the Liberal Party, including Andrew Leung, Jeffrey Lam, Sophie Leung and Lau Wong-fat, left the party and established Economic Synergy due to some significant disagreements on social policy with geographic constituency members of the Liberal Party. Hence, the Functional Constituency system is weakening the cohesion of a party and party members. The existence of Functional Constituencies makes it unnecessary for party members, especially for those who have seats in Functional Constituencies, to follow the party line (Loh, 2006: 237). As long as these party members are dissatisfied with their political parties, they are free to leave their original political party and establish a new one. The functional constituency system is not favourable to the development of political parties in Hong Kong and leads to the fragmentation of political parties (Kwan, Lau, Louie and Wong, 1999: 21).

Finally, the existence of Functional Constituencies also indirectly reduces the desire of the business community to donate money to political parties. Hong Kong’s functional constituency system has a role in protecting the industry. It is customary for members of the functional constituency to secure and protect the interests of the industry by voicing for the industry in the Council. The voting-by-group arrangement<sup>2</sup> also provides an opportunity for Functional Constituency



councillors to veto bills which are proposed by Geographical Constituency members but not beneficial for their sectors (Ma, 2007: 144). Therefore, it is different from western countries; business sectors usually think that it is not necessary for them to sponsor political parties, as Functional Constituency councillors will protect their interest in the Legislative Council, and because political parties will never become a ruling party due to the constitution (Ma, 2007: 144). The lack of sponsorship significantly affects party development as they have insufficient resources to do policy research, to recruit and train political elites, and to mobilise the masses. Therefore, political parties in Hong Kong are generally small, and people cannot see a prominent political party which can mostly represent their voice.

### 2.3 Proportional representation system

Hong Kong's electoral system was not a proportional representation system in the colonial era. In 1995, the single-member constituency system was adopted for the Geographical Constituency seats in the final election of the Legislative Council in the colonial period. At that time, Hong Kong was divided into 20 constituencies; each Geographical Constituency had only one seat. However, in 1998, the election system of the Legislative Council election was changed from the single-member constituency system to the proportional representation system. Some scholars such as Hermans (1970) and Epstein (1980) argue that the proportional representation system can improve party discipline, increase party cohesion, and benefit small political parties. In the proportional representation system, the candidate must rely on the resources of the political party, including the capital, manpower and the reputation of the party, to participate in the election. If a candidate wants to be nominated and get a higher ranking on the list, resulting in a higher opportunity to be elected, the candidate, then, need to follow the party's regulations and line. This process, ideally, can strengthen the party discipline (Kreuzer, 2000: 487-504). However, the proportional representation system in Hong Kong does not provide a strong impetus for political parties but makes political parties fragmented.

The proportional representation system contributes to different negative effects in Hong Kong because of institutional problems. The proportional representation system of Hong Kong allows independent candidates to join an election by running on a list of their own; it also allows one political party to send more than one list in the same constituency. As a result, some of the most significant political parties, such as the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong and the Democratic Party, will send two lists in the same constituency to maximise their seats in an election. Because of this unique rule, it is difficult for political parties to control their members. For those party members cannot get support and the nomination from their party for a long time, they are likely to quit the party (Ma, 2002: 125-159; Choy, 2002: 99-123). There are many examples in the past. For instance, some of the Young Turks of the Democratic Party, including Albert Chan Wai-yip and Andrew To Kwan-hang, have left due to disputes of party nomination. Albert Chan and Andrew To established another small party, the League of Social Democrats, with Raymond Wong in 2006; Gary Fan also left the Democratic Party in 2010 and established Neo Democrats.

These small political parties or independent lists have their place to survive. In fact, the proportional representation system in Hong Kong favours small parties, as Hong Kong adopts the Hare Quota system, which encourages small political parties to form their lists to run an election. They usually can win the last seat by just getting 5 to 7 per cent of the votes, according to past statistics (Ma, 2007: 146). Therefore, the proportional representation system is also one of the reasons for many small political parties in Hong Kong.

### 2.4 Abolishment of the Urban Council and the Regional Council

Formerly known as the Sanitary Board established in 1883, the Sanitary Board was renamed as the Urban Council in 1935. The Urban Council was a municipal council mainly responsible for the affairs of cultural, leisure and environmental construction services. Before the political reforms of the 1980s, the Urban Council was the only council with elected seats. In 1985, the Hong Kong Government set up the Regional Council, and it was responsible for municipal affairs outside Hong Kong Island and Kowloon. However, due to the deliberate centralisation after the handover, the two municipal councils were abolished by the then Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa, in 1999 (Ma, 2007: 147).

The abolition of two municipal councils has brought great obstacles and negative impact on the development of political parties in Hong Kong. The two municipal councils provided considerable salaries and allowances, which was

sufficient for their members to become full-time councillors. Prominent full-time members include Elsie Hume Tu, Kam Nai-wai and Wu Chi-wai. For political parties, the Urban Council and the Regional Council were places where political parties could foster political talent. It was supposed that the two municipal councils were a political ladder, the upward flow of political talent should be first elected to the District Boards, then to the two municipal councils and finally to the Legislative Council. As the Urban Council and the Regional Council had actual political power and financial autonomy, two municipal councils provided opportunities for the Young Turks to learn decision-making skills and to prepare to run for Legislative Council seats (Lau and Liu, 1984: 39; Chan, 2008: 2). Some current or former Legislative Council members, such as Wong Kwok-hing of Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, Wu Chi-wai, Lee Wing-tat, Albert Ho Chun-yan and Albert Chan Wai-yip of the Democratic Party, Christopher Chung of the DAB, were members of the Urban Council or the Regional Council before being elected as a member of the Legislative Council.

The municipal councils were platforms for political parties to cultivate politicians. Before the closure of the two municipal councils, the DAB had 15 municipal councillors, while the Democratic Party had 24 members serving either in the Urban Council or Regional Council (Chan, 2008: 66). After the closure of the municipal councils, there has been a gap between experienced politicians and political novices, and the upward mobility of the Young Turks has been interrupted (Chan, 2008: 2). After 1999, there have been only two places for political elites to become councillors, the District Councils and the Legislative Council. However, the District Councils only have little resources and powers; the meeting and the agenda of the District Councils mainly focus on district-level issues, instead of territory-level issues. Because of this prospect, people who are interested in politics or public services are reluctant to join political parties; they would instead join the government to get a chance of being appointed as a senior government official under the Principal Officials Accountability System (Scott, 2005: 50). The ending of the municipal councils has made it difficult for political parties to train their successors and limited the party development (Ma, 2002: 125-159).

## 2.5 Catch-all parties and the lack of ideology

Political parties in Hong Kong generally do not have a specific ideological or political spectrum, such as conservatism or socialism, at all. The DAB and the Democratic Party, the two most prominent political parties in Hong Kong, are examples, as they claim that they are centrists. These parties tend to become catch-all parties, which means that they try to get a wide range of support from different parts of society (Ma, 2012: 165).

The election system indirectly causes the lack of strong political ideology of political parties. As political parties in Hong Kong cannot become the ruling party, the public pays less attention to political parties. In order to win in an election, it is unavoidable for political parties to use the 'big tent' approach or to get people's support by having erratic positions. This can be observed in major political parties, and they have successfully gained people's support over the past two decades. Some small political parties, especially those were established after the 2000s, claim that they have an ideology. These ideologies, however, are not too strong as they are mainly centre-left, such as the Civic Party and the Labour Party, or centre-right, such as the Liberal Party and the New People's Party.

Although the two biggest parties in Hong Kong do not have a clear ideology, they have the so-called strong political stance, either pro-Beijing or pro-democracy. However, the so-called political stance also made them gradually fail to mobilise people. As a political party, it is crucial to have a shared ideology and value to gather and mobilise people. Kuan and Lau (2002: 561-582) claimed that the two biggest parties in Hong Kong, especially the Democratic Party, tend to mobilise people by using cognitive emotion, but not a shared political ideology.

The Democratic Party began to develop after the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, getting massive support by demanding the democratisation of China and organising democratic movements. These movements have successfully made the party well-known in the past 20 years (Ma, 2007: 104). However, over-focusing on democratic movements in China also makes the Democratic Party dissociate from the civil society of Hong Kong. Ignoring socio economic issues and overemphasising democratic movements make the public feel tired of the Democratic Party and make the Democratic Party fail to create deep roots or linkage with people in Hong Kong society. The new activists and the new generation always criticise these pro-democrat parties overemphasising the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, and these young activists generally do not accept the leadership of these parties (Ma, 2007: 213). On the contrary, these new activists or the young generation might prefer joining Non-governmental organisations or even establish their parties with strong political ideology.

There are some examples that some new social activists felt dissatisfied with their original political parties and then established a new one, including Gary Fan of the Neo Democrats in 2012, Leung Kwok-hung of the League of Social Democrats in 2006 and Albert Chan of People Power in 2011. They are either former members of the Democratic Party or social activists, and they always criticise the older generations of the Democratic Party that has dominated the Legislative Council and social movements for decades. These newly established political parties always make criticisms towards traditional or old political parties. Some of these newly established parties even have charismatic personalities, including Leung Kwok-hung's League of Social Democrats and Albert Chan's People Power. They prefer doing something different from the old parties, including being radical in the chamber.

The lack of political ideology undermines the development of political parties, especially for the old political parties. In recent years, some newcomers who are interested in politics prefer organising a new political party rather than joining the old one. The Hong Kong National Party, Demosisto and Youngspiration are examples. Unfortunately, the scale of these political parties is small, and their resources are limited. They are just unable to organise and mobilise the masses; they can only rely on limited resources to run for Legislative Council seats. If they are lucky enough, they might be able to get one to two seats, just like Demosisto, Youngspiration and People Power. However, at the district council level, due to lack of funds and manpower, it is not possible for these small political parties to carry out too much work on local affairs and mobilise people to have an election campaign at the district level. Thus, most of the small parties have less than ten seats in District Councils; some parties, such as League of Social Democrats, even have none, although they might have one or two Legislative Councillors.

### 3 Discussion: Status of political parties and the governance

Due to the high number of small political parties in Hong Kong, the author argues that this circumstance is not beneficial to governance in Hong Kong to a large extent. A large amount of small political parties cannot effectively gather different opinions in society. It is understandable that some people might argue that a higher number of small political parties in Hong Kong is suitable for social stability as well as the governance of Hong Kong. Under the proportional representation system in Hong Kong, seats of the small Hong Kong political parties could be secured in the Legislative Council, which assists the inflow of different voices drifting into the Council. For example, Demosisto and the League of Social Democrats could still express their views on varying issues, such as political reform and minimum wage, in the Legislative Council, although they have got one seat respectively. As democracy and social stability are believed to be elevated through accepting opinions from different sectors, people then agree with the view that a multi-party system is beneficial to the governance in Hong Kong.

Although some people may believe that a multi-party system could enhance social stability by respecting different voices in the Legislative Council, it is, in fact, a hindrance to the governance in Hong Kong. As political parties in Hong Kong are not able to obtain Hong Kong people's confidence and support, views being expressed in the Legislative Council are believed to be not representative. It will further magnify the failure of political parties to act as a bridge of communication between the government and the people of Hong Kong. Under the executive-dominant system in Hong Kong, the roles of political parties have been limited to only monitoring, consultation and discussion. As the function of the political party is weak in Hong Kong, it is difficult for them to receive support from the public. The Chinese University of Hong Kong (2013) conducted research and found that nearly 60 per cent of Hong Kong people do not support any political party in Hong Kong. Thus, it is not difficult to see the challenges that political parties in Hong Kong are encountering. As political parties in Hong Kong are not representative, political parties in Hong Kong fail to act as a bridge between people and government officials.

Furthermore, as political parties fail to recruit political elites, it is believed that political parties are helpless to improve the governance of Hong Kong. With insufficient resources as well as the absence of political ideologies of political parties in Hong Kong, it is difficult to recruit and train political elites. The general public rarely sees the emergence of new political figures in traditional political parties. Most of the familiar political figures in traditional political parties are the product of the 1990s, such as James Tien from the Liberal Party, Martin Lee and Emily Lau from the Democratic Party and Christopher Chung from the DAB. New political figures can be only commonly seen in newly established political parties, such as Andy Chan Ho-tin of the Hong Kong National Party and Joshua Wong of Demosisto.



According to Ma (2007: 135), recruiting and training political elites is one of the essential functions of political parties, it is also a key for them to understand the views of the new generation. Failure to recruit new political figures will only deteriorate the reputation of a political party and the quality of lobbying in the chamber. The deterioration of the quality of lobbying is observed in the Legislative Council nowadays. It greatly affects the policies being reviewed in the Legislative Council, and it indirectly affects people's well-being. Thus, the current multi-party system is not favourable to the governance in Hong Kong.

Small political parties in Hong Kong are unable to do policy research because of insufficient resources. With insufficient finance and human resources, seldom do small political parties in Hong Kong research to understand the view of the public. However, policy research of the big political parties is not necessarily high-quality. Taking Hong Kong's largest pro-democratic and pro-Beijing party as examples, the Democratic Party and the DAB had conducted a total of five (The Democratic Party, 2017) and four (Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, 2017) policy research initiatives respectively in 2013, which are regarded as a low quality contributions to Hong Kong political development. In 2016, the two parties only conducted a total of three policy research initiatives (see table 2).

Moreover, with the absence of political ideology, many political parties have become electoral-oriented parties, and they seldom focus on matters of research or local affairs (Choy, 1999: 121-148). They fail to address social issues by making useful social policy suggestions; they only formulate policy suggestions to catch support from the public in elections. The alteration of the stance of the Democratic Party from opposing the issue of the minimum wage in 1999 to supporting it in 2010 has vividly served as an example of the absence of political ideology as well as an act for pleasing voters. Filibustering in the Legislative Council on the matter of Old Age Living Allowance in 2012 is another example of adverse political discussions, as some pro-Beijing parties opposing the bill without understanding the actual problems of the elderly in Hong Kong. As a result, it is observed that most of the political parties in Hong Kong do not know what they are doing as they do not have a particular political ideology and research foundation. The position on social issues of political parties in Hong Kong can always be changed, as long as they can get votes in an election. The 'catch-all' ideology does not benefit voters, but only political parties. Political parties seldom have a concrete research foundation to support their stance and are unable to express their views and suggestions for the well-being of citizens. Due to the lack of constructive suggestions and insights being given by political parties in the Legislative Council, the quality of discussion and lobbying in the chamber is deteriorating, and it greatly influences Hong Kong's long-term policymaking process. The failure to address social problems and to make some visionary suggestions by using substantial evidence also makes the public have negative views towards political parties. Even worse is, the lack of policy research makes potential political elites, especially graduates of the political science, unwilling to join the political parties, as they might think that there are not sufficient opportunities for them to develop in the political parties and influence the government by doing research (Ma, 2012: 159-177). It could be a vicious circle for political parties in terms of recruiting talents and gaining support from the public.

As previously discussed, as the cohesion and party discipline of political parties in Hong Kong are loose, it is difficult for political parties to mobilise their members and the public to participate in social movements. Since most of the political parties in Hong Kong do not have a clear party structure, ideology and political stance, party members can leave the party anytime, as long as they disagree with their party. Some of the examples have been mentioned earlier: several members initiated the Economic Synergy after leaving the Liberal Party in 2011; Raymond Wong, Albert Chan and several members established the People Power after leaving the League of Social Democrats in 2011. It should be noticed that some of these party-leavers were prominent figures in the 1990s. For example, Albert Chan was a member of the Democratic Party who served as a member of the Legislative Council and the vice-chairman of the Regional Council in the 1990s. Because of the lack of unity and stability of political parties, the dissatisfaction and division between parties and prominent political figures are nothing rare. The instability of these political parties will lead to a decline of public support towards political parties. Consequently, it will only undermine the ability of political parties to mobilise the public and integrating different opinions in society.

Generally speaking, social movements give pressure to force the government to adjust and amend unwelcome policies. However, it is unlikely in Hong Kong, as most of the political parties in Hong Kong are small, lacking resources and, most importantly, social support. As a result, it is difficult for political parties in Hong Kong to mobilise the public to fight against unjust public policies. The malfunction and fragmentation of political parties in Hong Kong also make the voices and opinions in society difficult to be gathered. As no party can represent most of the people of Hong Kong, the society will go into discord consequently.

**Table 2:** The number of political research conducted by DBA and DP from 2013-2017.

	DBA	DP
2017 (until July)	2	0
2016	2	1
2015	3	0
2014	3	1
2013	4	5

Notes. DBA= Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, DP= Democratic Party. Only proper research reports publicly issued are counted. Sources: Party's official websites

The problems of political party development, including the lack of ideology, funding and research, have been widely discussed in this paper. Although the author spent much space on analysing the weaknesses of political parties, these problems, all in all, are caused by institutional and constitutional problems. Institutional and constitutional problems are the key to the defect of political development. For example, the executive-led system has reduced the influence of political parties on public policies; the Functional Constituency system has also discouraged donations from the business sector, and hence, makes it difficult for political parties in Hong Kong difficult to mobilise the masses and conduct policy research. The proportional representation system also encourages the fragmentation of political parties in Hong Kong by favouring the existence of small political parties. The resources of a political party will be smaller due to competition, which is unfavourable to the integration of voices. The abolition of the Urban Council and the Regional Council has made political parties difficult to nurture their successors; it is also a deadlock of the party development in Hong Kong; voices and opinions are hard to be integrated as there is no political party big enough to represent the people of Hong Kong.

## 4 Conclusion

Overall, the social discord and the malfunction of the political parties is caused by institutional and constitutional issues. Because of these issues, political parties in Hong Kong are small and unlikely to develop by achieving the seven functions of the political party suggested by Gunther and Diamond (2003), including candidate nomination, electoral mobilisation, issue structuring, societal representation, interest aggregation, forming and sustaining governments, and social integration.

In 2014, the Umbrella Movement, a political movement, took place in Hong Kong. The movement was initially suggested by Benny Tai Yiu-ting, who advocated the Occupy Central Movement. The author does not intend to go into the details of this 79-days political movement. The author wants to point out that no organisation or political parties could control the movement or have a leading role in the movement. Many protesters believed that there were no leaders in this movement; people voluntarily participated in the movement. The protesters in this movement were not willing to listen to political organisations; they somehow even felt disgusted with political organisations, as they thought that these organisations were not well-planned. Many people were also dissatisfied with the student and political leaders in the protests and called for more radical and militant approaches.

After the umbrella movement, some political parties have lost a lot of mobilisation ability by losing their supporters; some political organisations which cooperate with the traditional pan-democrats have faced significant crises. For example, Andy Chan Ho-tin, who was a student of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, blamed the leaders of the democratic leaders and the Hong Kong Federation of Students for the failure of the movement. Chan then launched the disaffiliation campaign to separate the Hong Kong Polytechnic University Students' Union from the Hong Kong Federation of Students membership as the convenor of the 'Hong Kong Polytechnic University Disaffiliation Concern Group'. In the end, four university student unions have expressed disappointment towards the poor performance of

the Hong Kong Federation of Students in the umbrella movement by quitting the Federation. After the disaffiliation campaign, Andy Chan Ho-tin began to strive for Hong Kong independence by establishing the first pro-independence party in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong National Party. As a result, old political parties and political groups not only cannot construct social harmony by effectively mobilising people in the past decades, but also extend the political spectrum of Hong Kong to the other extreme.

In recent years, the emergence and existence of some radical groups can be observed, such as the Hong Kong National Party, Demosisto and Youngspiration. These newly established political parties advocate autonomy, ‘Hong Kong First’, or even independence. Their emergence is attractive to the public, especially the younger generation, as they have a new ideology which is different from the traditional parties. However, the author foresees that under the current restrictions and deadlock of the development of political parties, political parties in Hong Kong will be still unable to integrate different voices and opinions, society will continue to divide. There are even more different radical and extreme opinions appearing, as the current constitution and institution do not allow political parties to function properly.

## Endnotes

1. The first District Board formed in Kwun Tong District in 1981, when the colonial government announced a political reform in the White Paper on District Administration in Hong Kong. District Boards were renamed District Councils in 2000. The reason for the Special Administrative Region Government to change the name of District Boards to District Councils was that the government promised to allocate additional resources and increase the powers of the District Boards. By changing the name from the District Boards to the District Councils, it was expected that the District Boards would have the same status as the ‘Council of Legislature’. Unfortunately, the promise of devolution has never been achieved, and the District Councils have not inherited the original powers of the two Municipal Councils.
2. Different from the simple majority rule before 1997, private members’ bills and motions must be passed by majorities of Geographical Constituency councillors and Functional Constituency councillors respectively after 1997. This arrangement, however, does not apply to government bills, where only a simple majority is required to secure passage. As private members’ bills and motions are required to be passed in each group of constituencies, it is difficult for Geographical Constituency members to propose a bill to influence the government or make an impact on business sectors.

## References

- Butenhoff, L., *Social movements and political reform in Hong Kong* (California: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999)
- Chan, M. K., *China’s Hong Kong transformed: retrospect and prospects beyond the first decade* (Hong Kong: City University Press, 2008)
- Chan, M. K., *The Challenge of Hong Kong’s Reintegration with China: Modern Diasporic Femininity* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1997)
- Choy, C. K. and Lau, S. L., ‘The executive-legislative relations in Hong Kong before 1997’, *Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences*, 8 (1996) pp. 237-66
- Choy, C. K., ‘Political parties and political participation in Hong Kong’, in Y. S. Lam, eds., *Political participation in Hong Kong: Theoretical issues and historical legacy* (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 1999) pp. 121-48
- Choy, C. K., ‘The divisive effect of the proportional representation system: From inter-party competition to intra-party competition’, in H. C. Kuan, S. K. Lau, T. Wong, eds., *Out of the shadow of 1997? The 2000 Legislative Council election in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2002) pp. 99-123
- Chung, T. Y. (2014). *Simple comments on local parties*. Retrieved in April, 2018 from The University of Hong Kong, Public Opinion Programme: <http://hkupop.hku.hk/english/columns/columns95.html>
- Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (2017). *Research reports*. Retrieved in April, 2018 from <http://www.dab.org.hk/page.php?t=7&st=7&mid=7,7>
- Epstein, L., *Political parties in western democracies* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1980)

- Fong, B. C., *Hong Kong's governance under Chinese sovereignty: The failure of the state-business alliance after 1997* (New York: Routledge, 2014)
- Gunther, R., and Diamond, L., 'Species of political parties a new typology', *Party Politics*, 9:2 (2003) pp. 167-99
- Hermans, F., *Democracy or anarchy* (New York: Johnson Reprint, 1970)
- Kreuzer, M., 'Electoral mechanisms and electioneering incentives: Vote-getting strategies of Japanese, French, British, German and Austrian conservatives', *Party Politics*, 6:4 (2000) pp. 487-504
- Kuan, H. C., and Lau, S. K., 'Cognitive mobilization and electoral support for the Democratic Party in Hong Kong', *Electoral Studies*, 21:4 (2002) pp. 561-82
- Kuan, H. C., Lau, S. K., Louie, K. S., and Wong, T. K. Y., *Power transfer and electoral politics: the first legislative election in the Hong Kong special administrative region* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1999)
- Lam, W. M., *Understanding the Political Culture of Hong Kong: The Paradox of Activism and Depoliticization* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004)
- Lau, S. K., and Liu, Z., *Society and politics in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1984)
- Leung, B., and Cheng, J., *Hong Kong SAR: In pursuit of domestic and international order* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1997)
- Li, P. K., *Political order and power transition in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1997)
- Lo, S. H., *The politics of democratization in Hong Kong* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997)
- Loh, C., *Functional Constituencies: A Unique Feature of the Hong Kong Legislative Council* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006)
- Loh, C., *Underground Front: The Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010)
- Ma, N., 'Factionalism in the Democratic Party and the 2000 election', in H. C. Kuan, S. K. Lau, T. Wong, eds., *Out of the shadow of 1997? The 2000 Legislative Council election in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2002) pp. 125-159
- Ma, N., 'Political parties and elections', in W. M. Lam, L. T. Liu, and W. Wong, eds., *Contemporary Hong Kong government and politics* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012) pp. 159-177
- Ma, N., and Choy, C. K., 'The impact of electoral rule change on party campaign strategy: Hong Kong as a case study', *Party Politics*, 9:3 (2003) pp. 347-67
- Ma, N., *Political development in Hong Kong: State, political society, and civil society* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007)
- Raiklin, E., 'On the Relevance of the Principal Programs of the Leading Post-Soviet Russian Political Parties', in B. Wejnert, eds., *Linking Environment, Democracy and Gender* (Yorkshire: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2012) pp. 73-103
- Schattschneider, E. E., *Party government* (New York: Rinehart, 1942)
- Scott, I., *Public administration in Hong Kong: Regime change and its impact on the public sector* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005)
- The Chinese University of Hong Kong (2013). *Survey findings on evaluation of political parties in Hong Kong*. Retrieved in April 2018 from [http://www.cpr.cuhk.edu.hk/en/press\\_detail.php?1=1&id=1595&s=](http://www.cpr.cuhk.edu.hk/en/press_detail.php?1=1&id=1595&s=)
- The Democratic Party (2017). *Research*. Retrieved in April 2018 from <http://www.dphk.org/index.php?route=news/category&path=1>
- Tsang, S., *Government and Politics: A Documentary History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995)
- Voter Registration (2013). *Voter registration statistics*. Retrieved in April 2018 from <http://www.voterregistration.gov.hk/eng/statistic20133.html>
- Wong, S. H. W., *Electoral politics in post-1997 Hong Kong* (Singapore: Springer, 2015)
- Wong, T. H., *Hegemonies compared: State formation and Chinese school politics in postwar Singapore and Hong Kong* (New York: Routledge, 2002)