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Democratic Participation Under Authoritarianism in Hong Kong and Singapore

Howard Sanborn[1]

Scholars have long debated the factors that drive political participation and have recently applied theories, developed from analyses of citizens from Europe and the United States, to respondents in the democratizing countries of Asia. In both Hong Kong and Singapore, however, citizens attend rallies and contact officials — yet do so under authoritarian governance. Are the causes of political participation in these cities similar to what is observed in other groups of respondents across Asia? Or, do institutions influence whether individuals participate? In this paper, I evaluate the development of liberal norms of engagement in both cities as a function of traditional models of participation. As citizens in these cities possess some of the highest standards of living in the region, they should also face frustrations with the limited democratic accountability of their leaders. Ultimately, individuals in each city have developed support for democracy but, given the differing goals of each regime, the nature of democratic engagement differs considerably. In Singapore, citizens are mobilized to engage and participate but support the status quo. By contrast, engaged Hong Kong residents participate out of a frustration with the government, a function of their high levels of internal efficacy and institutional detachment.

Introduction

In Asia, the expansion of democracy has occurred as economies have grown and individuals have developed support for liberal values. Scholars have long observed the relationship between these phenomena, as middle classes drive the deepening of democratic norms and processes. The consolidation of regimes in Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Indonesia, and Mongolia are testaments to the persuasiveness of this argument. Yet, despite these movements, there remain pockets of authoritarian power in Eastern Asia even where economic development is at its highest level, challenging the notion that the rise of the middle class brings democracy along with it. Do traditional theories of democratic political participation apply in these cases? And, if they do, how does authoritarian institutional performance encourage, or inhibit, the inclination to participate?

In the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), support for democratic values has progressed even as institutional autonomy has been limited by the central government in Beijing.

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City residents have engaged in widespread mass protest in response to frustrations with the perceived interference of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in local affairs. This has led to a disconnect between a general growth in democratic consciousness and a lack of external efficacy — the ability to influence the workings of government.

One can see an alternative path in Singapore, where the city-state's government rules over a population that has not developed the same support for liberal values that has developed in Hong Kong. Here, individuals are mobilized less by their own personal beliefs in liberal ideals and more by the parties and networks that gather citizens together to support their platforms; even if an individual possesses a grievance, he may not be sure of whether others share this frustration and, subsequently remain hesitant to take the first step to demonstrate in public. This form of participation, then, is more passive and does not reflect a widespread desire for greater democratic accountability.

In this paper, I compare models of participation in Hong Kong and Singapore to illustrate the role of internal and external efficacy in the decision to attend rallies and engage in other campaign-oriented activities. In Hong Kong, where there have been debates over the degree of self-governance permitted in the city, individuals participate because they have developed support for liberal values — in strong contrast to Singapore, a more traditional, authoritarian system. The heavy-handed approach of the PRC has been to clamp down on local governance, with a strong role for pro-Beijing parties in the Hong Kong Legislative Council (LegCo) and the selection of the Chief Executive for the city by a committee of officials that are sympathetic to the central government. However, the frustration produced from this interference motivates these citizens even further in opposition to the central government, particularly those individuals who have developed internal efficacy in the post-handover era of Hong Kong politics.

Background

Resources, Mobilization, and Social Networks

Previous literature offers multiple explanations for the decision of citizens to participate (Blais 2002). First, scholars have offered support for the role of resources in motivating citizens to participate (Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, et al 1995; Brady et al 1995). Older citizens, with years of experience living within the political system, may be more likely to participate. In addition, citizens with greater incomes and higher levels of education may participate more as a function of their material wealth and more sophisticated understanding of their preferences. They may also have more to lose, participating in more political activities when they perceive a decline in their fortunes.

Citizens who possess a high level of internal efficacy, a feeling of internal empowerment developed through an understanding of and interest in the political system, should also be more likely to participate (Torcal and Largo 2006; Sanborn 2015). If individuals are so disaffected by

the poor performance of their political leaders or insecurity in their own capacity for engaging the government, they may have little motivation or incentive to participate. These citizens may possess duty-based norms of participation and show up to vote but will not develop the engagement-based norms that motivate democratic action in between elections (Dalton 2004; 2008).

Citizens may also participate when they possess a high level of external efficacy, a belief that institutions are representative and responsive to their concerns (Pollock 1983). There has been less support in the literature for institutional affection as a predictor of political participation, though the results have remained largely inconclusive (di Palma 1970; Levi and Stoker 2000; Shih 2003). Some studies suggest that individual detachment from institutions may motivate participation when one possess a high degree of internal efficacy (Gamson 1968). Individuals may become frustrated by the lack of a responsive government but will need to develop a belief in their own power to process the political system in order to mobilize in response to this poor performance.

Second, citizens may participate more as a function of collection action (Finkel and Opp 1991). If they believe, individually, that they will be the only ones to protest, they may decide to stay home. However, if these citizens believe that others share similar preferences and are willing to act, they may attend rallies and participate in campaigns. As such, political parties should serve as mobilizing forces in the process, helping to solve the bring supporters together and provide a legitimate channel for participation They may also inculcate norms of participation within their members, such as when it is appropriate to participate (Finkel et al 1989; Finkel and Opp 1991), as part of a mutually-reinforcing process (Dinas 2014).

Third, social networks may play a similar role as political parties, helping to reduce the coordination issues surrounding collection action. Putnam (2000) famously details the ability of social networks to channel the conditions of citizenship across members of the community, and the deleterious effects of the decline of these networks. On a wider scale, Putnam (1993) demonstrates these effects in his longitudinal comparison of Northern and Southern Italy. As individuals expand their networks, they have greater points of contact from which to gain information about the political landscape and support for coordinated mobilization to support a cause.

Hong Kong and Singapore

Denton (2016) notes the potential benefits from the application of traditional theories of political participation, developed in tests on the citizens of Europe and the United States, to the behavior of survey respondents in Asia. Individuals from wealthier countries in the region, such as Taiwan and South Korea, may participate as a function of their own internal efficacy, as well as the degree to which they are connected to social networks (Fan 2004; Kim 2004; Sanborn 2015). Indeed, Kadir (2004) comments on the complex nature of civil society in Singapore, allowing for individuals to articulate their interests within their networks while not challenging the political status quo. However, individuals may be discouraged from participating in politics through poor institutional

performance from government actors that work within institutions that are directly descended from prior authoritarian rule (Rose and Shin 2001; Sanborn, forthcoming).

Table 1: Support for Democracy in Hong Kong and Singapore, 2010-2012

	Hong Kong	Singapore
Want Democracy? (out of 10)	8.64	8.14
Observations	1114	989
Suitable for Democracy? (out of 10)	7.74	7.91
Observations	1077	991

Source: Asianbarometer Wave 3

Hong Kong and Singapore, in comparison to one another, offer a test of the difficult balance sought by authoritarian regimes in maintaining control while responding to the demands of citizens who have more gained more wealth and education over the last three decades. In both cities, support for democratic values runs high despite the control of authoritarian regimes (Table 1). Citizens of both cities rate their desire for democracy highly, with an average response of above 8 (out of 10) to the question, "To what extent would you want our country to be democratic now?" Similarly, respondents offer positive evaluations of the suitability of democracy to govern their countries. Although, Hong Kong residents rate their want of democracy higher than Singaporeans (with the reverse true of suitability), the general level of support for democracy is quite high in both cities.

At the same time, there have been indicators of frustration with the current governments of each city. The 2014 Umbrella Movement followed a debate on the degree of Hong Kong's autonomy in choosing its own leader; the PRC government, at the very least, planned to open voting for the Chief Executive to all citizens of the HKSAR. In Singapore, increasing support for the Workers' Party may indicate vulnerability in the rule of the People's Action Party (PAP), a function of an increasingly "competitive" authoritarian regime (Diamond 2012).

In addition, higher standards of living, in the form of greater individual incomes, a rising middle class, and equal provision of primary education across the sexes, support the development of democracy (Barro 1999). On all accounts, both Hong Kong and Singapore rate highly. The GDP

per capita for each city, as measured by the World Bank, places them in the top ten of major economies across the world, ahead of the United States, Germany, and Japan (World Bank 2016). Both cities spent about 20 percent of their budgets on education in 2013; the United States spent roughly 13 percent (World Bank 2016). And, the provision of education equally across both sexes has improved; in Hong Kong, the gross enrollment ratio indicates that more women than men are enrolled in school and succeeding in their courses of study (Yau 2014). This data is not available for Singapore, but recent reports indicate that 71 percent of women possess at least a secondary education, up from 57 percent in 2011 (The Straits Times 29 December 2015).

In Hong Kong, while the city did not possess the networks of political groups that would normally mobilize citizens, as Scott (1992) notes (21-22), the transition to Chinese rule heavily influenced the formation and actions of those groups. Postiglione (1992), looking ahead to the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to the PRC, observes, "[S]chools have never been a force in democratizing Hong Kong, and, if anything, have hindered the process. The school curriculum has, until the late 1980s, virtually ignored raising political consciousness" (17). However, the support for liberal candidates ahead of the transition, and the current dominance of the pro-Beijing bloc in LegCo produced by functional constituencies, are testament to both the rise in political engagement grounded in liberal values and the tensions that now exist in the political system between the preferences in the population and the interests of the central government.

In Singapore, the regime has maintained control over the public sphere and civil society has served to maintain, not to challenge, the status quo (Kadir 2004). Over the last decade, however, the regime has begun to permit more forms of participation, allowing more public debates and speeches without prior permission (Tan 2014: 186). This may follow less through the government's support for democratization and more for managed liberalization, using political participation as a release valve rather than a form of interest articulation (188).

Thus, much of the potential differences in the motivations for political participation stem from different perspectives of legitimacy. Singapore's government possess a strong claim to rule which, along with its management of civil society and regulation of protest, stem the democratizing effects of traditional factors, such as age and education. In Hong Kong, there is a "legitimacy deficit" produced from the perception that the city government appears to be controlled from Beijing (Cheng 2014). While both cities have faced challenges that typically drive protest, such as high unemployment, the nature of Hong Kong's handover, and the suspicion that the PRC will interpret the Basic Law, Hong Kong's post-colonial charter, to offer less autonomy for the city, has fanned the flames of popular frustration in a place that was not thought to be particularly interested in politics prior to the handover. Indeed, as others have noted within the Chinese context, the historical legacy of dysfunctional institutions may pose the greatest challenge to the solidification of democratic practice (Schafferer 2010).

Methods

To conduct an analysis of political participation in both cities, I use Wave 3 Asianbarometer data collected for Hong Kong (2012) and Singapore (2010). The dependent variable is an index comprised of answers to various questions about conventional participation activities. Respondents were asked whether they had attended a campaign meeting or rally, persuaded others to vote for a candidate, participated in some other activity to help a candidate or party, and contacted an elected official (Sanborn 2015: 52). This operationalization follows from Verba and Nie's (1972) battery of questions to measure conventional participation. The answers to each of the queried activities are coded as yes (1) or no (0), summed together, and collapsed into an ordinal variable consisting of three categories: No activities (0), one activity (1), and two or more activities (2). As a result, I regress this index on the independent variables using an ordered logistic regression.

To assess the implications of the literature cited above, I include several variables to measure aspects of resources, internal and external efficacy, party mobilization, and social networks on the likelihood of participation. Education, gender, and age are important demographic indicators of resources. For example, older citizens may have more experience with the system to inform their participation. In addition, greater education may spur on participation through both an individual's development of preferences and the coordination of group efforts to influence the political process.

I also regress participation on a number of economic indicators. The Asianbarometer includes measures for macro and "pocketbook" evaluations of the economy over the previous five years. Respondents marked their responses along a five-point scale, from negative to positive. These measures should allow for the exploration of the role of grievances in motivating participation. If a citizen perceives the conditions around them getting worse, they may be more likely to vent their frustrations outside of the voting booth.

To create a measure of liberal values, I calculate an index based upon one's agreement with a number of statements: "Harmony of the community will be disrupted if people organize lots of groups," "if people have too many different ways of thinking, society will be chaotic," and "government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions." Respondents were asked to agree or disagree along a four-point scale. These responses were averaged and calibrated to a 10-point scale of support for liberal values.

Sanborn (2015) also includes measures for party mobilization, social network, and efficacy. Respondents were asked whether they felt close to a party and, if they answered in the affirmative, how close they felt. These two questions were combined into a three-category measure, ranging from not close (0) to very close (2). As citizens become closer to their preferred political parties, they are more likely to be mobilized into action by party leadership, as well as the values and norms of the group.1

Additionally, respondents were also asked how many people they came into contact with in a given week. The resulting variable consisted of five categories: 0-4 people (1), 5-9 people (2), 10-19 people (3), 20-49 people (4), and 50 or more people (5). As citizens interact with more individuals, they can be assumed to possess larger networks of family, friends, and acquaintances. When a respondent sees more people come into his orbit, he should be more likely to participate as a function of social pressures and expectations than individuals who do not have many connections.

The internal efficacy variable, political engagement, is based upon Torcal and Largo's (2006) study of participation (321-322). Their analysis of engagement follows from the many studies evaluating the effect of internal efficacy on the likelihood of participation (Balch 1974; Craig 1979; Dalton 2008). Respondents were asked both whether they were interested in politics and whether they believed politics and government were too complicated to understand. A positive response to the former question and negative response to the latter were coded 1; these two variables were they added together to create a three-category measure of engagement, ranging from low (0) to high (2). Institutional affection, or external efficacy, is calculated using a similar procedure; respondents were asked whether they believed they could change the government and hold the government accountable between elections. These responses were summed to produce a three-point scale of institutional affection.

Finally, I consider the degree to which internal and external efficacy interact with one another. In other words, does the degree to which one is internally-motivated to participate increase the likelihood that poor-performing institutions will depress one's desire to engage in political activities? Previous research has offered support for this relationship (Gamson 1968; Shingles 1981; Sanborn, forthcoming). Individuals who possess a high degree of internal efficacy may be the most inclined to participate when they feel they do not believe they are able to influence the workings of their government.

To test this interaction, I create a variable that combines political engagement and institutional affection. Rather than multiplying the two terms together, and creating values that indicate opposing attitudes along both scales, I code this new variable based upon whether one's internal efficacy, or political engagement, is disconnected from one's external efficacy, or institutional affection. Respondents are coded as 1 when political engagement is "High" and institutional affection is either "Low" or "Moderate," or when political engagement is "Moderate" and institutional affection is "Low." All other combinations are coded as 0.

Findings

The results of the analyses of participation in Hong Kong are presented in Table 2. In terms of the traditional, demographic controls, only age is a significant predictor of participation (Model 1). Older respondents are more political active than younger respondents. As members of society age, they gain experience and, potentially, learn the limits of the political system. They may also

develop grievances given advancing socio-economic status. Neither education and gender nor the economic indicators, however, are statistically significant.

Table 2: Ordered Logistic Regression of Participation in Hong Kong, 2012

	Dependent variable:	
	Conventional Participation	
	(1)	(2)
Education	0.150	0.246
	(0.172)	(0.171)
Age	0.242**	0.185
	(0.116)	(0.113)
Female	0.146	0.084
	(0.269)	(0.265)
Past Macroeconomic Evaluation	0.115	0.087
	(0.161)	(0.158)
Past Pocketbook Evaluation	0.112	0.089
	(0.183)	(0.180)
Close to Party	0.284**	0.309**
	(0.123)	(0.121)
Know People	-0.040	-0.036
	(0.132)	(0.128)
Liberal Values Index	0.174**	0.185**
	(0.079)	(0.079)
Political Engagement	0.816***	
	(0.188)	
Institutional Affection	-0.275	
	(0.189)	
High Internal/Low External		0.960***
		(0.276)
Observations	477	477
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Attachments to a political party and support for liberal values do appear to motivate individuals to participate. Political parties can help mobilize individuals into action by solving the collective action problem for those supporters who want to rally together but may not be able to connect with other like-minded citizens on their own. And, individuals who subscribe to liberal values are more likely to engage in political activities. These respondents believe in a number of ideas, such as that many groups in society are not a threat to harmony and that leaders are not like the head of a family. As a result, they engage in traditional forms of democratic participation.

Interestingly, however, the variable for social capital is not significant, which does not follow from previous literature. It appears that social networks, instrumented here as the number of people and individual comes into contact in a given week, do not have an influence on the decision to participate. This finding is a departure from the traditional literature on participation. One possible explanation is that individuals in Hong Kong are not mobilized through their connections to other residents and the source of information on grievances that this provides. Rather, they mobilize out of personal frustrations with the regime in Beijing.

In addition, the measure for political engagement is significant. As citizens voice more interest in and understanding of politics they turn out to vote. These findings should come as not surprise, in particular the "obvious" high level of political engagement amongst students in Hong Kong most recently manifest in the 2014 Occupy Central/Umbrella Movement (Chiu 2014).

Institutional affection, or the influence one believes she has over the political system, is not significant. This suggests that connections to, or frustrations with, institutions do not influence the decision to participate. However, in a place, such as Hong Kong, where institutional actors are engaged in a tug-of-war related to the status of the city's autonomy, one must consider how the relationship to the government is conditioned by the salience of these debates. Individuals who possess a high level of internal efficacy, in particular, may be sensitive to the perceived lack of responsiveness of government actors.

To test this contention, I regress participation on this interaction of internal and external efficacy described above (Model 2). One can see that this measure of high internal efficacy and low external efficacy is significant at the .01 level. Individuals who are politically engaged participate more often than individuals who are not, but those politically-engaged individuals who are also not quite attached to institutions are even more likely to participate. Thus, in Hong Kong, frustrations with institutions influence one's decision to participate, particularly when one has an internal capacity to process the political system.

Contrast these results with Singapore (Table 3). The traditional measures of resources and ability to participate are not significant; education, age, and gender do not appear to influence whether one attends rallies or contacts elected officials (Model 1). Evaluations of macro-level economic conditions do appear, however to influence the participation decision in Singapore; the coefficient for this indicator is both significant and positive. This suggests that socio-tropic economic conditions can motivate participation, but not as a grievance. Instead, it appears citizens are motivated to participate when the city-state's economic conditions have improved over the

previous five years, in contrast to those who have found that poor economic performance stirs conventional participation. This finding may be the result of the increased resources for the individual, or it may indicate participation as a function of affinity for the good performance of the government. Pocketbook evaluations, however, are not significant.

Table 3: Ordered Logistic Regression of Participation in Singapore, 2010

	Dependent variable:	
	Conventional Participation	
	(1)	(2)
Education	0.163	0.176
	(0.139)	(0.138)
Age	0.123	0.120
	(0.098)	(0.098)
Female	-0.173	-0.193
	(0.201)	(0.200)
Past Macroeconomic Evaluation	0.366***	0.375***
	(0.111)	(0.110)
Past Pocketbook Evaluation	0.013	0.014
	(0.132)	(0.132)
Close to Party	0.591***	0.599***
	(0.106)	(0.105)
Know People	0.171*	0.174*
	(0.096)	(0.096)
Liberal Values Index	0.010	0.031
	(0.065)	(0.063)
Political Engagement	0.237*	
	(0.137)	
Institutional Affection	-0.015	
	(0.146)	
High Internal/Low External		0.269
		(0.221)
Observations	740	740
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

The indicators for party attachment, social networks, and political engagement are all significant, as expected. However, one can see the limits on democratic development in the city-state. Support for liberal values do not appear to spur on participation. And, when one accounts for institutional disaffection amongst those citizens who are politically engaged, there is no effect on participation (Model 2). The interaction variable that is significant in the model to explain participation in Hong Kong is not significant in Singapore.

Discussion

Though Hong Kong and Singapore are similar in size, population, and influence in the world economy, their citizens engage the political system in different ways. Singaporeans have largely made a deal with the authoritarian government, pushing only so far for reforms so long as the government makes efforts to maintain its legitimacy through transparent operations and the assurance of stability. Adherents to this "agreement" walks a fine line, as regimes that tie legitimacy to economic performance can be seen as brittle, ready to fall during a particularly steep downtown. Singapore's government has made efforts to use political participation as a release valve for frustration (and the renewal of legitimacy) but time will tell how long this pact will endure.

In Hong Kong, the difference in the status of its sovereignty makes a fair comparison to Singapore difficult. With two governments to which they must answer, including a central authoritarian regime that regularly interferes with the affairs of the city's democracy, Hong Kongers have a unique set of circumstances that drive their interest in politics. Yet, in partly-free Singapore, citizens participate when they are possessing internal efficacy or are mobilized by parties and social networks — just as the literature predicts for the citizens of democratic countries. Citizens in Hong Kong, particularly those individuals who are already interested in politics, are much more frustrated by the performance of government institutions. This finding, in combination with their support for liberal values, frames political participation on the part of Hong Kong respondents as a function of opposition to the government, itself.

It is clear that much of the frustration and growth in political engagement in Hong Kong stems from frustration with the PRC's involvement in city politics. The PRC has attempted to scale back the move to democratic consciousness that began before the handover in order to ensure stability and compliance, as has been true in Singapore. In doing so, it has produced the exact opposite outcome it intended: a citizenry mobilized and aware, fully prepared to engage in political activities as proof of their support for democracy.

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