



Occasional Paper No. 8

Centre for Hong Kong Studies

香港研究中心

July, 1985

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**The 1985 District Board Election in Hong Kong:
The Limits of Political Mobilization in a Dependent Polity**

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This paper was subsequently published as:

Lau, Siu-kai and Hsin-chi Kuan. 1987. "The 1985 District Board Election in Hong Kong: The Limits of Political Mobilisation in a Dependent Polity," *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 25(1):82–102.

劉兆佳。2016。「1985年區議會選舉與殖民地的政治動員」，載劉兆佳，〈香港社會的政制改革〉。北京：中信出版社，頁81–102。

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Acknowledgement

We are grateful to the City and New Territories Administration for making available the necessary information. To the government officials and community leaders who talked to us about their role in the election and their reflections on it we are deeply thankful. We are particularly indebted to our research assistant, Mr. Peter T.Y. Cheung, for his dedicated and conscientious service.

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THE 1985 DISTRICT BOARD ELECTION IN HONG KONG:

The Limits of Political Mobilization in a Dependent Polity

The second District Board Election of Hong Kong was held in March 1985 immediately in the wake of the signing of the Sino-British Agreement which arranged for the return of sovereignty over Hong Kong to China in 1997. The prolonged and tortuous process of negotiation over Hong Kong's political future by Britain and China, while agonizing and frightening to a majority of the people of Hong Kong, ineluctably exposed them to a tumultuous political experience which could hardly fail to affect their political outlook.

Since the conclusion of the Sino-British negotiation in 1984, Hong Kong entered into a period of transition which will end on June 30, 1997. Despite the resolution of the prickly issue of sovereignty, political changes in the run-up to 1997 and beyond are still perceived to be murky, and the possibility of serious political instability cannot be totally ruled out. Uncertainties and anxieties abound not only because of the vast differences in the political and economic institutions between Hong Kong and China, but also because the maintenance of Hong Kong's political individuality hinges ultimately on China's goodwill and tolerance. Political malaise is further complicated by the lack of trust in China on the part of the majority of the Hong Kong people.

In order to alleviate the fear and apprehension of the Hong Kong people, China and Britain have devised seemingly compatible and mutually reinforcing political plans for Hong Kong. On the part of Britain, the catchwords are 'representative government' and

'self-government,' while those of China are 'autonomy' and 'Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong.' As Britain is responsible for the administration of Hong Kong in the transitional period and China will exercise sovereignty thereafter, their respective plans for Hong Kong can only be realized if they act in tandem. Apparently, the development of a representative form of government in Hong Kong before 1997 by the British will lack credibility if it is not to be followed by political autonomy afterwards. By the same token, China's promise of political autonomy will be empty if the groundwork for the transfer of part of the political power to the local people is not laid by the departing government. While theoretically Sino-British cooperation in the area of political reform in Hong Kong is desirable as well as imperative, reality is much more intricate. In the first place, 'representative government' and 'autonomy' are still vague prescriptions devoid of programmatic content. It is always possible that Britain and China have different and even conflicting conceptions of these terms and harbour different senses of urgency in implementing political reforms. Even if political independence for Hong Kong is categorically precluded, both countries can still have contradictory views as to the necessity and desirability of specific reform measures and the timing of their introduction. Secondly, the issue of political reform is a divisive one in Hong Kong. Even though the majority of the populace are indifferent, the possibility of 'democratization,' whatever its precise meaning, is an impetus to the tiny but growing group of political activists who see it as their opportunity to obtain and wield political power. Contrariwise,

it instills fear and consternation among the bourgeoisie and the professionals who are worried that 'over-democratization' will undermine Hong Kong's capitalist system and generate political instability.

As the top elites in Hong Kong still suffer from an acute sense of political impotency and a lack of effective political organization, they largely confine their actions to petitioning and filing representations to the Chinese and British authorities. Political activists, however, waste no time in getting organized, resulting in a proliferation of small but vocal political (e.g. Hong Kong People's Association, Meeting Point) and quasi-political groups (e.g. Hong Kong Affairs Society, Professional Teachers' Union) in the last couple of years. These groups are by and large middle-class in composition and reformist in disposition. While they differ in conceptions of the scope and timing of political, social and economic reforms to be pursued, up to now they are only able to articulate broad-scale policy intentions without much substantive specifications. Practically none of the groups are so radical in ideological tenor as to take up an anti-capitalist stance. Many of them are in varying degrees distrustful of China and Britain, but they have eschewed any militant anti-British or anti-Chinese platform in their campaigns.

The appearance of these new political groups to a certain extent changes the political configuration of Hong Kong. Before their emergence, Hong Kong's monocratic bureaucratic political system was conducive mainly to the formation of a weak layer of community, civic and rural leaders. They were mainly officers of the Kaifong (neighbor-

hood) organizations, mutual aid committees (MACs) in high-rise residential buildings, area committees (ACs) in the localities, and the Rural Committees and Heung Yee Kuk (Rural Consultative Council) of the original inhabitants of the New Territories.¹ All of these organizations have been formed by the government for advisory purpose. Their leaders are traditionalistic, authoritarian, conservative, and deferential to political authorities.

Since the 1970s, as a result of the expansion of government activities and the rise in demand for public facilities and services, a large number of so-called 'pressure groups' were formed (e.g. the People's Council for Public Housing Policy),² on the issue basis, to

¹The original inhabitants are the indigenous people of the New Territories, the rapidly urbanizing hinterland of Hong Kong. They are a special group in the New Territories, and its appearance and continual existence owe substantially to the administrative definition adopted by the government. In a strict sense, the original inhabitants are those inhabitants and their descendants in the villages recognized by the government in 1898 when the New Territories were leased to Britain by Manchu China. They were granted a number of privileges which would serve to undergird the integrity of the village and lineage organizations. Since the vast majority of the people in Hong Kong are denied such privileges, the consciousness of themselves as a special interest group with a defensive solidarity is strong among the original inhabitants.

²It is almost impossible to provide a precise definition of the term 'pressure group' in Hong Kong because of the relative newness of the phenomenon. Over the past decade the 'pressure groups' and the largely nonviolent influence tactics they used had gained increasing acceptance by the people of Hong Kong. Groups which in the past would consider the label 'pressure group' a political stigma are now more willing to embrace it. For our purpose it suffices to define 'pressure groups' those groups which are more 'radical' in outlook, demand policies with redistributive effects and employ relatively unconventional tactics of political influence.

push for public policies with redistributive goals. The 1997 issue and the prospect of transfer of political power directly give birth to the political and quasi-political groups, but they also operate to politicize the non-political groups to a certain extent. The conventional and traditionalistic leaders suddenly realize that their bases of support, though quite weak, can still be converted into a political asset in a context where strong political organization and leaders are still non-existent. Yet they are at the same time seriously challenged by the newcomer political groups and the hard-hitting 'pressure groups.' To the 'pressure group,' the sudden prospect of obtaining political power to realize their redistributive goals propels them to compete for power within the institutional system. And the same prospect of political opportunity, reinforced by a perception of political threat by newcomers, prompts the two established but rather inactive political-civic clubs (the Reform Club and the Civic Association) to join in the fray. By 1985, while the bureaucratic government was still the predominant political force in Hong Kong, it was flanked by a congeries of political, quasi-political and proto-political groups and groupings waiting to fight for the chunks of political power to be transferred downward in accordance with the requirements of a decolonization policy which was peculiar to Hong Kong.

The District Board Election

In anticipation of its eventual loss of sovereignty over the colony, the Hong Kong government has since the early 1980s stepped up its program of political reform, which started from the local level. 18 District Boards (D.B.s) (increased to 19 in 1985) were set up primarily as advisory bodies with extremely limited executive responsibilities. Half of the membership in the D.B. were elective and their tenure was fixed at three years. The first D.B. election was held in 1982 and was received by the electorate with indifference.³ Since then a series of measures were adopted to upgrade the political status of the D.B. and to make it a more integral component of the political system. The ratio of elected members in the D.B. would be increased to two-thirds in 1985. Government officials would no longer be the chairmen of the D.B., and the members of the new D.B. would elect the chairmen from their ranks. The executive duties of the D.B. and the financial remunerations of the D.B. members would be slightly increased. What was most significant is that the D.B. would return by election 10 of their members to the newly constituted Legislative Council (the 'national' advisory body) with a total membership of 56 in 1985.

Accordingly, the significance of the D.B. election has to be assessed against the changing political context and the enhanced political status of the newly-constituted D.B. But this is not the end

³ See Lau Siu-kai and Kuan Hsin-chi, 'District Board Elections in Hong Kong,' *The Journal of Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, XXII, 3 (November 1984) 303-317.

of the story, as the real significance of the D.B. election can only be appreciated by taking into account other factors which have to do with the peculiar features of Hong Kong's political system and the critical juncture in time where Hong Kong finds itself.

In the first place, the political relevance and importance of the D.B.s are ambiguous and they change with the political conditions. What mark the D.B. out are not its advisory function, its limited executive duties or its local basis but the facts that it is a popularly elected political organization, that it is the source of authentic public opinion and that it is not confined to a delimited area of public discourse. With the trend towards representative government set in, the 1985 D.B. election must take on increased importance. In a telephone interview by the researchers of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 58.3 per cent of the respondents believed that the 1985 D.B. election was more important than the one held in 1982.⁴ Ergo, prima facie evidence should lead one to expect more popular support for the 1985 D.B. election. Besides, the government and the mass media had devoted tremendous efforts to promote the election, almost to the point of turning it into a carnival and relegating its political meaning to secondary importance. Nevertheless, the attitude of the government

⁴ The telephone interview was conducted for a research project on "Problem Perception and Mass Media Use in Hong Kong" by Professor Erwin Atwood and Dr. Philip Cheng, both of the Department of Journalism and Communication at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, in January 1985, immediately before the D.B. election. The random sample of the study consists of 1,000 names gathered from the telephone directory. A total of 725 successful interviews were returned.

to the election was ambivalent. Whilst electoral turnout would be treated as an indicator of its popularity and legitimacy, the government however was discreet enough not to oversell the D.B. as a political institution for fear of fomenting unrealizable expectations and encouraging unacceptable political demands in the future.

Another factor contributing to the significance of the D.B. election is that it provided an unified channel for political expression immediately after the Sino-British negotiation and the malaise it brought about. The acts of voting or nonvoting would hence take on meanings far larger than that of electing candidates to the D.B.s alone. The election would furnish some hints about the political mentality of a people who had just gone through a prolonged period of emotional turmoil. At the very least, the election would enable them to release their pent-up feelings in a concentrated way, even though the direction the process would take was far from clear.

The D.B. election also provided a concrete arena for the political groups to 'entrench' themselves by cutting out a niche for themselves in the evolving political system and to prepare themselves for the bigger political battles to come. In fact, almost all the available political forces in Hong Kong were involved in the election. To most political or quasi-political groups, the D.B. election in 1982 was too insignificant to warrant any efforts. Many 'pressure groups' even regarded the election as a political trickery designed with the sinister motive to subjugate them. In 1985 the 'pressure groups' made a complete turn-about and joined the game in earnest. So were the Rightists (pro-Taiwan

activists) and the Leftists (pro-China activists). The Rightists would certainly like to put up some form of resistance to the ever-rising power of the Leftists by winning some seats in the D.B.s, but they were simply too weak organizationally to pose any real threat.⁵ The Leftists found themselves in a more embarrassing situation. Being a formidable but not overwhelming political force by themselves, they were as yet not powerful enough to control the outcome of the election. An all-out effort to mobilize support not only carried no guarantee of success in the election, it might even backfire by frightening the people into believing that China was out to wrest political control over Hong Kong ahead of time. The Leftists were however still suspicious of British intentions and were hesitant in participating in a game designed by the Hong Kong government. And yet, to totally withdraw from the election was equally difficult. Firstly, power, however minimal it was, would then be fallen into the hands of others, and to let power slip by was not palatable. Secondly, it would give the Hong Kong people the impression that China and Britain were at loggerheads, and that would also be politically destabilizing. Lastly, it would mean that China's promise of autonomy with its 'democratic' undertones was a farce, and that would alienate the politically active in Hong Kong. In order to lend credence to the promise of autonomy, to exercise a

⁵ Only about several elected candidates in 1985 are strictly speaking hard-core Rightists. In all, pro-Taiwan elected candidates total around 12 and they occupy approximately 5.1 per cent of the elected seats of the D.B.s.

moderate control over the electoral outcome and to demonstrate that China and her supporters were capable of behaving responsibly and fairly, pro-China forces played only a modest and relatively inconspicuous role in the election. They (particularly the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions) launched a small-scale and only moderately successful effort to get their supporters registered as voters. And they gave limited, covert and subdued support to about 80 candidates who were either directly affiliated with pro-China organizations or were simply friends and sympathizers.⁶

Accordingly, the second District Board election was held in a political context and in a historical time which presumably should produce an enthusiastic response. Nevertheless, to anticipate the presentation of the electoral results, what did actually turn out is basically a letdown.

The Candidates and the Voters

For electoral purposes, Hong Kong is divided into 2 regions, 19 districts, 145 constituencies and 237 seats (see Table 1). The number of elected seats is much larger than the 122 up for grasp in the 1982 election, and the increase in seats is devised to boost the

⁶In 1985, among the 10 candidates affiliated with hard-core Leftist organizations, 5 were elected. In all, about 23 elected candidates can be considered Leftists and pro-China candidates, accounting for 9.7 per cent of the elected membership of the D.B. If all the elected candidates who can be considered friendly to China are included, the total would be 43, making up 18.1 per cent of the elected membership.

participation of voters and candidates in the electoral exercise.

Table 1. Candidates, Constituencies and Seats in the 19 Districts

	Candidates	Constituencies	Seats	Candidate/Seat
<u>Urban Districts</u>				
Central/Western	19	7	13	1.5
Eastern	42	12	18	2.3
Kowloon City	30	8	16	1.9
Kwun Tong	37	12	20	1.9
Mong Kok	22	6	10	2.2
Sham Shui Po	28	10	18	1.6
Southern	23	6	11	2.1
Wan Chai	21	5	10	2.1
Wong Tai Sin	39	12	21	1.9
Yau Ma Tei	17	5	8	2.1
<u>Sub-total</u>	278	83	145	1.9
<u>New Territories</u>				
Islands	17	7	7	2.4
Kwai Chung/Tsing Yi	38	8	15	2.5
North	22	6	8	2.8
Sai Kung	12	5	5	2.4
Sha Tin	32	8	15	2.1
Tai Po	17	7	7	2.4
Tsuen Wan	18	6	9	2.0
Tuen Mun	35	8	16	2.2
Yuen Long	32	7	10	3.2
<u>Sub-total</u>	223	62	92	2.4
<u>TOTAL</u>	501	145	237	2.1

The almost doubling of the number of seats did not bring about a corresponding doubling of candidates. There were a total of 501 candidates for the 1985 election, in contrast to 404 in 1982, thus reducing the number of candidates per seat from 3.3 in 1982 to 2.1 in 1985. Ironically, the higher level of involvement of various political interests and groups in the D.B. election not only had not intensified

competition in the election, but had actually depressed it. Generally speaking, the number of candidates in an election is correlated with the level of voter participation. The unexpected hesitancy of people to come forward as candidates portended a less than enthusiastic voter turnout.

The rather disappointing turnout of candidates can be explained by several factors. The most important factor must be that, despite the clamour and aggressiveness of the political groups and interests, they were simply too fragile organizationally to mobilize large-scale popular involvement in the election. Many of them were too small and too immature as to make a significant impact in the political arena. The more established groups (like the Kaifongs, the Mutual Aid Committees, the Area Committees, the Civic Association and the Reform Club) were generally weak both organizationally and politically. Rural organizations in the New Territories (the Heung Yee Kuk and the Rural Committees) were in a better position as they could still rely on traditionalistic and primary ties, sustained by material benefits, with their rural constituents. But even these were weakened by modernization and urbanization, especially the recent influx of outsiders into the new towns planned and built by the government.

Besides their organizational deficiencies, the newly-formed political groups and the 'pressure groups' did not have the necessary resources to take on the election in a large scale. They could manage only to field a limited number of candidates in selected constituencies, even though they might provide nominal or symbolic support to some

others. Compared to the last election, the 1985 one had seen more candidates affiliated with political groups or interests, involved in electoral alliances, or at least formed into electoral partnerships. The formation of electoral coalitions of various sorts did serve to scare away quite a number of potential candidates, particularly those of the conventional kind, who still treated electoral participation more as civic participation fit for a good citizen than political participation with an explicit quest for power.

Upon closer scrutiny, the 'group' factor in the 1985 election is more apparent than real. After a study of the last D.B. election, we concluded that it was a contest of individual attributes rather than that of organizational power.⁷ Despite prima facie evidence to the contrary, we still think the same conclusion applies, though with lessened force, to the 1985 election. It is true that since the last election, new groups have emerged in the political scene and many old groups which were not involved or only marginally involved in the last election did pay more attention to this one (e.g., the Kaifongs, the Mutual Aid Committees, the Civic Association, the Reform Club, the Professional Teachers' Union, etc.). But the real significance of political organizations was only dimly expressed. We can summarily brush aside the trivial electoral partnerships, which were primarily perfunctory expedients and were of questionable effectiveness in winning votes. Electoral alliances and political groups were much less formidable than they appeared to be.

⁷See Lau and Kuan, *op. cit.*, p.309.

The two most impressive alliances - those in Eastern and Central/Western - were very loose ad hoc groups, based mainly upon expediency, convenience and mutual acquaintance, had no organization, no discipline and no common platform. Political groups normally did not seem to support their candidates as a matter of official policy. There was no official nomination procedure, no campaign officers or units to coordinate activities in the constituencies, no common platforms and practically speaking no financial support to the candidates. The groups mostly gave symbolic support, with substantial support (campaign workers, training facilities, letters of support, endorsements of celebrities, etc.) devoted to selected candidates in selected constituencies. Discipline within the groups was loose, and in not a few cases it was the candidates who originally decided to stand for election and the groups concerned saw it prudent to offer membership. The newness of the political groups might have compelled them to expand their organizations through recruiting talents who had proved themselves or were proving themselves independent of the groups. As such it was common for candidates to claim multiple group memberships and to use one but not another of these memberships in the process of electioneering depending on the constituencies. On the whole, none of the groups could depend on a loyal and dedicated membership.

The participation of political groups and interests, together with the stepped-up involvement of the various issue- or community-oriented 'pressure groups' had some effects on the socio-demographic profile of the candidates. Since these organizations were largely middle-class in

composition, their members had more education and not infrequently came from the professional-managerial sector. Moreover, they were younger in age. But one distinctive feature about these candidates is that extremely few of them can be said to belong to the top elite of Hong Kong, who still were rather reluctant to engage themselves in electoral politics at the local level. Hence it can be said that in the early stage of political transition in Hong Kong it is the sub-elite with a reformist orientation that first come forward to play a more active political role, and they find themselves in a political arena which is populated by a large number of weak and largely pro-government traditionalistic leaders and organizations. Nonetheless, compared with 1982, the candidates in 1985 are younger, more educated and enjoy higher occupational prestige.

The increase in the number of candidates in the 1985 election is matched by a similar increase in the number of registered voters. Before the election, the government had launched a large-scale campaign to register more voters for the coming election. The campaign incidentally benefitted from the politically uplifting effects produced by the still ongoing Sino-British negotiation over Hong Kong. As a result, an additional 521,832 names were entered into the registered voters' list. And it is not unreasonable to assert that the newly-added voters are less politically involved than the original lot.

Table 2 presents the relevant figures on the registered voters, actual voters and the voter turnouts in the two D.B. elections. The number of actual voters has increased by 135,370, from 341,198 in 1982

Table 2. Registered Voters and Actual Voters in the 19 Districts

	(A) Registered Voters	(B) Actual Voters	(C) Voter Turnout B/A %	(D) Voter Turnout in 1982
<u>Urban Districts</u>				
Central/Western	68,711 (53,778) ⁺	16,267	30.2	32.8
Eastern	143,175 (128,171) ⁺	41,331	32.2	32.1
Kowloon City	107,534 (97,491) ⁺	28,766	29.5	34.7
Kwun Tong	174,801 (148,780) ⁺	53,518	36.0	41.5
Mong Kok	72,361 (72,361)	17,773	24.6	25.0
Sham Shui Po	112,565 (78,351) ⁺	28,978	37.0	35.4
Southern	70,435 (48,795) ⁺	18,498	37.9	44.8
Wan Chai	59,364 (59,364) ⁺	17,870	30.1	27.3
Wong Tai Sin	142,350 (116,391) ⁺	39,762	34.2	34.0
Yau Ma Tei	44,025 (44,025)	11,389	25.9	24.7
<u>Sub-total</u>	995,321 (847,513)	274,152	32.3	34.5
<u>New Territories</u>				
Islands	19,945 (17,754) ⁺	10,408	58.6	60.0
Kwai Chung/Tsing Yi	90,853 (90,853)	37,425	41.2	-
North	34,542 (34,542)	17,064	49.2	63.5
Sai Kung	12,448 (12,448)	7,402	59.5	59.9
Sha Tin	61,751 (61,751)	31,237	50.6	45.3
Tai Po	27,850 (27,850)	12,442	44.7	64.5
Tsuen Wan	51,019 (51,019)	20,994	41.1*	37.2
Tuen Mun	72,196 (72,196)	36,903	51.1	54.1
Yuen Long	55,466 (55,466)	28,541	51.5	61.3
<u>Sub-total</u>	426,070 (423,879)	202,416	47.8	50.5
<u>TOTAL</u>	1,421,391	476,568	33.5	37.9

⁺No election was held in constituencies with uncontested seats. There were 3 uncontested seats in Central/Western, 3 in Eastern, 2 in Kowloon City, 3 in Kwun Tong, 5 in Sham Shui Po, 4 in Southern, 3 in Wong Tai Sin and 1 in Islands. The bracketed numbers in column A refer to the actual numbers of registered voters in the districts who could vote in the election.

* In the 1982 election, Kwai Chung/Tsing Yi was part of the Tsuen Wan district. If Kwai Chung/Tsing Yi and Tsuen Wan were recombined into a single district in the 1985 election, the voter turnout would be 41.2 per cent, still higher than the 1982 figure of 37.2 per cent.

to 476,568 in 1985, which reflects a more enthusiastic response from the electorate. Notwithstanding this increase in absolute number, the voter turnout in 1985 actually declines to 33.5 per cent, in comparison with the 37.9 per cent in 1982. The decline is also evident in the New Territories where the traditional rural forces are more capable of mobilizing their constituents to go to the ballot box. In the case of the New Territories, the explanation may lie in the fact that the influx of the politically less active urban residents into the new towns had suppressed the voter turnout rate there. On the other hand, it is the younger and slightly more politically active urban residents who are more willing to migrate to the New Territories, and their departure from the urban areas might have dampened the voter turnout there. Another factor lurking in the background seems to be the sudden inclusion of the newly registered, but politically more apathetic, voters immediately before the election, their overall impact being to reduce the level of voter participation. Moreover, impressionistic evidence seems to show that voter participation is not much correlated with the socio-economic status of the voters. In areas afflicted with salient social problems the 'pressure groups' were able to bring out more voters to the ballot box. Despite all the euphoric official and unofficial evaluations, the D.B. election in 1985, when measured by the response of the voters, cannot be declared an unqualified success. When it is also recognized that only about half of the qualified voters have actually registered, the actual voters are only a minority of the electorate. Strictly speaking, then, the mandate received by the elected candidate is shaky.

From the point of view of political development in Hong Kong, what is most interesting is whether the dramatic 1997 issue has wrought any significant change in the political orientation of the people of Hong Kong, as reflected in their voting behavior. Even though no systematic study has been done on the phenomenon, quite a number of surveys and polls have been conducted by various concerned organizations before and after the election to throw some light on it.⁸ The thrust of the findings is that not much has changed substantively except maybe a slightly heightened interest in election as a democratic procedure, a greater awareness of the relevance of governmental activities on the livelihood of the people, and an increased willingness to speak out. Otherwise their basic political outlook remained more or less unchanged, and that conditioned their voting behavior. This in turn imposes a serious constraint on the campaign behavior of the candidates. Politically speaking, Hong Kong is still an atomistic society which is only minimally organized for political purposes. Some forms of small-scale, ad hoc organizations can be organized among the ordinary folks, with leadership provided by middle-class activists, only when concrete interests are at stake and are seen to be amenable to realization without costly efforts. Paralleling this structural limitation is a political proclivity which can be characterized as instrumental, pragmatic, personalistic and self-oriented.

⁸ We pay note particularly to the surveys by Atwood and Cheng, the Student Union of The Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Social Science Society of the University of Hong Kong.

Instrumentalism manifests itself in the people's perception of the D.B. as a means to obtain benefits to oneself or to one's neighborhood. The D.B. is seldom seen to be an embodiment of political values not related to day-to-day living. The voters are pragmatic in that they are rarely moved by appeals based on ideology of an idealistic or apocalyptic nature. Their attention is focused on the here and now and the practicable. They are personalistic in that they look for particular attributes (honesty, knowledge, integrity and ability are the more prominent ones) in the candidates in deciding to cast the vote. These attributes, upon closer analysis, refer primarily to characteristics that adhere to the candidate as an individual. They only accidentally and marginally touch upon the organizational or social relationship between the candidate and the voter. The organization whereto a candidate belongs figures only marginally, if at all, as a criterion in assessing the candidate. This identification with the person rather than the party or the issue distinguishes Hong Kong's voters from voters in western nations. However, except perhaps in the rural areas less ravaged by the forces of modernization, the general impersonal environment in the urban areas does not afford ample opportunities for personalistic tendencies to fully flourish. This is further reinforced by the absence of outstanding charismatic leaders for the ordinary folks to personally identify with. Consequently personalistic inclinations can only find an outlet in a process whereby supposedly personal attributes of the candidates are inferred indirectly from the mass media or the casual contacts (during home visits for example) made with them. In

this process, the facial appearance, the attire and the paper qualifications of the candidates loom very large in the personal impression formed by the voters.

The self-orientation of the Hong Kong voters further marks them out from their counterparts in the West. And it might be just a transient phenomenon in a society where bits and pieces of democratic principles have been imbibed by the people whilst the political system is fundamentally undemocratic. Self-orientation is shown in the reasons given by the voters for going to the voting booth. Scattered evidence at hand shows that the predominant reason to vote is to carry out the duty of a citizen. It is thus this self-imposed, but vague, personal 'duty' rather than a sense of external obligation to a political group or to an issue that informs a person's voting behavior in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, this sense of 'duty' is normally not translated into efforts to participate in political activities other than the simple act of voting. Nor does it drive the voters to actively seek more information about the candidates other than that acquired casually through the mass media. Political groups, while proliferating, still remain some kind of an anathema to the people of Hong Kong. And the fact that none of them declare themselves to be political parties is certainly revealing. 'National' issues might be important to a voter, but their sense of powerlessness in tackling with them seems to be readily projected onto the candidates who are thus in turn considered as also inept in that respect.

The juxtaposition of a growing and increasingly active group of

candidates with a largely apathetic mass produces a campaign style by the candidates which can only be considered a kind of 'concession' or even 'compromise' on the part of the candidates in order to come to terms with a less than supportive political environment. As a receptacle and source of public-opinion-cum-public-pressure the D.B. is not really confined to local problems and issues. The vagueness of the D.B.'s terms of reference has in practice enabled it in the past to address itself to 'national' issues which in no small measure has elevated its stature in the eyes of the public. But in the 1985 election, 'national' issues were conspicuously missing from the platforms of the candidates. Issues such as the future of Hong Kong, political reform, Hong Kong's relationship with China and even the role of the D.B. in the evolving political system were scarcely mentioned. Instead, the candidates focused mainly on local services and facilities, which they considered would appeal better to their constituents.

Nor did many political groups attach their group labels to their candidates. Except for one 'pressure group' (viz., People's Council on Public Housing Policy) and two old-timer political-civic clubs (viz., the Civic Association and the Reform Club), the candidates of other political groups ran as individuals, with their groups rendering support in the background. Candidates running with explicit group labels, however, did not necessarily find their labels an asset, as some of them did encounter grave difficulties when their manifest group affiliation raised suspicion among the voters as to their ultimate political intentions. Still, with or without explicit group labels, it is undeniably true that

candidates with some kind of group support ran their elections more effectively, as the groups were in a better position to help them to utilize more effectively and economically the direct (home visits, hand-shaking, forums, etc.) and indirect (TV, radio, handbills, banners, letters, posters) means of appealing to the minimally organized mass. If we have to rate the significance of the 'group' or 'organizational' factor in the 1985 D.B. election, the more plausible conclusion seems to be that the 'group' gives its candidates a marginal edge over candidates without much group support. Paradoxically, this marginal edge comes about because the group, through its activities, manages to magnify the personal appeals of the candidates. This is achieved by confining group support to a limited number of pre-selected candidates already blessed with valuable personal attributes and by 'selling' these attributes in a more effective way by deploying modern means of communication. In short, the 'group' factor bolsters the all-important personal factor in the 1985 election rather than displaces it as a relevant factor. The political inertia of the voters has compelled the political groups to maneuver in accordance with its terms.

Electoral Results

While the 'group' factor must be assessed in a proper perspective, it still has done some magic for candidates affiliated with quasi-political, political and 'pressure' groups. Since the number of candidates fielded by these groups is small, their handsome success has not brought about a fundamental shift in the balance of political forces in the

D.B..⁹ But their performance has already posed an enormous threat to the conventional and traditionalistic forces whose candidates largely run their election campaigns individually, relying on patron-client networks, traditional ties, reciprocal exchanges of benefits or sheerly being well-known in their constituencies.¹⁰ Given the orientation of the voters, we cannot summarily dismiss the traditionalistic leaders as politically foredoomed as many of them still possess many personal traits which would appeal to the voters. And they have the further advantage of being looked with favour by the government. How they would reorganize themselves and recruit talents into their ranks would account very much for their future political fate. In the 1985 election, traditionalistic forces lost badly in some new towns (Tuen Mun and Kwai Chung/Tsing Yi) and in old dilapidated resettlement areas, both of which were inflicted by serious social problems and suffered from an acute shortage of social service and community facilities. These areas are naturally the hotbeds of the 'pressure' groups.

In the following sections, we shall analyze the socio-demographic attributes and organizational affiliations of the elected candidates, and, whenever feasible, make comparisons with the 1982 election.

⁹As a matter of fact, in the subsequent election of D.B. chairman, elected members won only 5 of the 19 positions.

¹⁰Traditionalistic appeal to the voters is not necessarily effective in the urban area. The ineffectiveness of the MACs in mobilizing the voters in the 1982 election is a case in point. See for example Janet L. Scott, 'Local Level Election Behavior in an Urban Area,' *Occasional Paper No.6*, Centre for Hong Kong Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, January 1985.

(1) Sex Only a slight change in the distribution between males and females among elected candidates is registered (Table 3). Females are still grossly underrepresented in the new D.B.s.

Table 3. Sex of Elected Candidates in the 1982 and 1985 Elections

Sex	1982		1985		% Change ⁺
	N	%	N	%	
Male	127	96.2	220	92.8	- 3.5
Female	5	3.8	17	7.2	+89.5
TOTAL	132	100.0	237	100.0	

⁺The figures are calculated according to the formula of $\left(\frac{\%_2 - \%_1}{\%_1}\right)\%$

(2) Age Elected candidates in 1985 are much younger than their counterparts in 1982 (Table 4). Whereas the percentages of elected candidates in the 21-30 and 31-40 age groups are 8.3 and 25.8 respectively in 1982, they have jumped to 19.4 and 36.3 respectively in 1985. But when we also recognize that the candidates in the two age groups are 6.2 per cent and 20.6 per cent respectively of all of candidates in 1982, whilst they are 12 per cent and 30.9 per cent respectively in 1985, the increase in young elected candidates in 1985 is much less impressive. A more cautious interpretation with respect to age appears to be that younger people are more active in electoral participation in 1985 and they have a slightly better chance of being elected.

Tabel 4. Age of Elected Candidates in the 1982 and 1985 Elections

Age	1982		1985		% Change ⁺
	N	%	N	%	
21-30	11	8.3	46	19.4	+133.7
31-40	34	25.8	86	36.3	+ 40.7
41-50	33	25.0	45	19.0	- 24.0
51-60	42	31.8	45	19.0	- 40.3
61-70	9	6.8	12	5.0	- 26.5
71-80	3	2.3	3	1.3	- 43.5
TOTAL	132	100.0	237	100.0	

⁺The figures are calculated according to the formula of $\left(\frac{\%_2 - \%_1}{\%_1}\right)\%$

(3) Occupation Table 5 shows the occupation of the elected candidates in 1982 and 1985. Businessmen and industrialists continue to dominate the D.B., though their overall strength is somewhat eroded. Educationists, social workers and professionals have made the most impressive inroads in the new D.B., and that has a lot to do with the success of the political and 'pressure' groups at the polls. In terms of knowledge and expertise, the new D.B. is hence somewhat superior to the old ones.

In contrast with age and sex, occupation appears to be a very reliable and valid criterion to predict electoral success. As occupation itself is strongly correlated with social status, education and income, its use by the personalistic and instrumental voters as the most important cue to determine the acceptability of candidates is unmistakable.

Table 5. Occupation of Elected Candidates in the 1982 and 1985 Elections

Occupation	1982		1985		% Change ⁺
	N	%	N	%	
Businessmen	58	43.9	67	28.3	- 35.5
Industrialists	4	3.0	3	1.3	- 56.7
Educationists	22	16.7	42	17.7	+ 6.0
Social Workers	4	3.0	20	8.4	+180.0
Professionals	5	3.8	30	12.6	+231.6
Office Workers	15	11.4	35	14.8	+ 29.8
Constructors	7	5.3	5	2.1	- 60.4
Housewives	1	.8	2	.8	0
Factory Workers/ Technicians	6	4.5	8	3.4	- 24.4
Drivers	0	0	5	2.1	-
Retirees	3	2.3	7	3.0	+ 30.4
Journalists	0	0	4	1.7	-
Others	7	5.3	9	3.8	- 28.3
TOTAL	132	100.0	237	100.0	

⁺The figures are calculated according to the formula of $\left(\frac{\%_2 - \%_1}{\%_1}\right) \%$

(4) Incumbency A total of 120 incumbent D.B. members have entered the electoral race, among whom are 108 elected members and 12 appointed members. Their success rate is appalling, which bespeaks both of the Hong Kong people's acceptance of the D.B. and their possession of the valuable personal attributes which appeal to the voters. 89 of the incumbent D.B. members are returned to office,

making a success rate of 74.2 per cent. A further breakdown sets the success rate in the urban areas to be 76 per cent, whilst that for the New Territories is 71.1 per cent. Appointed members, with a success rate of 83.3 per cent, perform even better than their elected counterparts, who only pull a success rate of 73.1 per cent. In all, incumbency appears to be a valuable asset in the electoral game.

(5) Indigenous Background The indigenous people, or original inhabitants, in the New Territories, with their past political experience, relatively close-knit social organization and effective leadership, were able to win handsomely in the last D.B. election. In the 1985 election, as can be seen in Table 6, even though candidates with indigenous background are able to retain their dominance in areas less affected by urbanization (Islands, Tai Po, Sai Kung and Yuen Long), they lose it in the problem-ridden new town of Tuen Mun.¹¹ What is more telling is that in view of the increase in elected seats from 56 in 1982 to 92 in 1985 in the New Territories, the original inhabitants are able to come up with only 71 candidates, less than the 95 in the last election. This might indicate a pending succession crisis in the leadership of the original inhabitants, most of whose existing leaders are relatively old. The continual onslaught of urbanization might further erode the political influence of the original inhabitants and their organizations. Meanwhile, however, in view of the newness of the electoral game and the immaturity of the

¹¹The new electoral district of Kwai Chung/Tsing Yi, highly urbanized, has no candidate with indigenous background.

emergent leaders among the new settlers, prominent leaders with indigenous background are still able to capture most of the leading positions in the evolving political institutions.¹² In other words, individual leaders of the original inhabitants are able to profit from the political reforms and get a new lease of political life by transforming themselves into area-wide leaders while the organizations from which they are bred will decline, as will the rest of the indigenous leaders.

(6) Area Committees (ACs) and Mutual Aid Committees (MACs)

On the whole, candidates coming from or sponsored by the government-supported community/neighborhood organizations - the Area Committees and Mutual Aid Committees - fare less well in the 1985 election (Table 7). They lose their dominant position in the D.B.s in Eastern, Sham Shui Po, Southern and Yau Ma Tei. Except for Sham Shui Po and perhaps also Kwai Chung/Tsing Yi, where they are displaced by the vocal 'pressure group' leaders, it is mainly to the challenge of the moderate professionals which the AC and MAC leaders succumbed.

In the New Territories, the AC and MAC leaders are able to gain some ground in several districts - Tai Po, Tuen Mun and Yuen Long. We suspect that they profit from the decline of the indigenous leaders. In Tuen Mun, where the pressure groups are active and influential, the AC and MAC people are still able to win more elected seats than in 1982.

¹²Seven of the nine elected chairmen of the D.B.s in the New Territories are original inhabitants.

Table 6. Electoral Performance of Candidate With Indigenous Background in the 1985 (and 1982) Elections in the New Territories

	Seats With I.B.	Candidates With I.B.	Elected Candidates With I.B. [% Change]*	Success Rate (%) [% Change]*	% of Elected Candidates With I.B. [% Change]*
Islands	7 (6) [†]	12 (9)	6 (6) [0]	50.0(66.7) [- 25.0]	85.7 (100) [- 14.3]
Kwai Chung/Tsing Yi	15 (-)	1 (-)	0 (-) [-]	- (-) [-]	- (-) [-]
North	8 (6)	11(11)	4 (4) [0]	36.4(36.4) [0]	50.0(66.7) [- 25.0]
Sai Kung	5 (5)	7 (9)	3 (3) [0]	42.9(33.3) [+ 28.8]	60.0(60.0) [0]
Sha Tin	15 (8)	3 (6)	2 (3) [- 33.3]	66.7(50.0) [+ 33.4]	13.3(37.5) [- 64.5]
Tai Po	7 (7)	9(20)	5 (5) [0]	55.6(25.0) [+122.4]	71.4(71.4) [0]
Tsuen Wan	9(10)	13 (6)	2 (1) [+100.0]	15.4(16.7) [- 7.8]	22.2(10.0) [+122.0]
Tuen Mun	16 (8)	10(16)	5 (7) [- 28.6]	50.0(43.8) [+ 14.2]	31.2(87.5) [- 64.3]
Yuen Long	10 (6)	15(18)	5 (3) [+ 66.7]	33.3(16.7) [+ 99.4]	50.0(50.0) [0]
TOTAL	92(56)	71(95)	32(32) [0]	45.1(33.7) [33.8]	34.8(57.1) [- 39.1]

[†]The figure in the bracket refers to 1982 election.

*The figure for the item % Change is the difference between the figures for the two elections as a percentage of the figure for the 1982 election.

Table 7. Electoral Performance of Candidates With Area Committee/Mutual Aid Committee Background in the 1985 (and 1982) Elections

	Candidates With AC/MAC Background	Elected Candidates With AC/MAC Background [% Change]*	Success Rate (%)	% of Elected Candidates With AC/MAC Background [% Change]*
<u>Urban Districts</u>				
Central/Western	10	8 (5) [†] [+ 60.0]	80.0	67.5(100.0) [- 32.5]
Eastern	7	2(10) [- 80.0]	28.6	11.1(100.0) [- 88.9]
Kowloon City	6	2 (3) [- 33.3]	33.3	12.5 (37.5) [- 66.7]
Kwun Tong	20	10 (7) [+ 42.9]	50.0	50.0 (58.3) [- 14.2]
Mong Kok	14	6 (4) [+ 50.0]	42.9	60.0 (80.0) [- 25.0]
Sham Shui Po	11	4 (9) [- 55.6]	36.4	22.2(100.0) [- 77.8]
Southern	8	3 (5) [- 40.0]	37.5	27.2 (83.3) [- 67.3]
Wan Chai	7	1 (1) [0]	14.3	10.0 (20.0) [- 50.0]
Wong Tai Sin	30	16(11) [+ 45.5]	53.3	76.2 (91.7) [- 16.9]
Yau Ma Tei	6	4 (4) [0]	66.7	50.0(100.0) [- 50.0]
<u>Sub-total</u>	119	56(59) [- 5.1]	47.1	38.6 (77.6) [- 50.3]
<u>New Territories</u>				
Islands	1	0 (0) [0]	0	0 (0) [0]
Kwai Chung/Tsing Yi	20	8 (-) [-]	40.0	53.3 (-) [-]
North	2	1 (0) [-]	50.0	12.5 (0) [-]
Sai Kung	4	2 (0) [-]	50.0	40.0 (0) [-]
Sha Tin	22	10 (6) [66.7]	45.5	66.6 (75.0) [- 11.2]
Tai Po	3	2 (1) [+100.0]	66.7	28.5 (14.3) [+ 99.3]
Tsuen Wan	9	5 (8) [- 37.5]	55.6	55.5 (80.0) [- 30.6]
Tuen Mun	14	5 (2) [+150.0]	35.7	31.2 (25.0) [+ 24.8]
Yuen Long	8	3 (1) [+200.0]	37.5	30.0 (16.7) [+ 79.6]
<u>Sub-total</u>	83	36(18) [+100.0]	43.4	39.1 (32.1) [+ 21.8]
<u>TOTAL</u>	202	92(77) [+ 19.5]	45.5	38.8 (58.3) [- 33.4]

[†]The figure in the bracket refers to the 1982 election.

*The figure for the item % Change is the difference between the figures for the two elections as a percentage of the figures for the 1982 election.

As the ACs and MACs are the creations of the government to pursue self-help activities and to mobilize support for official policies, the performance of the ACs and MACs in the election is seen by the government as a shocking disappointment, as it has high hopes for them. In fact, ACs and MACs are on the whole defunct organizations with very low popular support.¹³ Their 'sub-optimal' performance in the election is not really surprising. What is surprising, however, is that as a group, ACs and MACs still wield a much bigger chunk of influence in the D.B.s than all the other neighborhood groups, 'pressure' or not, combined. This testifies to the shortage of effective popular leaders at the local level in Hong Kong.

(7) 'Pressure Groups', Political Groups and Quasi-Political Groups

As can be seen in Tables 8 and 9, 'pressure groups' have put up a remarkable performance in the 1985 election, particularly in the new towns of Kwai Chung/Tsing Yi and Tuen Mun. Inevitably, the intrusion of more 'pressure group' leaders into the formerly tranquil and acquiescent D.B. will change the orientation and operational style of the D.B. On the whole, however, 'pressure group' leaders are still a small minority in the D.B., but their influence is almost certain to increase in the years to come, barring unforeseen circumstances.

Likewise, the political and quasi-political groups have achieved magnificent success rates for the few candidates they sponsor. This

¹³ See Kuan Hsin-chi, Lau Siu-kai and Ho Kam-fai, 'Organizing Participatory Urban Services: The Mutual Aid Committees in Hong Kong,' *Occasional Paper No.2*, Centre for Hong Kong Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, November 1983.

is most encouraging to the incipient political groups and quasi-political groups which desperately need the D.B. election to prove themselves to be bona fide contenders for political influence. More established political groups and quasi-political groups are also able to resuscitate themselves somewhat through the election. While this election does not declare the winner among them, it at least contributes to their political maturation and whets their political appetite.

Table 8. Elected Candidates Supported by 'Pressure Groups'

	N	% of Elected Candidates
<u>Urban District</u>		
Central/Western	4	30.8
Eastern	7	38.9
Kowloon City	3	18.8
Kwun Tong	3	15.0
Mong Kok	3	30.0
Sham Shui Po	4	22.2
Southern	1	9.1
Wan Chai	0	0
Wong Tai Sin	4	19.0
Yau Ma Tei	1	12.5
<u>Sub-total</u>	30	20.7
<u>New Territories</u>		
Islands	0	0
Kwai Chung/Tsing Yi	6	40.0
North	0	0
Sai Kung	1	20.0
Sha Tin	4	26.7
Tai Po	0	0
Tsuen Wan	1	11.1
Tuen Mun	8	50.0
Yuen Long	0	0
<u>Sub-total</u>	20	21.7
<u>TOTAL</u>	50	21.1

Table 9. Electoral Performance of 'Pressure Groups',⁺ Political Groups and Quasi-Political Groups

Group	Number of Candidates	Number of Elected Candidates	Success Rate (%)
Civic Association	53	21	39.6
Reform Club	33	17	48.5
Eastern Alliance	11	11	100.0
Central/Western Alliance	12	10	83.3
Professional Teachers' Union	30	24	80.0
Federation of Trade Unions	10	5	50.0
Meeting Point	4	4	100.0
People's Council on Public Housing Policy	11	7	63.6
Hong Kong People's Association	9	9	100.0
Hong Kong Affairs Society	3	3	100.0

⁺ It is quite common for candidates to claim multiple membership in various groups. Only the major 'pressure groups' are included in the table.

(8) Re-alignment of Political Forces in the D.B.s The newly-elected D.B.s differ from the old D.B.s in the heterogeneity of their membership. Whereas the old D.B.s are dominated by conventional/traditionalistic leaders and 'independent' civic leaders, the new D.B.s have seen an injection of aspiring politicians belonging to politically-relevant groups. As shown in Table 10, even though proportionwise elected candidates from ACs, MACs and rural organizations still hold sway in the D.B.s, their monopoly over influence has already been curtailed.

Table 10. Representation of Politically-Relevant Groups among Elected Candidates⁺

Group	Number of Elected Candidates	% of Elected D.B. Members (N=237)
A. Traditionalistic Forces		
1. Area Committees/ Mutual Aid Committees	92	38.8
2. Original Inhabitants	32	13.5
3. Civic Association	21	8.9
4. Reform Club	17	7.2
B. New Forces		
5. 'Pressure Groups'	50	21.1
6. Electoral Alliances, Political and Quasi- Political Groups	47	19.8

⁺A candidate may belong to more than one politically-relevant group.

The infusion of members with more political ambitions, professional expertise and organizational ability will no doubt lead to more heated debates within the D.B., foster factionalism among the D.B. members and make the D.B. a more unruly, vociferous and even recalcitrant political institution vis-a-vis the government. As the D.B. is dominated by elected members, they naturally enjoy the greatest popular legitimacy and is deemed to be the logical repository of public opinion and feelings in Hong Kong. This newly elevated popular standing of the D.B.s, however, co-exists uncomfortably with the paucity of their executive responsibilities. It is expected that the new D.B.s will clamour for more executive functions and the concomitant financial power. At the

same time, the large discrepancy between popular legitimacy and real power will inevitably propel individual D.B. members to resort to liberal use of verbal attacks on public policies and the government as the means to assert themselves. Competition among individuals and groups within the D.B., coupled with the fact that D.B. members rely unduly upon the mass media to appeal to their constituencies, will undoubtedly exacerbate the acerbity and even irresponsibility of the verbal offensive.

Discussion

In view of the momentous political changes in Hong Kong in the last couple of years, the D.B. election in 1985 takes on meanings which have less to do with the actual political functions of the D.B.s than with its portent for the political future of the place. The D.B. election will provide an acid test of the extent to which the people of Hong Kong are politically mobilized, and if so, in what direction. As electoral politics is going to play a more significant, though not the dominant, role in the future political system of Hong Kong, it is necessary for the aspiring politicians and political groups of whatever convictions to appeal to the people, especially those who bother to vote. From the point of view of Britain, China and the top elites of Hong Kong, the election is also interesting in the sense that it signals the types of forces that are emergent and have to be dealt with if the stability and prosperity of Hong Kong are to be preserved. To say the least, how enthusiastically will the people embrace elections as a crucial part of

their political life will interest all parties concerned.

The D.B. election illustrates a situation where a small part of the sub-elite, activated by the tempting opportunity to gain political power, attempts to obtain a foothold in the political system through election to local advisory bodies. They try hard to mobilize electoral support from a still relatively unmobilized and unorganized mass. There is a discrepancy in the definition of political reality and goals between the activists and the mass. Appeals have to be made to conform to the desires and wishes of the pragmatic, self-oriented, and instrumental electorate, who still tend to personalize politics, emphasize the personal attributes of the candidates and pay heed only to the kinds of material and concrete goods they can be expected to deliver. It is the nature of the electorate that retards the formation and consolidation of the budding political groups, which, for lack of popularly felt acute political crises, find it extremely hard to assert themselves politically. A lowly mobilized and organized electorate further saps the representativeness of the elected D.B. members and exacerbates the divisions and conflicts among them. Under these circumstances, while the activists can still play a part in politically activating the masses, it is more pertinent to say that it is the aspiring politicians that become the captives of mass political passivity.

The involvement of the top elites in the D.B. election is minimal, indicating an avoidance or even abhorrent attitude toward electoral politics. Their hostility to the expansion of political participation will constitute a formidable impediment to political reform and might deter

the development of those political groups which seek the accommodation of the interests of both the privileged and the underprivileged.

Sandwiched between a still largely apathetic mass and the hostile and recalcitrant top elites, there might be a possibility of 'radicalization' among a portion of the politically 'compressed' sub-elites seeking upward mobility through electoral channels. Were this to really happen, it is quite likely that, given the overwhelming power of the Sino-British alliance and the determination of both nations to preserve Hong Kong as a thriving capitalist enclave, Hong Kong will shift to a more authoritarian direction of political development. Consequently, while the D.B. election definitely represents a trend of 'democratization,' it ironically might be a breeding ground for a parallel trend of authoritarianism and de-mobilization.

香港一九八五年的區議會選舉

(中文摘要) 劉兆佳、關信基著

香港在一九八五年三月舉行了第二屆區議會選舉。中國政府「港人治港」的方針，港府推行的政制改革，和本地新興政治團體的崛起，使今次的選舉顯得更為重要。

在今屆選舉中，全港分為19個地區，共145個選區，民選議席增加至237，比一九八二年增加122個。雖然候選人的總數已從一九八二年的401人增為501人，但競爭每個議席的候選人平均只有2.1人，比一九八二年的3.3人為低。

聯盟和合夥競選乃今次選舉的特色之一。但一般的政治團體不單組織甚為鬆散，缺乏足夠的力量來發動大規模的羣眾參與，亦沒有充足的資源支持參選工作。因此，「團體背景」在今屆選舉中的影響力並非如想像中那麼重要。今屆候選人的組成亦有變動。他（她）們都較為年輕，大部份來自專業和管理階層，不過，他（她）們仍非全港最頂尖的精英份子，只屬帶有改良色彩的次精英份子。其次，登記選民的數目已遞增至521,832人，不過實際的投票率只有33.5%，比一九八二年的37.9%還低。可見一九九七問題仍未能改變市民對政治和投票的冷漠態度。

市民對區議會選舉的看法還是相當實際。他們較重視候選人個人的特點，而非他（她）們所屬的組織或關注的問題。一些研究今次選舉的調查資料顯示，市民投票最重要的原因乃履行市民的義務，而不是表達他們對某些團體的支持或對某些問題的意願。為適應選民的要求，很少候選人把全港性的問題，如香港前途和政制改革等，列為競選的政綱，而將注意力集中於地方上的問題。

今屆當選的區議員較為年輕。21至30歲的佔19.4%，而31至40歲的亦佔了36.3%。女性的比例雖然由1982年的3.8%升至現在的7.2%，但仍然偏低。不過，候選人的職業卻是預測選舉勝利的一個可靠和可信的標準。商界和工業界人士繼續佔了大部份的議席，而教育界和專業人士在今屆選舉中都相當突出。競選連任的區議員的成績亦不俗，在120名競選連任的區議員中（其中12名為委任議員），獲選成功率達74.2%。其中委任議員的成功率更達83.3%，比民選議員的73.1%更高。

新界原居民在仍未都市化的地區（如離島、大埔、西貢和元朗）表現較佳，在屯門則較差。事實上，新界的議席已由一九八二年的56個增至現時的92個，可是原居民只能取得71席，比一九八二年的95席還少。當然，個別的原居民領袖能夠利用個人的資歷和現有的機會，成為地區性的領袖。

分區委員會和互委會的候選人在今屆選舉表現較差。他們在東區，深水埗，南區和油蔴地都失去勢力。除了在深水埗或葵涌／青衣區外，他們主要受到政治態度溫和的專業人士的挑戰。在新界，因為原居民勢力衰退的關係，他們在一部份地區，如大埔、屯門、元朗等，取得一些席位。壓力團體在選舉中的成績十分驕人，但總當選人數卻有限。如無其他不可預期的變化，壓力團體的政治影響力當可逐步增長。

總的來說，新一屆區議會的組成比以前更為複雜。過去傳統領袖的支配力量已不復見，分區委員會，互委會和新界組織的勢力亦受到挫折。區議會新成員的政治熱忱，專業才能和組織能力將使區議會的辯論更為激烈，議員之間的分歧更為加劇，甚至可能使區議會變成一個與政府對抗的機構。從今次選舉來看，本港一部份次精英份子銳意進軍區議會，但仍要面對政治冷漠的選民和最頂尖的精英份子對民衆參與的敵視，所以，一部份的次精英份子可能變得較為激進，而可能導致在上的當政者對他們作出抑制。可以說，香港雖然表面上走向政制開放，但權威主義的傾向，卻是不可忽視的。