

Beyond the China Factor: Policy Representation on Economic Issues in the Legislative Council of Hong Kong (1998-2012)

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential of multi-dimensional politics in the Legislative Council (LegCo) of Hong Kong. The conventional understanding of Hong Kong's elite politics is that the issues of democratization and its relationship to Mainland China have absorbed other potential issues. In contrast, this paper argues that other potential issues sometimes appear to be important in Hong Kong politics. To demonstrate this argument, I focus on the parliamentary questions of the LegCo members to the executive branch on the economic issue. The empirical analysis presents that the LegCo members' ideology along the major cleavage has *not* related to parliamentary questioning on economic issue. Rather, the statistical result of the negative binomial regression presents that legislators who are less aligned with the China factor participate more actively in economic policy-making in the legislature. The structure of parliamentary politics is complex, and if we take an earlier legislative process seriously, a limited but considerable amount of diverse policy representation in Hong Kong could be observed.

Keywords

Political cleavage, economic policy-making, parliamentary representation, multi-dimensional politics, Hong Kong

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INTRODUCTION

As featured by the Umbrella Movement in 2014, the main political cleavage in contemporary Hong Kong has been about the issues of democratization and its relationship to Mainland China. It is well known that Hong Kong is largely divided into the two camps along this Beijing/democracy dimension. The pro-Democracy camp supports more democratic values and human right issues as well as the rule of law and autonomy from Beijing. The pro-China camp takes a more conservative attitude towards democratization and emphasizes a better relationship with Beijing. Due to this dominant China factor, other potential issues are considered to be unseen in Hong Kong politics (Siu-Kai & Hsin-Chi 2000; Wong 2015).

In contrast to this conventional understanding, this paper argues that other potential issues sometimes appear to be an important factor to explain parliamentary representation in the Legislative Council (LegCo). For this purpose, I focus on the economic issue representation in the LegCo, as the economic left-right is one of the most salient issue dimensions in the legislatures around the world (Coman 2017; Poole & Rosenthal 2011; Rosas 2005). In particular, I focus on parliamentary questioning to the executive branch as an indicator to examine the potential effect of other latent issues beyond the China factor on individual legislator's behavior.

The empirical analysis presents the compelling evidence that the LegCo members' ideological position along the main Beijing/democracy dimension has *not* been a determinant of the parliamentary activity on economic issue. Rather, it is the LegCo member's issue attention beyond the China factor that has played a key role in explaining participation in parliamentary questions on economic issue. This result suggests that the structure of LegCo politics is more complex than previously discussed and parliamentary representation in Hong Kong sometimes includes multiple issue dimensions.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. First, it provides a brief introduction to Hong Kong's political context. Later, a hypothesis based upon the literature review is presented, following the details about the data and empirical specification. Last, the statistical results and conclusion are provided.

HONG KONG'S POLITICAL CONTEXT

Under the “One Country, Two Systems” principle, Hong Kong is supposed to be an autonomous Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China. For this purpose, the Basic Law of Hong Kong has served as the constitutional document for its autonomous governance with an exception of military defense and foreign affairs, since its handover from the British in 1997.

The executive branch has powerful authorities to implement policies, such as the power to sign bills and budgets, decide on government policies, and appoint or remove holders of public offices and judges (Article 48, the Basic Law). The unicameral LegCo is the counterpart of the executive branch. The LegCo is allowed to enact, amend or repeal laws, examine and approve budgets introduced by the government, approve taxation and public expenditure, raise questions on the work of the government, and debate any issue concerning public interests (Article 73, the Basic Law). The LegCo consists of 60 elected members.¹⁾ The term of office is four years, except for the first LegCo that was set to be two years (1998-2000).

About half of the LegCo members are directly elected by universal suffrage under the closed-list proportional representation system using the largest remainder method and the Hare quota in each of the five Geographic Constituencies (GCs). These direct and competitive elections have been conducted in a free and fair manner with a seven-week campaign period (Ma & Choy 2003). The total number of seats in these GCs is 20 for the 1st LegCo (1998-2000), 24 for the 2nd LegCo (2000-4), and 30 for the 3rd and 4th LegCos (2004-8 and 2008-12).

The remaining half of the LegCo seats is filled by indirect elections in the Functional Constituencies (FCs) and by the Election Committee. These FCs represent various business and professional groups and have small electorates, composed of corporate votes, individual votes, or a mixture of these two types. Many candidates in FCs are elected without a competition. The total number of the FC seats is 30. This FC representation is a legacy of the British colonial government for its legitimacy, and has been maintained under the Chinese sovereignty. In the first and second LegCos, the Election Committee chose 10 and 6 LegCo members, respectively. This practice was abolished after the third LegCo (Kwok 2006; Loh 2006; Zhang 2011).

1) Its size was expanded to 70 in the 5th LegCo (2012-6), which is beyond this paper’s coverage. Since the data set for this paper was constructed when the 4th LegCo was ended, it is not feasible to include the recent LegCo case for this study.

Political parties in Hong Kong are largely divided into the two camps along the pro-democracy and pro-Beijing dimension. The Democratic Party (DP) the flagship parties in the pro-Democracy camp. The Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB) and the Liberal Party are the key political groups in the opposite side. However, neither of these two parties achieved a majority status to control the LegCo and independents and other minor party members filled many LegCo seats (Ma & Choy 2003; Siu-Kai & Hsin-Chi 2002; Wong 2015). Table 1 summarizes the distribution of the LegCo seats.

Table 1. The Distribution of LegCo Seats among Political Parties

		1998-2000	2000-4	2004-8	2008-12
Pro-democracy	DP	13	12	9	9
	Other Parties	5	6	8	12
	Independents	2	4	8	2
Pro-China	DAB	9	10	10	10
	LP	10	8	10	7
	Other Parties	7	7	3	4
	Independents	14	13	12	16
Total		60	60	60	60

In the next section, I will juxtapose the above Hong Kong's unique political system and political spectrum with the existing literature based on parliamentary behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS

Under the British sovereignty, Hong Kong was considered as an exemplary economic case for laissez-faire capitalism (Friedman 1982). As the concept of "positive non-interventionism" demonstrates, Hong Kong's economy was allowed to run mostly by itself with a minimal amount of government interference, which led toward its rapid economic growth (Chau 1993). After the change of sovereignty, however, the government has actively intervened in a variety of aspects of the economy, including economic management and financial regulation (Ip 2015; Latter 2007). The economy in contemporary Hong Kong is not free from politics anymore (Cheung 2000; Wong & Yuen 2012).

The policy-making process is grounded in the political process, and this political process,

in turn, is affected by the key political actors (March & Olsen 1984; Weaver & Rockman 1993). That is, understanding the economic policy outcome requires a comprehensive knowledge of the decision-making of political actors, including the LegCo. In many legislatures around the world, legislators' preference along the economic left-right issue dimension is one of the most important determinants for understanding the pattern of parliamentary policy-making as the economic left-right is one of the most salient issue dimensions in legislatures around the world (Coman 2017; Poole & Rosenthal 2011; Rosas 2005).

In contrast, the existing literature on the LegCo demonstrates that the main dimension is about the issues of democratization and its relationship to Mainland China. Moreover, this dominant Beijing/democracy issue dimension has absorbed other potential issues and hindered representation of diverse social interests, including economic issues (Lo 2010; Ma 2007; Siu-Kai & Hsin-Chi 2002; Wong 2015). Wang and Peng (2016), in particular, demonstrate this marginalization of other issue dimensions by presenting that parliamentary voting is shaped by a strong party unity, which is based on party discipline and ideological homogeneity among same party members. As political parties in Hong Kong are aligned to the main cleavage, this highly cohesive roll call voting behavior implies the dominance of the Beijing/democracy issue in the LegCo.

This paper suggests that we need to take a look at an earlier legislative stage than the final roll call voting decision. The literature on legislative agenda setting provides a valuable theoretical consideration not to conclude that Hong Kong politics is too unique to observe the economic left-right politics. That is, this literature considers the final decision-making in the form of roll call voting is a limited selection of issues and other potential issue dimensions can be observed in earlier legislative processes (Talbert & Potoski 2002; VanDoren 1990). These studies theorize that multi-dimensional ideas are introduced to the parliament and discussed through a number of legislative stages (Baumgartner & Jones 1993; Hall 1996; Kingdon 1984). As the parliamentary procedure is considered as the process of interest aggregation, some proposals are privileged, while others are weeded out (Aldrich 1995; Cox & McCubbins 1993; 2005; Rohde 2010; Shepsle & Weingast 1981; 1987). In return, only a small portion of parliamentary agenda is reached by the roll call voting stage, and therefore we only observe the overwhelming Beijing/democracy dimension.

From this perspective, issue representation beyond the major cleavage can be made by individual LegCo member's strategic participation. Studies of parliamentary behavior assume representatives are individualistic and goal-oriented actors who seek to achieve one or more of goals, such as, reelection, power within the chamber and good public policy (Arnold

1992; Fenno 1973). These political elites only have a finite amount of time, energy, and resources to pursue these goals, and therefore they pay attention to the selected set of issues that may return the greatest accomplishment (Hall 1996; Schiller 1995). Thus, bringing other potential issue dimensions to the LegCo is primarily based on individual political elites' policy agenda.

Parliamentary questioning to the executive branch, in particular, provides a unique opportunity for the legislators who seek to achieve their own goals (Franklin & Norton 1993; Martin & Rozenberg 2014). It serves for a variety of purposes, including monitoring the government, claiming the ownership of some particular issues, and revealing a government-opposition dimension (Russo & Wiberg 2010; Vliegthart & Walgrave 2011). Especially for those who want to raise some other issues beyond the main cleavage in the legislature, this parliamentary questioning is extremely useful to achieve their goals. Any LegCo members are allowed to raise a question to the executive branch with a pre-notice. For each meeting, they may address up to two questions (The Rule of the Procedure of the LegCo). As there are fewer institutional constraints and greater uncertainty in comparison to the roll call voting stage, representatives are able to take advantage of these institutional and informational contexts to bring various issues that they want to address in formal political settings (Alemán *et al.* 2010; Talbert & Potoski 2002).

In this regard, parliamentary questioning can be considered to observe the LegCo members' behavior beyond the China/democracy dimension-based decision-making. This less structured form of parliamentary debate on various questions of economic policy may have a number of different considerations, which are not fully explained by the major political cleavage. This expectation is formulated as follows:

H1: Legislators who are less aligned with the main issue dimension are more likely to participate in parliamentary questioning to the executive branch on economic issues.

DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

For this paper's purpose, I collected the parliamentary questions on the economic policy, made by the individual LegCo members who served in the four legislative sessions from 1998 through 2012. I accessed the Database on Particular Policy Issues, provided by the official LegCo. In this database, I selected issues on commerce and industry, economic

development, and financial affairs as economic policy issues.²⁾ This issue topic selection allowed me to collect 537 parliamentary questions on the economic issues for commerce, industry, economic development, and financial affairs. This economic policy is comprised of about 22%, as the total number of the parliamentary questions in my data set is 2,466.

As my hypothesis is about individual LegCo member's active participation of parliamentary activity, I count the number of parliamentary questions on economic policy issues made by each individual LegCo member in each legislative session. This dependent variable ranges from zero through 50. The total number of observations, i.e. the LegCo members who served in the four LegCo sessions in my data set is 243, and the 135 legislators have a record of parliamentary questioning on economic policy. There are the 108 observations that the value is zero, meaning as they are inactive legislators. Among the active LegCo members, the median and mean values are 2 and 3.978, respectively. Including those inactive legislators, the median and mean values are 1 and 2.21, respectively.

The main explanatory variable is the issue attention beyond the China/democracy dimension. To measure this variable, I rely on the one-dimensional W-NOMINATE model (Poole 2006), which is the classical scaling technique to measure individual legislator's position in the main dimension. Applying the one-dimensional W-NOMINATE model to the LegCo member's roll call voting information provides two measures. One is each member's position on the pro-democracy vs. pro-Beijing dimension. The other is its degree of each LegCo member's alignment to the main dimension. This latter diagnostic statistics, the Geometric Mean Probability (GMP) score, is useful for constructing the main independent variable of issue attention. The GMP score, ranging from zero to one, measures the extent to which each member's roll call voting behavior is aligned to the main dimension (Jang 2016).

To construct the explanatory variable of issue attention beyond the main cleavage, I subtract the GMP score from one. This is done for denoting that a higher value of issue attention variable means that a LegCo member is more salient to other potential issues. This issue attention variable theoretically ranges from zero through one, and in my data, it ranges from .039 through .68, while its mean and median is .16 and .13, respectively.

Other control variables are also considered. The ideology variable captures the LegCo member's political viewpoint on major political cleavage of the Beijing/democracy issues.

2) Other issues in this database include administration of justice and legal services, commerce and industry, constitutional affairs, development, education, environmental affairs, food safety and environmental hygiene, health services, home affairs, housing, information technology and broadcasting, manpower, public service, security, transport, and welfare services.

This variable varies from -1 through 1, and higher values denote that the member is more supportive to the executive and Mainland China. Regarding the type of elections, I prepare two binary variables. The FC variable is coded 1 if the LegCo member is elected in the Functional Constituencies (FCs) and 0 for otherwise. The EC variable is coded in a same manner whether the legislator is elected in the Election Committee or not. The baseline to be compared is the LegCo members who are elected directly in Geographical Constituencies.

I also prepared two binary variables named as the DP and the DAB, indicating that the LegCo member is affiliated with one of the two major political parties. In addition, one dummy variable is used to capture whether the LegCo member is independent or not. The baseline for these variables is the legislators from minor political parties. Several other control variables are also included, such as gender, age, seniority, and electoral competitiveness as well as a series of dummy variables for legislative session.

I employed the negative binomial model to estimate effect sizes of the independent variables on the count outcome. Given that I want to examine whether the LegCo members who are less aligned to the main political cleavage are more likely to raise questions than other representatives, I expect that the estimated coefficient of the issue attention variable should be negative and statistically significant.

RESULTS

Table 2 summarizes the result of the negative binomial model on the frequencies of parliamentary questioning on economic policy. The key finding is that the estimated coefficient of the issue attention variable is positive and statistically significant. This suggests that the LegCo members who are less aligned to the main dimension are more active in parliamentary questioning on economic issues than other deputies. Moreover, it turns out that the ideological variable for the Beijing/democracy dimension does not matter for the variance of the frequency of the parliamentary questioning. That is, it is not always the main political cleavage that affects the LegCo members' parliamentary activities.

Table 2 also presents that other potential factors in contemporary Hong Kong politics do not have a meaningful explanatory power on the dependent variable. First, the type of election variable does not have statistically significant influence on the outcome variable. Second, there is no meaningful difference among the LegCo members who are affiliated with one of the two main parties, any minor party members, or independents.

Table 2. Participation of Parliamentary Questions on Economic Policy

	DV: # of Questions
Issue Attention	2.860** (1.365)
Ideology	0.289 (0.224)
FC	-0.0554 (0.328)
EC	0.587 (0.440)
DP	0.486 (0.385)
DAB	-0.191 (0.308)
Independents	-0.544* (0.310)
2 nd Session	1.966*** (0.342)
3 rd Session	3.129*** (0.393)
4 th Session	3.685*** (0.431)
Age	-0.0498** (0.0204)
Gender	0.00748 (0.313)
Seniority	-0.178 (0.119)
Contested	-0.302 (0.308)
Constant	0.866 (1.343)
Observations	236

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

In order to more fully understand the nature of parliamentary questioning on economic issues, I collapse those questions into the three sub-categories, including commerce and industry, economic development, and financial affairs. There are 118 questions on commerce and industry issue, 182 questions on economic development issue, and 237 questions on the financial affairs issues. Then I calculate the numbers of parliamentary questions on these three sub-economic issues made by the individual LegCo members, and then run the same count model on the three outcome variables.

Table 3. Participation of Parliamentary Questions on Sub-economic Issues

	(1) Commerce & Industry	(2) Economic Development	(3) Financial Affairs
Issue Attention	0.636 (1.677)	5.453** (2.259)	3.033** (1.541)
Ideology	0.388 (0.372)	0.516 (0.315)	0.0863 (0.264)
FC	1.104** (0.502)	-0.479 (0.411)	-0.342 (0.386)
EC	1.315* (0.743)	-0.891 (1.019)	0.995* (0.540)
DP	0.758 (0.771)	0.603 (0.639)	0.337 (0.509)
DAB	0.435 (0.434)	-0.575 (0.406)	-0.432 (0.322)
Independents	-0.188 (0.450)	-1.272*** (0.483)	-0.198 (0.331)
2 nd Session	2.635*** (0.620)	2.142*** (0.625)	1.348*** (0.436)
3 rd Session	2.674*** (0.672)	3.963*** (0.586)	2.826*** (0.575)
4 th Session	3.483*** (0.719)	3.955*** (0.618)	3.800*** (0.564)
Age	-0.00243 (0.0312)	-0.0636** (0.0274)	-0.0694*** (0.0200)
Gender	-0.479 (0.418)	0.0665 (0.368)	0.0904 (0.419)
Seniority	-0.356 (0.218)	-0.281* (0.156)	-0.0614 (0.133)

Contested	-0.507 (0.369)	-0.188 (0.504)	-0.111 (0.372)
Constant	-2.452* (1.444)	0.0918 (1.598)	0.694 (1.647)
Observations	236	236	236

As Table 3 shows, the result is basically similar with Table 2. First, the estimated coefficients of the ideological variable are consistently statistically insignificant. This result echoes the previous finding that the main political cleavage is not a determinant of the LegCo member's behavior on economic issues. Second, except for the commerce and industry issue, the estimated coefficients of the issue attention variable are positive and statistically significant, similar to the one in the Table 2.

Regarding the commerce and industry issue, instead of the issue attention variable, the FC variable denoting that the members elected in Functional Constituencies becomes a meaningful factor to capture the variance of the outcome variable. This result provides an evidence of the electoral connection between the FC legislators and their small constituencies representing a variety of interests of commerce and industry fields. Except for this FC variable on the commerce and industry issue model as well as the independent LegCo member's variable on the economic development model, several parties and electoral rules variables do not provide a significant difference to explain the LegCo member's parliamentary question on the three economic issues.

CONCLUSION

In an earlier literature, overlapped with the handover period, several studies discussed about the potential of multi-dimensional politics in Hong Kong (Baum 2000; Li 2000; Ma 2007). They admitted that the major political cleavage is about the China factor, but they also share a common insight that the additional dimension may exist and its nature would be about the economy. Due to the dominance of the China factor, however, this possibility of higher-order dimension has been neglected in the recent literature, which raises concerns of the quality of parliamentary representation as incorporating voters' policy concerns to formal agenda in the legislature (Miller & Stokes 1963; Miller 1999; Powell 2004).

In contrast to the conventional gloomy understanding of unidimensional Hong Kong

politics, this paper presents that the main Beijing/democracy dimension is not always *the* key factor. By utilizing the comprehensive data set of parliamentary questions on economic issues, this paper finds that the legislator's issue attention beyond the China factor has been the main determinant of addressing economic issues to the LegCo. In other words, those who are less aligned to the main cleavage are more influential on the key elements of the economic policy-making process in parliament. This empirical finding implies that Hong Kong politics is more complex than previously described and suggests that a considerable amount of policy representation has been made in the LegCo.

In order to understand this policy representation in the LegCo, it is required to track how multiple issues are introduced and evolved through the parliamentary procedure with a comprehensive policy agenda. While the LegCo is the formal institution in Hong Kong that represents the people by deliberating various societal issues as political agenda, little has been done in this direction. This paper addresses only a single form of parliamentary activity on one specific issue area, which provides a stepping stone for developing scholarly understanding of policy representation across multiple issue dimensions in the LegCo.

It seems that Hong Kong politics has become more polarized in these days, demonstrated by the rise of localism movement with earning close to 20 percent of the vote share in the 2016 LegCo election (Kaeding 2017). Nevertheless, economy matters for Hong Kong voters, which requires a fair amount of policy representation beyond the China factor. This paper has demonstrated that if we take an earlier legislative process seriously, we may observe multi-dimensional issue politics in Hong Kong.

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