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Political Parties and Party Systems

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**The University of Hong Kong
Department of Politics and Public Administration**

**2014-2015 2nd Semester Session 2B
POLI1003 Making Sense of Politics**

Research Argumentative Essay

Topic: Why are political parties important for a democratic society? What are the different political consequences of one party system, two-party system and multi-party system?

Paper submitted by:

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1. Introduction

Political parties play an important role in supporting a democratic institution. Even in authoritarian countries, dictators need political parties to consolidate power and maintain governance. Without them, a country could not function healthily. However, there is growing discontent against “partisan politics” in some parts of the world. Similarly, some in Hong Kong do not want the Chief Executive to be a party member in the future.

In light of the global trends and local debates, the first part of this paper argues that political parties have practical importance¹ in operating and stabilising a democratic system, and they facilitate political bargaining which could effectively balance the interests of citizens². Discontent itself simply does not disregard the importance of the parties³.

The second part argues for a multi-party system through comparing the political consequences of it with one party and two-party systems in terms of the quality⁴ and the effectiveness⁵ of democracy.

¹ Discussed under subheading 2.1

² Discussed under subheading 2.2

³ Discussed under subheading 2.3

⁴ Discussed under subheading 3.1 and 3.2

⁵ Discussed under subheading 3.3

2. Importance of political parties

2.1 Fundamental: Operative and stabilising functions

Past researches and publications have focused heavily on how political parties help *operate* and *stabilise* the democratic machine in order to show their importance in bringing the democratic ideal into practice. In *Political Science: An Introduction*⁶, the authors provide a summary of the parties' operative functions: first, they act as a bridge between people and the government and help integrate citizens into the political system⁷ such that a governing platform *of* the people could be formed; second, they inform citizens about politics through socialization and mobilization of voters⁸ to ensure that the decisions are made *by* the people; third, they have the capacity (including a large pool of political talents, intellectual resources and cross-sectors relationships) to organize governments and set policies⁹ so as to work *for* the people's quality of life. All these important functions correspond to Lincoln's core principles of a democratic society, that there should be a government *of, by* and *for* the people.¹⁰ The same logic applies to the legislative branch of a country.

Further, Peter Burnell have pointed out two stabilising functions of the parties in *Building Better Democracies*¹¹. First, they hold politicians accountable for their performance through in-party and cross-party competitions¹². One example is that presidential candidates in the United States are required to go through popular primary elections of their own party before competing with the other party. Second, the parties offer clear ideological choices for the electorate¹³ which are in my view different from non-partisan competitions where candidates' stances might fluctuate and become unpredictable. These two functions reinforce people's confidence on the democratic system and provide opportunities for change. Thus the system would not collapse easily

⁶ Roskin, Michael G. (2008) *Political Science: An Introduction* 10th Ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, pp.195-201

⁷ See n 6 above pp. 196-197

⁸ See n 6 above pp. 197

⁹ See n 6 above pp.197-201

¹⁰ Lincoln, A. (1863). *The Gettysburg Address*

¹¹ Burnell P. (2004) *Building Better Democracies – Why political parties matter*. Westminster Foundation for Democracy pp. 5-6 (Retrieved from: http://www.wfd.org/upload/docs/WFDBBD5_noprice.pdf)

¹² See n 11 above

¹³ See n 11 above

even if there is wide-spread temporary dissatisfaction towards the politicians, ultimately maintaining social and political stability.

2.2 Intermediate: Productive value of collective bargaining

Apart from putting the democratic theories into practice, political parties also make the democratic machine *useful* and *productive* in the sense that they facilitate collective political bargaining and compromise such that the interests of citizens could be effectively balanced. *Political Science*¹⁴ has mentioned that parties could aggregate interests of different people and foster cooperation among likeminded individuals. This in turn unite different stakeholders and build strong forces with higher bargaining power.

For instance, trade unions workers in UK united to form the Labour Party to counter the domination of the richer Conservative Party (Tories). Labour Party's landslide victory in 1945 election have forced the Tories to accept the building of welfare state and expansion of public sector after they regained power in 1951¹⁵, contrary to their principal belief of small government. It is evident that the "post-war consensus" were successful in providing security for working population and boosting post-war recovery¹⁶. Without the help of a political party (in this case the Labour Party), the post-war labour movement might not be able to turn UK into a welfare state due to opposition of the nobles and entrepreneurs. Another remarkable case is the rise of Eurosceptic parties in Europe over the past few years, which have effectively forced large parties to reflect the problems caused by European integration. For example, the victory of UKIP in European Parliamentary elections¹⁷ and local elections has influenced the governing Tories to promise for a "Brexit" referendum and more restrictions on immigration¹⁸.

It could be observed from the above examples that political parties do have *productive* value as they could bring in new ideas, arouse social reactions and changes,

¹⁴ See n 6 above pp. 196

¹⁵ Hickson K (2004). The Postwar Consensus Revisited. *The Political Quarterly*. 75: 142–154. p.147

¹⁶ Heyck T.W., Veldman M (2015). *The Peoples of the British Isles* p.224 (retrieved from: http://lyceumbooks.com/pdf/PeoplesBritishIslesIII_Chapter_11.pdf)

¹⁷ Wintour P., Watt N. (2014 May 26). Ukip Wins European elections with ease to set off political earthquake. *The Guardian*. (retrieved from: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/may/26/ukip-european-elections-political-earthquake>)

¹⁸ Dominiczak P., Holehouse M., Hope C. (2014 Oct 10). David Cameron to unveil EU immigration crackdown following Ukip victory. *The Telegraph*. (retrieved from: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/11155570/David-Cameron-to-unveil-EU-immigration-crackdown-following-Ukip-victory.html>)

and finally break the status quo to meet the fast-changing socio-economic conditions. Non-partisan politics surely could not achieve this because of relatively scattered forces and resources.

2.3 The myth: Demise of political parties?

Some claim that there are currently more voters who identify themselves as politically “independent” which indicates a declining importance of political parties¹⁹, but it is only a myth. It is true that people are sick with pointless political tensions because the parties often produce stalemates at the expense of citizens’ general welfare. According to the Gallup poll, 42% of the voters in US consider themselves as independent from political affiliations in 2014 due to the bad reputation of the parties²⁰. Yet it does not follow that they will opt for non-partisan politicians because in my view what they mean by being “independent” is that they would not blindly cling to specific party ideologies, but make judgements and decisions according to their feeling as to which party is best appealing to them under different socio-economic environments over time. Also, it is common sense that one would prefer a temporary battle between Republicans and Democrats rather than long-lasting personal negotiations in a congress wholly consist of “independents” on the issue of whether the debt-ceiling should be raised. Mere dissatisfaction does not convert to total abandonment. Thus the worsening public image of political parties does not disregard their importance mentioned above.

¹⁹ (2010 Oct 21) The party’s (largely) over. *The Economist* (retrieved from: <http://www.economist.com/node/17306082>)

²⁰ Abramowitz A. (2014 Jan 8). The Partisans in the Closet. *Politico Magazine* (retrieved from: <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/01/independent-voters-partisans-in-the-closet-101931.html#.VS-02fmUfsE>)

3. Political consequences of one-party, two-party and multi-party systems

3.1 Quality

Different party systems have different political effects to the quality of democracy. As stated by Lijphart, quality of democracy refers to “the degree to which a system meets such democratic norms as representativeness, accountability, equality and participation”²¹, and I shall focus on accountability and participation. In general, a one-party system has weaker accountability and a less inclusive platform for political participation. Take the example of Japan, the dominating Liberal Democratic Party would normally reshuffle the cabinet or replace the prime minister when there are unpopular governments in order to regain party-ratings and shift the blame towards individual politicians.²² Replaced officials are often not expelled from the party and they still have considerable influence in decision-making procedures. This lack of “penalty” leads to lower sense of responsibility. Moreover, potential political talents having different rationales (i.e. socialists in Japan) might fail to get into power by joining disadvantaged small parties, deterring active political participation of the opposition. For two-party systems, threatening to vote the other party or other candidates of the same party is always a powerful weapon in keeping incumbent politicians honest since they are totally kept out of power if they are ejected from the government or the parliament. It has a higher incentive for people in the opposition to engage in political participation. As for multi-party systems, not only politicians are checked by voters, they are also monitored by all governing parties since their power ultimately rest on consensus and it is a must to cooperate. If politicians have unacceptable wrongdoings, they could be isolated by many parties in the future (i.e. Mr Berlusconi in Italy)²³. This double-checking mechanism thus increase the accountability. It also has the most flexible platform for political participation, since people have more opportunities to reach the governmental core regardless of which party they join or vote so long as the coalition is formed by many parties.

²¹ Lijphart A. (1996) Constitutional Choices for New Democracies. Diamond and Plattner, eds. *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*. John Hopkins University Press, pp. 165

²² Burden B.C. (2008). *Economic accountability and strategic calibration: The case of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party* p.18 (Retrieved from: <https://faculty.polisci.wisc.edu/bcburden/ldp.pdf>)

²³ Yardley J. (2013 Nov 27) Berlusconi Expelled From Senate in Italy After 2 Decades In Government. *The New York Times* (Retrieved from: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/28/world/europe/berlusconi-expelled-from-senate-in-italy.html?_r=0)

3.2 Capacity for change

In my opinion, the *capacity for change* is also an important element in assessing the effects of different systems on the quality of a particular democratic system. For me, multi-party system undoubtedly has the highest capacity. One-party and two-party systems have the possibility of becoming overly rigid or uncertain respectively, failing to respond to social changes. Politicians under one-party system are always required to act in accordance to the only and “sacred” party manifesto or established governing principles (i.e. the right-leaning LDP). Whereas in two-party systems, party polarization would result in too radical changes²⁴ which might damage social institutions. For instance many people would lose the chance to receive benefits of healthcare insurance if the “Obamacare” policy is repealed by Republicans²⁵. Yet for multi-party systems, things are more stable. Governments are formed and led by the largest winning party in elections, and it is customary for the party to reserve some political power to the defeated and small parties in order to secure a safe transition as well as allowing changes of policy orientations. For instance the incumbent right wing Christian Democratic Union in Germany has formed a “grand coalition” with the opposition parties, agreeing to adopt some left-wing initiatives such as raising the minimum wage²⁶. As a whole, multi-party systems have higher capacity for countries to change as compared to one-party and two-party systems which is conducive to national development.

²⁴ See n 21 above pp. 172

²⁵ Rhodan M. (2015 Mar 17) Republicans to Renew Call For Obamacare Repeal in 2016 Budget. *Time Magazine* (Retrieved from: <http://time.com/3747320/republicans-obamacare-repeal-budget/>)

²⁶ (2013 Dec 16) ‘Grand coalition’ returns to Germany. *Deutsche Welle* (Retrieved from: <http://www.dw.de/grand-coalition-returns-to-germany/a-17299248>)

3.3 Effectiveness

Apart from the quality of democracy, the three mentioned party systems also have contrasting consequences towards the effectiveness of democracy. Lijphart has pointed out that the effectiveness of democratic systems refers to “the ability to maintain unity and peace in divided society” as well as having a “firm leadership” which could carry out effective policies²⁷. It is undeniable that both one-party and two-party systems could make fast and efficient decisions. But the ability of attaining strong leadership in two-party systems highly depends on whether both the legislative and executive branches are in hands of one particular political party. In other words, the risk of having political obstacles and social divisions in two-party systems is higher. One notable example is the US budget battle between the Republican legislature and the Democratic executive in 2013 which has led to a shutdown of federal government²⁸. In a multi-party system, government and the legislature usually make decisions through an issue-by-issue approach where *negotiation* of principles between parties precedes *formulation* of concrete plans, different from a two-party system where *formulation* precedes *negotiation*. The room for compromise is therefore larger. Thus a multi-party system is favourable to the formation of strong and stable coalitions which could ensure smooth policy implementation and ease social frictions.

²⁷ See n 21 above pp.166

²⁸ (2013 Oct 1) US begins government shutdown as budget deadline passes. *BBC News* (retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-24343698>)

4. Conclusion and Implications

If democracy is a machine, then political parties are the operators and engineers of it who do maintenance works and put efforts in making it productive. They safeguard the liberal foundations of the society such as freedom of speech and right to own property, also fight for the interests of the general public and work to find the optimal point. It must be stressed that the increasing discontent against the parties does not reduce the importance of the political parties. Thus it is crucial to develop mature and competent political parties if a country or city is undergoing a fast pace of democratization. This could be done by devoting more resources to intellectual training and absorbing foreign experiences. A thorough “Party Legislation” is also essential as it could establish a framework guiding the conduct of political parties. In addition, it is evident that multi-party system is preferable for new democracies since it has a higher quality and better effectiveness. Thus the Anglo-American model should not be treated as overwhelmingly attractive for developing democracies. It might be incompatible and bring chaos to them. At the end, political parties should be allowed to participate in the executive branch of a country so as to ensure that the democratic ideal works.