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## Pathways into Political Party Membership:Case Studies of Hong Kong Youth

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## Pathways into Political Party Membership: Case Studies of Hong Kong Youth

### Abstract

This article explores and conceptualizes the individual mobilization processes into political party membership of a sample of young people in Hong Kong, a semi-autonomous and semi-democratic region under Chinese sovereignty where political parties are relatively underdeveloped. Based on life history interviews with 23 young party members, I found that the mobilization of young people into party membership comprises three different steps. I also found that not all young party members went through the same order of steps. In total, three orders of steps are identified, which create three different paths into party membership. Lastly, this article found that each mobilization path is shaped by a specific set of macro-, meso-, and individual level influences

### Keywords

Party Membership, Young People, Life History, Hong Kong, Mobilization

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## Pathways into Political Party Membership: Case Studies of Hong Kong Youth

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*This article explores and conceptualizes the individual mobilization processes into political party membership of a sample of young people in Hong Kong, a semi-autonomous and semi-democratic region under Chinese sovereignty where political parties are relatively underdeveloped. Based on life history interviews with 23 young party members, I found that the mobilization of young people into party membership comprises three different steps. I also found that not all young party members went through the same order of steps. In total, three orders of steps are identified, which create three different paths into party membership. Lastly, this article found that each mobilization path is shaped by a specific set of macro-, meso-, and individual level influences. Keywords: Party Membership, Young People, Life History, Hong Kong, Mobilization*

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Ample evidence from recent years show that party membership in many Western democracies have shrunk substantially and this decline is particularly evident in the younger generations (van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2011; van Biezen & Poguntke, 2014). Young people in many Western democracies are increasingly turning away from institutional forms of political participation such as voting and tending to favor extra-institutional forms of activism such as protests, single-issue movements, and online activism (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Norris, 2003; Quintelier, 2007). This phenomenon has stimulated scholars to investigate the reasons behind the decline of party membership (Scarrow, 2007; Seyd & Whiteley, 2004; van Biezen & Poguntke, 2014) and how and why some young people still choose to join and engage in political parties (Bruter & Harrison, 2009; Cross & Young, 2008a; 2008b).

The reluctance of the young people to join political parties also exists in non-Western democracies and semi-democratic regimes such as Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong (Choy, 1999; Lin, 2013; Ma, 2007; Tan, 2010). However, limited research has been conducted in these contexts. Moreover, most literature on party membership focuses on finding the contextual *factors* leading individuals to join political parties but neglects the *processes* through which individuals are mobilized into party membership and how the factors are temporally woven together to produce the outcome (Harley et al., 2009).

This paper contributes to bridging these research gaps by exploring and conceptualizing the processes through which a sample of young people came to join political parties in Hong Kong, which is a semi-democratic and semi-autonomous regime under Chinese sovereignty where political parties are relatively underdeveloped and non-institutionalized (Lam, 2010; Lau & Kuan, 2002). Specifically, I use life history method (Denzin, 1989; Roberts, 2002) to examine the processes that resulted in the decision of 23 young people in Hong Kong to join political parties and to identify the important contextual and individual factors at play in the processes.

It was found that the mobilization of young people into party membership is a three-step process shaped by a variety of macro- and meso-level contextual factors as well as the individual agency of the young people. The different configurations and interactions of the

factors lead young people to go through the steps in three different orders, which in turn create three paths into party membership.

This paper is divided into six sections. The first section is the background, which gives a brief description of the development of political parties and party membership in Hong Kong. The second section reviews a host of influences explaining individual participation in political parties and explains why we should go beyond the search for factors and shift the focus to the processes through which people are mobilized into parties. The third section describes the methodology of the study. The fourth section presents the results. It first presents the steps and paths into party membership identified from the interview data, and then describes the contextual and individual factors at play in the mobilization processes. The fifth section discusses the theoretical implications of the results and presents the limitations of the study. The last section is the conclusion.

This paper is based on my doctoral research at the Hong Kong Institute of Education which started in June 2010 and completed in September 2014. I chose this topic because I support the view that strengthening of political parties is beneficial to the good governance and democratization of Hong Kong (Ma, 2007). To this end, political parties need to recruit more new blood to rejuvenate them. Therefore, we need to know more about the processes and factors which lead young people to join political parties.

## **Background**

Hong Kong was a British colony from 1842 to 1997 and was handed over to the People's Republic of China in 1997 as a semi-autonomous special administrative region. Party politics have a short history in Hong Kong. Local parties did not emerge until late 1980s when the city entered the decolonization period. In 2014, 17 parties occupy the 70 seats in the city's legislature, the Legislative Council (LegCo). Those parties can be roughly divided into two rival coalitions, namely the pro-democracy and pro-Beijing camps. The former advocates more civil liberties and quicker democratization, whereas the latter stresses political stability and the maintenance of good relations with the Chinese central government (Ma, 2012).

Hong Kong is not a full democracy but a "liberal authoritarian" hybrid regime (Diamond, 2002; Wigell, 2008). The people there enjoy civil liberties comparable to many Western democracies (Ma, 2010), but the political institutions are only partially democratic, posing severe constraints to party development. For example, the Chief Executive (head of government) is neither democratically elected nor allowed to have party affiliation, which prevents any party from governing the city. Only half of the LegCo members are elected through universal suffrage, whereas the other half is returned from Functional Constituencies (FCs), who mainly represent narrow occupational and business interests. Parties are difficult to penetrate as most FCs have very small electorates (Ma, 2009).

Perhaps because of the limited role of parties in the political system, Hong Kong parties generally have low public trust (Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, 2013; Sing, 2004) and party membership. Hong Kong has about 26,000 party members in 2013 and its party membership/electorate ratio (M/E) is only 0.74, which is lower than many European democracies (van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2011). Most parties have less than 1,000 members, except for the pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB), which has about 20,000 members.

The young people in Hong Kong share a similar attitude towards political parties with the general population and are not very interested in joining parties. The 2009 International Civic and Citizenship Study of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, which surveyed more than 140,000 14-year old students from 38

societies, found that only 15.2% respondents in Hong Kong claimed they would certainly or probably join a party when they become adults, which ranks among the bottom (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010). Moreover, politically active youth are now reported to be more interested in participating in social movements or advocacy organizations rather than political parties (Ma, 2007; Sham & Shen, 2007).

Nonetheless, a small number of young people are still joining parties. Some parties have even successfully recruited more young members in recent years (Canzheng xinyidai, 2010). Young members also account for a significant proportion of party memberships. Table 1 shows that, except for the DAB and Liberal Party, young members account for 17% to 40% of party memberships, which is relatively high compared with some Western democracies (Cross & Young, 2004; Kenig, Philipov, & Rahat, 2013; Pedersen et al., 2004). However, the absolute number of young party members is still very small. The total number of young party members in Hong Kong aged 30 or below was estimated to not exceed 3,000 in 2013. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore how and why some young people come to the decision to join political parties.

**Table 1.** Youth Membership of Major Political Parties in Hong Kong

Political Party	Year	Total party membership	Number of young member (Age)	Young members as percentage of total membership
Pro-democracy camp				
Democratic Party	2013	769	200 (18-35)	26.0%
Civic Party	2013	500	100 (18-30)	20.0%
Labour Party	2013	200	67 (18-30)	33.3%
LSD	2013	157	63 (18-30)	40.1%
ADPL	2013	97	16 (18-30)	16.5%
Pro-Beijing camp				
DAB	2011	20,000	1,408 (18-35)	7.0%
Liberal Party	2013	344	36 (18-35)	10.5%
New People's Party	2013	514	105 (18-30)	20.4%

*Note.* The figures are collected from party official websites and personal communications with party officials. LSD = League of Social Democrats. ADPL = Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood. DAB = Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong.

## Literature Review

The political science literature has suggested a range of contextual factors to explain individual participation in political parties. The first group of factors are the macro political contexts such as political institutions and political culture (Linek & Pecháček, 2007; Morales, 2009; Norris, 2002; Scarrow, 2007; Seyd & Whiteley, 2004). Macro-level contexts are the primary factors used by Hong Kong political scientists to explain the low party membership in Hong Kong (Choy, 1999; Lam, 2010; Lau & Kuan, 2002; Ma, 2007; Sing, 2004). In terms of political institutions, they argue that the political system of Hong Kong is very unfavorable to party development, which discourages people with political ambition from joining parties. In terms of mass political attitudes, they point to the mistrust or low level of support among Hong Kong people towards political parties (Lam, 2010; Lau & Kuan, 2002; Sing, 2004).

Although they have successfully pointed out those macro-contexts that are unfavorable to party membership, they have neglected those which may be favorable. For example, the partially democratic hybrid regime of Hong Kong creates perennial legitimacy problem for the government (Ma, 2008; Sing, 2006), which provides the pro-democracy parties with the momentum to mobilize popular support (Case, 2008). The tolerance of civil

liberty also allows the pro-democracy parties to organize democratic movements and campaigns which may inspire young people to join them.

The political science literature also suggests a range of meso-level factors to explain party membership. They include political parties themselves and a range of political socialization agents such as family, media, educational institutions, voluntary organizations, and peers. In terms of political party, the literature focuses on how parties create different kinds of incentives to recruit new members (Clark & Wilson, 1961; Seyd & Whiteley, 1992; Whiteley & Seyd, 2002; Whiteley, Seyd, & Billingham, 2006). In terms of family, Cross and Young (2008a) found that having a party member parent is an important factor influencing the decision of politically active youth to join a party. Similarly, on the basis of in-depth interviews with young party members in six European countries, Bruter and Harrison (2009) found that many are inspired by their parents to join a party.

Mass media is also argued by some studies as influential. Cross and Young (2008a) found that news exposure in media such as television, newspaper, and the Internet has slightly increased the likelihood of joining a party. Educational institutions such as schools and universities are another factor suggested by the literature. For example, Cross and Young (2008a) found that taking a course in government or politics in high school or university increases the likelihood of joining a party. Persson (2014) found that university education increases individual likelihood of joining parties as it brings people into a higher status social network, which in turn makes them easier to be recruited by political parties.

In addition, voluntary organizations may contribute to individual participation in political parties. Voluntary groups such as religious and youth organizations have also long been regarded as an important socialization agent (Frisco, Muller, & Dodson, 2004; McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Quintelier, 2008). Bruter and Harrison (2009) found that some young party members attributed their party membership to the influence of trade unions and pressure groups. Desrues and Kirhlani (2013) found that participation in scouts and trade unions connected with the parties helped young people to become party members.

Apart from contextual factors, the more recent literature on political socialization suggests that the individual agency of young people has to be taken into account when explaining youth political engagement as young people are *active agents* who are able to interact with the contexts to construct their own political realities. They are able to critically interpret the political messages they received before taking their political actions (Amnå, Ekström, Kerr, & Starrin, 2009; Leung, 2006).

In short, the paragraphs above suggest that party membership is shaped by a broad range of contextual and individual factors. I recognize their importance but argue that a more thorough understanding of youth participation in parties can be achieved if we go beyond the search for factors and shift the attention to the *process* through which young people are mobilized into political parties. This process-based explanation has become more popular among the social sciences in recent years (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2007; Hall, 2008). It focuses on understanding the mechanism or process through which an outcome is produced (Becker, 1963; Gerring, 2007; Hall, 2008; Pierson, 2000). However, it does not mean that this approach ignores the importance of factors. It just puts the focus on how the factors are temporally woven together to produce the outcome (Hall, 2008; Harley et al., 2009).

This approach has been widely used to examine how people become social movement activists (Bosi & Della Porta, 2012; Klandermans & Mayer, 2006; Munson, 2008). For example, Munson (2008)'s study of pro-life activists found that becoming a pro-life activist is a process involving four distinct steps. Some studies even found that there are more than one path into social movement activism (Bosi & Della Porta, 2012; Linden & Klandermans, 2007; Viterna, 2007). Despite its popularity in social movement studies, this approach is

rarely used in the study of party membership, which is dominated by large-scale surveys and statistical analysis of the correlation of variables (Goodwin, 2010).

I make use of this approach to explore how a sample of Hong Kong young people became party members because it has the potential to offer us a more thorough understanding of youth party membership. First, it can capture the dynamic, gradual, and processual nature of political activism (Horgan, 2008; Klandermans & Mayer, 2006; Munson, 2008; Quéniart, 2008). As Munson (2008) said, “mobilization into activism is a dynamic process, not a singular event” (p. 4). Second, shifting the focus to mobilization processes allows us to better grasp how the factors interact and weave together (Bosi & Della Porta, 2012). Third, there may be more than one path into party membership because not all mobilization processes are shaped by the same set of factors and not every factor is important at the same time for every person (Viterna, 2007). Shifting our focus to the mobilization process allows us to examine whether multiple paths exist and what configurations of factors are behind those paths.

### Method

Life history was used as the research method of this study. It is a biographical method rooted in the Chicago School of Sociology and the tradition of symbolic interactionism (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Merrill & West, 2009; Roberts, 2002). It uses conversations or in-depth interviews to collect personal life stories that are subsequently interpreted and reported by the researcher (Denzin, 1989; Roberts, 2002). Life history is an ideal method to explore the processes that lead people to become politically active because it can trace the sequence of events that a person has experienced (Blee, 2002; Klandermans & Mayer, 2006; Munson, 2008). As argued by Blee (2002) in her study of activists in racist groups, “life histories string together life events in sequences, suggesting how people understand the patterning of their political and personal lives. These patterns help us untangle the causes and effects of political affiliation” (p. 202). Therefore, it is considered an appropriate method to address the research objective of this study, which is to explore the individual mobilization process of a sample of young party members.

Purposive sampling was used to select the participants of this study. The main criteria of selecting the samples are that all participants should be party members and aged between 18 and 29. I also diversified the sample in terms of party affiliation, organizational position, and gender (Blee & Taylor, 2002; Della Porta, 1992). In terms of party affiliation, I selected party members from both political camps in Hong Kong, namely the pro-democracy and the pro-Beijing camps (Ma, 2007). Civic Party (CP), Democratic Party (DP), and League of Social Democrats (LSD) were selected from the pro-democracy camp and DAB and New People's Party (NPP) from the pro-Beijing camp. In terms of organizational position, I selected participants from different levels of the party organization such as central and branch executive, youth wing, and rank-and-file members. I also tried including at least one female member from each selected party as females are usually underrepresented in political parties (Scarrow & Gezgor, 2010).

Cold-calling, snowballing, my own social networks, and social media such as Facebook were used to recruit the participants. Eventually four to six participants were recruited from each selected party, making the sample size to 23 (Table 2). Albeit small, the sample is comparable in size with many similar life history studies on political activists (Braungart & Braungart, 1994; Goodwin, 2010; Linden & Klandermans, 2007; Sawyer, 2005; Searle-Chatterjee, 1999). The average age of the participants was 25.8. Except a DAB participant who had just reached the age of 30, all other participants were within the target age range. I also recruited one female participant from each party except the LSD, which has very few female members.

The interviews were conducted from February 2012 to January 2013. Before arranging the interviews, my study underwent an ethical review by the Human Research Ethics Committee of my institute to ensure its compliance with the institute guidelines on research ethics. The venues of the interviews were chosen by the participants. Some interviews were conducted in their workplaces and others in restaurants, cafés, or university campuses. Written consents were sought before the beginning of each interview. To remind me of the interview questions and to increase the comparability between different life histories, an interview guide was designed to facilitate the interview (Della Porta, 1992). The guide is divided into four sections. The first section addresses the personal background of the participants such as upbringing and schooling experiences. The second section addresses how and why the participants became involved in party activism and joined their respective political parties. The third section touches on the daily lives and activities of the participants as party members. Lastly, I collected their basic demographics such as place of birth, education, and occupation.

All interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the mother tongue of the participants, and tape-recorded. Most interviews lasted for one to two hours and the average duration was one hour and 15 minutes. Follow-up interviews were arranged for 12 participants to clarify the unclear points and explore topics that I found interesting after reading the transcripts.

I used several strategies to enhance the factual accuracy of the interviews. First, I helped the participants to recall their memory during the interview by asking questions about particular events such as schooling and work experience. Second, I cross-checked the interviews with other sources such as news reports and historical events. To minimize my misinterpretation of the meanings expressed by the participants, I clarified any uncertain points through follow-up interviews, email or telephone conversations. I also conducted member checking by sending the interview transcripts back to the participants.

My data analysis process is mainly informed by the procedures suggested by Ritchie, Spencer, and O'Connor (2003), which is divided into six steps. First, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. After that I developed a codebook based on the interview guide and my initial reading of the transcripts. Then I used the themes and sub-themes of the codebook to code the interview transcripts with the help of qualitative data management software NVivo. After that, new codes were created when new themes emerged and some existing codes were deleted when they were no longer deemed useful. The coded data were then sorted and summarized, which was followed by a cross-case analysis to discover similarities and differences between participants. Finally, I identified the mobilization processes into party membership, categorized them into three paths, and discerned the major factors at play in each path. The results are presented in the following section.

**Table 2.** Participant Characteristics

Participant (Pseudonym)	Party	Age	Gender	Position in the party	Occupation
Philip	CP	22	Male	Branch vice-chairperson; district developer	Teaching assistant
Nick	CP	25	Male	Branch and youth wing Exco member; district developer	Legislator's assistant
Brian	CP	25	Male	Branch vice-chairperson; former youth wing Exco member	Teaching assistant
Anna	CP	24	Female	Youth wing and policy branch Exco member	Legislator's assistant
Aaron	DAB	26	Male	Branch Exco member; community officer	Legislator's assistant
Henry	DAB	26	Male	Branch Exco member	District councilor
Thomas	DAB	23	Male	Deputy policy spokesperson	Secondary school teacher



Stephen	DAB	28	Male	Deputy policy spokesperson	Assistant coordinator, DAB
Jack	DAB	26	Male	Youth wing Exco member; deputy policy spokesperson	Assistant coordinator, DAB
Cherry	DAB	30	Female	Youth and women wing Exco member	Assistant coordinator, DAB
Keith	DP	24	Male	Branch and youth wing Exco member	Legislator's assistant
James	DP	27	Male	Central committee member; Branch Exco member	Staff in a bank
George	DP	26	Male	Youth wing Exco member, community officer	Community officer, DP
David	DP	26	Male	Central committee member, youth wing Exco member	District councillor
Grace	DP	25	Female	Branch and youth wing Exco member	Legislator's assistant
Daniel	LSD	28	Male	Party deputy secretary-general	Legislator's assistant
Vincent	LSD	27	Male	Party deputy secretary-general (acting secretary-general)	Media editor
Peter	LSD	25	Male	Party Exco and branch Exco member	Research assistant
Alex	LSD	24	Male	Ordinary member; former party Exco member	Advertising company staff
Charles	NPP	26	Male	Party Exco and Central committee member; policy spokesperson; community officer	Research director in a think tank
Ray	NPP	29	Male	Youth wing chairperson	Public affairs consultant
Patrick	NPP	28	Male	Youth wing Exco member	General manager of a private company
Sophia	NPP	24	Female	Head of the external affairs unit of the party's youth committee	Staff in a bank

## Results

### Paths into Party Membership

The first part of the result section reports the mobilization process and paths into party membership identified from the life history interviews. My analysis of the interviews found that the process of becoming party members can be divided into three steps, namely (a) attitudinal affinity, (b) initial involvement, and (c) formal enrolment. Below is a brief description of each step.

**Attitudinal affinity.** The term was first used by sociologist Doug McAdam (1988) to describe the supportive attitude towards the American Civil Rights Movement. The term is employed in the present study to refer to the step wherein a participant develops psychological affinity with the party, either through adherence to party ideology, favorable impression of the party or some party figures, and/or interest in joining.

**Initial involvement.** This term refers to the time when a participant first becomes involved in the activities of the party. These activities may include helping out in an electoral campaign, joining an internship program, volunteering with the party, or working for the party as salaried staff.

**Formal enrolment.** This refers to the moment when participants formally become a member of the party. They usually have to complete a membership form and pay a membership fee.

Although all participants went through these three steps, I found that not all of them went through the steps in the order listed above. In total three sequences are identified, which I refer to as the paths of hesitant believers, decisive believers, and converted staff. I illustrate them with examples in the following paragraphs.

**Hesitant believers path.** Hesitant believers went through the steps by (a) → (b) → (c). They usually had a supportive attitude towards the party principles or an interest in joining before their first involvement. Their primary motivation for initially getting involved was to put their beliefs into practice, but they were hesitant or reluctant to join the party immediately. Rather, they chose to take part in some party activities first before deciding to join. An example of this path is Anna from the CP.

**Anna.** She grew up in a low income family. She claimed her family did not have a strong influence on her politically because her parents were not interested in current affairs and would not discuss politics with her. Nevertheless, they helped develop her political awareness by purchasing newspapers daily.

The first step she took was attitudinal affinity. What made Anna become a true supporter of the CP was the national security legislation controversy in 2003, a big political crisis in Hong Kong wherein half a million people took to the streets to protest against the legislation. The event occurred when she was in senior secondary school. She paid close attention to the crisis and was very impressed by the actions taken by a group of pro-democracy lawyers, many of whom later became the leaders of the CP. “I was very impressed with their defense of the rule of law and fighting against this *evil legislation*.” The events helped her develop an interest in joining the CP when it was founded in 2006.

The second step Anna took was initial involvement. Anna’s first contact with the CP happened in her second year of university. At that time, she discovered from the CP website that the party was recruiting summer interns for its 2008 LegCo election campaign. She applied and was allocated to the campaign team of CP lawmaker Alan Leong. She was noticed because of her good performance and Leong invited her to remain in his employ beyond her internship as a part-time staff. Subsequently, he hired her as his full-time assistant when she graduated.

The final step Anna took was formal enrolment. Anna did not immediately join the CP after being hired as a full-time staff because she was struggling with whether she would share the same view with the party in the future. “When I initially got involved in politics, my concern was I don’t know what to do if I have disagreement with the party in the future.” Her worry eventually disappeared as she gradually felt that she should join as long as she subscribes to the party’s core principles. She joined two years later.

**Decisive believers path.** Decisive believers went through steps by (a) → (c) → (b). Similar to hesitant believers, they adhered to party principles and ideologies even before deciding to join, but they were more decisive because they decided to join the party before participating in any party activity. Thus, their first involvement took place after joining the party. An example of this path is James from the DP.

**James.** James was born in a public housing family. He claims his family did not have a big impact on him politically because both parents were workers in garment factories with very long work hours. His parents seldom discussed current affairs with him and did not want him to engage in politics. “[They wanted me] to find a job, preferably not to do with politics, and start a family.” School education also did not have much effect as the curriculum of James’ secondary school had nothing related to politics.

The first step he took was attitudinal affinity. After secondary school, James’ parents sent him to the US for college. Living in a foreign land triggered him to pay more attention to Hong Kong affairs. Thus, he read many Hong Kong newspapers. James was particularly attracted to the commentaries of DP lawmaker Martin Lee, who later became his reason for joining the DP. The most important event that triggered his interest in entering politics is the 2003 national security legislation controversy, as was illustrated above. Pictures of the protest shocked James and made him want to do something for Hong Kong. His observation of US elections also strengthened his belief in democracy. “You can see that many Americans

believe that their votes can change the fate of the country, but you can't see that emotion in Hong Kong.”

The second step James took was formal enrolment. James eventually decided to join the DP when he was 19, primarily because he admired Martin Lee. “If you are talking about why I chose the DP, the most important reason was Martin, no other person.” He also thought he could achieve more in the DP because it was the first and the largest pro-democracy party in Hong Kong.

The final step James took was initial involvement. James joined the party in 2005, but he did not participate in any party activities until he returned to Hong Kong in 2007. At that time, he did not know a single DP member, so he asked the party headquarters what he could do to help. Later, he landed an internship in the office of Martin Lee and his first activity was to campaign for a by-election.

**Converted staff path.** Converted staff went through the process by (b) → (a) → (c). They have two defining characteristics. First, they had neither developed a solid adherence to party principles nor an interest in joining at initial involvement. Their initial involvement was primarily motivated by non-political reasons such as occupational consideration, curriculum requirement, or mere curiosity. They were socialized to identify with party principles and developed an intention of joining after spending some time in the party. Second, their initial involvement usually took the form of party employment as legislator assistants and interns. An example of this path is Aaron from the DAB.

**Aaron.** Aaron was born in a low-income family. His father has already passed away and his mother was once a street vendor but has now retired. His parents did not exert any influence on him politically because their working hours were very long and they were uninterested in politics. Aaron studied social policy in university because he had some interest in the discipline and there were limited choices for him due to his mediocre public examination results. He joined the university student press and become one of its reporters. However, he said he still had not developed much political awareness at that time.

The first step Aaron took was initial involvement. Aaron graduated in 2008. Since he studied social policy, he wanted to find a job related to social service. Thus, he applied for various positions in political parties, trade unions, and voluntary organizations. Finally, a DAB district councilor hired him as his assistant. His major tasks then were to handle caseworks<sup>1</sup> and provide constituency services<sup>2</sup> to the residents.

The second step Aaron took was attitudinal affinity. Aaron initially perceived his councilor assistant job as an ordinary job. Only later did he gradually develop an interest in entering politics. He said:

I think the first year [of work] is the most important. I personally felt the party did take constituency work very seriously. You helped the residents and handled their cases in person. This made you feel that a party or a district councilor is really capable of helping the residents.... So after a year or so I thought, why [can't I] be a councilor too?

He also started learning and accepting the party's ideology during his work in the party.

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<sup>1</sup> Caseworks refer to the handling of inquiries, complaints, and requests for assistance from residents. Typical cases include complaints about poor sanitation and requests for assistance in applying for public housing and social welfare.

<sup>2</sup> Constituency services refer to the services offered by political parties to the residents of a specific electoral district to cultivate electoral support. Typical services include tea gathering, tours, interest classes and haircut service for the elderly.

The final step Aaron took was formal enrolment. Aaron was employed as an assistant coordinator of a party local branch a year later, but he was still not a party member. Several months later, he eventually decided to join, mainly because he agreed with the party beliefs and planned to run for election on behalf of the party.

Among the 23 participants, there were 6 hesitant believers, 11 decisive believers, and 6 converted staff. The distribution does not vary significantly with political camp. It should be noted that the actual experiences of the participants are usually more complex than the three paths described above and some participants share elements of more than one path. But the characteristics of a single path usually dominate. So classification was done without much difficulty. Having said that, classifying the stories to fit one of these paths may lose some nuance in the mobilization experiences. For example, although all the decisive believers joined the party before participating in any party activity, a few did ponder or hesitate for a while before deciding to join. Nevertheless, this classification helps us better understand how the mobilization processes into party membership unfold and vary.

### **Influences in the Mobilization Processes**

Apart from distinguishing the three different paths into party membership, I also discerns the factors shaping these paths. This part first reports the influences shaping the path of hesitant believers, which is followed by those of decisive believers and converted staff.

**Influences shaping the hesitant believers path.** For the hesitant believers, the first step they took is attitudinal affinity. The hesitant believers mainly attributed their attitudinal affinity with the party to three contextual influences, namely critical political events, school education, and university experience. In terms of critical event, for example, Anna (CP) said her supportive attitudes towards the party was triggered by the national security legislation controversy in 2003 in which a group of pro-democracy barristers, many of whom later became the founding members of the CP, strongly opposed the legislation to safeguard the civil liberties of Hong Kong. In terms of school education, for instance, the pro-Beijing secondary school that Stephen (DAB) attended offered him many opportunities to learn about the latest developments in mainland China, which made his political attitudes closer to that of the pro-Beijing DAB by strengthening his favorable impression of China and his national identity. In terms of university experience, Vincent (LSD) said his participation in the student press of his university made his ideology closer to that of the LSD as he learnt many socialist ideas and met many social movement activists in the student press. Apart from these three major influences, some participants also perceived mass media, family, and voluntary organizations as influential in the development of their attitudinal affinity.

The second step that the hesitant believers took was initial involvement in the activities of the party, which the participants said was mainly motivated by their attitudinal affinity developed in the previous step. However, the recruitment efforts of the parties such as internships, job opportunities, and persuasion by party figures also played a role. For example, Vincent (LSD)'s initial involvement was marked by his recruitment into the party as a salaried organizing officer. Anna (CP) and Thomas (DAB) initially became involved in their parties through the summer internship programs of their respective parties. Brian (CP) was directly persuaded by a CP legislator whom Brian met him through a mentorship program of his university to get involved with the party. It should be noted that these participants sought out or were willing to accept the recruitment efforts of the party because they had already developed an attitudinal affinity to these parties in the previous step. Apart from party recruitment efforts, university education was also perceived by a few hesitant believers as influential in this step.

The final step that the hesitant believers took was formal enrolment in the party as members. Persuasion from party figures and experiences within the party are most commonly cited by the participants as their reasons to take the joining decision. For example, Brian (CP) was persuaded to join the CP by a party official he assisted during an electoral campaign. For Stephen (DAB), the atmosphere or norm within the party mattered the most. He said his decision to join the party was a natural step to take partly because he, as a party staff himself, was also encouraged to invite other people to join. Thus, it would have been strange if he was not a member himself. Lastly, a few participants also perceived critical political events as an influence that triggered their joining decisions.

**Influences shaping the decisive believers path.** For the decisive believers, the first step they took is also attitudinal affinity, which was mainly shaped by five contextual influences, namely political parties, critical political events, mass media, university experience, and voluntary organizations. In terms of political parties, they exerted their influence mainly through their charismatic figures. For example, Philip (CP) was attracted to the CP by the caring and righteous image of a CP candidate during the 2008 LegCo election. In terms of critical socio-political events, their influence was disproportionately strong among pro-democracy participants and the most frequently mentioned event is the national security legislation controversy in 2003. For example, after participating in the rally opposing the legislation on 1 July 2003, George (DP) realized the importance of democracy and universal suffrage for Hong Kong, which made his ideology closer to that of the DP. The rally also shocked James (DP) and stimulated his interest in entering politics.

In terms of mass media, Peter (LSD) learned much about social democracy and developed an intention to join the LSD after listening to the online radio program of the LSD chairman. James (DP)'s favorable impression of the DP was largely developed by reading the newspaper column of a former DP chairman. In terms of university experience, Ray (NPP) became more aware of social and political issues after participating in a book club on Marxism and political economy when he was in graduate school. Charles (NPP) developed a favorable impression of the NPP chairwoman after meeting her in an event held by a student association in his university. In terms of voluntary organization, they helped the participants to develop an interest in joining political party. For example, Henry (DAB) developed a favorable impression of the DAB after receiving advice from a DAB district councilor on how to be a good master of ceremony in an event held by a volunteer group he joined.

Apart from these five influences, a few decisive believers also said family played a role. But its influence was mainly latent and indirect. None of the participants came from a politically active family. Their parents also seldom taught them about politics. School education was also rarely viewed by the decisive believers as influential in this step.

The second step the decisive believers took was formal enrolment. Their decision to join the party as members was mainly motivated by the attitudinal affinity they developed in the previous step. However, persuasion by party figures also played a role in some cases. For example, George (DP) was persuaded to join the party by a DP activist he met in the past. Charles (NPP) was directly persuaded by the party chair to join the party. For a few participants, voluntary organizations also played a role in this step. For example,

Ray (NPP) met a NPP activist in a think tank event and that activist later persuaded Ray to join the party.

The decisive believers became involved in party activities after they had joined the party. Their initial involvement was mainly a result of requests or persuasion from fellow party members. For example, Philip (CP) was invited by somebody from his local party branch to participate in party activities for the first time after he joined the party. Some participants also regarded critical socio-political events as influential. For example, Peter's

(LSD) first involvement with the party was helping out in the “De-facto Referendum Movement” in 2010<sup>3</sup>, of which LSD was one of the initiators.

**Influences shaping the converted staff path.** For the converted staff, the first step they took is initial involvement with the party, which was mainly motivated by recruitment efforts of the party. For example, Keith (DP) and Nick (CP) first became involved in their respective parties through the internship programs co-organized by their universities and the political parties. Aaron (DAB), Cherry (DAB), and Grace (DP) became involved with their parties when they were recruited by their parties as salaried staff such as councilor assistant or local organizer.

But how and why the converted staff were successfully reached by or attracted to the recruitment efforts of these parties? The interview data show that they were recruited successfully because of the influences of university experience and family. In terms of university experience, both Keith (DP) and Nick (CP) were students of the same public administration program which requires all students to intern in a political party or NGO in a summer vacation. This brought them to the internship programs of the parties they later joined. In terms of family, Grace’s (DP) became an assistant of a DP legislator because of the request of her mother, who tried helping her to find a job after graduation.

The second step that the converted staff took was attitudinal affinity. Political party played an important role in this step. Many participants developed a supportive attitude toward the party and the intention to join through their experiences within the party organization. For example, Nick (CP) gained a favorable impression of the CP after joining its internship because he enjoyed the activities. Aaron (DAB) developed his interest in having a political career and joining the DAB because of his work experience as an assistant to a district councilor.

The final step that the converted staff took was formal enrolment as party members. Some of the converted staff joined the party by themselves because of the attitudinal affinity developed in the previous step, but others joined because of persuasion of party figures. For example, Nick’s decision to join the CP was strongly influenced by the persuasion of a senior party member, who convinced him that the democratic movement of Hong Kong needed new blood to sustain itself. Jack (DAB) was persuaded by the chairperson of the party’s youth wing to join the DAB during the graduation ceremony of the internship program.

Overall, I found that political parties, critical political events and university experience are most frequently perceived by the participants as important contextual influences in their pathways into party membership. School education, family, voluntary organization, and mass media are also perceived by some participant as important.

**Interrelation among the contextual influences.** Apart from identifying the contextual influences, I also found that some contextual influences are strongly interrelated. Their effect sometimes depends on the presence of other influences. For example, as mentioned above, some young party activists first became involved with their parties through party internship programs co-organized by the political party and their university program of study. For other participants, the influence of mass media depended on the family. For example, some participants attributed their habit of reading newspaper, which enhanced their awareness of current affairs and politics, to their parents who purchased newspapers daily.

**Influence of individual agency.** Lastly, the findings show that the participants are conscious individuals and the impact of contextual influences was not deterministic in shaping their paths into party membership. The individual agency and critical thinking of the participants also played a role in shaping their course of action. For example, Anna (CP), a

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<sup>3</sup> In 2010, five legislators of the Civic Party and League of Social Democrats resigned to trigger a by-election, which was treated as a movement by the two parties to draw public support on universal suffrage.

hesitant believer, spent two years pondering whether she should join the party after becoming a party staff because she was afraid that the party would not share her beliefs in the future and she only decided to join when she concluded that her principles were consistent with those of the party. For Philip (CP), a decisive believer, the LegCo election did not directly lead him to join the CP, but only stimulated his interest in politics and gave him an opportunity to evaluate the performance of various parties. He finally decided to join the CP because of his favorable evaluation of a CP candidate and his desire to expand the presence of the CP at the district level. Cherry (DAB), a converted staff, initially did not accept the invitation to join the party and stand for election on behalf the party because she was reluctant to take sides with any political camp. However, upon deeper reflection, she accepted the invitations because she found that she could not remain neutral forever in the political arena and must choose a side.

## Discussion

This section discusses the implications of the research findings for the literature on youth participation in political parties. But before that I recap the objective and main results of this paper. This paper aims to examine the processes that resulted in the decision of 23 young people in Hong Kong to join political parties and to identify the important influences at play in the processes. The findings show that mobilization into party membership is composed of three steps, namely (a) attitudinal affinity, (b) initial involvement, and (c) formal enrolment. The study also found that the participants did not all follow the same sequence of steps and three different paths into party membership are identified, namely the paths of hesitant believers, decisive believers, and converted staff. Participants following the first two paths have already developed attitudinal affinity with the party before becoming involved but the converted staff have not. They initially became involved with the party as employees for non-political reasons and only gradually learned the ideology of the party after becoming involved with it. Lastly, as just discussed in the previous section, the study found that each path was shaped by a distinct set of contextual influences as well as the individual agency of the participants.

These findings generated some insights for the study of youth participation in political parties. First, it provides further evidence to show that the process approach and the study of individual mobilization process can be extended from the study of social movement activists (Bosi & Della Porta, 2012; Munson, 2008) to the study of young party members because the findings show that youth participation in political party can also be conceptualized as a multi-step process.

Second, the process of joining a political party can be less straightforward than the literature believed. Bruter and Harrison's (2009) study of young party members in Europe discerns two steps to becoming a party member: being inspired and deciding to join. The present study found that an exploratory stage may exist between being inspired and formal enrolment. For example, the hesitant believers of this study decided to participate in some party activities before deciding to join, even if they had already developed an ideological affinity with the party. This exploratory stage also exists among the converted staff who became party staff before deciding to join.

Third, the present study shows that having an ideological affinity with a party is not a prerequisite for initial involvement in that party. As stories of the converted staff have shown, youth can become involved with a party for non-political reasons and gradually learn the party ideology after becoming involved. This finding echoes some studies of social movement activists (Blee, 2002; Munson, 2008) which found that joining a movement might precede the acquisition of its beliefs.

Fourth, the study confirms the importance of some meso-level factors in contributing to individual mobilization into party membership such as political party, educational institutions, mass media, family, and voluntary organization. It also provides further insights to the role played by political party. For instance, the literature on party membership focuses on the incentives that parties create to attract new members. The study attempts to increase the given knowledge by tracing how young party members were attracted by these incentives through examining their personal experiences and histories prior to their initial involvement with the party, enhancing our understanding of how and why incentives work. For example, some participants were attracted to internship programs or job openings of political parties because they had already developed an attitudinal affinity with them. Moreover, this study proves that offering incentives is not the only strategy that parties can use to recruit young members (Mjelde, 2013). For example, direct persuasion by party personnel is another important recruitment strategy. The findings also show that political parties can act as agents of political socialization by helping young people develop ideological affinity with the party.

Fifth, this study shows that the importance of some contextual factors is contingent on the socio-political context of a society. A case in point is the family, which is repeatedly found in established Western democracies to be a very important influence contributing to youth participation in political parties (Bruter & Harrison, 2009; Cross & Young, 2008a; Gidengil, O'Neill, & Young, 2010; Van Liefferinge, Devos, & Steyvers, 2012). But family did not exert the same level of influence on my Hong Kong samples. Most parents of the participants were politically inactive and seldom discussed politics with their children. This may partly be explained by the historical and political context of Hong Kong where a culture of depoliticization existed during the post-war years (Lam, 2004) and the indifference of the British colonial government to civic education (Fairbrother, 2003).

Moreover, the importance of critical political events in contributing to youth mobilization into party membership shows that the macro-level context of Hong Kong may not necessarily be unfavorable to youth participation in political parties. It is because the emergence of many critical political events, such as large-scale demonstrations and social movements, can partly be attributed to the "liberal authoritarian" regime type of Hong Kong. This type of regime on the one hand creates perennial legitimacy problems for the government (Ma, 2008; Sing, 2006) and on the other hand gives the pro-democracy forces enough freedom to mobilize people to challenge it (Case, 2008; O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986).

In addition, the present study highlights the complex interplay of factors in the individual mobilization process, which has received relatively little attention from the literature (Amnå, Ekström, Kerr, & Starrin, 2009; Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2013; Quintelier, 2015; Solhaug & Kristensen, 2013). It shows that the contextual factors could not only exert their influences independently, but can also interact and exert their influence indirectly through other influences.

Lastly, this study provides further evidence to support the importance of individual agency in the process of youth political participation, which is emphasized by the more recent literature of political socialization (Amnå, Ekström, Kerr, & Starrin, 2009; Hahn & Alviar-Martin, 2008; Leung, 2006). It shows that individual agency is also important in shaping the individual mobilization processes into party activism of young people, who are not passively and exclusively influenced by the contexts surrounding them.

### **Limitations of the Study**

I must acknowledge that this study has several limitations. First, more information about the participants other than life history interviews would have provided a more in-depth



picture of their lives and context for their mobilization into party membership. Second, my analysis may have been somewhat biased (particularly my interpretation of the interview data) because I am a supporter of the pro-democracy camp (McEvoy, 2006). Nevertheless, I tried my best to minimize this bias through continuous and critical self-reflection.

### Conclusion

This paper enhanced our understanding of the individual mobilization process leading some Hong Kong young people to join political parties through life history interviews with 23 young party members. It found that the mobilization of young people to party membership is a three-step process shaped by a variety of macro- and meso-level influences as well as the individual agency of the young people. It also found that there is more than one mobilization pathway because different configurations of influences have led young people to go through different orders of steps and create three different paths into party membership.

Future studies could be conducted on the young party members of this study a few years later to track the developments and changes in their lives so that we can gain a deeper understanding of the political careers of young people in Hong Kong. Scholars could also examine the mobilization processes of young party members in other similar hybrid regimes in Asia such as Singapore for comparison.

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