

1991 ELECTIONS: OFF TO A GOOD START

The Administration and political commentators, following the March 3 District Board elections, concluded that political organizations played an important part in the electoral process by helping to encourage voter turnout. However, a survey conducted by the *Hong Kong Foundation* just prior to the District Board elections, indicates that the candidates themselves were as instrumental to furthering the development of Hong Kong's political process as party organizations.

The results of this survey are printed below (see Table 1). 320, or 68.5% of this year's total number of 467 District Board candidates, responded to the survey. Of these respondents, 63.7% identified themselves as independent candidates. The remaining 36.3% reported some political affiliation.

When asked whether membership in a political organisation would be helpful to the electioneering process, 50.3% responded positively, and 45.6% negatively. By comparing the findings of questions #10-#11 (refer to Table 1), one finds that more than 10% of independent candidates believed membership of political organisations would be helpful to electioneering.

More than 80% of respondents felt that the most important contribution political parties can make to the electoral process is (in decreasing order of importance): financial resources, manpower, and fame. The remaining 20% felt that political organisations play a primary role in providing information, experience and election strategies for their members.

Whether District Board turnout rates will influence election turnout in either May or September is now only a matter of speculation. However, 78.8% of respondents felt confident that District Board turnout rates will encourage voter turnouts later this year.

Our survey also asked candidates their future political plans. 30 respondents expressed interest in

contesting the Municipal Councils seats, while 14 people plan to run in the Legco elections in September. A majority of candidates confirmed that they have ruled out the possibility of getting involved in future elections.

As for fixed election expenses and the demarcation of constituencies, 60% found the existing arrangements to be satisfactory. Nearly 70% expressed dissatisfaction with the information provided by the Administration which some described as "chaotic".

In rating the overall performance of District Boards, more than 70% said it was satisfactory. 60% supported the suggestion to re-organise the existing three tier system in a bid to expand the powers of the District Boards and Municipal Councils. 90% believed that operations of District Boards would be adversely affected if the Administration cuts resources allocated to them. 60% felt the monthly allowance for District Board members is reasonable.

The majority of candidates felt their door-to-door visits was the most satisfying way for them to contact voters, with the distribution of publications a close second. 45% of respondents used the "Meeting the Public" program, regular news bulletins and reports to demonstrate accountability to their electorate.

The issues which candidates identified as their priorities are (in decreasing order of importance as "first choice") the environment, law and order and transportation, ranking 36.9%, 22.8% and 21.3%, respectively.

Despite an overall increase in District Board seats this year, fewer candidates were seeking the seats. Nearly 70% of respondents believed that the four most frequently cited reasons for this are: 1) weakening of the power of District Boards; 2) apathy of public participation in public affairs; 3) insufficient government campaigning; and, 4) brain drain. 10% respondents felt the low turnout rate of candidates was caused by an increased presence of political organizations. 28 people felt that candidates want to evaluate their chances of winning before running.

TABLE 1: QUESTIONNAIRE #1

(1) Will you run for the Municipal Council elections in May?

Yes: 30 No: 231 Undecided: 59

(2) Will you run for the Legislative Council elections in September?

Yes: 14 No: 260 Undecided: 46

(3) Do you think enough election expenses are allocated for District Board candidates?

Enough: 211 Not enough: 104 N/A: 5

(4) Do you think the limit of elections expenses for District Board members is adequate?

Yes: 188 No: 120 N/A: 12

(5) Are you satisfied with the geographical demarcation of constituencies in the District Board elections?

Yes: 192 No: 116 N/A: 12

(6) Do you think the administration has provided enough electoral information to the candidates in this election?

Yes: 98 No: 219 N/A: 3

(7) How would you comment on the performance of the District Boards?

Satisfactory: 42 Quite Satisfactory: 33 Fair: 170 Not satisfactory: 58 Very unsatisfactory: 8 N/A: 9

(8) Do you agree with the suggestion to re-organise the existing three tier system by combining the Municipal Councils and District Boards?

Agree: 194 Not agree: 111 N/A: 15

(9) Do you think the operation of District Boards will be affected if the administration cuts down the allocated resources for the District Boards?

Yes: 292 No: 26 N/A: 2

(10) Are you a member of any of the existing political organisations?

Yes: 116 No: 204

(11) Would it help your electioneering efforts to be a member of a political organisation?

Yes: 161 No: 146 N/A: 13

(Table Cont.)

(12) In what ways do you think the political organisation can best contribute to elections?

- a) celebrity 33 ab) 18
- b) manpower 49 ac) 20
- c) financial resources 75 bc) 17
- d) others 62 abc) 46

(13) If you are elected, what method will you prefer to demonstrate accountability to your electorates?

- a) news bulletins 12 ab) 11
- b) "Meeting the Public" 71 ac) 6
- c) work reports 28 bc) 30
- d) others 20 abc) 142

(14) During elections, what aspect of your performance were you most satisfied with?

- a) publications 51 ab) 5
- b) banners 6 ae) 20
- c) forums 17 abcde) 13
- d) platforms 29 N/A) 34
- e) door-to-door visits 145

(15) If you are elected, what issue will you address first?

- a) law and order (first choice): 73
- b) environment (first choice): 118
- c) transportation (first choice): 68
- d) education (first choice): 7
- e) youth problem (first choice): 7
- f) welfare (first choice): 7
- g) N/A: 40

(16) There were fewer contested seats in this year's District Board elections than there were in last years. Why do you think this is so?

- a) declining influence of DB's: 88
- b) declining public interest: 70
- c) lack of government campaigning: 17
- d) increasing influence of political organisations (thereby decreasing the influence of District Boards): 33
- e) age of District Board members: 2
- f) emigration: 11
- g) others: 28
- ab) 15 bc) 4 abd) 4 abcf) 5
- ad) 11 abc) 5 adf) 4 abcdef) 3
- af) 2 abf) 4 cdf) 4 N/A) 10

(17) Do you think the turnout rate of the District Board elections will affect the turnout rates of the Municipal and Legislative Council elections?

Yes: 252 No: 64 N/A: 4

QUESTIONNAIRE #2

The objective of a second survey conducted by the *Hong Kong Foundation* was to explore why current District Board members have not run for re-elections. 35 out of 50 candidates responded to this questionnaire. Selected questions are listed in Table 2.

Although the Administration claims that emigration and the old age of existing Board Members explains why 50 District Board members did not seek reelection, our survey results show that 31.4% of the respondents stated that they had no spare time to participate in District Board affairs. Nearly 20% cited the insufficient power of the District Boards as the primary reason for them to drop out. Only two respondents felt that they were too old to run for election. Not one respondent cited emigration for not running again.

Some claimed that preparations for the Municipal Council elections and the September direct elections to Legislative Council occupy most of their time. Others said they felt it was time for the younger generation to shoulder political burdens.

More than half of the respondents said they would not take part in any other elections in the year ahead. Eight persons did not rule out the possibility of seeking the seats in the Municipal Councils while 12 members were still undecided about their plans for the Legco elections in September.

According to the Government Gazette, many existing District Board members became election agents, rather than running on their own platform. Analysts believe this was reflected by strategies of certain political organisations.

More than 90% of the respondents rated the performance of District Boards satisfactory. There was no consensus among respondents about how District Board performance could be best improved. Nor was there any indication that District Boards should be disbanded.

60% of the respondents felt their priorities as District Board members were environmental and transport issues. The majority of respondents registered to vote between 1982 and

1988. Only 4.7% rushed in the last minute to register.

TABLE 2

(1) What is the main reason you decided not to run for re-election in the upcoming District Board elections?

- a) insufficient power of the District Boards: 28.6%
- b) insufficient time to participate in DB affairs: 31.4%
- c) no interest: 2.9%
- d) age problem: 5.7%
- e) emigration: 0
- f) others: 31.4%

(2) During your term as a member of the District Board, do you feel there is adequate government support?

Yes: 48% No: 51.4%

(3) Will you run for Urban Council?

Yes: 48.6% No: 60% Unsure: 22.9%

(4) Will you run for Legislative Council?

Yes: 14.3% No: 51.4% Unsure: 34.3%

CONCLUSION

The high turnout in the District Board elections will hopefully set a precedent for upcoming elections in May and September.

Figures released by different political organisations after the recent District Board elections indicate that more than half of elected members are affiliated with them. This does not include party members who do not run under party banners. Political analysts pointed out that many of these party members will appear on the scene for direct elections in September.

Experienced District Board members and candidates have not ruled out the possibility to run for the next two elections. This could indicate that some, and particularly those in political organizations, have loftier ambitions.

One can conclude that candidates' longstanding willingness to participate in public affairs has helped Hong Kong step out onto solid political footing.