

Exchange Student Gives Perspective on Political System in Hong Kong

By Jekyll Chau for The Chronicle | Posted: Tuesday, May 3, 2016 1:53 pm

Politics has been a hot topic lately on campus. It's not surprising, since the presidential primaries are underway right now. I find it interesting to listen to people discuss politics, because you will always end up surprised, one way or another.

People who normally don't speak up might have strong opinions about some political figures, or you might find that a person who agrees with you on most other things holds a completely opposite political stance. In any case, the interaction is certainly productive — it lets people have a better understanding of their friends and family.

It's also intriguing because of my position: a foreigner in the United States who's staying for a long period of time. Since I'm not a U.S. citizen and can't vote, I'm not really a stakeholder in the local politics; politicians won't be pandering to my demographic.

But at the same time, it's definitely possible that I'll be affected by policies put in place by the new president. It's a weird feeling, for something to be so close yet a bit distant.

The political system in Hong Kong is rather different compared to America's. While we do have the standard conservative and liberal sides, the party system is not as well-developed. Instead of having two large parties, both sides have a fairly large number of small parties, with some being more extreme in their views than others.

There is probably just as much bickering between the parties as there is within one party in America, but the lack of a central leader sometimes causes problems when it comes to decision-making. Members of political parties are elected as district councilors and legislative councilors by citizens in each of the 18 districts. The former are only in charge of affairs in one of the districts, while the latter have to vote to pass or veto new legislations or bills that will affect Hong Kong as a whole.

Currently, there are two problems with Hong Kong's political system that prevent true democracy. First, not all members of the Legislative Council are directly elected by Hong Kong citizens; there is a second section called "functional constituencies," which is supposed to represent different sectors of the economy, categorized by occupation.

Doctors, taxi drivers and construction workers are examples. Representatives, elected by citizens who share the same occupation, also get to vote in the Legislative Council. Unfortunately, the functional constituencies almost always side with the government on any issue, partly because of the fear of economic repercussions.

This section of the Council, which was not truly democratically elected in the first place, ends up giving the conservatives a major advantage on many occasions. Second, the chief executive, who governs all of Hong Kong, has nothing to do with any of the political parties, and is not elected by the citizens. Instead, an election committee of 1,200 people are responsible for choosing the next chief executive every four years.

There's no hard evidence to suggest that the elections via the committee are staged, but since citizens have no say anyway, the end result is that a chief executive not chosen by the people takes office. There have been many cries against these two problems throughout the years, but to be honest, change doesn't seem like it's coming any time soon.

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