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The curious case of Chinese non-engagement in local politics



A vibrant China Town: But why don't the Chinese engage in local politics?

Key messages

- For everyone – The non-involvement of the Chinese community in local democracy provides a clear example of the effect of cultural attitudes on behaviour.
- For public service providers – that the Chinese community cannot be relied upon to further its interests through engagement in local politics.
- The lack of Chinese support for community organisations leaves its members vulnerable in the absence of family support.

Context

At Webber Phillips we specialise in using evidence to show the differently members of Britain's different minority communities behave. Not infrequently, when confronted with the evidence we publish, people argue that these differences must be the result of discrimination on the part of the

white community. Where this argument fails it can be alleged that differences in behaviour must be the result of some suppression of opportunity in the near or distant past.

The evidence of systematic non-engagement by the Chinese community in local politics is, in our opinion, one of a number of instances where analysis suggests an alternative explanation – that a difference in behaviour is better understood in terms of the different cultures of different minority populations.

In recent years both main political parties have made serious efforts to improve the diversity of the candidates they field in local and general elections. Overall these efforts have been very successful. In most inner-city wards where there is a significant, long-established non-white-British community, South Asians, West Indians, Turks and Greek Cypriots have organised themselves in such a way as to



achieve significant representation on local councils and to use their position to promote policies which support minority populations as a whole.

In a number of local authorities they have also been successful in approving the funding of projects which foster community development within specific minority groups, such as Theatro Technis, a Greek Cypriot Theatre project in Camden or an Asian Women's and Children's Centre in Keighley.

Keighley South Asian Women's and Children's Centre

Evidence

To better understand the engagement of particular minorities in local government Webber Phillips examined the names of 690,000 candidates who have stood for election since 1973. The data were supplied courtesy of the Election Results Centre at the University of Plymouth. From the personal and family name of each candidate we were able to establish the extent to which different minority communities were more or less well represented among candidates compared with their share of the country's adult population.

Our assumption had been that communities which had achieved greatest success in engaging economically, for example by setting up and becoming directors of limited companies, would be the ones which had also the most successful in politically, in other words standing for election. Both, we thought, would result from their better levels of spoken English, education, integration and lack of discrimination.

Groups most and least likely to stand for election to a local council		
	<i>Origins type based on name</i>	% of national average
Most likely to stand	Jewish	191
	England	112
	<i>All adults</i>	<i>100</i>
Groups least likely to stand	Turkish	21
	Russian	19
	Sri Lankan	18
	Nigerian	14
	Cantonese	8
	Mandarin	3

Origins categories by likelihood of standing for election, UK

Contrary to our expectation members the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities, two of the most disadvantaged and least integrated of all Britain’s minority population, were on average more likely to stand for election to local councils than the average for minorities as a whole. Likewise given the high educational attainment of the Chinese community, its commercial success and its propensity to live in England’s more prestigious postcodes, we were surprised that people with Chinese names were the least likely to stand for election, and by a considerable margin.

Insight

Initially we supposed that the reason for this lack of engagement might be the lack of democratic history in China. But when we undertook separate analysis of people with Cantonese names, mostly people originating from Hong Kong, from those with Mandarin names, mostly people originating from mainland China, we found little difference. The behaviour seemed to apply to all people of Chinese origin, irrespective of whether their cultural influence was colonial or Marxist.

To investigate the possible reasons for this pattern we then obtained and analysed the names of all people elected to public position in the United States. Despite the success of East Asians in the United States, we found exactly the same pattern as in England. Americans with Chinese names were by a considerable margin the least likely to put themselves forward for democratic election.

To better understand what might be the reasons for this apparent lack of interest in the formal political system we conducted interviews with members of the Association of Chinese Liberal Democrats, an association founded in order to encourage more members of the Chinese community to stand for election in local and national elections.

One of the explanations which was tendered was that unlike other minority communities, Britain’s Chinese community tended not to settle residentially in distinct parts of large cities. Although London is famous for its China Town, this is primarily a business district rather than a residential one. Whereas Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, Turks and Cypriots tend to live in very distinct areas of London and in sufficient numbers to dominate a number of local neighbourhoods, the Chinese, we were told, were generally unenthusiastic about living close to other members of their own community.

In addition, perhaps because the Chinese culture attaches a high value to self-reliance and to inter-generational support within the family, we were told that it is relatively uncommon for the Chinese to collaborate with other members of their own community, even to the extent of not starting business ventures together, a problem apparently identified in China itself by the current Chinese government. Whilst family members were trusted, non-family members tended not to be. As a result it was particularly difficult to persuade members of the community to form groups to campaign for improvements which would benefit them collectively.

It was also suggested that compared with other communities the Chinese feel that energies are better spent in the pursuit of education or professional qualifications, in advancing careers or in developing business than on community or political activities.

This hypothesis is consistent with a study Webber Phillips undertook of the 7,000 delegates to the 2015 conference of the American Association of Geographers. This study demonstrated very clearly that papers contributed by attendees with Chinese names were disproportionately in branches of geography with a practical application, such as traffic management or logistics, rather than on subjects which involved normative judgements, such as the geography of religion, cultural geography or Marxist geography. Despite many of them having been brought up in an ideology-driven society, the Chinese were, as a rule, more interested in topics relating to efficiency than to social justice.

Implications

At a general level we believe that these analyses of the Chinese community support our overall contention that members of minority communities are still very much affected by the cultural attitudes of their community; that these attitudes persist into second and subsequent generations; and that it is difficult to explain them in terms of historic or present disadvantages. What are often criticised as stereotypes often have more than a grain of truth to them and what distinguishes members of a minority community is not necessarily obvious to its own members.

At a more specific level we believe that it is important that people working in the public sector are aware that the democratic process cannot be relied upon to ensure that the interests of the Chinese community are taken into account via elected representatives or by responses to consultation exercises. Although the Chinese community may profess its self-sufficiency, not all of its members can rely on the support of its immediate family. In such situations members' needs are less likely to be met from within the community than those of members of other communities. In addition we believe that members of this community are more likely to be unaware of the services they are entitled to and how to go about obtaining them.

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