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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

RPA—Republican Party of Armenia

OE— Orinats Erkir

ARF—Armenian Revolutionary Federation

MAK— Miavorvats Ashatankayin Kusaktsutyun

AZhK--- Azgayin Zhoghovrdavarakan Kusaktsutyun

LDP—Liberal-Democratic Party of Armenia

HZhAK--- Hayastani Zhoghovrdakan Azatakan Miutyun

ABSTRACT

The current study addresses the fundamental issue of responsiveness of the political parties in Armenia. It aims at discovering how Armenian parties learn about public opinion; utilize public opinion in order to represent the public's interests, and which strategic tools they use to influence public opinion. By comparing parties that got elected to the National Assembly in 2003 with those that participated in the elections but were not elected, this study reveals whether those having representatives in Parliament have been conducting more active work with public opinion.

In-depth interviews with the officials of ten political parties revealed the current state of affairs concerning the Armenian parties' understanding of and work with public opinion. As the findings show parties themselves realize the existence of many problems in the Armenian party system. They also realize the functions to be performed by each party in a democratic society. This awareness is a considerable progress taking into account the deeply rooted Soviet mentality and the Soviet legacy of the country.

The study revealed that parties represented in Parliament have more strategies and resources to learn about electoral priorities and issues. They have more effective regional outreach with the public, possess media analyzing centers, and most importantly, they conduct opinion polls and public research in general, to become aware of the people's problems and concerns, to receive feedback on a particular policy decision of the party, and to assess the party's overall image. So, more or less significant parties do have an understanding of public opinion and try to work with it.

Parties represented in National Assembly have both more resources and more access to Mass Media as compared with parties not represented in parliament. They also realize the importance of maintaining active cooperation and relations with media, as opposed to the not elected parties which attain the Soviet style views of the media to take the initiative of cooperation with political parties. Furthermore, elected parties appear to have more meaningful media related goals. Besides presenting the party's ideology, they also have an understanding of the importance of such objectives as promoting freedom of speech and advancing the ideas of democracy.

Elected parties have both a more profound understanding of the significance of organized meetings with the public and conduct them more frequently than not elected parties do.

Thus, parties that are represented in the National Assembly have more strategies to learn about, be responsive to, and influence public opinion in Armenia. The reason should not be confined to the fact that in National Assembly parties have more resources to do so. As the study demonstrated, one party (United Labor) not previously represented in Parliament was elected, another party (Ramkavar Azatakan Party) having sufficient resources was not elected.

These two examples demonstrate that neither previous representation in Parliament, nor financial resources are sufficient preconditions to be elected. What parties need for being elected is meaningful strategies and active work with public opinion.

Political parties are vital for the functioning of a healthy democratic political order. Political parties in a democracy ought to be the public's representatives and channels of communication to government. Political parties should be responsive to the public opinion and use it as a basic means for appreciating and understanding the electorate's priorities, as well as for assessing the party's image. Therefore, the consolidation of a functional party system is crucial to Armenia's continued transition to democracy.

POLITICAL PARTIES IN ARMENIA

Armenia's constitution allows for a multi-party democratic system. Article 7 of the Armenian Constitution states: "The ideological pluralism and multiparty system are recognized in the Republic of Armenia. Parties are formed freely and promote the formulation and expression of the political will of the people. Their activities may not contravene the Constitution and the laws, nor may their practice contravene the principles of democracy."

For the purposes of this study it is appropriate to introduce a chronological classification of the Armenian political parties in order to obtain a better understanding of the differences in the parties' ideologies and therefore of the parties' responsiveness to public opinion. This will further clarify the political reality in Armenia concerning party politics.

The OSCE/ODIHR background information on the 1999 parliamentary elections divides the numerous Armenian political parties into four types: traditional parties, post-independence parties, splinter parties from the official Communist Party of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, and new parties or alliances. Altering a little the OSCE/ODIHR classification and taking into account the fact that most Armenian parties were created after Armenia got its independence in 1991, for the purposes of this study the independence will be taken as the

dividing line for classifying Armenian parties into traditional/historic parties, independence parties, and post-independence parties.

Traditional/historic parties have a history that goes back several decades and, in some cases, to much of the twentieth century. These parties are characterized by having some core ideology, some form of a national presence and a sustainable organizational structure. These are Liberal Democratic "Ramkavar Azatakan" Party of Armenia (Hayastani Ramkavar Azatakan Kusaktsutiun) (1885), Social Democratic "Hnchakian" Party (Sotsial Demokratalkan Hnchakian Kusaktutiun) (1887), Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Hay Heghaphokhakan Dahsnaktsutuin) (1890), Communist Party of Armenia (Hayastani Komunistakan Kusaktsutyun) (1920). Traditional parties played a major role during the pre-Soviet independence period. Many of these parties maintained support within the Armenian diaspora and were able to re-emerge quickly when independence was declared in 1991. Thus, independence created the opportunity for the return of the three main 'historical' parties which existed in the Diaspora since the breakup of the first Armenian Republic in 1920. That is why they are also called 'diaspora parties'. These three are the socialist-oriented *Armenian Revolutionary Federation* (Dashnaks), the *Liberal-Democratic Party* (Ramkavars) and the Communist- oriented *Hnchak*.

The appearance of *independence parties* can be considered to be the period from 1980 till 1991. The parties in this group were all created prior to or around the period of those elections which framed independence and the formation of the new Armenian Republic on September 23, 1991. This period of party formation and activity was characterized by the emergence of several political parties, many of which are still significant in Armenian politics. Many, like the Armenian National Movement, started as political movements, and include the Union of Constitutional Rights, founded by Hrant Khachatrian (1989), the Republican Party of Armenia,

founded by Ashot Navasardian (1990), Mission and Free Armenia Mission (1990), the National Democratic Union and the Democratic Party of Armenia (1991), as well as others. As in the earlier period, party formation centered largely on independence and nationalism.

Post-independence parties started to emerge in the mid-1990s. The essential characteristic of these parties is the relative ease with which they formed which is characteristic of other post-communist states after they got rid of the Soviet rule. Some of these parties would attain some significance, while others, formed immediately for a particular election, would be easily forgotten shortly afterwards.   Among them there were: National State (Azgain Petutiun), Intellectual Armenia (Mtavorakan Hayastan), Union of Intellectuals (Mtavorakanneri Miutsiun), Women of the Armenian Land (Kanayk Hayots Ashkhari), Shamiram, Rule of Law (Country of Law) (Orinants Erkir), United Progressive Communist Party of Armenia (Hayastani Arajadimakan Miatsial Komunistakan Kusaktsutiun), People's (Popular) Party of Armenia (Hayastani Zhoghovrdakan Kusaktsutyun), Democratic Homeland (Motherland) (Zhoghovrdavarakan Hayreniq), Motherland-Diaspora Union (Hayreniq-Spiurq Miutiun), Powerful Motherland (Fatherland) (Hzor Hayrenik), Dignified (Worthy) Future (Arzhanapative Apaga), etc.   Among this new generation of political parties were those centered almost exclusively on their leader—sometimes called "pocket parties." Many of the post-independence parties are splinter groups from the independence-era parties. Very few of the post-independence parties have developed a broad base of popular support.

Regardless of their date of creation, political parties are fractured; party structures are hierarchical and heavily dependent on the personality of the party leader. The ideologies of most of the parties are weak appealing not to concrete constituents but to the nation as a whole. In fact, in terms of ideology and party programs, there is relatively little to distinguish Armenian

political parties. Party platforms are identical and therefore they cannot serve as a rationale for a party loyalty. Personal disagreements between leaders often result in party splits and a proliferation of small parties. Individuals use the parties as tools to gain power and do little with them to aggregate public interest. Thus, national party leadership is disconnected from the average citizen.

To sum it up, many challenges face the development of a pluralistic, democratic, and competitive political party system in Armenia. Although Armenia has been independent for fifteen years, autocratic mentalities and practices remain deeply rooted in the country.

THEORIES EXPLAINING POLITICAL PARTIES

The renowned political scientist E. E. Scattshneider (1942, 1) once concluded "modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties." Similarly, James Bryce (1921, 119) stated "parties are inevitable… No one has shown how representative government could be worked without them." Joseph Schumpeter (1942) emphasized the role of parties in his definition of democracy as "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's votes". These views are shared by many other political scientists and political analysts, ranging from the *American Political Science Association's* call for more responsible party government in 1950, to a 1999 *Economist* article that examines the role of political parties as the basis for democracy (24 July 1999).

The political science literature lists a great many party functions that parties perform in a democracy. These functions reflect the importance ascribed to parties. V. O. Key (1964) used a tripartite framework in describing parties' functions: parties in the electorate, parties as political organizations, and parties as governing institutions. For the purposes of this study it is

appropriate to focus on the functions that parties perform in the electorate, i.e. their work with the public: simplifying choices for voters; educating citizens; generating symbols of identification and loyalty; mobilizing people to participate.

Simplifying choices for voters. Politics can be rather complex for an average voter. Modern electoral research has demonstrated that the average voter often finds it hard to make sense of all the issues and choices confronting him or her at an election (Campbell et al. 1960, Dalton and Wattenberg 1993). Political parties help to make politics 'user-friendly' for citizens. When the political parties take clear and consistent policy positions, voters are offered valuable information about specific candidates and policy issues. Once voters know which party represents their interests, this information can guide their view of the issues and behavior at the polls (Campbell et al. 1960). From a rational choice perspective, Morris Fiorina (1981) has shown how party identification can be an 'economizing device' for voters faced with complex political decisions.

Educating citizens. Parties educate, inform and persuade the public. They often bring certain issues to the public attention and draw attention to their specific position on the issues. In other instances parties educate their followers concerning why they should take certain policy stands. Samuel Popkin (1991) has described elections as courses in civic education, with political parties as the teachers.

Generating symbols of identification and loyalty. It has long been argued that loyalty to a political party makes citizens less susceptible to being influenced by demagogic leaders and extremist movements (Converse and Dupeux 1962). Converse (1969) also argued that partisan attachments are a conserving and stabilizing force in a democracy, creating continuity in voter

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choices and election outcomes. Furthermore, political dissatisfaction with governmental activities can be directed at specific institutions rather than the state itself.

Mobilizing people to participate. In nearly all democratic polities, political parties play an important role in getting people to vote and participate in the electoral process (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba et al. 1978). Party organizations work actively to solicit votes and mobilize citizens to become involved in the campaign itself.

According to Russel J. Dalton (2000), the number of campaign rallies organized by a party, the election mailers and brochures, and the party contact with voters "are means toward an end—developing public support for the party, and indirectly legitimacy for a system of party-based democracy."

These functions that parties are to perform in democratic societies can be used as a useful tool in order to evaluate to what extent Armenian political parties are successful in performing them.

This research study will address the basic issue of responsiveness of the political parties and propose policy recommendations for strengthening the development of a democratic and accountable party system in Armenia. It aims at discovering how Armenian parties learn about public opinion; utilize public opinion in order to represent the public's interests, and which strategic tools they use to influence public opinion. By comparing parties that got elected to the National Assembly in 2003 with those that participated in the elections but were not elected, this study will reveal whether those having representatives in Parliament have been conducting more active work with public opinion. Therefore, the basic aim of this research is discovering whether public opinion makes a difference in Armenia. For the above-mentioned purposes the following research questions are the focus of this study.

1. To what extent do the political parties in Armenia understand the power of public opinion?

2. Is the age of the party related to its current understanding of and work with public opinion?

3. How do the parties in Armenia understand the functions they are to implement in a democratic society?

4. What do the parties do to inform and educate the general public?

5. What tools do the parties use to learn about the electoral priorities of the public?

6. To what extent are the parties responsive to the electoral interests?

7. What kind of strategies do the parties use to influence public opinion?

8. How do the parties work with Mass Media?

9. To what extent do the parties evaluate the necessity of interactive communications or outreach with the general public?

10. Do the political parties compete with each other over who is the most responsive to the voters' interests?

This research will attempt to find support for the following hypotheses:

1. There is a relationship between the frequency of public forums and gatherings and the percentage of votes got by the parties during the 2003 parliamentary elections.

2. Parties represented currently in the National Assembly conduct more active work with public opinion as compared with those that are not.

3. There is a relationship between the percent of votes political parties got during 2003 National Assembly elections and their resources for mass media activities.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to identify how political parties in Armenia learn about the public concerns and public opinion in general, and how the parties themselves influence the public opinion in Armenia.   The study employs descriptive research. The units of analysis in this research study are Armenian political parties. The study sample is purposefully selected to include five political parties or blocks that got at least 5% support of the electorate during the 2003 National Assembly elections and five parties that did not pass the 5% barrier in order to make comparisons with regard to their responsiveness to and influence on public opinion. In-depth interviews are used for collecting the data.

Following is the list of political parties used as the sample for this study:

Political parties that were elected in 2003 National Assembly elections:

1. Hayastani Hanrapetakan Kusaktsutyun (RPA)—Republican Party of Armenia

2. Orinats Erkir (OE)—Rule of Law Country

3. Hay Heghapokhakan Dashnaktsutyun (ARF)—Armenian Revolutionary Federation

4. Miavorvats Ashatankayin Kusaktsutyun (MAK)—United Labor Party

5. Azgayin Zhoghovrdavarakan Kusaktsutyun (AZhK)---National Democratic Party

Political parties that were not elected in 2003 National Assembly Elections:

1. Azgayin Hamadzaynutyun—National Consent

2. Hayastani Misavorvats Komunistakan Kusaktsutyun—United Communist Party of Armenia

3. Hzor Hayrenik Kusaktsutyun---Powerful Motherland

4. Hayastani Ramkavar-Azatakan Kusaktsutyun (LDP)—Liberal-Democratic Party of Armenia

5. Hayastani Zhoghovrdakan Azatakan Miutyun (HZhAK)—Liberal-Democratic Union of Armenia

In each political party the person directly responsible for public relations was interviewed. In two parties (National Consent, HZhAK) the party heads were interviewed.

FINDINGS

As it has been mentioned earlier in this study the political parties in Armenia are divided into traditional/historical, independence, and post-independence parties. From the traditional parties the study sample includes the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and the Liberal Democratic (Ramkavar) Party. From the independence parties the study includes only the Republican Party of Armenia. The rest of the parties belong to the post-independence era. All of these parties participated in 2003 parliamentary elections.

Regardless of their date of creation the political parties in Armenia face the same problems and impediments for their future development. The main drawbacks of the Armenian party system as mentioned by the parties themselves are discussed below.

Five out of the ten parties included in the sample named the lack of clear and distinct ideology as the major drawback of the Armenian parties. These parties are: The Liberal Democratic Union of Armenia (HZhAK), National Democratic Party, United Labor Party, Rule of Law Country, and RPA. The United Labor further stated that the parties do not clarify their belonging to the right or left wing because they do not have orientation yet. The parties prefer not to declare their ideological belonging so that afterwards they can support decisions having the greatest popular appeal. The Rule of Law was of the opinion that parties are created mostly before elections to win power, so their ideologies are copied from the Internet and remain on paper. That is the reason why parties appear and collapse in one day. RPA also mentioned that

as a result of ideological vacuum politicians frequently change their party allegiance. The same phenomenon can be observed in all post-communist states.

Another drawback named by the four parties (Powerful Motherland, The United Communist Party of Armenia, National Democratic Party, and ARF) was the personality-centric character of most of the Armenian parties. The ARF expressed the view that parties are based on the image and personality of their respective leaders. When the leader is removed or stops his activities the party collapses. In fact, ARF was named by most of the parties as an exception in this regard as it has proved throughout its history that there is no specific leader on whom it is dependent. Interestingly, this fact was considered to be a major flaw of ARF by the Rule of Law. The latter is of the opinion that every party besides having ideology should also have a leader. It is one of the drawbacks of ARF that it does not have a leader whom it can promote as a distinct candidate for presidency. It is a great disadvantage not to have a leader with appropriate education, appearance and image, since the aim of any party is to win power.

Three of the parties (National Consent, National Democratic Party, and United Labor) mentioned also that the programs of the parties are declarative in nature and they do not become actions. Parties just declare problems without suggesting concrete solutions. So, Armenian parties are mostly 'office parties'; the link with the people is established only during the elections.

Armenian Parties' Understanding of the Functions of Political Parties

With regards to different functions that political parties are to perform in a democracy, opinions varied as to the intensity of the performed functions. Among the general functions the most prominent answers were: to unite the people (United Labor); to form and the develop the societal and political thought, to solidify the feeling of state in the society (HZhAK); to feel their

duty before the people and the state; to become the spirit of the time and build the right kind of socialism (The United Communist Party of Armenia); to inspire hope towards the future in terms of political thought, to preserve national values (LDP).

As to the parties' understanding of the democratic functions to be performed by parties, only the Rule of Law directly named founding of democracy as one of the parties' functions, through realization of which it becomes possible to perform other functions, such as bringing its ideas to the public. RPA expressed the view that if there is a multi-party system in place, it is already democracy and therefore parties do not need to consolidate it further. LDP mentioned creating civil society as one of the parties' democratic functions. The most profound understanding of a party's democratic function was demonstrated by the National Democratic Party which stated that the function of the pro-governmental parties is using power as leverage, whereas the function of the opposition parties is creating public opinion, being an alternative to those in power, observing the drawbacks in legal initiatives and raising their voice. Thus, the idea of checks and balances was expressed.

The opinion that one of the political parties' functions should be bringing their ideology to the public was expressed by the Liberal Democratic Union of Armenia (HZhAK), United Labor Party, Rule of Law Country, and The Republican Party of Armenia which further specified that this should be done without using *Black PR*. The same idea was expressed both by the United Communist Party of Armenia and OE: parties should not interfere with and downgrade the work of the other parties.

Of the ten parties only four were of the opinion that parties should also perform such functions as realizing their programs through coming to power (National Democratic Party), expressing the interests of the people by ensuring decent life for all with no distinction as to the

social class (ARF), doing an everyday work with the electorate as every work wins a vote (RPA), suggesting solutions to the problems and solving them by the methods propagated by the party (United Labor). The United Labor further specified that the function of the civil society is to raise issues. As compared to it, political parties should suggest decisions; their function is incomplete if they only raise issues, the parties should be problem solvers. So, their main function is problem solving through political leverages.

Informing and Educating the General Public

One of the functions of political parties in a democracy, as stated by V. O. Key (1964), should be educating and informing the public. Parties should bring certain issues to the public attention and emphasize their specific position on the issues. In other instances parties educate their followers concerning why they should take certain policy stands. This study will reveal how the political parties in Armenia implement this function.

Five out of the ten parties interviewed (Powerful Motherland Party, National Consent Party, National Democratic Party, Rule of Law Country, and ARF) emphasized the importance of the immediate contact with the people (such as meetings in marzes, villages) for presenting their platforms and standing on issues of importance to Armenia. The Rule of Law further specified that the party had recently initiated a program called *Drnedur* (From Door to Door) which organizes visits to every household in the city of Yerevan for presenting the party's program and ideology, through booklets, speeches, etc. Due to this program many people have already become party members or bearers of the party's ideology. According to the party official, the program will be implemented in the regional organizations as well.

All the parties, except the *National Consent Party*, named mass media as the major way of presenting their programs and standing on the issues to the public. The Democratic Free Union

of Armenia used all the types of mass media available: television, radio, press, Internet. Ramkavars use only their web page to present their programs to the public. The United Communist Party of Armenia uses both television and the official party paper *Dzayn Bazmats*. However, as the party official stated, they did not make unnecessary efforts to present their views to the public. The United Labor Party mentioned that they were the only party that had bought air time and had a TV program on ALM channel twice a week (on Mondays and Fridays). The Rule of Law claimed that their party newspaper had the greatest circulation in Armenia and thus, was the basic means of bringing the party's programs and ideas to the public, especially when television became virtually unavailable for them after their entering the opposition field. The RPA has a web page and the *Republican* monthly (which is mostly ideological). Moreover, the party has a mass media and PR department which organizes press conferences. Using such tools as press conferences as well as announcements, public speeches, interviews as a means of presenting the party's standing on issues was also mentioned by the Liberal Democratic Union of Armenia, Ramkavar-Azatakan Party, National Democratic Party, and United Labor Party.

National Consent Party, HZhAK, Ramkavar-Azatakan Party, and Rule of Law Country also mentioned such methods as distributing booklets, brochures and circulars for presenting their parties' ideologies. The United Labor Party was the only one to mention debates as a way of presenting and defending their standing on issues to the public.

All the five parties in the study sample represented in Parliament (National Democratic Party, United Labor Party, Rule of Law Country, ARF, and RPA) mentioned speeches and announcements in the National Assembly as a major way of keeping the public informed about their respective parties' standing on issues of importance for Armenia. The United labor also

mentioned the *Parliament Hour* TV program through which their party has a chance of presenting their views and activities to the public.

As to the question of how the parties educate their followers concerning why they should take certain policy stands, most of the parties did not mention any distinct method of educating people. The Powerful Motherland Party simply recognizes the necessity of basing policy stands on reasonable judgments; otherwise it is impossible to persuade the public. HZHAK was confident that their 18-year-old practice of political work had already earned them a credit in the eyes of the public and in the political world. Moreover, the party has clearly defined arguments which need not be further clarified. The United Communist Party of Armenia emphasized the power of oral speeches, meetings, debates which were meant for the representatives of the political world already knowledgeable in politics. As for the general uninformed public, the party did not mention any strategy of educating them. Ramkavars were of the opinion that the following facts were a sufficient and reasonable ground for the public to be willing to follow them: 1. the party is being ruled by young people who are not filthy with corruption and other vices; 2. their 120-year history. Thus, the necessity of educating the uninformed voter, mentioned by V. O. Key, is not yet recognized in Armenia.

Methods the Parties Use to Learn About the Electoral Priorities of the Public

In order to be responsive to public opinion, parties should first and foremost be aware of what that opinion is. Armenian parties mentioned both active and passive ways of doing this. By active methods the parties' own efforts are meant (such as organized meetings, mass media, opinion polls) by passive---the opportunities provided to the public to express their problems and concerns (such as letters, phone calls, visits).

Four of the parties (Powerful Motherland, HZhAK, Rule of Law, and ARF) among other things mention organized meetings with the public as a means of becoming aware of the people's concerns. Seven of the ten parties emphasized the importance of the regional organizations for getting involved into interactive communication with people. ARF further stated that it was of the utmost importance to be within the people. The party claimed that people knew where they were and could always go to them with their problems. Overall, all the parties agreed that it is very important to create effective regional outreach to the people.

The Liberal Democratic Union of Armenia named bringing of the issues by the surrounding societal structures to the agenda of the party administration as one of the ways of learning about people's problems. RPA mentioned that the parties' deputies elected by the majoritarian system become aware of and raise the issues and problems of their particular constituents.

Only three of the parties (National Democratic Party, United Labor Party, and ARF) use mass media to become aware of the people's problems. Interestingly, all the three parties have representatives in Parliament. The United Labor Party claimed having a media analyzing center supplied with modern technologies which analyzes the content of the media and updates the party's awareness of the public's priorities.

Opinion polls as a method of learning about electoral priorities are not conducted frequently in Armenia. As the head of the National Consent Party mentioned, "Public research should be conducted professionally, and we do not have resources for conducting professional research. It is not difficult to become aware of the people's problems. In order to taste sea water you needn't drink the whole sea, just one cup is enough."

Interestingly, from five parties represented in Parliament, four conduct opinion polls and survey research to find out the party's overall image and the electorate's opinion on different

political issues. Those parties are: United Labor Party, Rule of Law Country, ARF, and RPA. The fifth party having a representative in Parliament (National Democratic Party) claimed that their active interaction with the public was sufficient for knowing public opinion and Armenian people's problems are already well-known to everyone.

From those not represented in Parliament, The Ramkavars and the Powerful Motherland Party conduct surveys through the regional organizations concerning both the major problems and the party's image. The rest claimed that the information was sufficient to realize the problems of the people. HZhAK stated that they did not conduct it themselves; they used research done by others on the eve of elections.

As to the 'passive' methods of learning about public opinion, six parties named visits, phone calls, letters as the basic means of the people expressing themselves.

Responsiveness to Electoral Interests

Seven parties out of the ten in the sample agreed that in order to be responsive to the electoral interests, parties need political leverage through the representation in Parliament and Government. All the five parties represented in Parliament stated that their primary means to solve people's problems was through raising issues and proposing draft legal acts in the National Assembly. The National Democratic Party specified that a country should be based on the rule of law. They are the initiators of many draft laws in the National Assembly, as well as they make interpellations from the tribune of the National Assembly. Besides legislative initiative the United Labor stressed that they were engaged in ongoing work with the government and the local authorities by discussing problems. Their representatives are also trying to find solutions to the problems of their constituents through proposing items during the adoption of the state budget which would maximally reflect their electorate's interests.

The Rule of Law named concrete legislative initiatives made by the party deputies in the National Assembly, such as the return of the savings of the Soviet times, support of the young families with hypothec credits proportionate to the number of children.

The RPA stated that as a result of their activities there had been a ten times increment to the budget allocations meant for the youth problems. The party is also actively working on the improvement of the cultural life of the country; as a result of their activities Houses of Culture in nearly all the marzes have been reconstructed.

ARF which is currently in the coalition, said, "We have never stopped working even when we were not represented in the Government, unlike other parties, whose only aim is to achieve power. And if they do not, they forget about their programs…" However, parties that had no representation in the National Assembly were rather pessimistic about what they can do to solve people's problems. The Powerful Motherland mentioned that they did apply to the Government with this or that issue; however it was not very effective. Some of the parties in this group did refer to concrete activities which were possible without political leverage. The United Communist Party of Armenia mentioned applying through letters to state institutions to solve this or that problem. HZhAK claimed that they represented the interests of a certain electorate-- small and medium-size businessmen and their concerns. They make every effort so that the state takes into consideration the concerns of the small and medium-size entrepreneurs, provides the necessary resources, and satisfies the interests of their electorate. They discuss the formation and creation of new resources for political structures. Ramkavars said they normally find a specialist pertaining to a particular problem, ask a counsel, give it a political thought, and present it to the people. Ramkavars also mentioned that they directed the aid from Diaspora to those in need. Interestingly, ARF (another traditional/historic party) also mentioned providing aid from

Diaspora to the people in need. It should be taken into account that these two parties continued their activities in Diaspora during the Soviet period of the ruling Communist Party, and at present they still have close relations with Diaspora. That is why they are also called Diaspora parties.

Three of the parties having representation in Parliament and the National Consent Party shared the opinion that political parties are political organizations and not charity institutions to distribute financial assistance to people. The National Consent was of the opinion that it is meaningless to distribute money to the people; that will not solve their problems. A party should be the link between the people and the government.

United Labor stated, "We are not obliged to help people materially as we are a political party. Being a political party we do not look for local solutions to problems but try to find systematic solutions." The same idea was expressed by the Rule of Law whose representative claimed that a party is not a social service; it should not win support by distributing money. RPA went as far as to assert that the phenomenon of such parties as *Bargavach Hayastan (Prosperous Armenia)* is very dangerous for our reality when parties without distinct platforms win votes by distributing material benefits. People do not understand that they will spend that money but the reality in the country will remain the same. "We need an ideological field, and the election results should be determined through the debates as in most Western democracies," claimed the party official.

However Rule of Law mentioned providing financial assistance within the reasonable limits. They sometimes become sponsors or provide advisory and legal services. But this support is mainly structural. The RPA official said that people come to them with their social or bureaucratic problems and the party tries to help them. They are sponsors of a football team. They allocate pensions to the families of the killed freedom fighters of the war in Karabakh, pay

tuition in high schools. Two other parties also mentioned sponsorship as a means of being helpful to the people--Powerful Motherland and United Labor.

Methods the Parties Use to Influence Public Opinion

In a democratic society with a multiparty system, parties use different strategies to get the votes of the public. In order to win support of the public parties should naturally influence the opinion of that public. It is appropriate to discuss now what is considered by the Armenian parties to be the most important way of influencing public opinion and whether they have resources for doing it.

Five of the parties (three elected and two not elected) considered mass media to be the most effective way of influencing public opinion. The National Consent Party emphasized television as the most effective type of media. The National Democratic Party further specified that one can never predict what opinions people will hold as human personality is sophisticated. But the most important way is mass media, particularly television and H1 channel.

The other five parties were of the opinion that no matter what resources the party has, concrete, tangible results of the party's activity are the best way of influencing the public opinion. The Ramkavar party mentioned that the best way to influence public opinion is being responsive to it, i.e. listening to the public and reproducing its wishes. Rule of Law was also of the opinion that making bare speeches will bring no results. The parties should realize their programs and bring real changes into the political life. The party representative further specified that Armenian people are tired of identical speeches and meaningless promises of a better life. All the parties have basically the same ideologies addressing the problems already well-known to everyone. What the people want at this concrete stage and what will influence their opinion most are real changes and tangible improvements.

The Powerful Motherland Party was of the opinion that the problem with the insufficient influence on public opinion is the fact that the majority of the people do not understand the programs of the parties as they are not presented in a comprehensive way. So, what the parties need is presenting their standing on issues in a way that the average voter can understand. However the representative of the same party mentioned that in Armenia 'black technologies' in general and 'black PR' in particular would impede the parties' voices from being heard by the public.

Still another opinion articulated by HZhAK was that parties need to do something for the public to remember, i.e. work for the public. The best way is organizing entertaining programs or holding and participating in various actions.

The United Labor stated that the main reason their party was elected in 2003 being founded only in 2002 was the fact that they had a good organization and a party team. No matter what resources the party has they should be organized in a right way with a right strategy to win public support.

As for the special department responsible for maintaining public relations, four of the parties represented in the Parliament have media or PR departments which organize the work with the media and create programs aimed at winning support of the public. The United Labor claimed having a media analyzing center supplied with modern technologies. The Rule of Law has a public relations and external relations department. They also have an information-analytical mass media department. One of their PR initiatives is *Drnedur* program which as it has been mentioned aims at spreading the party's values by going to every household in the city. As the party official claimed, there is no other way to struggle with *Black PR*. Interestingly, it was only

the National Democratic Party that did not have either a department or a person responsible for public relations.

From the five parties not having a representation in Parliament, two parties (Powerful Motherland and National Consent) have a PR department and a specialist. Both HZhAK and the United Communist Party have a PR specialist who works with mass media and organizes press conferences. Ramkavars do not have either a special department or a specialist, but they have a person responsible for maintaining public relations.

As among other methods of influencing public opinion mass media was the most frequent answer, work with the media will be discussed separately in order to reveal the parties' understanding of and work with the most influential tool of affecting public opinion.

Work with Mass Media

All the parties in the sample agreed that it is possible to influence significantly or change public opinion via mass media. However, the Powerful Motherland specified that if the "black technologies" are in place it is impossible to influence public opinion via mass media. But in 'normal democracies' mass media does influence public opinion. National Consent Party was of the opinion that opinion change is possible mainly through television. The printed media is not significant taking into account the fact that its circulation is rather limited.

As for their media resources, four parties have a web site on the Internet and a party newspaper. Three of the parties have representatives in the National Assembly: Rule of Law *(Orinats Yerkir),* ARF *(Iravunq),* RPA *(Hanrapetakan).* From those having no representatives in Parliament, only the Powerful Motherland and the United Communist Party have a party paper, however these are mainly ideological and are meant for intra-party circulation.

United Labor has a paid air time on ALM TV channel as well as a web site. Eight of the ten parties sampled have a party web page. This is a remarkable progress since more and more people in Armenia get access to Internet.

The head of the National Consent Party said that they did not have media resources. The head of the HZhAK party claimed that they did not have any kind of media resources except for a web page, as it was not the proper thing to do for a party. Both of the above mentioned parties had no representation in the National Assembly.

According to the Electoral Law (1999), all the parties are entitled to equal access to the mass media with free airtime on public television and radio and free ad space in government newspapers. Thus, equal access to free and paid air time is a part of the electoral law. However, as the study shows, not all the parties in the sample believe this provision in the Law is being equally implemented.

Two parties not represented in the National Assembly (Powerful Motherland and United Communist Party) and three having representation, said that they could always get as much of paid air time as they wanted. The National Democratic Party claimed that they could not have as much access as they wanted as there were media that did not want to cooperate with them. Another party having representation that had complaints was the Rule of Law. The party official said that the television was virtually not available for the party after the renunciation of the party leader. Moreover, their activities were interpreted mostly wrongly. Besides the price of air time is too high. Three of the parties not represented in Parliament also said they could not gain as much access as they wanted because they could not afford the price.

Five of the parties assessed said they had relations and cooperated with all the kinds of mass media. From them, the United Labor specified that they had relations with all of them but did

not cooperate, i.e. had no arrangements with media on a regular basis. The Rule of Law mentioned that they cooperated with those kinds of media that were impartial. The National Consent Party and HZhAK said they cooperated and had relations with television and newspapers. The Powerful Motherland said they had relations mainly with television--different TV channels invited them to participate in programs. All the three above mentioned parties have no representation in the National Assembly.

Four of the parties assessed claimed that the initiative to work with the media belonged *only* to the media. The United Communist Party specified that they raised issues but the initiative belonged to the media. Interestingly, all the four have no representation in the National Assembly. The fifth party (Ramkavars) said that the initiative belonged *mostly* to the media. HZhAK party stated that once the initiative had belonged to them, now to the media.

Three of the parties having representatives in Parliament (National Democratic, United Labor, ARF) said that the initiative belonged *mostly* to the media. National Democratic Party specified that if they had a press conference they invited media but in most of the cases media representatives initiated the coverage of their activities. United Labor expressed the opinion that the initiative mainly belongs to the media as it is *their* business to do it. Two other parties (Rule of Law and RPA) said that the initiative belonged equally to them and the media. However, Rule of Law was of the opinion that the initiative should belong to the media if they are really independent. They should come to the political forces to find out new ideas and make them public. As opposed to it, RPA stated that the initiative should belong to the party because if the party does not want to disclose some information how can media cover it, no matter how it wants to?

The work with the media becomes meaningless if the parties do not have specific goals and purposes with regard to this work and if their relations are spontaneous lacking any meaningful strategy. So, it is of the utmost importance that the political parties realize what their media related objectives are.

Three of the parties not represented in Parliament named informing the public as the main purpose of their media related activities. The United Communist Party said their main objective was showing to the public that they still exist, have not changed their ideology concerning politics, and will not leave their followers. The Ramkavars named the following goals: to make the programs more understandable to the public, to create the image of their party.

Those parties that are represented in Parliament demonstrated more profound understanding of their media related goals. The National Democratic Party named three main objectives: 1) to keep people informed about party programs; 2) to raise a particular issue in the society and to present their viewpoint; 3) to propagate their ideology. Interestingly the United Labor mentioned basically the same goals: to raise issues in the light of their ideology and to suggest solutions as well as to create the image of the party. The Rule of Law named such general goals as bringing to the public who they are, what they want, and what kind of Armenia they dream. RPA named two basic goals: presenting objectively the activities of the party; promoting freedom of speech. ARF stated their main goals as follows: to present the activities of the party; increase the political involvement; increase the rating of the party; inform of their standing on different issues. But the main objective was the promotion of democracy. "Armenia is not historically predisposed to democracy. We do not have conditions for that. It is in our psychology that we have always been under dictatorship and brutal rule. To achieve democracy

we should change the psychology of people through media. People should realize that democracy is creating their own government and therefore governing themselves…"

Interactive Communication and Outreach with the General Public

Although nowadays mass communication systems gradually replace the importance of the interactive communication with the public, one can never underestimate the necessity of organizing meetings and gatherings for creating a more intimate contact with people. As the United Communist Party's official claimed, "During the meeting the spirit of the party is felt more profoundly. Meetings are more effective than media."

Five of the parties (Powerful Motherland Party, National Consent Party, National Democratic Party, Rule of Law Country, and ARF) emphasized the importance of the immediate contact with the people (such as meetings in marzes, villages) for winning support of the electorate. As it has been mentioned, the Rule of Law is the initiator of the program *Drnedur* the essence of which is going to every household for presenting and explaining the party's programs. As the party official claimed, there is no other way of struggle with *Black PR.*

According to Powerful Motherland, HZhAK, Rule of Law, Ramkavars, and ARF, organized meetings with the public are very important to become aware of the people's problems and concerns. Seven of the ten parties stressed the importance of the regional organizations for getting involved into interactive communication with people. Ramkavars said they did not see other means of effective work with the public. Rule of Law claimed that they strived to make regions centers for political debates to establish democratic norms as regions are the main circles of communication through which information systematically goes to the center. ARF further stated that it is essential for any party to be within people. People should know where the party is to go there with their problems. Overall, all the parties agreed that it is very important to

create effective regional outreach to the people. However, the head of the HZhAK stated that outreach with the public should not be for demagogy; the parties should use the meetings to solve people's problems.

As for the frequency of organizing public forums and gatherings, the study revealed the following results. All the parties claimed that during pre-election period the political life naturally becomes more active, and within the framework of the parties' electoral campaigns the frequency of meetings and gatherings with the electorate increases. On the average from the non-represented parties the Powerful Motherland Party claimed organizing public gatherings three times a month; National Consent Party—once a month; HZhAK—twice a month; the United Communist Party—once every three months; Ramkavars—twice a month. Form the represented parties National Democratic Party—whenever necessary; United Labor, Rule of Law, ARF, and RPA —every week. It becomes clear form this data that parties represented in the National Assembly conduct meetings with general public more often than those that are not.

Political leaders should be linked with their constituents in democratic societies. Therefore, the political dialogue with the average citizen on the issues of importance for the electorate should be an essential part of party politics.

Virtually all the parties assessed in this study claimed that they did use political dialogue with the citizens on different issues. National Democratic Party said that using a political dialogue was their credo since democracy presupposes plurality of voices. The United Labor claimed that their central office and regional organizations held public receptions once a week. RPA official stated that they were constantly engaged in dialogue with the citizens as without it they would lose control of the situation. The citizens often give reasonable advice which they take into consideration.

From the parties' responses it becomes clear that Armenian parties at least understand the importance of creating active links with the citizens. This finding contradicts with the USAID, *Armenia Political Party Assessment* (May 2005), according to which most political parties lack strong roots in Armenian society and are disconnected from a shifting electoral base.

It goes without saying that the more members a political party can claim, the greater the chance is that the ideas which the party promotes have found a certain support among the citizenry and therefore, the party does a tangible work with public opinion. So, whether or not parties are interested in recruiting new members and the methods they use for doing it becomes very important for understanding the party's work with public opinion.

Two of the non-parliamentary parties (Powerful Motherland and National Consent) and two of the parliamentary parties (Rule of Law and ARF) stated that recruiting new members should be the purpose of any party. The main ways for doing it are the regional organizations of any party, TV appearances, and public meetings. HZhAK party claimed that they were representing the interests of a certain electorate (small and medium businesses), so there was no need of active recruitment. The rest of the parties stated that recruitment was not their major goal. People should first and foremost be the bearers of the party's ideology.

The United Communist Party stated that they had 3742 members who were powerful bearers of the ideology. If someone did not share the ideology, there was no need to recruit him/her. Ramkavars stated that they had created a new institution of co-thinkers who did not necessarily have to be party members; and it was very effective for getting people to adopt the party's ideology. The National Democratic Party was also of the opinion that new members should primarily be the bearers of the party's ideology; they were not interested in artificially increasing the number of party members. The United Labor Party shared the same opinion, i.e. they were

interested in members that share their ideology. "We respect the liberty of each individual. We propagate our ideas to those who are interested in getting additional information," stated the party official. RPA claimed that being the first registered party in Armenia and a serious political power they did not see recruiting new members as an aim in itself. However, if the flow to the party gets reduced that means naturally that the party has a problem which should be solved. The party official claimed, "We are against artificial recruiting. It is better to have a large army of co-thinkers than artificial members. Those that are recruited artificially will leave the party artificially." It becomes clear that some major political players in Armenian party politics prefer the quality of the party members over their quantity.

All the parties in the sample stated that there have been such cases when their party members changed party allegiance. As it has been claimed by the Powerful Motherland official, in Armenia changing party allegiance has become a part of one's life. Today they are in the *Republican Party*, tomorrow in *Bargavach Hayastan (Prosperous Armenia)*. The reason is the fact that people mostly join parties not for ideological convictions but expecting certain benefits. This asserts the ideological weakness of most of the parties in Armenia. That is why as it has been mentioned above, most parties in the sample do not artificially recruit members but primarily look for people that share the party's ideology. Some parties (Powerful Motherland, United Communist, and United Labor) even claimed that before becoming party members people should prove their loyalty to the party. The most interesting case in this regard was the Rule of Law. The party official claimed that since they had joined opposition, most of the politicians quitted their membership. Mostly these there those people that did not imagine themselves being in the opposition or had distinct expectations connected with the party. From another perspective this has been a positive phenomenon since OE has got rid of those people that did

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not share the party ideology but had become members to come to power. "Now whoever is left, we can distinctly say, shares our ideology, since it is not easy to be in opposition today. After the renunciation new members have joined the party. People appreciated this daring step on our part and believed in us," said the party official.

Inter-Party Competition

Multi-party systems in a democracy presuppose competition among political parties in order to win the support of the electorate. Parties should be constantly engaged in political debates with each other over who is the most responsive to the voters' interests. These debates should be publicized, for the public to be able to choose among the competing parties.

Practically all the parties in the study claimed being engaged in debates with other parties. However, parties represented in Parliament appeared to have a more profound understanding of the purpose and nature of debates in a democratic society. The United Labor claimed that if a party is represented in Parliament it is in constant debate with the representatives of other parties. They have discussions in the Great Hall of the National Assembly. They participate in debate clubs as well. The National Democratic Party official said that all the legal acts were created in the course of debates among the representatives of different parliamentary parties. The Rule of Law said they were always ready for debates and they were mostly publicized by the "Press Club+" program on *Yerkir Media*. RPA representative stated that they were constantly initiating debates with other parties. "We have recently had such a debate with our opposition colleagues. We have debates also with many NGOs. We had a protest action against the religious movements. We try to maintain normal human relations with everyone; one should be respectful to the other political forces that have an opinion. Plurality is the precondition of democracy," stated the party official. As for the debates outside the National Assembly, the party official said

that the parties in Armenia lack an ideological field in order to be able to debate over ideological issues as in most Western democracies.

As for the parties not represented in Parliament, they claimed that they were engaged in debates whenever there was a possibility. The head of the National Consent Party said that all the parties are engaged in debates 'at a distance' with the other parties. Propagating one's position is a debate. "There is no political culture in Armenia concerning real debates because of the underdeveloped tradition of debates. Parties conduct debates aimed at downgrading the opponent's personality, not defending their standpoint on a particular issue," claimed the party official.

In a market economy businesses should conduct market research to see what production is being offered. In a multi-party democracy parties should be interested how the other parties address the interests of the electorate. Four of the parties in the sample said they were aware of the other parties' activities as much as they were publicized through media. National Consent Party claimed that other parties' methods of addressing voters' interests were more or less the same if one disregards the fact that some of them give bribes to the electorate. The United Communists said that it was not their business to interfere with other parties' methods. Parties mostly use demagogy and it was not adequate with their methods. It was only the Rule of Law that claimed having an active interest with the other parties' activities. In general, opposing parties are seen as enemies rather than as democratic competitors or a loyal opposition.

Understanding the Power of Public Opinion

The rational concept of the public opinion, expressed by Speier (1950), presupposes a rational, well-informed citizen capable of advancing sensible arguments and making sound judgments. The concept of "public opinion as social control" (Burke, 1826) presupposes a

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sufficient level of consensus on which actions and decisions may be based, including all members of society, regardless of the level of information, interest, and influence. According to G. Sartori (1994), people are always right even if they are wrong. Moreover, people have the right to make their own mistakes. This statement reconciles in itself the 'rational' and the 'social control' concept of public opinion. Moreover, consistent with the findings of B. Page and Y. Shapiro (1982), public opinion is overall stable over a variety of political issues, it is rational.

Parties not represented in National Assembly were rather pessimistic about public opinion in Armenia. They claimed that the reason they were not elected was the fraudulent elections and public disenchantment with politics. Practically all of them asserted that the official results of the elections varied greatly from the real percentage of votes their party got during the elections.

Powerful Motherland stated that public opinion has not made a difference up to now and it will hardly make in future. The head of the National Consent claimed that public opinion can make a difference but the probability is very low. The first prerequisite for making difference is free and a fair elections, as the public expresses its opinion mostly during the elections. That is why public opinion does not make a considerable difference.

As opposed to them, parties that were elected were certain that if there is a meaningful work done with the public, the opinion of that public does make a difference. Large masses of public cannot be ignored, and the opinion of the public matters if it is strong and consistent.

The RPA official stated that for being elected parties in Armenia need a powerful ideology and a distinct political platform as well as everyday work with the electorate based on distinct party programs. He further asserted, "Public opinion mattered since the times of Ancient Greece. If it is ignored there can be serious implications. One should never disregard public opinion as history shows what such disregard could mean: Hitler, Stalin, etc. But first of all the

public should realize its power to make a difference. An independent media is a major prerequisite for that. The problem with the public in Armenia is that it is inert and shifts the responsibility to the politicians."

Political Parties and Public Opinion in Armenia

Democracy has still a long road to go in Armenia. Based on the previous discussion and on the parties' assessment of the situation in Armenia, it is possible to identify the following problems and impediments to the further development of the party system in Armenia. The major one is the fact that opposition parties are focused not on offering policy alternatives but on removing the government and seizing the power. In reality, a political struggle (in a classical sense) between the authorities and the opposition is non-existent. Getting some ministerial posts, a political party becomes pro-governmental or splits. And vice versa, when a political party is not a ruling one but holds a top position and then is deprived of it, it joins the ranks of the opposition.

Second, most Armenian parties lack a coherent ideology, platform, and policy program. Few parties offer alternative choices to the voting public with regards to concrete policies, thus appealing to the nation as a whole and claiming to present a national ideology, which translates to defense of Armenian territorial integrity and culture. Thus, there is a lack of clear differences in party programs, left—right differences are blurred, and political alliances cut across ideological lines. This state of affairs hardly provides voters with clear-cut choices. As it was mentioned by Vahan Hovhannisyan, Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly during his speech, it is premature to draw a left-right line of classification for Armenian political parties. Being the chairman of the *Armenian Revolutionary Federation*, he mentioned that notwithstanding the fact that *Dashnaktsutyun* is a social-democratic party, the party members in

the National Assembly seldom vote for pro-socialist issues. It is premature to promote socialism in Armenia as it might hinder economic development and harm businesses.

To sum it up, it remains the case that national issues seem to be an overwhelmingly dominant force in Armenian politics, and compared with other countries' political parties, all Armenian political parties are very nationalistically oriented.

Third, parties are personality-centric, they form, exist, and function around powerful leaders without whom they would become marginalized, as is the case with the *People's Party of Armenia* after the death of its leader K. Demirchian. The formation of most parties does not follow or reflect the interests of existing social strata: it rather centers on certain, political figures.

Fourth, ideology and policies are developed by a top-down, leadership-centric approach. This is largely due to an autocratic political culture and autocratic leaders and party institutions, and a lack of basic understanding of how a democracy actually functions, including its value systems, basic principles, and practices.

Fifth, most Armenian political parties lack broad societal reach and deep contacts in Armenian society. There also seems to be a great deal of mistrust of or indifference to political parties by the public; there is little sense that parties are their representatives or channels of communication to government. In the 2004 *International Foundation for Electoral Systems* (IFES) survey only three percent of the respondents thought political party membership was a way to influence government.

Like in many post-Soviet societies, due to the 70-year rule of the hegemonic Communist Party, there is a certain anti-party bias in politics. In addition, a middle class, the prerequisite of party system development in other countries, has been slow to emerge in Armenia because of

poor economic conditions. There is, in other words, little connection between citizens and parties which is a major constraint to democratic development. Exceptions to this rule exist, in particular among traditional parties, like the *Armenian Revolutionary Federation*, which has extensive contacts both inside and outside of Armenia, in the Diaspora, and is a member of Socialist International. But on the whole, most political parties lack strong roots in Armenian society and are disconnected from a shifting electoral base.

It is certainly a progress in itself that parties themselves realize the existence of many of these problems in the Armenian party system. They also realize the functions to be performed by each party in a democratic society. As mentioned by most of the parties, parties in a democracy should represent the electorate's interests, offer distinct policy alternatives, and realize their programs through coming to power.

One of the functions of political parties as stated by V. O. Key (1964) should be educating the citizens and presenting their standing on different issues. As the study demonstrates, Armenian parties present their party platforms mainly through mass media, public meetings, and distributing booklets to the public. However, they do not realize the importance of bringing certain policy problems to the attention of the public, educating voters concerning different political issues and defending their standpoint on them. This is largely because their programs and policy stands are more or less the same. Parties in Armenia do not realize that in a democracy parties should offer policy alternatives on the issues and represent interests of a concrete electorate. In their opinion, political party struggle boils down to the struggle for power based on whose voice is louder, or whose resources are more. Thus, the ultimate aim of the parties is coming to power using various means except those of policy, i.e. being a real alternative to each other.

The study revealed that parties represented in Parliament have more strategies and resources to learn about electoral priorities and issues. They have more effective regional outreach with the public, possess media analyzing centers, and most importantly, they conduct opinion polls and public research in general to become aware of the people's problems and concerns, to receive feedback on a particular policy decision of the party, and to assess the party's overall image. This is very important for creating a responsive party system, as the most exact measure of the public opinion, as stated by Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin (1991), are opinion polls. "Before the advent of the public opinion polls one had to rely on much more inexact measures of what the public was thinking." (Erikson et. al, p. 43). Most informal methods of assessing public opinion, such as letters, phone calls, meetings, have a bias in them. For example, people who write letters on public issues tend to be more "extreme" in their opinions than the bulk of the public. Also when people contact public officials, they tend to contact those with whom they ordinarily agree. Similarly, public officials listen more attentively to the views of the people with whom they ordinarily agree. For this reason, a distorted view of public opinion can be received. However, both elected and not elected parties emphasized the importance of the above mentioned "informal methods" of assessing public opinion.

The basic idea of democracy is responsiveness and accountability to the electoral interests. If parties are not responsive they will not be re-elected, provided the elections are free and fair. According to the concept of the spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann, 1973, 1984/1993), all societies threaten with isolation individuals who deviate from the consensus, and individuals in turn experience fear of isolation. Individuals constantly observe their environment, in order to see which opinions and modes of behavior will win the approval of society and which will lead to their isolation. According to the USAID, Armenia Political Party Assessment (May 2005), the

lack of a free and fair electoral process and endemic corruption distorts incentives in Armenia's political process and, as a result, most political parties are not responsive to the electorate's interests. This has resulted in a vicious cycle that has added to increasing citizen disenchantment. Since parties do not aggregate interests or coherently frame political debates, the general public has begun to disengage from political life. This can be interpreted as the phenomenon of the "spiral of silence" in the sense that the public is sure beforehand that the election results will be fraudulent, that they will not make a difference, and this "opinion" spreads throughout the population like the climate. From the previous discussion it is apparent that more or less significant parties do have an understanding of public opinion and try to work with it. So, the basic problem to be solved is abolishing citizen disenchantment, breaking this "spiral of silence" by promoting the idea that any citizen in a democracy can and is entitled to make a difference. Interestingly, political parties not having passed the 5% barrier are of the opinion that they can never make a difference as the elections are fraudulent. They should realize that it is them who should be promoting democracy. Their basic task should be bringing it to the people that they can make a difference and not disenchant them by proclaiming beforehand that the elections will be fraudulent.

Interestingly, all the five parties in the study not having passed the 5% barrier asserted that for the political parties to be elected in Armenia there should be free and fair elections, and the public opinion can make a difference only if there are free and fair elections. They never indicated working with public opinion for those "free and fair elections" to take place. As opposed to them, parties having passed the 5% barrier, expressed belief in public opinion by asserting that for being elected parties need a powerful support of the large masses of public. All

the parties represented in the National Assembly asserted that public opinion is a very powerful weapon.

All the parties in the study claimed that in order to be responsive parties need political leverage through the representation in Parliament. Applying to different state institutions with this or that problem was claimed to be hopeless without representation. However, Armenian Revolutionary Federation asserted that even without political leverage they had tried to be responsive to people's problems and representation is not the prerequisite for responsiveness. Parties learn about public opinion in order to be responsive to it. If parties have strategies to learn about public opinion, an inference can be made that they want to be responsive to it, otherwise there would be no sense to learn about it in the first place. Interestingly, the parties in the sample that named more strategies to learn about public opinion also have more strategies to be responsive to it. These are also the parties that do not underestimate the power of public opinion for the parties to be elected in Armenia. These parties are ARF, RPA, and OE. If one takes into consideration that these parties have been re-elected in two subsequent elections, a basic inference can be made that those parties that have meaningful strategies to work with public opinion are elected. One can argue that once in Parliament parties naturally have more resources to work with public opinion and therefore more chances to be re-elected. On the other hand, one should not disregard such examples as the United Labor which as claimed by the party official was elected the next year of its creation due to significant tactics and knowledgeable team implementing public relations.

It is certainly remarkable progress that Armenian parties realize that demagogy alone cannot influence public opinion. As the parties claimed, concrete, tangible activities of the parties were the best way to win the support of the public. The reason for this is the fact that the parties'

ideologies are more or less the same, and the public is tired of meaningless promises of better life. It is certainly not a positive phenomenon that parties' programs are so much identical that policy strategies alone cannot win public appeal. Moreover, they are not presented to the public in a comprehensive way. What is more, while realizing the role of media in influencing public opinion, parties that are not in Parliament do not have enough mass media resources for influencing the opinion of the public. Represented parties have both more resources and more access to mass media as compared with parties not represented in National Assembly. They also realize the importance of maintaining active cooperation and relations with media, as opposed to the not elected parties which attain the Soviet style views of the media to take the initiative of cooperation with political parties. Furthermore, elected parties appear to have more meaningful media related goals. Besides presenting the party's ideology, they also have understanding of the importance of such objectives as promoting freedom of speech and advancing the ideas of democracy.

Besides work with the mass media, parties also try to create effective regional outreach with the public. Both elected and not elected parties realize the importance of interactive communication with the people. However, elected parties have a more profound understanding of the significance of organized meetings with the public. Moreover, they conduct them more frequently than not elected parties do. Parties represented in Parliament also reported to be conducting political dialogue with the electorate for establishing links with the society.

In a democracy parties should compete with each other over whose policy programs most represent the electorate's interests. Naturally if a party's membership is large it means that the ideology of the party has found support in the electorate. Thus, recruitment of new members becomes a test of a party's ideological appeal. However recruitment of new party members in

Armenia was not considered by the parties to be a major goal. The majority of the parties employed in the study agreed that the quality of the party members is more important than their quantity. Given the fact that party members often change their party allegiance in Armenia, it becomes clear that having large masses of co-thinkers is preferable for the parties than artificially recruiting new members. This attests to the ideological weakness of Armenian parties on the one hand, and the lack of citizen understanding of parties' role in politics on the other hand. Today Armenian citizens would readily become party members excepting certain material benefits even without knowing the party's programs and standing on policy issues.

Ideological weakness of Armenian parties is the major reason that there is a lack of the tradition of debates. Inter-party competition is virtually non-existent in Armenia as most of the parties claimed they are not interested in other parties' activities and addressing the voters' interests. Parties are engaged in political debates mostly in Parliament while discussing the draft laws. As for non-parliamentary parties, their understanding of debates boils down to propagating their programs which they call "distant debates". As claimed by the parties, in Armenia debates touch the personality of the debaters, not their standing on policy issues. Here lies the basic difference with most of the western democracies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking into account the above mentioned drawbacks of the Armenian party system, the following policy recommendations could be appropriate to promote the development of a democratic and accountable party system in Armenia.

For creating a consolidated party system in Armenia, parties need to move beyond their personal differences and work together to develop policy alternatives and solutions to Armenia's problems. They should raise issues of policy rather than personality. At minimum, parties

should offer clear and distinct policy alternatives that citizens can understand, should do so with some degree of consistency and continuity, and should work to implement those policy alternatives when in office. Only in this way can parties develop and function as the linkage institutions they are ideally supposed to be in a democratic political order.

Parties should recognize the importance of public relations and thus, should communicate with citizens more effectively and regularly. They should use strategic tools, such as public opinion research, public communication and conflict-resolution skills. What is more important, the tradition of inter-party debates should be developed in Armenia based on the example of the most western democracies.

Parties should be involved in civic education aimed at eliminating citizen disenchantment with politics and political parties and promoting values of democracy.

All the political parties should participate in election administration, supporting the development of free and fair elections in Armenia.

A critical precondition for the development of a democratic party system is equal access to media. As it has been mentioned in the study, this is not the case in Armenia. Thus, state authorities should oversee the implementation of the Electoral Law which guarantees equal access to media for all the parties.

Until the political environment becomes more conducive to political party strengthening, international communities' assistance to parties should be focused on developing the political party system instead of developing individual parties.

CONCLUSIONS

As it has been demonstrated in the previous discussion, parties that are represented in the National Assembly have more resources and strategies to learn about, be responsive to, and

influence public opinion in Armenia than parties that are outside. One may conclude that once in National Assembly, parties will be reelected during the subsequent elections. However, this is not necessarily the case. One should not disregard the example of such parties as United Labor which was established in 2002 and elected to Parliament in 2003 elections. One might also conclude that financial resources of a party play a major role in organizing campaigns and winning votes. In that case what about Rmakavar-Azatakan Party which has sufficient financial resources and active links with Diaspora and still did not pass the five percent barrier? These two examples demonstrate that neither previous representation in Parliament nor financial resources are sufficient preconditions to be elected. What parties need in order to be elected are meaningful strategies and active work with public opinion.

The study also revealed that the age of a political party is not related to its current understanding of and work with public opinion. Both ARF and Ramkavars are traditional parties; nevertheless the former has achieved remarkable progress in working with public opinion and has been elected to the National Assembly in every election since independence. Being another traditional/historic party, Ramkavar-Azatakan Party was not successful in either 1999 or 2003 parliamentary elections. The same idea can be proved by the example of the United Labor Party which although created a year before parliamentary elections and is the youngest party in the sample, has sufficient understanding of public opinion and meaningful strategies to work with it.

As the study shows parties that got elected had been conducting public forums and gatherings more frequently during pre-election period as compared with those that were not elected. Moreover, parties that were elected have more resources and strategies to work with mass media. Thus, elected parties conducted more active communication with the public. What is more,

elected parties are currently conducting more active work with the public, as they have more opportunities and resources to be active. Therefore, once in Parliament, parties have more chances to be reelected during next elections if they employ all the resources under their disposal.

As all of the previous discussion has demonstrated, political parties in Armenia understand the functions and the roles to be implemented by parties in a democratic society. Parties realize the importance of public opinion and have various strategies to work with it. What is still lacking in Armenia today is party awareness that democracy is not a one-time event that comes naturally. Democracy is a dynamic process, and all the members of a society should be engaged in its strengthening. The primary role in this regard belongs to political parties. Instead of complaining of the lack of free and fair elections parties should be actively engaged in election administration. What is more, parties should promote the ideas of democracy among citizens. They should bring it to every citizen that it is they who should be building democracy and not the political leaders. This vicious cycle of citizen disenchantment should be broken by active work with the public.

One of the major reasons of this disenchantment is the Soviet legacy which still has its influence in the Armenian society. People are used to leaving their problems to politicians to solve and are waiting for a powerful leader to come and abolish all the evils in the society. A society where the majority of citizens are ready to sell their votes has no right to complain of the lack of free and fair elections. However, one should not disregard the fact that Armenia has only fifteen-year history of democracy, and definitely it takes some time before democracy is firmly rooted in the mentality of the people. Despite its short democratic history, Armenia has made a

notable progress on the road to democracy. Political parties, NGO-s, civil society, international organizations have done a remarkable work for raising citizen awareness of democracy.

Thus, political parties should and can play an active role in consolidating democracy in Armenia. This should be done from both 'above' and 'below.' By participating in election administration they will ensure election fairness and transparency. By conducting active communication with people for advancing the ideas of democracy, they will ensure citizen involvement in the process. And the motivation for the parties should be the fact that, as demonstrated by the findings of this study, public opinion does make a difference in Armenia.

Appendix 1

Questionnaire

1. In your opinion, what do the parties need to be elected?

2. Can public opinion concerning policy issues change anything in Armenia?

3. What are the main functions of any party in a democratic society?

4. What are the major drawbacks of the political parties in Armenia?

5. How do people get informed about your party's platform and standing on issues of importance to Armenia?

6. How does your party educate its followers concerning why they should take certain policy stands?

7. What methods does your party use to become aware of the people's (your potential voters') problems and concerns?

8. Does your party conduct public research on the electorate's priorities?

9. What does your party do to solve people's problems?

10. How does your party maintain public relations?

11. What is the single most important way to influence public opinion? What methods does your party use to influence public opinion?

12. What kind of media resources do you have?

13. With what kind of media resources do you have relations or cooperate?

14. Does the initiative to work with mass media belong to you or to the particular media?

15. Is your party successful in gaining the amount of access it wants to the mass media? Why or why not?

16. What are the specific goals and purposes of your party's media related activities?

17. Do you think it is possible to influence significantly or change public opinion via mass media? Why or why not?

18. Do you have regional organizations? If yes, how effective is the regional outreach to the people?

19. Is your party interested in recruiting new members? If yes, what methods does it use?
20. Does your party use political dialogue with the average citizen on the issues of importance for the voters?

21. How often did your party organize public forums and gatherings during pre-election period? What is the frequency now?

22. Are you engaged in political debates with other parties? If yes, are they publicized?

23. Do you have any knowledge of other parties' methods of addressing potential voters' interests?

24. Have any of your members ever changed their party allegiance? If yes, what was the underlying reason?

Appendix 2

Հարցաշար

1. Ձեր կարծիքով, ինչ է հարկավոր կուսակցություններին ընտրվելու համար:

2. Արդյոք հասարակական կարծիքը Հայաստանում քաղաքական հարցերի վերաբերյալ կարող է ինչ-որ բան փոխել:

3. Որոնք են կուսակցությունների հիմնական ֆունկցիաները դեմոկրատական հասարակության պայմաններում :

4. Որոնք են Հայաստանի կուսակցությունների հիմնական թերությունները:

5. Ինչպես են մարդիկ տեղեկանում ձեր կուսակցության հիմնադրույթների և դիրքորոշման մասին կապված Հայաստանի կարևորագույն խնդիրների հետ:

6. Ինչպես է ձեր կուսակցությունը պարզաբանում իր հետևորդներին, թե ինչու նրանք պետք է ընդունեն այս կամ այն քաղաքական դիրքորոշումը:

7. Ինչպես է ձեր կուսակցությունը տեղեկանում ժողովրդի (ձեր պոտենցիալ ընտրողների) խնդիրների և հոգսերի մասին:

8. Արդյոք ձեր կուսակցությունը կատարում է հասարակական հետազոտություն՝ տեղեկանալու համար , թե որոնք են ժողովրդին հուզող հարցերը:

9. Ինչ քայլեր է ձեռնարկում ձեր կուսակցությունը ժողովրդի խնդիրները լուծելու համար:

10. Ինչպես է ձեր կուսակցությունը հաստատում հասարակական կապեր:

11. Որն է ամենակարևոր միջոցը հասարակական կարծիքի վրա ազդեցություն գործելու համար: Ի՞նչ մեթոդներ է օգտագործում ձեր կուսակցությունը հասարակական կարծիքի վրա ազդեցություն գործելու համար:

12. Ինչպիսի ԶԼՄ-ներ դուք ունեք:

13. Ինչպիսի ԶԼՄ-ների հետ ունեք առնչություն կամ համագործակցություն:

14. ԶԼՄ-ների հետ աշխատանքի նախաձեռնությունը պատկանում է ձեզ, թե տվյալ ԶԼՄ-ին:

15. Արդյո՞ք ձեր կուսակցությունը կարողանում է իր ցանկացած քանակությամբ ժամանակ ունենալ ԶԼՄ-ներում: Բացատրեք խնդրեմ պատասխանը:

16. Ի՞նչ նպատակներ է հետապնդում ձեր կուսակցության կատարած աշխատանքը ԶԼՄ-ների հետ:

17. Ձեր կարծիքով հնարավոր է արդյոք ազդել հասարակական կարծիքի վրա կամ փոխել այն՝ ԶԼՄ-ների միջոցով: Ինչու :

18. Տարածաշրջանային կառույցներ կա՞ն արդյոք: Եթե այո, ինչքանով է արդյունավետ մարդկանց հետ շփումը տարածքներում:

19. Արդյո՞ք ձեր կուսակցությունը հետաքրքրված է նոր անդամներ ներգրավելու մեջ: Եթե այո, ինչ ճանապարհներով է դա անում:

20. Արդյո՞ք ձեր կուսակցությունը օգտագործում է քաղաքական երկխոսություն սովորական քաղաքացու հետ ընտրողների համար կարևոր հայցերի շուրջ:

21. Ինչքան հաճախ էր ձեր կուսակցությունը կազմակերպում հասարակական ժողովներ և հավաքներ նախընտրական շրջանում: Իսկ ինչպիսին է հաճախականությունը հիմա:

22. Արդյո՞ք դուք ներգրավված եք քաղաքական բանավեճերի մեջ այլ կուսակցությունների հետ: Եթե այո, արդյո՞ք դրանք հրապարակվում են:

23. Արդյո՞ք դուք տեղյակ եք, թե ինչպես են մյուս կուսակցությունները արձագանքում ժողովրդին հուզող հարցերին:

24. Արդյո՞ք ձեր անդամներից որևէ մեկը երբևից դուրս է եկել կամ ներգրավվել է մեկ այլ կուսակցության մեջ: Եթե այո, որն է եղել հիմնական պատճառը:

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