

Researchers study mindset of Hong Kong voters

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Two UT Dallas political scientists are studying voter behavior in Hong Kong elections, providing some of the first data on that city's public attitudes about electoral democracy.

Dr. Harold Clarke, Ashbel Smith Professor in the School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences, and Dr. Karl Ho, clinical associate professor of political science, public policy and political economy, are examining voter participation in the Nov. 22 elections for 363 district councilors and in a 2016 vote for legislative council members.

"It's the first time I've been involved in doing a study in a country that is not a full-fledged, Western-style democracy," Clarke said. "We want to find out what factors influence residents' decisions to vote and their choices they make."

The researchers teamed up with Dr. Stan Hok-wui Wong, assistant professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, to design surveys that voters took before and after the Nov. 22 [election](#)—the first since the city's mass pro-Democracy protests last year. Clarke said Hong Kong's society has become increasingly divided over political reforms.

The city faced demonstrations last year, known as the Umbrella Movement, over a ruling by the Chinese government that only candidates approved by a nominating committee can run for office to become Hong Kong's chief executive. The outcome of the Nov. 22 election included several Umbrella Movement participants winning seats. According to

The New York Times, the Chinese government reported higher voter turnout than previous elections in 2007 and 2011.

Clarke has studied voter participation and [civic engagement](#) in several nations, including the United States, France, Germany and Canada. He was principal investigator for the British Election Studies in 2001, 2005 and 2010. But the Hong Kong project takes his research into new territory.

Hong Kong maintains a capitalist economy under a constitutional principle of 'one country, two systems' established when the city was returned from British to Chinese rule in 1997. According to the city's Basic Law, the chief executive and all members of the Legislative Council ultimately will be elected through universal suffrage. Currently, 35 of the 70 legislative council members are elected directly by voters.

"Our surveys aim to answer key questions including whether people vote to protest the status quo or because they believe their participation can bring about policy changes," Clarke said. "We also want to find out if people vote based on their evaluation of parties' competence or based on ideological positions."

The study will also look at critical factors that may divide voters, such as class, generation, immigration status and political affinity.

The project is modeled on established international election studies such as the American National Election Studies, the British Election Study and the Taiwan Election and Democratization Study. Clarke and Ho said they hope their work establishes a foundation for further election research on Hong Kong. They said that applying rigorous research methods will allow researchers to compare the findings to [voter participation](#) and civic engagement in other elections.

"The opportunity to study public attitudes in an electoral context in Hong Kong is really exciting," said Ho, who teaches a course in the politics of China. "The data we gather will enable us to understand factors affecting civic engagement in countries around the world."

Provided by University of Texas at Dallas

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