

The Race to Freedom: Hong Kong and the Beijing Threat to Democracy Before 2047

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Abstract

In 1997, Hong Kong was released from British colonial control back to China on the agreement that the territory would be able to operate under a policy of “One Country, Two Systems” until 2047. This policy allowed Hong Kong a degree of governmental autonomy from the Beijing government in mainland China while still remaining inherently Chinese. It also prompted the creation of a Hong Kong constitution called the “Basic Law” which promised universal suffrage before the year 2047. However, Beijing has recently blurred these lines of separation and ramped up its influence in Hong Kong. In light of these increased tactics of repression from Beijing, I ask the research question, “Will Hong Kong’s efforts to democratize result in achieving universal suffrage before 2047?” I examine factors such as Beijing’s policies, wealth, colonial history, and electoral structure to determine the extent of democratization efforts in the city. The main variables highlighted in this study are the authoritarian Beijing policies after the 2020 pandemic which resulted in a weakened state of democracy in the territory. This study examines the statistical effects of these policies on voter turnout, election results, and democracy index scores. Using multiple linear regression models in R, the results indicate that the Beijing policies have a significant and negative impact on each democracy indicator. These effects suggest a troubling future for democracy in Hong Kong and, if these trends continue, indicate a likely failure to achieve universal suffrage. I analyze these results in the context of modernization, rampant inequality, and government repression against a democracy movement that refuses to be silenced.

Introduction and History

In the twenty-first century, China continues to emerge as a dominant global superpower. It is the second most populous nation in the world (Worldometer 2023), has the second largest economy (Worldometer 2022), and has been ranked as the second most powerful country (US News 2022). While the entire world is aware of the growing power of China, one place in particular is acutely conscious of the changing nature of Beijing's domestic and foreign policy: Hong Kong. The territory holds a historically contentious and complicated relationship with the mainland, and the future of Beijing's policy in regards to the city remains uncertain at best.

From 1841 to 1997, Hong Kong was under British colonial rule. By the end of the twentieth century, Hong Kong had gained full autonomy back from the colonial powers who previously controlled it. The territory was officially released back to China from British control in 1997 in what is now referred to as the Handover. Since the Handover, Hong Kong has developed in substantial ways. Hong Kong is now the fourth most developed territory in the world, sitting at an impressive 0.956 Human Development Index score (United Nations 2023). It has the highest life expectancy of any country or territory in the world with the average Hong Konger living to 85.83 years old (Worldometer 2023). The Handover also granted Hong Kong certain freedoms under the "One Country, Two Systems" doctrine such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and a separate governmental structure from mainland China. These freedoms were supposedly guaranteed until a full integration with China in 2047, 50 years after the Handover. Hong Kong was also promised universal suffrage by Beijing in the Basic Law, which is Hong Kong's constitution (Hong Kong Basic Law Article 45 1997). Despite these promises, every attempt to achieve universal suffrage in the Hong Kong legislature has been denied or postponed.

In a city influenced heavily by its colonial past, Hong Kongers have demanded freedom from mainland China in dangerous ways. Independence movements in Chinese-controlled territories are tantamount to treason, and participants are punished accordingly. This has not stopped the people of Hong Kong. Large scale protest movements in the area have grown in recent years, such as the Umbrella Movement in 2014 and the 2019 anti-extradition bill protests that brought out millions of people. Hong Kong has also experienced changing policy from Beijing, including numerous challenges to democracy domestically and a growing divide between pro-democracy supporters and pro-Beijing leaders within the region (Davis 2022). Due to the relevance of democracy movements in Hong Kong and the growing importance of China on the global stage, it is more crucial than ever to study China's influence and policy in the region. In light of this, I intend to study democratization efforts in Hong Kong from 1997 (the Handover) to the present day. I will use this research to answer the following

question: Will the democratization efforts in Hong Kong result in achieving universal suffrage before 2047?

Hong Kong's government has never fully represented its people. Before the Handover, colonial rule dictated the government, and now the government is only partially elected by popular vote. Universal suffrage assumes that all eligible citizens may participate in the electoral process of choosing new government leadership. In Hong Kong, this would theoretically look like the Legislative Council and Chief Executive being elected by the popular vote. Currently, only 20 out of 90 total seats in the Legislative Council are elected by popular vote through geographical constituencies (Hong Kong Government 2022). Another 30 seats are elected by functional constituencies which represent specific industries or business sectors within Hong Kong. The last 40 seats are elected by the Election Committee made up of 1,500 Hong Kong residents who are primarily pro-Beijing members (Electoral Affairs Commission 2023). This same Election Committee also selects the Chief Executive. The District Council is comprised of 479 seats, 452 of which are popularly elected in local elections, combining to form 18 Districts in Hong Kong. When Hong Kongers advocate for universal suffrage, they are specifically advocating for the constitutional guarantee of universal suffrage in elections for the Legislative Council (LegCo) and the Chief Executive of Hong Kong. The pro-democracy movement's support for universal suffrage has been extensive. This research explores the results, turnout, and democracy index scores over time to explain the continued lack of universal suffrage in Hong Kong.

This research is also vital in order to understand the implications of modern Beijing's policy in Hong Kong. Not only does Hong Kong represent a genuine expression of a people desiring democratic representation, but it may also be an indicator for other global developments. Taiwan and China's relationship has been strained for decades, ever since the 1949 split of the US-backed Republic of China in Taiwan and the Communist-ruled People's Republic of China on the mainland. These tensions have only grown in recent years and China's policy on Hong Kong may provide crucial insight into China's decisions on Taiwan in the coming years. Also, Hong Kong is a global commercial hub, accounting for \$26.5 billion in US exports in 2022 alone (International Trade Administration 2024). Hong Kong's fate as a democracy determines more than the political freedom of its 7.4 million residents. It acts as a solemn indication of the trending global decline in democracy and the increase in authoritarian powers across the world.

My findings show a troubling decline in democracy across multiple categories in the past few years. I argue that the Beijing political reforms after the pandemic, specifically the 2020 National Security Law and 2021 election reforms, have had the largest effect on democracy in Hong Kong since the Handover and represent a worrying reduction in rights in the territory. I intend for this research to serve as a motivator to

protect human rights and political freedom in Hong Kong, as well as to keep the democratization movement in Hong Kong on the global stage.

The paper will be organized into the following sections: literature review, hypotheses, empirical strategy, data analysis, discussion, and a conclusion.

Literature Review

Hong Kong's history as a former British colony transferred back into Chinese control primes it to be a unique case in democratization studies. Hong Kong's politics are centered around Hong Kongers' ability to operate within their own system while remaining Chinese. Hong Kong expert Jeffrey Wasserstrom expands upon Hong Kong democratization politics: "Democracy is and always had been the dominant issue in Hong Kong politics" (Wasserstrom 2020, 39). Why, then, has Hong Kong still not achieved universal suffrage when Hong Kong Basic Law has promised this democratic structure since the Handover in 1997?

Democratization is based upon a variety of factors, especially in Hong Kong's case where its ties to China are slowly but significantly becoming less blurred. This literature review provides a background of the extant research available on democracy efforts in Hong Kong. The literature included in this review may be divided into three main categories:

1. Democratization efforts (and democratic backsliding) around the world
2. Civil disobedience and protest movements
3. Elections (reforms, participation, and results) and Beijing policy on elections in Hong Kong

These three categories cover the vast majority of important research on democratization efforts in Hong Kong and lay the foundation for the research in this paper.

Democratization and Democratic Backsliding

According to both Freedom House and Varieties of Democracy democratic data sets, Hong Kong's democracy has experienced a decline over the past two decades, especially in the years following the 2020 pandemic. This trend is not limited to Hong Kong, and existing research shows that democracy has been trending downwards on a global scale (Freedom House 2018, 2022, 2023; Diamond 2015; Heldt and Schmidtke 2019; VAŞ 2021; Varieties of Democracy 2023). Extensive research has been conducted on why democratic backsliding, or the reversal of democratization efforts that results in more repression, autocracy, and less freedom in countries around the world, may be happening (e.g. Burmeo 2016; Lust and Waldner 2018). Factors influencing

democratization range from socioeconomic conditions and the role of global activism (Schmitz 2004) to global disasters such as financial crises or pandemics that result in excessive or long term repression (V-Dem 2020). Many studies argue that economic development is a prerequisite to democratization (Lipset 1959; Boix and Stokes 2003; Rueschemeyer, Stephens, E. and Stephens, J. 1992) while others cite education level as key (Alemán and Kim 2015). Most of these studies focus on the democratic structures within governments, but not all. One scholar argues that Western style structures which typically indicate democratization, such as elections and party competition, should not be the main indicator and that emphasis should instead be placed on “social and political citizenship” (Grugel 2003). Essentially, there is no singular accepted theory on why democratization or autocratization occurs within countries. Hong Kong is a unique case because it is not a sovereign nation, so some of the existing literature on why states democratize, or do the reverse, will not be applicable to Hong Kong. One study even goes as far as to argue that since Hong Kong is not a sovereign nation and is not free from external political influence, it cannot ever be a true democracy (Ortmann 2016). Studying Hong Kong as a unique entity within the confines of Chinese power is integral to truly understanding political development in the territory.

One reason for why Hong Kong may democratize (or fail to) is economic development, with both the high GDP in the territory and the growing inequality being factors for potential democratization or democratic backsliding (Sing 2007; Chiu and Lui 2009; Ortmann 2015; Bush 2016; Ortmann 2016; Wong 2022). Though Hong Kong has been characterized as a large economic hub long before the Handover, its recent growing disparities between the city elites and those living in poverty have caused more animosity towards democracy from those in power, who are almost always elites (Piketty and Yang 2022). There is a very high degree of inequality in Hong Kong and in 2019 the city had 18% of its population living below the poverty line while the top 10 billionaires in the city accounted for 35% of the territory’s GDP (Wasserstrom 2020). It also has one of the worst gini coefficients, a measure of inequality, in the world at 0.533 in 2019. Hong Kong’s past reliance on stability and economic prosperity as a form of government legitimacy may be crumbling as inequality soars (Wong 2022). These economic conditions undoubtedly have a significant impact on Hong Kong’s populace and influence democratization efforts.

Civil Disobedience and Protest Movements

The right to protest is often seen as a key indicator of a healthy democracy which encourages its citizens to use their voices to implement change. Hong Kong’s Basic Law, the constitution governing the territory in lieu of mainland laws, guarantees its citizens the right to “freedom of speech, the press, assembly, association, procession

and demonstration” (Hong Kong Basic Law 1997). Many significant protests have gained worldwide attention in Hong Kong, not least of all the Umbrella Movement in 2014, also known as the Occupy Central Movement. Numerous studies have been conducted on the Umbrella Movement specifically, ranging from studies analyzing the success of the protests to ones simply documenting the events which occurred during the Movement (e.g. Chan 2014; Chan and Lee 2014; Ortmann 2015; Ortmann 2016; Cheng and Ma 2020; Wasserstrom 2020). The Umbrella Movement protests demanded the direct election of the Chief Executive by 2017, which did not come to fruition. However, the student-led movement sparked hope that a new generation of Hong Kongers were willing to commit themselves to fighting for democratic ideals and that, despite the police brutality and mass arrests which occurred, Hong Kong would not be silenced. As Wasserstrom (2020) put it, the Umbrella Movement became “a fight to defend the right to protest” (Wasserstrom 2020, 56).

Another protest wave came about in 2019 over a proposed extradition law which would allow Hong Kong to extradite political activists who may have fled Beijing’s oppression on the mainland to receive justice in Hong Kong. Hong Kong has long been a place of sanctuary for political activists. One example of this is Operation Yellow Bird which helped Tiananmen Square protesters in 1989 to escape from the mainland to Hong Kong (Wasserstrom 2020). The wave of protests in 2019 responded to protect this history of Hong Kong’s identity, as well as push for justice for Occupy Central protesters who had been sentenced. They also called for the pro-Beijing Chief Executive at the time, Carrie Lam, to resign. These protests culminated on June 16, 2019, a day after Chief Executive Carrie Lam agreed to temporarily suspend the extradition bill, with almost two million protesters breaking the record for Hong Kong’s biggest protest ever (Wasserstrom 2020). Many scholars have tracked the history of protest in Hong Kong (e.g. Chun 2009; Kwong 2016; Dapiran 2017; Purbrick 2019) and most have come to the conclusion that an identity of protest is shared within Hong Kong. This identity may have even contributed to the development of localism within the territory where Hong Kongers value a unique Hong Kong identity that is distinctly separate from their mainland counterparts. An example echoing this sentiment comes from a protest in a Hong Kong World Cup qualifying match on September 10, 2019 in which protesters booed the Chinese national anthem and instead sang a local alternative called “Glory to Hong Kong” (Zialcita 2019; Wasserstrom 2020). Undeniably, a unique Hong Kong identity has become rooted in protest.

Beijing does not take any semblance of independence movements lightly, and has responded to protests over the years by cracking down on the Special Administrative Region (SAR). New Beijing policies were recently passed in 2020 and 2021 in response to the 2019 protests which were so successful. These policies have allowed more control from Beijing, including the arrests of protesters to make them ineligible to run for office and the abduction of booksellers to be prosecuted in the

mainland. Despite widespread efforts to demand the universal suffrage that has long been promised, there has been little budge on election reform in the direction of democracy. “[Hong Kong]’s people had no vote, and their voices were not heard, no matter how loudly they protested” (Wasserstrom 2020, 71). Acts of protest in Hong Kong are seen as central identity markers to many Hong Kongers, as indicators of democracy, and as desperate attempts to preserve Hong Kong against the onslaught of Beijing oppression.

Elections (Reform, Participation, and Results) and Beijing Influence

It is nearly impossible to discuss Hong Kong’s political reforms and elections without also talking about the influence of Beijing. Since Hong Kong operates under the Basic Law, it is guaranteed many constitutional rights that are frequently found in liberal democracies, such as the right to vote, to protest, and to freedom of speech. However, the major caveat to the Basic Law is that it is subject to the doctrine of “One County, Two Systems” (1C2S) meaning that while Hong Kong may use its own unique governance systems, it is fundamentally part of China. Hong Kong is governed by a Chief Executive and a Legislative Council (LegCo) made up of 90 members who are partially elected by the people and partially selected by elites and corporate interests. Government elections have historically been influenced by Beijing, particularly the Chief Executive election, and any dissent within the government is not tolerated (Ngok 2017). In 2016, a record high number of locally registered voters participated in the elections, resulting in the appointment of 29 pro-democracy lawmakers (enough for veto power in the 70 member LegCo). This wave of democratic support was quickly stifled after some pro-democracy legislators pledged their allegiance to “Hong Kong nation.” This act was of a similar magnitude to treason itself in the eyes of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Consequently, many pro-democracy legislators were barred from taking office by the National People’s Conference Standing Committee (NPCSC) in Beijing (Huang, E. and Huang, Z. 2016; Wasserstrom 2020). Those excluded from office included some pro-democracy candidates who had not participated in the pro-independence protests. Not long after these elected members were barred from taking office, activists from Hong Kong’s democracy movement were arrested, effectively preventing them from running for office as well (Freedom House 2017). This is just one example of many which showcase Beijing’s oversight and repression in Hong Kong’s elections.

Elections in Hong Kong have changed frequently in the years since the Handover and many studies have been conducted on individual elections and election reform bills (e.g. DeGolyer 2008; Martin 2009; Lo 2017; Lim 2017; Zhang 2010). Other articles have focused on democratization efforts in Hong Kong across a broader time period (e.g.

Shiu-hing 1997; Sing 2004; Davis 2006; Lee 2005; Chou 2013; Chen 2014; Kurata 2015; Chen 2016). Some of these studies look at support for democracy among the Hong Kong polity, others track the progress of democratization in the territory both before and after the Handover, and still others provide a general overview of Beijing's efforts in the area. This study seeks to fill gaps in the existing research on Hong Kong's elections and democratization efforts in recent years, especially in light of significant changes since the 2020 Pandemic.

There are many underlying factors that contribute to the enduring lack of universal suffrage in Hong Kong but the main reason universal suffrage continues to evade the territory is Beijing's influence. Beijing's repression of liberal values within Hong Kong have clearly ramped up in recent years. There is extensive research on the role of Beijing in Hong Kong elections and its oppression in Hong Kong generally (e.g. Pepper 2007; Lo 2010; Huang, E. and Huang, Z. 2016; Lo 2017; Ngok 2017; Freedom House 2022; Maizland 2024). Reforms in 2021 gave Beijing direct oversight into Hong Kong's elections (Young 2021) and a 2020 National Security Law significantly limits freedom of speech in Hong Kong (Datt 2021). These reforms following the 2020 Pandemic will be a major focus in this study, since there is a lack of holistic academic research on the impacts of the reforms on Hong Kong elections.

With Beijing's power increasing in the area, there will likely be more mass arrests, silencing of the press, and a widening gap between hope for democracy and the reality of Hong Kong (Davis 2022). My research attempts to fill gaps in the existing literature by providing an updated report on the state of democracy in Hong Kong. I examine factors that impact democratization efforts, such as wealth and the Handover, which are measured by V-Dem democracy scores, as well as election results and turnout. The use of V-Dem scores has not been done in studies regarding Hong Kong elections in the past so I will fill gaps that may exist in statistical research on the city. This research is both crucial to understanding the current status of democracy in Hong Kong and will be helpful to understanding the dire need to act before it is truly too late. Jeffrey Wasserstrom (2020) asks, "Will the resistance be able to stop the erosion of Hong Kong's hopes and liberties?" (84). My research will act as a documentation of this erosion of political and civil liberties, but most importantly it acts as an amplification of the resistance and of Hong Kong's hopes and liberties before they disappear. Accordingly, this study examines the research question: Will democratization efforts in Hong Kong result in achieving universal suffrage before 2047? Below, I examine the methodological approach that I take to answer this vital question.

Empirics and Methodology

I. Approach

I adopt a quantitative observational study as my research approach which observes and compares democratic structures between Hong Kong election years. In order to compare democracy, I examine a number of factors which I consider to be measures of the independent variables outlined in my theory section. I run a multivariate linear regression in R which determines the impact of multiple variables in a singular model. This method allows the inclusion of categorical variables such as dummy variables for the Handover and election types. Linear models are also the best models to understand the impact that multiple independent variables have on a specific dependent variable. In the case of this study, the linear model allows a statistical analysis of the effects of variables like the Beijing reforms on election turnout, results, and democracy index scores. However, this method has drawbacks in that it is prone to skewing towards outliers, resulting in a less accurate model at times. Realistically, no statistical model will be perfectly accurate, but they are still incredibly useful at revealing patterns present in data. Below I present the dependent and independent variables, hypotheses for each of the independent variables, and a summary of the data used in my regression.

II. Dependent Variables: Democracy Indicators

My unit of analysis for my study depends on which measure of democracy I am examining. For the results and turnout variables, I use District Council and Legislative Council election years as my unit of analysis. The first local elections in Hong Kong which I examine were held in 1982 and my data goes until 2023 (Hong Kong Government). The first District Council election was in 1999, but Hong Kongers still participated in local elections starting in 1982 during British control. The first Legislative Council election was held in 1998 and goes until 2021 (Armstrong and Richter 2021). Usually, both of these elections are held every four years, however there are some discrepancies in that due to circumstances such as the Handover or the Pandemic¹. I combine the District Council election results and turnout with the Legislative Council election results and turnout for the sake of creating a larger pool of data, and I account for this difference with a dummy variable indicating a 1 for District Council election and a 0 for Legislative Council election. I define the result of the election as the percentage of total seats available that are won by pro-democracy candidates. Turnout is defined as the percentage of eligible voters who came to the polls to vote in that specific election². For the electoral democracy score, I use the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Electoral Democracy Score because I am primarily concerned with the electoral structures of

¹ The length between elections is not a variable that I take into consideration.

² This does not take into account varying numbers of registered voters or the percentage of people eligible to vote but are registered.

Hong Kong and specifically universal suffrage. For the V-Dem data, I study every year from 1960-2022. Below, I outline the existing research that has used V-Dem data.

III. Varieties of Democracy: Democracy Index

In order to talk about democratization efforts in Hong Kong, there must first be a working definition of democracy established for the purpose of this paper. There are many definitions of democracy and many different indices which measure democracy in varying degrees. However, each approach agrees on a general definition of democracy: “A democracy is an electoral political system in which citizens get to participate in free and fair elections” (Herre 2022). Out of the plethora of available measures of democracy, I have chosen to focus on one: the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Index. Varieties of Democracy attempts to measure the quality of democracy within a country or territory with established elections through a fully encompassing approach. V-Dem measures a broad variety of democratic characteristics, and is generally considered to be representative of theories of democracy outside of the typical liberal-pluralist theories, such as participatory and deliberative theories (Geissel, Kneuer and Lauth 2016). V-Dem specifically measures “characteristics of political systems which are difficult to observe” (Herre 2022) and has been used to measure democratization in a large number of new studies (e.g. Pietrzyk-Reeves and Samonek 2023; Basu, Mitra and Purohit 2023; Prys-Hansen, Kaack and Mezinárodní 2023; Whetsell 2023). V-Dem scores specifically take into account the following democratic principles: electoral, liberal, majoritarian, consensual, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian (Coppedge et al. 2024, 5). Of these, I focus specifically on the electoral democracy score because of the focus on universal suffrage in this study. The V-Dem electoral democracy score captures how well a territory facilitates regular elections which put leaders in power who are accountable to the citizens of the territory. Importantly, this score takes into account more factors than simply election turnout, participation, and results. The scores are calculated by multiplying scores from multiple different factors, so that the factors are “mutually reinforcing” and the absence of one factor will impact the score just as much as the strong presence of another (Coppedge et al. 2024)³. These factors include the following: freedom of association, clean elections, freedom of expression and alternate sources of information, elected officials, and suffrage. Including this V-Dem measure is incredibly important, in addition to the other democracy indicators of specific Hong Kong election turnout and results, because of its consideration of the weight of varying factors. For example, an election with high turnout and participation, but which does not allow opposition candidates to run will not be given a high score. Similarly, an election

³ For further reading on specific coding formulas with weighted equations for the V-Dem electoral democracy score, please find the Varieties of Democracy Methodology 2024 citation in the references section at the end of the paper.

which does not allow all citizens the right to vote, but which offers high levels of freedom of expression and protest will have a higher electoral score even in the absence of universal suffrage. In an effort to take into account all potentially impactful factors, I include the V-Dem electoral scores in addition to the Hong Kong election turnout and results.

Essentially, by using a democracy measure to observe electoral structures in Hong Kong, I will obtain a more holistic view of democratization efforts in Hong Kong. Also, there has not been widespread research done on democracy within Hong Kong that has relied on data from the V-Dem index. Hence, I will fill this gap by combining knowledge from many different sources to present a well-rounded picture of the fate of Hong Kong, contributing to future research in the field along the way.

IV. Independent Variables and Hypotheses

Many factors impact democratization efforts in varying degrees which can be measured in a number of ways. In this study, I define “less democratic” elections as elections which have lower voter turnout, will elect fewer pro-democracy candidates, and that those election years will produce a lower electoral democracy score. On the other hand, “more democratic” elections will have higher turnout, more pro-democracy candidates elected, and will correspond with a higher electoral democracy score. A healthy electoral democracy relies upon citizen participation, free and fair elections, and other elements of democracy such as freedom of speech and freedom of assembly (United Nations 2024). Accordingly, a reduction in access to these democratic indicators would limit democracy in a given area, and an increase in access would presumably increase democratization.

My independent variables are wealth, Beijing policies, and the Handover⁴. For Beijing policy, years prior to 2020 (the year the National Security Law was passed) receive a score of 0, 2020 and subsequent years receive a score of 1. The Handover from British colonial rule to Chinese rule happened in 1997, and therefore any year prior is given a score of 0 and a score of 1 is given to the years 1997 and after. Wealth is measured by Hong Kong Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita from 1960 to 2022 (MacroTrends 2024). I also add a dummy variable to my elections data set to distinguish between local and national elections, since local elections typically have lower voter turnout that needs to be accounted for (Kouba, Novák and Strnad 2020; Hajnal and Lewis 2003).

Independent Variable (IV) 1: Beijing Policy Decisions of 2020 and 2021

⁴ The Beijing policies and the Handover were dummy variables, meaning they were put into two categories and given either a 1 or a 0.

As stated above, the main independent variable that I will be studying is the Beijing policies of 2020 and 2021 which directly followed the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency measures were implemented, resulting in the delay of the Hong Kong Legislative Council election of 2020 (Ramzy 2020). Largely viewed by pro-democracy activists as a political move, the use of the Emergency Regulations Ordinance by Chief Executive Carrie Lam effectively prevented an election which likely would have resulted in a pro-democracy sweep of the legislature. Following this election delay, the Beijing government passed a new National Security Law in 2020 which has since been used to arrest protesters and pro-democracy candidates. The arrest of opposition party candidates is a popular autocratic strategy to establish power (Repucci and Slipowitz 2022). The National Security Law has also limited public freedom of speech and acts of civil disobedience (Fong and Maizland 2024). Election reforms passed by Beijing in March 2021 drastically changed the electoral system for both Chief Executive and Legislative Council elections by requiring pro-Beijing committees to vet candidates. It also reduced the number of directly elected seats in the Legislative Council from 35 seats to just 20 seats and increased the power of Beijing in the Election Committee which now elects almost half of the 90 LegCo seats (Fong and Maizland 2024). Essentially, the Beijing measures of 2020 and 2021 reduced opposition representation in government, reduced voter turnout, and eroded the pretext of Hong Kong democracy even further. Due to this heightened nature of Beijing control in Hong Kong's electoral processes following the 2020 pandemic, I hypothesize that elections after the 2020 and 2021 Beijing policy decisions will be significantly less democratic than previous elections.

Hypothesis 1: Hong Kong elections after the 2020 and 2021 Beijing policy decisions will be less democratic than previous elections.

IV 2: Wealth

Modernization theory tells us that as countries (or in this case, a territory) become more economically stable and wealthy, the government and politics of the region also become increasingly liberal or democratic (Sing 2007; Chiu and Lui 2009; Ortmann 2015; Bush 2016; Ortmann 2016; Wong 2022). "The more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy" (Lipset 1988). The theory assumes that as people become more educated, less reliant upon a strict government for basic needs, and more financially independent, they will also demand more political independence and power. In Hong Kong however, a special case of elite influence in elections exists in the functional constituencies. These functional constituencies elect a majority of the candidates to the Legislative Council and help choose the candidates for Chief Executive. In this way, elite influence may have a significant impact on the application of modernization theory to Hong Kong. As the Special Administrative Region grows wealthier, the power of the city elites grows and so does inequality. In 2020, the

wealthiest 0.001% of the citizenry accounted for 55% of Hong Kong's total income (Stanford University 2024). This wealth disparity continues to increase and in 2023, Hong Kong had a record high income disparity with "the wealthy making almost 60 times more than the lowest earners in the first quarter of 2023"(Ha 2023). This massive wealth disparity in the city may actually counter modernization theory. In Hong Kong the wealthy elite have incentives to support pro-Beijing candidates who will maintain their power in the system, and to stifle pro-democracy candidates who appeal for universal suffrage (Piketty and Yang 2022). In this way, as the city grows wealthier, elite power and influence in support of Beijing also grows. However, general wealth and education still increase democratic participation generally, and I believe that democracy will increase with a national rise in wealth. Accordingly, I hypothesize that increased wealth in Hong Kong, specifically after the Handover to China, will result in more democratic elections. I also acknowledge that this trend may not continue in the future considering the power of elites in the Hong Kong government. Essentially, wealth alone will not give Hong Kong universal suffrage but it may contribute to an increase in democratic processes, especially early in the period after the Handover.

Hypothesis 2: Increased wealth in Hong Kong will result in more democratic elections.

IV 3: Handover

As my data sets contain data from before the Handover, I need to account for the obvious effect of this maneuver. Since Hong Kong was a British colony from 1841 to 1997, Hong Kongers had little say in their electoral processes before the Handover. The hope was that after colonial rule ended in 1997, Hong Kongers would gain more autonomy and voice in their own government. Thus, I hypothesize that elections which occur after the Handover will be more democratic than elections which occurred prior to the Handover during colonial occupation.

Hypothesis 3: Hong Kong elections after the Handover in 1997 will be more democratic than elections during British colonial rule.

V. Data Description

The figures below present readers with visual aids to facilitate an understanding of the data used in my regression models. I present data on voter turnout and results by election year and type as well as changes in wealth and V-Dem scores over time. This will familiarize readers with the data and show the drastic changes that have occurred in recent years as a result of Beijing's influence.

Figure 1A: Voter Turnout by Local Election Year

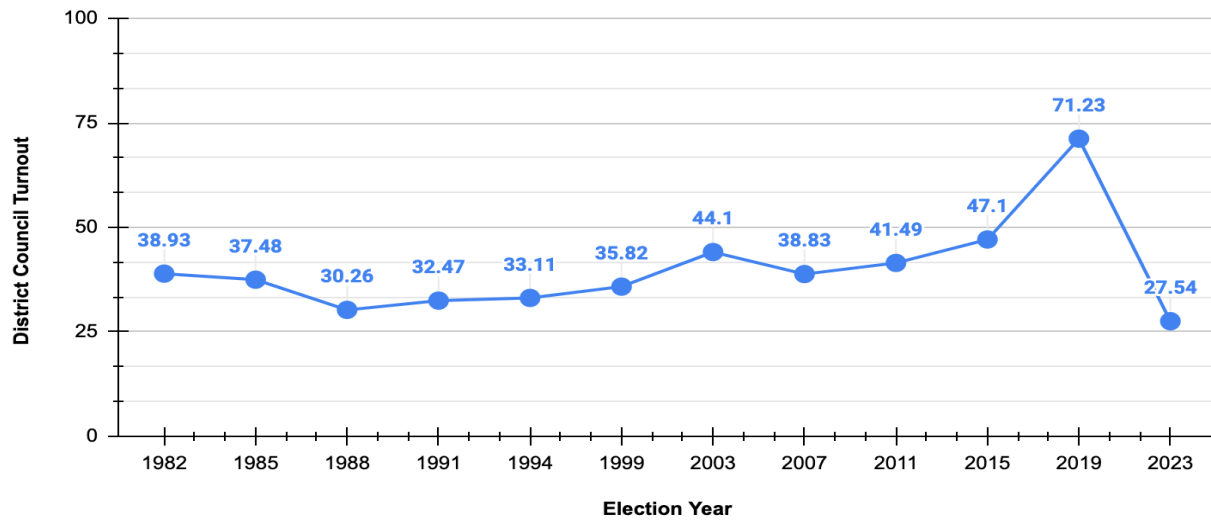
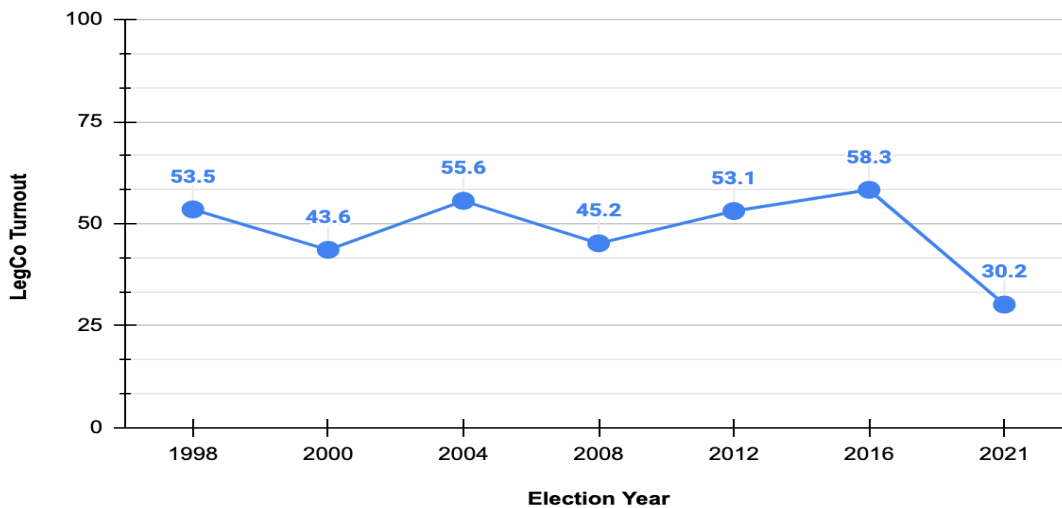


Figure 1B: Voter Turnout by Legislative Council Election Year



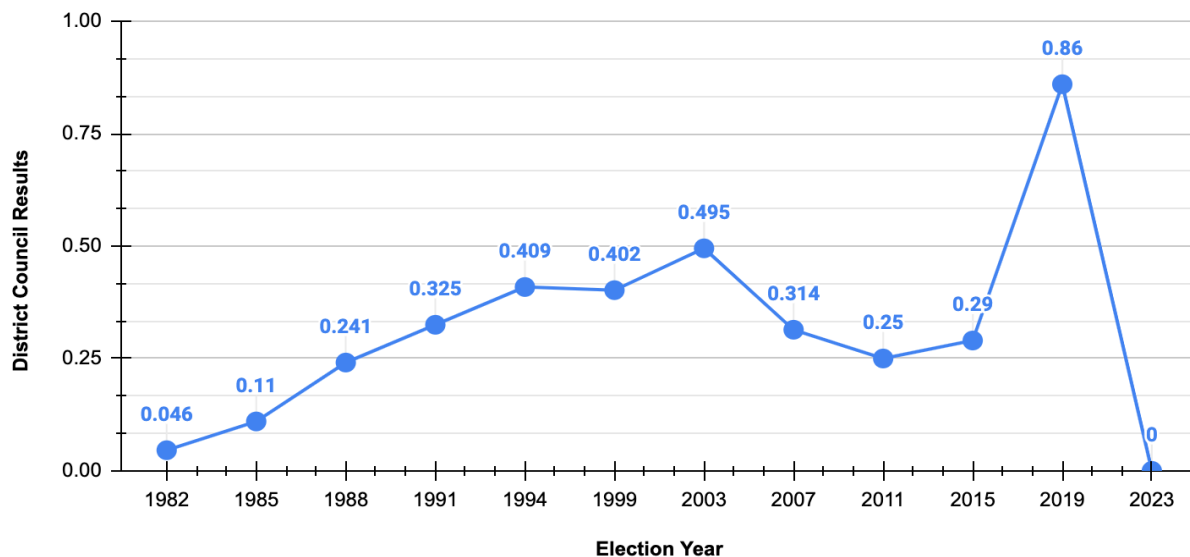
Figures 1A and 1B above show, respectively, the local and national voter turnout rates by election year. The local election years range from 1982 to 2023. The LegCo national election years range from 1998 to 2021.

As shown in Figure 1A, voter turnout in Hong Kong has been steadily rising. The highest voter turnout to an election in Hong Kong happened in 2019 after the massive anti-extradition protests that set records for the largest protests in Hong Kong history. Estimates place up to 2 million people protesting on June 16, 2019 (Amnesty International 2019). The protests sparked the highest voter turnout in Hong Kong election history in 2019, with 71.23% of registered voters turning out to vote in the 2019 District Council Elections. The record high voter turnout and protest numbers of 2019 were met with swift resistance in the form of the 2020 National Security Law and the 2021 Beijing election reforms. Turnout in the next elections in 2021 (LegCo) and 2023 (District Council) plummeted to the lowest in Hong Kong history with 30.2% and 27.54%

of voters turning out respectively. This trend can also be seen in the 2003 to 2007 election data. In 2003, a massive protest against a national security law similar to the one passed in 2020 resulted in pro-democracy candidates gaining traction and high voter turnout in the 2003 and 2004 elections (Sing 2001). Protests seem to hold large significance over election turnout. Unfortunately, there was inadequate data to include a protest variable in my regression analysis. It is still valuable to note this potential influence on election turnout, even if it is not statistically accounted for due to lack of reliable data.

The two graphs shown in Figure 1A and 1B represent the two different election structures in Hong Kong that I examine in my data. The local elections, shown in Figure 1A, have lower turnout by 5% on average so the difference in turnout between the two graphs is expected. Despite these differences, the drop in turnout from the 2019 District Council to 2023 District Council elections and 2016 LegCo to 2021 Legco elections is notable and significant for both election types. Another significant change in voter turnout data occurs after the Handover. Prior to the Handover, the average voter turnout was 34.45%. After the Handover, this average jumps to 46.12%. These differences in pre- and post-Handover data, as well as election type, are all accounted for in the linear regression models.

Figure 2A: Pro-Democracy Vote Share by Local Election Year



The graph above (Figure 2A) displays the percentage of elected candidates in Hong Kong's local elections which classify as pro-democracy from 1982 to 2023. The graph below (Figure 2B) displays the percentage of candidates elected in national Legislative Council elections which classify as pro-democracy from 1998 to 2021.

Figure 2B: Pro-Democracy Vote Share by Legislative Council Election Year

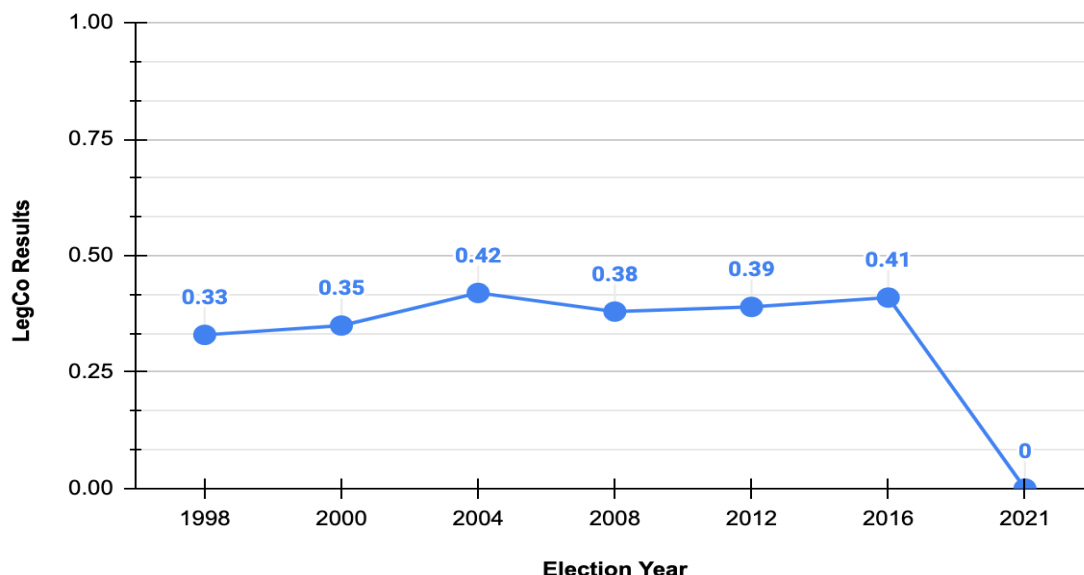


Figure 2 includes two graphs showing the percentage of elected local and national officials which support democracy. The proportion of elected officials who support democracy is valuable to measure because the inclusion of popular opposition candidates in an election is one sign of a well-functioning democracy (Sedaca 2024). An increasing percentage of vote share going to pro-democracy candidates indicates that Hong Kongers want democratization and are willing to use their votes to support it. Also, higher percentages of pro-democracy supporters in the legislature increases the power of the pro-democracy base to oppose constitutional reforms. One example of this was in the 2016 election when pro-Beijing parties won 870,000 votes and the pro-democracy parties won 1.2 million votes, giving the pro-democracy lawmakers veto power in the Legislative Council (Wasserstrom 2020, 62). As shown on the graph in Figure 2A, the 2019 local elections saw the largest proportion of elected candidates from the pro-democracy base in history. After the 2019 protests, voters were re-invigorated to turn out for the pro-democracy cause and 86% of elected candidates were pro-democracy. The next year, the percentage of vote share won by a pro-democracy candidate was 0%. This stark difference came in the wake of the 2021 Beijing election reforms which required candidates running for office to be vetted by a pro-Beijing electoral committee. This effectively removed all pro-democracy candidates from running for office in Hong Kong. Clearly, Beijing was scared of the wave of support for democracy and power of the people of Hong Kong in 2019.

Figure 3: V-Dem Electoral Democracy Scores Over Time

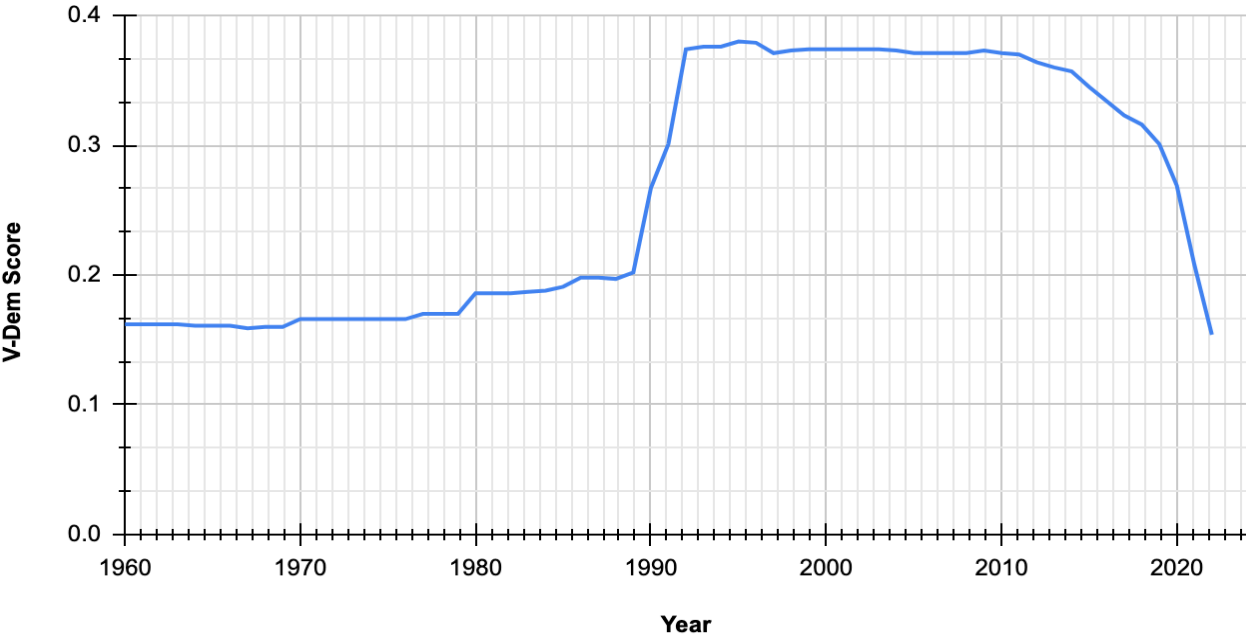
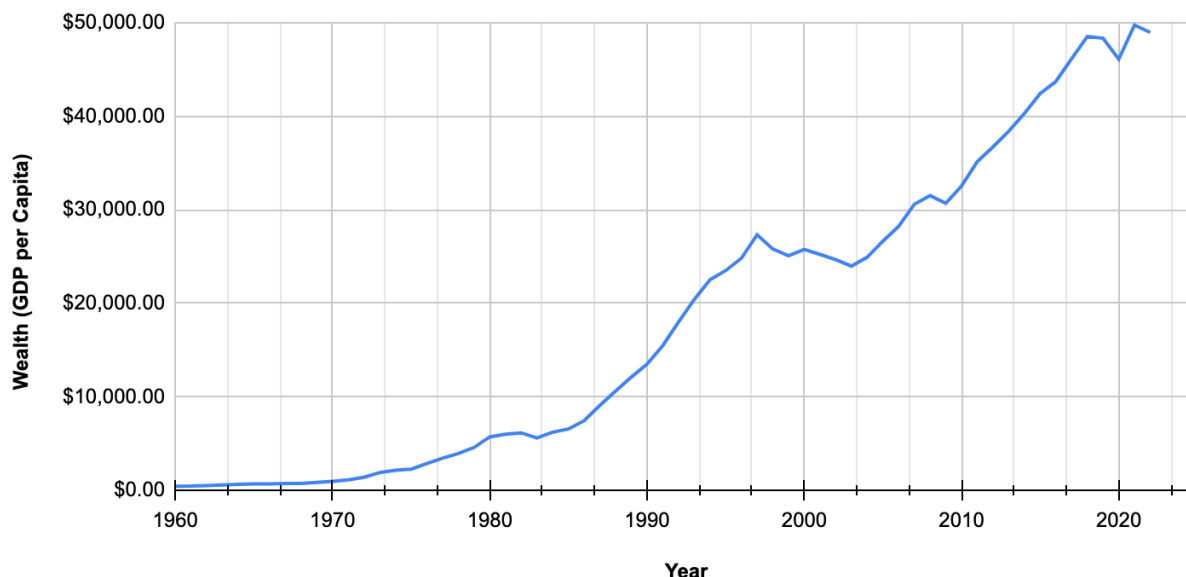


Figure 3 shows the Varieties of Democracy electoral democracy score over time. The V-Dem scores use experts to provide ordinal values to immeasurable concepts, such as freedom of expression (Herre 2022). In Hong Kong, I use data from 1960 to 2022 in order to truly see the progression of electoral democracy in the territory. In the early 1990's, there is a sharp rise in the electoral democracy score. This is likely due to the governorship of the last British governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patten. Patten governed Hong Kong from 1992 to 1997 and attempted to institute broad democratic reforms that seemed to go against both British and Chinese leadership. Some view Patten as a hero of the people and an idealist with good intentions while others view him as a self-serving colonial ruler who wanted to institute chaos in Hong Kong before British rule ended (Cheng 1994). Since 1997, scores remained roughly even until 2010 and then in 2020 the scores plummeted to the lowest in the data set. In the regression analysis, I measure the effects of wealth and the Beijing reforms of 2020-2021 on the V-Dem score. I also account for the Handover with a dummy variable of 1 or 0.

Figure 4: Wealth (GDP per Capita) by Year



The wealth of Hong Kong has steadily increased from 1960 to 2022. Hong Kong is a global financial and commercial hub and the small city has a larger GDP than many countries in the world: \$359.84 billion in 2022 (TradingEconomics 2022). The data has varied significantly from 1960 to 2022. The minimum GDP per capita was just \$424.06 in 1960 while the maximum jumps to \$49,764.79 in 2021. The average GDP per capita across this time period was \$18,284.20. Hong Kong's GDP will likely continue to grow for a few more years, but the imposition of Beijing policy on the Special Administrative Region does not bode well for capitalists in the area. Under the current system of "One Country, Two Systems," Hong Kong remains more politically and economically free than the mainland. However, if trends continue, Hong Kong may lose many of these freedoms before the year 2047.

Discussion: Regression and Analysis

After collecting the data on Hong Kong and forming my hypotheses, I ran three multiple linear regression models in R in order to understand the effects of the predictor variables (wealth, the Handover, and Beijing's policies) on each outcome variable (V-Dem score, turnout, and election results). I present the results in a singular table below for ease of viewing, but each of these results were found by running separate regressions for each democracy indicator.

Table 1: Multiple Linear Regression Model Results

	Wealth	Beijing Policy	Handover	Electoral Type
VDem Score	0.00000436	-0.2157	0.038	N/A
Turnout	0.0005655	-29.470	-0.149	-6.090
Results	0.0009911	-57.2	-1.1	2.4

Table 1 displays the regression results from running a multilinear regression model with the independent variables (Wealth, Beijing Policy, Handover, and Election Type) to find their effects on the dependent variables (VDem Score, Turnout, and Results). The effects can be found in the body of the figure.

In Table 1 the regression results for each independent variable's effect on the dependent democracy measures are shown. Multiple variables were statistically significant. The Beijing policy variable and the wealth variable were significant at the 95% confidence interval for all three regressions. Wealth also had a positive effect on all three dependent variables, meaning that as wealth has increased in Hong Kong, so do indicators of democracy. The effects themselves look small in the table since the results show the effects on their given indicator for a change in a singular unit (in the case of wealth, this is a singular dollar). If adjusted for realistic changes in GDP, such as one standard deviation, the results tell us that a change in GDP results in significant changes to all three dependent variables. A GDP per capita increase of \$16,202.12 (one standard deviation) results in a 0.07 increase in V-Dem score (about the same as a standard deviation in V-Dem score of 0.09). This shows that V-Dem score and wealth are highly correlated, as a change in the standard deviation of one results in a near identical change in standard deviation of the other. The data therefore supports the modernization theory hypothesis that an increase in wealth will result in an increase in democracy, measured through V-Dem score. Similar findings are true for wealth's impact on the other democracy indicator variables. A change in standard deviation results in a 16.1% increase in the proportion of total elected candidates who are pro-democracy and a 9.16% increase in voter turnout. It is, again, important to note that these trends will likely not continue if Beijing's influence in Hong Kong's elections continues to grow. The power of elites in the voting base for LegCo, as well as rises in inequality, will likely play a factor in this as well.

The Beijing policy variable was also statistically significant and produced the anticipated directional significance for all three dependent variables. The Beijing policies had a negative effect on V-Dem score, election turnout, and election results as predicted. In the regression model, the Beijing policies resulted in a 0.22 decrease in V-Dem score which is quite large, as well as a 29.5% decrease in voter turnout and a 57.2% decrease in the proportion of pro-democracy candidates winning. These effects are all quite substantial and will likely increase in the coming years as Hong Kong elections continue to exclude pro-democracy candidates from running for office.

The Handover results run counter to my hypothesis and do not support the data trends which I have seen. Elections after the Handover produced more pro-democracy results and had higher turnout, on average, than elections before the Handover. So the regression model results showing a negative effect on turnout and results does not seem feasible. I assume that the Handover variable is highly correlated with another variable in the data set which caused the model to produce this result. The Handover did have a positive effect on V-Dem score which is interesting. Since the V-Dem data set did not include a variable for electoral type, and since national LegCo elections only began after the Handover, I assume that this is the correlated variable in my elections data set. If I ran this regression again, I would choose to run the Handover dummy variable and the electoral type dummy variable data separately to avoid this correlation. As predicted, local elections had a negative effect on turnout and a positive effect on pro-democracy results. This is because less people usually vote in local elections but local elections are less influenced by Beijing than national elections so more pro-democracy candidates are able to be elected.

The Beijing policies passed after the Pandemic had a significant effect on Hong Kong's democratization efforts, as shown in Table 1. These policies alone would have done irreversible damage to Hong Kong's freedoms, but Beijing did not stop there. On March 19, 2024, while this paper was still being written, Hong Kong passed a new national security law. Known as Article 23, or the "Safeguarding National Security Ordinance," this new bill includes national security language from the mainland. It expands punishments and classifications for espionage and includes mandated reporting of fellow Hong Kongers with jail time for citizens who criticize the government (Amnesty International 2024). In practice, this will further degrade political and civil liberties in the city, especially freedom of speech and the right to protest. With these new laws in place, it seems as though universal suffrage may never come to fruition in Hong Kong, at least not in the Western sense. There may be increased access to voting for citizens but voters will be choosing from candidates vetted by Beijing, excluding pro-democracy activists.

One other important contribution to democratization efforts in Hong Kong which was mentioned in my study but not measured, is protest movements. Protests invigorate potential voters and spread awareness about the threat of certain candidates or policies to the general public. In Hong Kong, significant protests have been used to push back against unwanted election reform and reform in other areas, such as the education curriculum. In 2019, Hong Kong saw some of the biggest protests in its history, and the subsequent elections saw the highest voter turnout and a "landslide victory" for pro-democracy candidates being elected (Tsung-gan 2020). I thoroughly believe that protests have been a contributing factor to voter turnout and the election of pro-democracy candidates in the past, and the data shows this to an extent. Election years following or during years which host large protests tend to have higher voter

turnout and election results skewed in favor of pro-democracy candidates. This is significant because the National Security Laws of 2020 and 2024 significantly and effectively limit protest movements in the city which will likely contribute to a further erosion of democratic participation. However, there is not enough reliable data on protests in Hong Kong since official protest estimates by the state are usually drastically different from estimates by protest organizers. This absence of a valuable variable in my regression analysis is one limitation of my study and if I were to conduct this study again, I would find a way to measure protests to include them in the data set. For future research I would also recommend that media censorship and arrests be taken into account. With the passage of the national security laws in 2020 and 2024, I believe that we will see a drastic decrease in free speech. This may look like less journalists publishing work that critiques the government, increases of political activist arrests, and less protests in the coming years.

Conclusion

Universal suffrage has been guaranteed to Hong Kong since the Handover in 1997, yet each year this goal appears increasingly less realistic. As Beijing continues its oppressive influence in the city, democracy activists have begun to lose hope of a future that Hong Kong has fought for decades to achieve. My research sought to combine past literature with contemporary data to find out if universal suffrage could be achieved before the 2047 expiration date of Hong Kong's freedoms and liberties. Unfortunately, it seems as though Beijing's efforts to dampen democracy in the city have been wildly successful. If trends continue in the direction they currently run, it is unlikely that Hong Kong will ever see universal suffrage in any meaningful way.

The findings of the regression models I ran show a decrease in all democracy indicators in the city after the 2020 and 2021 Beijing policies. I believe this trend will sadly continue, and that much of the activism and triumphs for democracy from 2000 to 2020 will not be seen again in Hong Kong. The power of Beijing is not the only factor that I found to influence Hong Kong democracy. Wealth was found to have a positive effect on all three democracy indicators, supporting modernization theory. Hong Kong is also highly developed in other ways, such as life expectancy and education, which are also part of modernization theory. Unfortunately, the presence of widespread and unbridled inequality in the city may contribute to Beijing's cause as wealth rises in the city. The power of the Electoral Committee, run primarily by city elites, was expanded with the 2021 election reforms and the full impact of these changes remains to be seen in future elections.

Jeffrey Wasserstrom dishearteningly comes to the conclusion that “Hong Kong as it has been will disappear well before 2047” (Wasserstrom 2020, 80). His accounts of the magnitude of the protests for democratization in the city and the fervor of supporters make it difficult to imagine that this bleak prediction may come true. Sadly, it seems there is little hope for true democracy in Hong Kong. Also, the reality of China increasingly imposing itself onto Hong Kong, despite the pretense of 1C2S, creates worrying implications for Taiwan. The democratic country is not officially sovereign and operates under a fragile version of 1C2S in the eyes of mainland China. With the erosion of freedoms in Hong Kong, Taiwan has reason for concern.

Despite the findings in this paper, which are less than encouraging for the official prospects of democracy, Hong Kongers continue to pride themselves in their unique identity. It is vital for the world to stay educated on issues in Hong Kong in order to give a voice to activists who are losing theirs. I learned the stories of many courageous students, activists, and journalists throughout the course of this research and I do not mean to discredit them and their hard work. This research should serve as a wake up call of the failure to protect Hong Kong and the dire consequences of Beijing’s power in the city.

Looking towards the future, Hong Kong’s next LegCo election will be held in 2025, barring a potential disruption in the current 4-year electoral cycle. No one is really sure what these elections will look like. With the new policy of vetting all candidates who run for office to ensure they are Chinese patriots, could there be future changes to elections in Hong Kong? Could there possibly be universal suffrage achieved solely to choose which pro-Beijing candidate to elect? Little is known. Joshua Wong, a leader among the pro-democracy movement once said, “We long to have a home where civil freedoms are respected, where our children will not be subject to mass surveillance, abuse of human rights, political censorship and mass incarceration” (Wong 2019). The fight to preserve political and civil liberties on a global scale remains imperative to protecting the future of democracy for Joshua Wong, the people of Hong Kong, and anyone else who desires freedom, safety, and independence.

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