CHAPTER ONE

AN OVERVIEW OF THE HONG KONG LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ELECTIONS OF 1991

Ian Scott

In a celebrated article published in 1955, V.O. Key sought to identify the characteristics of what he called ‘critical’ elections. There were, he felt, three essential features which served to distinguish these kinds of elections from more commonplace varieties. First, critical elections were those ‘in which more or less profound readjustments occur in the relation of power within the community;’ 1 secondly, in such elections, the depth and intensity of electoral involvement would be high; and, thirdly, the election would provide the means by which ‘new and durable’ political groupings were formed. These criteria have been used to pass judgement on the significance of many elections. Most British commentators, for example, seem to agree that the elections of 1906 and 1945 were critical elections. 2 Key himself felt that the American presidential elections of 1896 and 1928 met the conditions of his categorization. 3 Palmer argues that the Ceylonese election of 1956 might also be included. 4 And so, too, could all the pre-independence elections in British colonies in Africa, which were usually marked by high turnouts, a commitment on the part of the colonial government to hand over power to nationalist leaders and the emergence of a mass party. 5

Hong Kong’s 1991 Legislative Council elections were officially declared to be critical elections. The Hong Kong government informed the public - in advance of the event - that the elections were ‘historic’. The spokesmen noted that it was the first time that Hong Kong voters had been permitted to elect some members of the legislature under full adult suffrage. Senior government officials called for a high turnout and suggested that, if the elections were a ‘success’, they might serve to speed up the pace of democratic reform. 6 There were even vague promises, subsequently re-
tracted, that British ministers might be prepared to talk to their Chinese counterparts to persuade them to consider a legislature which would contain a higher proportion of directly elected members. But, in all this, there was a degree of ambivalence and of ground-shifting. The government’s television advertisements might proclaim that the elections meant ‘power in your hands’, but the constitutional framework, as many voters were aware, was not designed to achieve that end. The government might appeal for a high turnout but the electoral register was out of date. And that patronising and insidious word ‘success’ could be interpreted to mean precisely what the government chose it to mean.

To evaluate whether these elections were indeed critical, and in what ways, we must return to Key’s criteria. Did the elections result in a profound shift of power? Did the elections engender a high level of public interest and voter turnout? Did the election see the emergence of ‘new and durable’ political groupings? We consider these questions in turn.

**Power and the Political System**

The parameters of the 1991 Legislative Council elections were deliberately set to prevent a dramatic shift in power alignments in Hong Kong. These arrangements centred on the expectation that power would remain firmly lodged with Hong Kong’s colonial and bureaucratic executive until 1997 when it would then be transferred in effect to the government of the People’s Republic of China. Lip-service is still paid to the Sino-British declaration of 1984, which formally provides for ‘a high degree of autonomy’ for the territory after 1997 under the ‘one country, two systems’ concept. But there is little public confidence that the Chinese government, if it retains its present inclinations, will respect the autonomy of its future special administrative region. The constitutional arrangements spelled out in the Basic Law, a Chinese document which is intended to apply to Hong Kong after 1997, and the political developments agreed to by the British and Chinese governments in the transitional period are clearly not aimed at the establishment of anything which could remotely be considered a popularly elected or supported government.
Seen in this light, the 1991 Legislative Council elections were simply a sop to democratic sentiment, a concession designed to ensure that conservative business and professional elites in collaboration with senior civil servants would remain the key decision-makers. The composition of the 60-member legislature was intended to bring about that result. Only 18 members of the Council were to be directly elected. A further 21 were to be elected from functional constituencies, mostly on very restricted franchises. The Governor personally was to appoint an additional 18 members, including the Deputy President of the Council. And there were three remaining official members, the Chief Secretary, the Financial Secretary and the Attorney-General (Table 1.1). This arrangement was designed to ensure 'convergence' with the Basic Law and anticipated the future legislature of the special administrative region which was to have 20 directly elected seats, 30 functional constituency seats and ten members appointed by a selection committee.

When the composition of the legislature was decided in 1988 and 1989, the Hong Kong government probably thought that the directly elected seats would produce a mixture of liberal, rural conservative and business representatives and perhaps some members of 'united front' organizations which had the support of the People's Republic of China. The constituencies were established as two-member seats which, it was assumed, would produce an appropriate mix if Hong Kong voters cast their ballots for prominent individuals rather than a 'party' label. This was an entirely reasonable assumption since, at that time, there were no formal political parties in Hong Kong. If matters had worked out as the government expected, then the 1991 Legislative Council elections would have resulted in comparatively little change because the government would have been able to claim that those who had been elected represented a broad and disparate spectrum of opinion. It would then have been able, as it had done so often in the past, to interpret the 'consensus' to its own advantage.9
Table 1.1
The Hong Kong Legislative Council, 1991: composition and electorate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Registered electorate</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
<th>Votes cast</th>
<th>Percentage turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directly elected</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1,916,925</td>
<td>750,467</td>
<td>1,369,313[^a]</td>
<td>39.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional constituencies[^b]</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>48,756[^c]</td>
<td>22,919</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointed by the Governor</td>
<td>18[^d]</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officials</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from information supplied by the Registration and Electoral Office of the Hong Kong government.

[^a] Each voter was entitled to cast two votes. There were 1,609 invalid ballots.
[^b] Elections in functional constituencies are by 'preferential elimination'.
[^c] This was the registered electorate for the contested constituencies only. The total registered electorate for functional constituencies was 69,825. Twelve seats were uncontested.
[^d] Including the Deputy President of the Legislative Council.

But the direct elections did not produce the results which the government had originally expected. One party, the liberal United Democrats, won 12 of the 18 seats. Two other seats went to an allied group, Meeting Point, whose candidates were not opposed by the United Democrats. Yet another liberal group, the Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood, won a seat in Kowloon West. Of the remaining seats, one went to a liberal independent, one to an independent incumbent and the other to an incumbent rural conservative (Table 1.2). In short, the results of the direct elections were a liberal landslide. The United Democrats alone received 45% of the vote. If votes for allied groups and sympathetic independents are included, approximately 67.5% of the voters cast their ballots for liberals.

The other parties and political groupings fared very badly. The conservative Liberal Democratic Federation, composed mainly of business
and professional groups favouring collaboration with China, polled only 5.1% of the vote. None of its candidates were elected. Candidates running for pro-China ‘united front’ organizations received only 7.9% of the vote and were also easily defeated. Chan Yuen-han, the Federation of Trade Unions’ candidate in Kowloon Central, polled approximately 11,000 votes less than the second place United Democrat, Dr Conrad Lam Kui-shing, and was 23,000 votes behind the winner, United Democrat Lau Chin-shek. In Island East, Cheng Kai-nam, who had the support of a pro-China group, Hong Kong Citizen Forum, polled 29,902 votes against the United Democrats’ leader, Martin Lee Chu-ming, who received 76,831 votes. Lee and his fellow United Democrat, Szeto Wah, who had been labelled ‘subversives’ by the Chinese government and expelled from the Basic Law Drafting Committee following their support for pro-democracy groups in China, received the highest number of votes cast for individual candidates.

What explains this liberal sweep? We should first consider arguments variously put forward by members of the Hong Kong and Chinese governments which essentially sought to discredit the view that the results were representative of Hong Kong public opinion. On the eve of the elections, when it was already clear that there would be a substantial liberal victory, Hong Kong’s highest ranking civil servant, the Chief Secretary, Sir David Ford, said on television that the elections should be seen in the context of a 50% registration rate, of whom perhaps only 50% might turn out at the polls. The implication was that those elected represented one quarter of the eligible electorate and that there remained, in consequence, a majority who were not represented. The government, Ford appeared to be saying, reserved the right ‘to balance’ the legislature by appointing members who might be thought to represent those who had not registered or had not voted.
Table 1.2
Direct election results: summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>Percentage of vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Liberals</strong>:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Democrats</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>45.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting Point</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association for Democracy and People’s Livelihood</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong Democratic Foundation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Liberal Independents</strong>:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conservative</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democratic Federation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pro-China</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federation of Trade Unions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hong Kong Alliance</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong Citizen Forum</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwan Tong Man Chung Association</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Groups</strong>:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform Club</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic Association</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trades Union Council</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Independents</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>54</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>99.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Calculated from *The Hong Kong Government Gazette Extraordinary* 133(41), 20 September 1991. For detailed results, see Appendix A.

aMost liberals stood for constitutional reform, including a directly elected legislature. Many supported the pro-democracy movement in China.

bComposed largely of business and professional groups opposed to rapid progress towards representative government. Many favoured collaboration with China and acquiescence to the views of the Chinese government on political development.

c"United front" organizations which took the Chinese government’s line and received financial and other support from that source.

dIncluded rural conservatives, one of whom was re-elected, some candidates who were probably pro-Beijing or who supported the Liberal Democratic Federation but did not directly identify themselves as such, past political notables without specific affiliations and an incumbent member who was re-elected but who did not belong to any political grouping. The elected independent rural conservative, Tai Chin-wah, whose qualifications to practise as a solicitor were being investigated by the police, did not take his seat. The subsequent by-election was won by a Meeting Point candidate.

Percentages do not add up to 100% because of rounding.
The problem with this argument, of course, is that, other than by surveys, there is no way of knowing how those who were not registered or did not cast their ballots would have voted. They might, quite conceivably, have voted in the same way as those who did vote. In fact, our surveys suggest that the views of voters and non-voters were not strikingly dissimilar. Both groups, for example, were adamantly opposed to Chinese government intervention in Hong Kong affairs and both strongly preferred liberal candidates. In addition, 20% of the eligible population did actually vote and, in other contexts, this would be taken as a more than adequate indication of the people’s preferences. Most governments in western democracies are not elected by a majority of the eligible voters or even by a majority of the voters. The Conservative party in Britain in the 1987 election, for example, obtained 42.3% of the votes on a 75% turnout. This translated into 374 seats out of 650 and was regarded as a substantial victory. No winning British party this century has ever received the votes of a majority of the eligible voters and only twice has a winning party been able to secure an absolute majority of those who did cast their ballots.

There may, of course, be many reasons why people do not vote. Hong Kong census statistics show that, at any one time, over 150,000 residents may not be in the territory. Some voters may have refrained from casting their ballots as a protest against government policies. Others, whose names were still on the register, were dead or had emigrated. Still others, a significant majority of non-voters in our sample, did not vote because they felt that their vote would have no effect, that the individual was powerless to change the course of political history (see Chapter 3). In none of these cases, however, was it appropriate for the government to claim the right to appoint individuals to the legislature to represent views other than those of the liberal majority. Yet this is precisely what the Governor chose to do when, following the election, he appointed 17 members to the legislature, none of whom were specifically identified with liberal groups.

The government’s arguments fail for another reason. The actual turnout in the direct elections was 39.15%, a figure which was sufficiently low for various commentators, including the Chinese government and the English-language newspaper, the South China Morning Post (SCMP), to imply that the results were not representative. It is clear, however, from the
electoral survey results that a major reason for the low turnout was that the electoral register was badly out of date. It had not been revised since 1982. New voters had only been added to the register on their own initiative and the names of voters who had left Hong Kong had not been removed from the register.

The government made no attempt to play a more positive role in the registration process. The issuing of new identity cards to all adult citizens in the years preceding the elections offered an excellent chance to register voters at no extra cost. Alternatively, the decennial census held in March 1991 might have been adapted to compile a more accurate register. Neither opportunity was taken. The result was that many voters had moved elsewhere in Hong Kong and so did not receive polling cards or campaign literature. Others, some 300,000 of a population of 5.5 million, had emigrated since the signing of the Sino-British declaration in 1984. Thirty-five thousand people were added to the register shortly before the elections because they had moved to other constituencies, but it is very doubtful whether this came remotely close to solving the problem. Our surveys in Kowloon Central showed that some 14% of the voters could not be contacted at their homes, even after repeat visits. In other constituencies, with greater mobility rates, the percentage of those who should not have been on the register might have been even higher. The effective voting rate, Robert Chung has suggested, was probably about 48%. Under the circumstances, the turnout rate does not lend itself to the interpretation that the results were unrepresentative. They were representative of those who were able to vote and they constituted a higher percentage of the eligible electorate than either the Hong Kong or the Chinese governments were willing to recognize.

The argument that the direct election results were not representative was quickly picked up by the New China News Agency, China’s diplomatic arm in Hong Kong, and by Mr Lu Ping, the director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs office of the Chinese government. Lu Ping, who had earlier warned the Governor not to appoint Martin Lee and Szeto Wah to the Executive Council, was quoted as saying that more than 80% of eligible voters had not voted in the elections and that ‘people in Hong Kong will sooner or later be able to see clearly what is real democracy.’ He also
warned that 'Beijing would not tolerate Hong Kong legislators challenging its rule after the transfer of sovereignty' or pressing for more directly elected seats in the legislature. He exhorted members of the Legislative Council to be loyal to the Basic Law and to work for the long-term prosperity and stability of Hong Kong. The Chinese government also declined to recognize the legislature before 1997, claiming that it was only an advisory body and, in the words of Zhang Junsheng, a vice-director of the New China News Agency, 'certainly not a representative one.'

It is not clear what the Chinese officials meant by representative or democratic. It is possible either that they meant to imply that the present political arrangements in Hong Kong did not reflect the wishes of the population which would be better served under Chinese sovereignty or that the elections themselves were not representative because only 20% of the eligible electorate voted. In the former case, the evidence from the elections itself and from opinion polls conducted before the elections does not suggest that most Hong Kong people were positively looking forward to the assertion of Chinese sovereignty over the territory in 1997. A poll conducted in June 1991, for example, found that only 21% favoured a return to China while 73% preferred options such as becoming independent (29%), becoming part of Britain (26%) or part of the Commonwealth (19%). The Chinese government is not generally regarded in Hong Kong as a model for 'real democracy'; words such as representative and democratic are not, in their normal usage, usually associated with the regime in Beijing.

If the argument, on the other hand, is that the elections were not representative, then the critical question is whether the direct election results or the allocation of seats is being considered. I have argued, to this point, that the results of the direct elections do provide an adequate and representative indication of the political preferences of the Hong Kong people. However, if one takes the allocation of seats as the principal criterion of representativeness, then there seems no doubt that the composition of the legislature, which includes 21 functional constituency members and 18 appointed members, does not properly reflect the views of the whole population. Table 1.3 shows the results and the size of the electorates in the functional constituencies. It is immediately evident that the government’s decision to grant functional
### Table 1.3
Functional constituency results: summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional constituency</th>
<th>Electorate</th>
<th>Turnout</th>
<th>Percentage turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commercial(1)</td>
<td>1,609</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>56.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial(2)</td>
<td>2,348</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial(1)</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial(2)</td>
<td>1,366</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance and Financial Services(1)</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance and Financial Services(2)</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>556</td>
<td>80.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Services</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical and Health Care(1)</td>
<td>4,031</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical and Health Care(2)</td>
<td>10,636</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td>38,678</td>
<td>17,034</td>
<td>44.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>1,240</td>
<td>714</td>
<td>57.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering, Architectural</td>
<td>2,805</td>
<td>1,511</td>
<td>53.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveying and Planning(1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering, Architectural,</td>
<td>1,481</td>
<td>1,039</td>
<td>70.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveying and Planning(2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountancy</td>
<td>2,276</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real Estate and Construction</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>847</td>
<td>728</td>
<td>86.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Council</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional Council</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>48,756b</strong></td>
<td><strong>22,819</strong></td>
<td><strong>47.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Registration and Electoral Office of the Hong Kong government.

*There are two seats for the labour functional constituency.

b Uncontested constituencies only. The total registered electorate for functional constituencies was 69,825.
constituency status to particular occupational groups was heavily biased towards the business and professional sectors. It is also clear that, in most cases, the electorate for these constituencies is very small. So-called ‘representative’ organizations determine who will constitute the electorate with the consequence that the results are open to manipulation and can often be determined in advance. In the 1991 elections, 12 of the 21 functional constituencies were uncontested. The two constituencies with the largest electorates, Health Care and Teaching, were both won by United Democrats. Of the remainder, members of the liberal Hong Kong Democratic Foundation won two seats (Commercial (1) and Medical and Health (1)) while the others mostly went to businessmen and professionals associated to varying degrees with conservative and pro-Chinese government positions. Taking into account the Governor’s 17 appointees (excluding the Deputy President of the Council), the legislature as a whole still has a predominantly conservative bias even though the vast majority of the electors preferred liberals.

Both the Chinese and the Hong Kong governments are fully committed to retaining the functional constituency system. In 1995, under an annex in the Basic Law, the number of functional constituency seats will increase to 30, the number of directly elected seats to 20 and ten members will be selected by an election committee composed mainly of members appointed from functional sectors and from Hong Kong delegates to the Chinese National People’s Congress. Despite abundant evidence that the functional constituency system does not permit adequate choice and that it discriminates between voters by allowing some to cast more ballots than others, it is attractive to the Chinese government because it enables political control to be exercised more easily. The Chinese strategy for Hong Kong appears to be to rule through surrogates and collaborators; the functional constituencies, with their small electorates, allow for greater manipulation in the selection of candidates than the large electorates in the directly contested seats. As a corollary, the Chinese leadership’s opposition to democratic constitutional reform probably stems principally from the fear that, if free elections were held to a wholly directly elected legislature, the result would be an assembly largely antagonistic to future Chinese plans for the territory. The paradox is that it is precisely the Chinese government’s intransigent position on consti-
tutional reforms and civil liberties which is fuelling support for the liberals. The evidence from the 1991 elections showed that the single most important variable determining voter support for candidates was their stance towards the Chinese government.

There are a number of separate factors which can be adduced to support this conclusion. The most obvious is that all candidates who supported, or were thought to support, the Chinese government lost. Beyond this, however, it is clear that even candidates who ran under a liberal banner but who were thought to have pro-China sympathies were defeated. In Kowloon West, for example, the Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood put up two candidates. The leader of the Association, Frederick Fung Kin-kee, had long-established roots in the constituency and was duly elected with 28.9% of the vote. His running mate, Law Cheung-kwok, was widely suspected of having strong links with the Chinese government. He received only 13.6% of the vote and finished fourth.

Suspected pro-China sympathies probably also lost the election for other candidates. In some cases, the voters may even have preferred the Beijing-supported candidates for their personal qualities to the liberals who were elected. Both the data from the Kowloon Central constituency survey and exit polls conducted by the Social Science Research Centre at the University of Hong Kong suggest a 'coat-tails' effect where the winning United Democrat pulled his less popular colleague into office with him.25 This can be ascertained by examining the voters' preferred pairings for candidates and by contrasting this with the number of single votes cast. In many cases, the leading United Democrat candidate had a substantially greater number of votes than his fellow party member (see Appendix A) who, in turn, received few votes that were not paired with those of the leading candidate. Thus, we might conclude that some liberals won because of what they were perceived to stand for rather than for their own personal attributes.

The perception of what the liberals did stand for, other than on the China question, is rather more difficult to assess. It is clear that the 1991 election was not an election which was fought on traditional policy issues. One study of party platforms suggests that there was little difference between the contending groups; most platforms were bland statements of support for generally liberal policies.26 The critical issues in personal debates between
candidates were their positions on Chinese intervention in Hong Kong affairs and their past record of support for constitutional reform in the territory. Judging from the Kowloon Central survey, however, voters did have strong views on a number of policy issues, such as the repatriation of the Vietnamese boat people. Yet this does not seem to have been the critical factor influencing their choice of candidate. Many liberals were equivocal on the boat people issue but were none the less elected. Emily Lau Wai-hing, for example, was elected in New Territories East on an election manifesto which was strong on human rights and freedoms, on maintaining Hong Kong’s autonomy and in advocating a directly elected Legislative Council. She said nothing in her manifesto about the Vietnamese boat people housed in camps in her constituency. Yet she was elected with support which appeared to increase over the course of the campaign. It is difficult not to conclude that her long past record of standing up for the political rights and liberties of Hong Kong people and against Chinese interference in the territory was the principal reason why she won comfortably over the incumbent independent, Andrew Wong Wang-fat.

Conventional policy issues probably did not play much part in determining voter allegiance for two reasons. First, there seems to have been widespread awareness that the Legislative Council did not make policy and was relatively powerless vis-à-vis the executive. In a poll conducted shortly before the elections, only 28% of the respondents thought that the Legislative Council would have the power to govern Hong Kong after the election whereas 52% thought that power would rest with the Governor, the Executive Council or the British or Chinese governments. Secondly, the parties and the candidates did not act as though policy questions, other than the China question, were important. Although the parties did have platforms, they were often vaguely expressed, mainly ‘motherhood’ promises about pressing government to control inflation, to improve law and order, to spend more on social policies and services and to clean up the environment. Where intense debate between candidates over policy issues did take place, it was normally conducted in the knowledge that they would not be called upon to put their recommendations into effect. Much of the campaign literature consisted of self-promotion, short on policy substance and usually restricted to recounting educational background and public service record. Most candidates also
sought endorsements from local notables or party leaders who might be expected to help their cause. This was characteristic of previous election campaigns in Hong Kong and was probably based on the assumption that voters would cast their ballots on the basis of the personal qualities of the candidate. If parties and groups are not contesting an election and if the platforms of the candidates are vague or indistinguishable, then this is a reasonable premise since the voter would have no other basis on which to make a choice. However, when parties enter the contest, as they did for the first time in 1991, there is always the possibility that they may be able to structure voters' preferences on a particular issue to their own advantage. The liberals seem to have been able to do this with the China issue although it seems likely that they were able to capitalize not only on immediate grievances sparked by the campaign but also on rather more long-standing resentment which went back to the Sino-British agreement of 1984 and its aftermath.

When we say that a party or a group has the ability to structure voter preferences, we mean that they can make a particular issue seem salient to voters and to persuade them, in consequence, to cast their ballots for those who seem most concerned about that issue. This was not an entirely new development in Hong Kong. There had been elections earlier in 1991 for both the District Boards and the Urban and Regional Councils. In the Kowloon Central constituency survey, nearly 65% of the sample had voted in previous elections and, of these, a surprising 52.6% had voted more than three times. The District Board elections, in particular, had resulted in liberal victories after campaigns which had focused, albeit rather less intensely, on democratic concerns similar to those expressed in the 1991 Legislative Council elections. There was also evidence in New Territories District Board and Regional Council elections that rural conservatives had firm support among the electorate, presumably on the grounds that they best represented the interests of villagers. This support appears to have been maintained in the Legislative Council elections. In New Territories West, for example, Ng Ming-yum, running for the United Democrats, drew strong support from voters in the urban areas of Tuen Mun who had previously elected him as a District Board member. However, one of his opponents, Tai Chin-wah, a conservative incumbent, was still able to take second place by retaining his
rural support.\(^{31}\) The by-election in December 1991, which resulted from Tai’s inability to take his seat following police investigations of his qualifications to practise as a solicitor, confirmed that there was strong support for rural conservatives in the constituency. Although a member of the liberal group, Meeting Point, won the election, his margin of victory over the rural conservative was only a few thousand votes. Thus, some voter preferences appear to have been structured before the 1991 elections. However, the territory-wide scope of the election, the number of new voters (approximately 250,000 more than voted in the District Board elections in the previous March) and the significance of the anti-Chinese government vote all suggest that the liberals were able to win support from among first-time voters and might possibly have created more long-term stability in voting patterns.

It is difficult to attribute the anti-communist vote to a specific cause because it could conceivably be related to any or all of the following: the Hong Kong people’s past experiences with the Chinese government; events associated with the Sino-British negotiations on the future of the territory both before and after 1984; the Beijing massacre in 1989; the actions of the Chinese government during the election campaign; and general apprehension about future Chinese government policies towards the territory. These factors are considered in turn.

**Past Experiences**

Approximately 35.6\% of Hong Kong’s population were born in China.\(^{32}\) Many people came to the territory as refugees in large waves of emigration after 1949, in the period from 1958 to 1962, or during the Cultural Revolution. Academic commentators and politicians alike are agreed that there remains great affection for China in a patriotic sense but little respect for its government.\(^{33}\) The Cultural Revolution, and later the Beijing massacre, significantly influenced the political attitudes not only of those who were born in China but also of their children who were born in Hong Kong. The suffering of relatives in China during the Cultural Revolution made a particularly strong impact on Hong Kong people and helped to create an atmosphere of mistrust of the Chinese government which persisted through-
out the Sino-British negotiations and beyond.

The Sino-British Negotiations

The 1984 agreement was negotiated without the participation of Hong Kong representatives and without the consent of the Hong Kong people. An assessment office was set up to ascertain their views but it was essentially an exercise in ratifying an ultimatum from the British government to accept the agreement or take the consequences. The British and Hong Kong governments also sold the agreement to the Hong Kong people on the grounds that it would protect their civil liberties, lead to an elected legislature, maintain 'a high degree of autonomy' after 1997 and promote continued economic growth.

By 1991, with the exception of economic prosperity, the grounds on which the assessment office claimed the agreement had been accepted had either been directly re-negotiated or become largely implausible. The promise in the agreement, for example, of an elected legislature to which the executive would be accountable had been undermined by the Basic Law and by China's refusal to permit more directly elected seats. In January 1986, the British and Chinese governments negotiated an agreement whereby Britain conceded that constitutional developments in Hong Kong in the transitional period would 'converge' with the Basic Law which was then still to be drafted by China. However, an earlier white paper had promised that there would be a review of constitutional developments in 1987 and that the question whether there would be direct elections to the legislature in 1988 would be considered. It seems clear from opinion polls that at least a plurality, and probably a majority, of Hong Kong people were in favour of the introduction of direct elections at that time. Because of the British government's agreement with China, however, the Hong Kong government was forced to resort to the expedient of counting cyclostyled petitions from Chinese 'united front' organizations as part of assessed opinion against introducing direct elections. Such tactics inevitably caused a backlash. The liberals probably gained support from those who saw the government's decision not to introduce direct elections as a violation of promises made in 1984 and as frustrating the democratic aspirations of the population.
The future autonomy of the territory was also a critical issue in post-1984 Hong Kong. The Basic Law, which included provisions for the stationing of People’s Liberation Army troops in Hong Kong and for the declaration of a state of emergency at the wish of the Chinese government, soon illustrated the very limited self-government which Hong Kong was likely to enjoy after 1997. The conclusion of another agreement between Britain and China in July 1991 to build a new airport in Hong Kong was further seen as compromising the territory’s political and economic autonomy in the transitional period.

Finally, civil liberties were called into question, partly because the Hong Kong government tried to introduce some ill-advised measures which raised questions about press freedom and judicial independence. The Beijing massacre and the subsequent treatment of dissidents in China focused attention on the future sovereign power’s view of political and civil liberties and did nothing to assuage local fears. In one sense, the 1991 direct elections results can be interpreted as a referendum on the past seven years. The elections represented the first opportunity that Hong Kong people have had to express themselves on a territory-wide basis on the Sino-British agreement and its aftermath. The election results were a vote against the Chinese government and against communism but also probably indicated a negative judgement on the facile role which the British and Hong Kong governments had played in failing to introduce representative government, to insist on autonomy and to protect civil liberties. The Beijing massacre was evidence, if evidence were needed, that the fears of the Hong Kong people were fully justified.

The Beijing Massacre

It may be too soon to estimate the full impact of the Beijing massacre on the political attitudes of the Hong Kong people. Over one million people (or 20% of the population) were estimated to have taken to the streets in one or more of the rallies organized in support of the pro-democracy movement in May and June 1989. The massacres were seen live on television and were widely condemned in the media, including one communist newspaper. The organization formed to aid the pro-democracy movement, the Hong Kong Alliance,
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was led by liberals and was denounced by the Chinese government as subversive. None the less, its leaders were still able to mobilize tens of thousands of supporters on the anniversaries of the massacre. It is not clear, however, that all the supporters of the Alliance were necessarily committed to the liberals’ vision of a democratic future which, in any event, was rather vaguely stated. What united them - and what may have been reflected in the 1991 direct elections results - was a profound distaste for the Chinese system of government, for its political values and for the implications which this had for Hong Kong.

The Chinese Government’s Campaign Tactics

Following the election campaign, the Chief Editor of the communist newspaper, Ta Kung Pao, concluded that Chinese official behaviour towards the election could be characterized as minimal involvement:

There was no organized fielding of candidates. For the eighteen seats contested in the direct elections, there were only three candidates from established pro-Beijing circles, and they had all decided to run on their own initiatives. There was no Chinese official attempt to contact more would-be candidates with enticement to run.42

He went on to point out in the same paper that no senior ranking local employee of official Chinese establishments in Hong Kong ran; that there was no attempt to remove the clause barring local people sitting on Chinese national or provincial legislatures from running; that there was no Chinese government support for any candidate; that there were no ‘united front’ tactics; that there was only limited, localized mobilization of support; and that no attempt was made to exclude any particular group.

It would perhaps have been more helpful for China’s cause if these points had been made before the elections. There was evidence during the campaign that the New China News Agency was actively involved in supporting candidates and no doubt at all that it would have claimed the
patriotic support of the Hong Kong people for the Chinese government had its candidates won. The difficulty for most candidates with Chinese connections was that they were aware that a pro-Beijing stance was a considerable electoral liability and that they took steps, accordingly, to distance themselves from the Chinese government and the New China News Agency. The fact remains that the New China News Agency did encourage particular candidates to run - in Hong Kong Island West, for example - and that it may not have exercised 'united front' tactics in that constituency only because the Agency itself was divided on the issue of whom to support. The Chinese government did provide funds for preferred candidates of at least $100,000 and used such organizations as the Federation of Trade Unions to mobilize voters. Finally, although it was later to claim that too much was made of this, the New China News Agency did warn Hong Kong voters to take candidates' attitudes to relations with mainland China into account when casting their votes.

The Chinese government’s role during the campaign does not seem to have influenced the vote significantly except perhaps to confirm the already established suspicions of the voters. There was some hardening of the Chinese position on democracy following the failed Soviet coup in August but there is no evidence that this had an impact on the elections. Given the financial and logistical support enjoyed by candidates backed by the Chinese government, it is surprising that they were able to garner so few votes.

Future Apprehension

Little more need be said about the growing apprehension with which Hong Kong people view the Chinese takeover in 1997. Before the 1991 elections, there were essentially two views on how the population should respond to this situation. One view held that the appropriate way to deal with China was through elite interaction, conceding the political demands of the Chinese leadership but seeking to preserve economic integrity and prosperity and to demonstrate, through this, the usefulness of the territory to China’s modernization programmes. The second view, that of the liberals, was that, while there was a need to communicate with the Chinese leadership, this was best
done on the solid foundation of a system which guaranteed civil and political liberties and which allowed properly elected representatives to present the views of the Hong Kong people. The latter position appears to have been supported by a solid majority of voters in the 1991 elections, but it was possibly not so much a consequence of the election campaign as an outcome of previous debates on constitutional issues.

If the 1991 election results can be interpreted as a referendum on the past rather than as an immediate response to the campaign, what conclusions can be drawn for the structuring of voter preferences? The liberals attracted two-thirds of the vote but it would seem that this vote was largely an anti-Chinese government vote rather than a vote for a particular political party. The United Democrats have yet to succeed in institutionalizing their political party; voters do not vote for the candidates because they are United Democrats but because they are perceived to be the group which has stood up most strongly for Hong Kong interests and in opposition to the Chinese government. To the extent that voter preferences are stable and rooted in history, it is that historical element rather than party loyalty which predominates. Provided that the United Democrats continue to occupy that part of the political spectrum they will continue to enjoy support but the fact that their candidates lost to other liberals in some constituencies does not suggest that they are necessarily in a monopoly position.

Finally, we may return to Key’s criterion of a critical election: the extent to which the election represented a profound readjustment in power relations. In formal terms, there were no changes in power relations after the 1991 elections. Informally, however, the results from the direct elections can scarcely be ignored. They mean, first, that the Chinese government has no mandate from the people of Hong Kong to interfere in the affairs of the territory either before or after 1997. Secondly, the Hong Kong government, which is not elected, has no mandate to claim that it acts with the support of the people of Hong Kong, while the liberal opposition can speak from a basis of popular backing. There have already been some signs that the relationship between the executive and the legislature is changing, with the newly elected members, and some appointed members, seeking greater accountability. Thirdly, as a corollary, that the government’s legitimacy and, in conse-
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sequence, its ability to formulate and implement policy is considerably impaired. The election may not have resulted in a shift in power but it did suggest that the community was fundamentally disenchanted with both the existing and planned future political arrangements.

**Political Participation and Involvement**

We can deal with the second of Key’s criteria - the level of political involvement in the election - rather more briefly. The usual indicator of high involvement in an election campaign is the turnout rate. However, as we have seen, the turnout rate of 39.15% in the direct elections is, in important respects, misleading and represents a considerable underestimate of the percentage of registered voters actually casting their ballots. None the less, the qualitative indicators suggest that voters were not as highly committed to participation as one might expect in a ‘critical election’. That is not to say that they were uninformed or that they were apathetic. Rather, voting seemed to constitute a single act in which voters expressed a preference rather than a process in which they might participate. There were no tumultuous or well-attended rallies, no landmark speeches and not much by way of active involvement in the campaign. The media did give the election a high level of coverage which kept the electorate well-informed of the candidates’ positions but this did not usually lead to impassioned or didactic debates over policy issues either among candidates or between candidates and the electorate. Voting itself seemed little more than a minor deviation from a normal Hong Kong Sunday. There were small groups of occasionally raucous candidates’ supporters outside the polling stations, who sometimes made it difficult to vote, but the process of voting itself was conducted very peacefully, almost without incident.

There may be many reasons why Hong Kong voters were not deeply involved in the electoral process but the following considerations may be germane. First, the Hong Kong public has traditionally distanced itself from politics and from government. Although this view has changed gradually over the years, it is still a fairly widely held value that people should not be involved in politics. Secondly, the elections were not elections about winning
political power. Control remained in the hands of the executive. The direct elections results did not change that fact, although they may have reduced further the extent to which the executive could treat the Legislative Council as a rubber stamp for its policies. Thirdly, the relatively recent emergence of political parties and political groups meant that there was only a limited organizational framework through which individuals could participate. The political parties did not have mass memberships or established district-level organizations; nor did they invite active participation from the electorate. These factors may become of less significance over time. The electoral process itself increased political awareness which, in turn, might possibly be expected to lead to greater involvement.

The Durability of Political Groups

Key’s third criterion has already been partially considered in our treatment of power relationships and political involvement. It is too early to say whether the political groups which emerged for the 1991 elections will prove to be durable. The United Democrats had been in existence for just over a year when the election was held. The party is itself a coalition of various liberal groups and there is tension among them, particularly over party support for candidates in elections. Candidates with strong liberal credentials who did not receive the party nomination ran against United Democrats and some received a significant proportion of the vote. It is possible, however, that the strong showing of the party in the election will tend to discourage other liberal independents in future. The election results suggest that the only real challenge to the United Democrats comes from those who were perceived to have better liberal credentials than party candidates or from those who had established a strong local base of support. The party did not challenge Frederick Fung Kin-kee, the leader of the Association for Democracy and People’s Livelihood, in Kowloon West, although this may change in the future. Its candidates lost to a prominent liberal, Emily Lau Wai-hing, in New Territories East. And the labour activist, Lau Chin-shek, could probably have won under any label in Kowloon Central. Party loyalty, in short, has still to be established. In most constituencies, the United Democrats offered the
best liberal alternative but, where there were choices, the voters were willing to consider those whose liberal political orientations best matched their own inclinations.

For the other declared party, the conservative Liberal Democratic Federation, the elections were little short of a disaster. Yet the party does have considerable financial and political resources and it is likely to remain an influence in Hong Kong politics although possibly in some reconstituted form. The party never claimed to seek a mass base, as the liberals did, and it has remained a collection of notables with ties to China and the Hong Kong governmental system rather than a distinctive organization. Its best prospects for the future, as one of its leaders, Maria Tam, candidly admitted, is the hope that the Hong Kong voter will see the need for a bridge with China in 1995. If the strong historical sensibilities of the voters remain in place, this may be a forlorn hope. None the less, because the functional constituencies are so strongly biased towards business and professional groups, it seems likely that the party will continue to enjoy political influence disproportionate to its popular support.49

Lau Siu-kai has suggested that the objective constraints to party development in Hong Kong are considerable.50 No doubt in the constitutional context which the Chinese, British and Hong Kong governments have sought to establish there is little room for any party other than the Chinese Communist Party. There are also considerable constraints in terms of the organizational effort which the party - in this case, only the United Democrats are relevant - would need to make to establish a permanent base in the society.

Key’s criterion, however, is not simply related to the likelihood of the political group enduring but also to the question whether the election results provide the means for creating durable political groups. Lo Chi-kin has remarked, for example, that the parties in the 1991 election were often less well-organized than the independent candidates.51 As we have seen, the support for the United Democrats has not yet been structured into party loyalty; voters do not support the United Democrats in the same way, say, as they might support a football team. They support them, rather more rationally, because they represent a very specific viewpoint with which the voter agrees. There is the possibility of structuring that perception into more
long-term durable support which might enable the party to retain voter support on wider policy issues, but this would require a more coherent policy message than the party has at present and a much more extensive organization.

Conclusions

If we examine the assumptions behind Key’s criteria, the most obvious omission in the Hong Kong context is the notion that the democratic process will be allowed to proceed unhindered. If Hong Kong were a colony which was moving towards independence, then the 1991 elections would have significantly aided the emergence of a mass party and the further development of representative government. In Key’s terms, they would have been critical elections. They may yet prove to be so. The Hong Kong voter delivered the unequivocal message that the territory should have an autonomous, free and democratic future untroubled by interference from the Chinese government. The results gave victories to a solid block of liberals, now composing over one-third of the members of the Legislative Council and 17 of the 18 members who are directly elected. Under most circumstances, this would represent a significant realignment of power away from the conservative and business groups who, together with the bureaucracy, have dominated Hong Kong’s political system for so long. But that is not the way in which the political die have been cast. The Chinese government has set itself against future constitutional changes for more directly elected seats. It has declared that it has the right, and will actively exercise that right, to intervene in Hong Kong affairs before and after 1997. The 1991 elections results show that, if the Chinese government chooses to take this course of action, it will do so against the democratically expressed wishes of the Hong Kong people.

NOTES

1. V.O. Key, Jr., ‘A Theory of Critical Elections,’ Journal of Politics 17 (February 1955): 3-18. Key also used the closely related concept of the ‘realigning election’ which was taken up in the classic study by Angus Campbell et al., The American Voter (New York: Wiley, 1960), pp.534-536. See also

2. For a contrary view of the 1906 election, however, see Kenneth D. Wald, 'Realignment Theory and British Party Development,' *Political Studies*, 30, 2 (June 1982): 207-220.


5. See, for example, David C. Mulford, *The Northern Rhodesian General Election 1962* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1964).

6. See, for example, SCMP, 12 September 1991. The notion that the elections might, or might not, be a 'success' seems to date from a statement made a year earlier by the Earl of Caithness, the British minister responsible for Hong Kong.


9. See, for example, Ian Scott, *Political Change and the Crisis of Legitimacy in Hong Kong* (London: Hurst, 1989), Chapter 7.

10. See Chapter 4 and Social Sciences Research Centre, University of Hong Kong, 'Public Opinion Programme', 11-13 September 1991 sponsored by Asia Television Limited (mimeo).


14. Most were professionals and business people chosen from among those who had loyally and conscientiously served on government committees.


17. Robert Chung, 'What Went Wrong with the Turnout Rate?' (unpublished manuscript).


This has been the government's objective since 1984 when the scheme to introduce functional constituencies was mooted in a green paper. The green paper argued that 'full weight should be given to representation of the economic and professional sectors of Hong Kong which are essential to future confidence and prosperity. Direct elections would run the risk of a swift introduction of adversarial politics, and would introduce an element of instability at a critical time.' See Green Paper: The Further Development of Representative Government in Hong Kong (Hong Kong: Government Printer, 1984), p.9.

The elected Regional Council functional constituency member, for example, was charged after the election with attempting to bribe an elector, SCMP, 20 December 1991. The functional constituency system has been widely criticized. See Electoral Reform Society's Report (London, 1991, mimeo), s5; Ian Scott, 'Functional Constituencies and Representation,' paper presented at a conference on 'Democracy and Political Development: Hong Kong Characteristics', organized by the Hong Kong Democratic Foundation, 19 May 1991; Ian Scott, 'Digging a Hole for Functional Constituencies,' SCMP, 21 September 1991. For the government view, see the paper given by the Secretary for Constitutional Affairs, Michael M.Y. Suen, 'The Hong Kong Electoral System and Its Future Development,' at a conference on 'Democracy and Political Development: Hong Kong Characteristics', organized by the Hong Kong Democratic Foundation, 19 May 1991. See also Hong Kong Democratic Foundation, 'Electoral Reform Proposals' (mimeo), November 1991.

The Basic Law, pp. 65-67.

This was particularly evident in Island East, where the United Democrat leader, Martin Lee Chu-ming, was running.


'Emily Lau Wai-hing's Election Manifesto,' n.d. (mimeo).

Sunday Morning Post, 15 September 1991.

If we exclude non-voters in the Legislative Council elections, the percentage is even higher (see Chapter 3).

Hong Kong Standard, 5 March 1991. The United Democrats, for example, saw 56 of its 80 candidates returned.

Exit polls conducted by the Social Sciences Research Centre, University of Hong Kong, conclusively show the bifurcated nature of political support in this constituency. Ng Ming-yum had previously won a District Board seat in Tuen Mun in the March elections polling more votes than any candidate in the territory, SCMP, 5 March 1991.


A liberal legislator who was elected in the Kowloon Central constituency, Dr Conrad Lam Kui-shing, put the matter rather precisely when he described Hong Kong people as 'anti-communist Chinese patriots', SCMP, 12 September 1987. The demonstrations in support of the democracy movement in China, when it was estimated that over one million Hong Kong people took to the streets, illustrated the point. See also Lau Siu-kai and Kuan Hsin-chi, The Ethos of the Hong Kong Chinese (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1988), p.84 and Norman Miners, The Government and Politics of Hong Kong (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5th ed., p.23.


38. Ibid., p.294.


40. 'Memorandum of Understanding Concerning the Construction of the New Airport in Hong Kong and Related Questions,' 4 July 1991 (mimeo).


45. *SCMP* and *Ming Pao*, 1 September 1991.

46. There were occasional heated television debates but they were mainly over allegations made about candidates, past support for constitutional reform and attitudes towards China rather than more conventional policy issues. See *Hong Kong Standard*, 4 September 1991.

47. On the origins of political parties in Hong Kong, see Louie Kin-sheun, 'Political parties,' in Sun Yun-wing and Lee Ming-kwan, eds., *The Other Hong Kong Report* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1991), pp.55-75.

48. The Meeting Point candidate in the by-election in New Territories West in December 1991 was opposed by a candidate from the Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood. Relations between the United Democrats and Meeting Point are much closer than those between the United Democrats and the Association for Democracy and People's Livelihood.

49. The party did win 50 seats out of the 89 contested in the March 1991 District Board elections. However, some of the successful candidates only declared their membership in the Liberal Democratic Federation after the election results had been declared.
