

An aerial view of Hong Kong's skyline, seen from the perspective of someone looking out of an airplane window. The wing of the aircraft is visible in the foreground, framing the view of the city. The dense urban landscape is filled with numerous high-rise buildings, and a large body of water is visible in the middle ground. The sky is a mix of blue and light purple, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

Fright & Flight: Hong Kongers Face the Demise of Democracy

SEPTEMBER 2021

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Executive Summary

Hong Kong society has changed extensively since the 2019 pro-democracy protests which led to the enactment of the July 2020 National Security Law (NSL). The first half of 2021 alone witnessed the mass arrest of individuals for participating in pro-democracy activities; the forced shut down of *Apple Daily*, a pro-democracy newspaper, through the freezing of its assets and the arrest of its founder, executives and editors; and a reform of its electoral system to vet election candidates and favor pro-Beijing politicians. These changes have reshaped political, legal and social aspects of what it means to live in Hong Kong. However, in July 2021, Hong Kong once again took a step further away from democracy and towards a closed society. The first NSL trial significantly altered Hong Kong court system procedure and the implementation of the NSL. A three-judge panel tried an individual despite the person requesting a jury of peers, as allowed by Hong Kong legal precedent, and the three judge panel determined that the popular pro-democracy slogan “Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Time” has a “secessionist meaning” and therefore using it is incitement to commit succession under the NSL.

The recent ruling under the NSL and the shutting down of the *Apple Daily* makes it hard to refute that the Hong Kong government has now criminalized participation in pro-democracy activities and opposition speech, systematically suppressing pro-democracy voices. Under these circumstances participation in speech or sharing opinions that can be viewed as pro-democracy carries a heavy legal risk. Therefore, collecting information on perceptions in Hong Kong of non-democratic reforms and democracy is challenging and dangerous, especially for domestic stakeholders. To address this widening information gap, NDI commissioned an organization to conduct an anonymous online survey of perceptions in Hong Kong on democracy, political engagement, life satisfaction and the future of Hong Kong.

The survey elicited complex findings depicting societal disagreement on how close Hong Kong should be with mainland China and on the value of democracy in Hong Kong. Despite the recent history of intense civic displays of political participation and engagement, the majority of survey respondents indicated no participation in activities such as; taking part in a demonstration, protest or strike; signing a petition; or even voting in an election. There were also societal divides between different age groups and those born in Hong Kong compared to those not born in Hong Kong. Those born in Hong Kong were less confident in Hong Kong institutions, less satisfied with democracy in Hong Kong and more likely to participate in civic actions and want a more distant relationship with mainland China. Similarly, young respondents were more interested in politics, believed more in democracy’s ability to maintain order and valued democracy over economic development. Both those born in Hong Kong and young respondents expressed a desire to leave the city more than other groups.

As the political and legal environment in Hong Kong continues to develop, there are three key findings international and domestic stakeholders should keep in mind from this report:

1. **Decreasing Trust in Institutions:** The majority of respondents lacked confidence in Hong Kong’s Legislature, Media, Chief Executive, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Government, Business, Courts and Political Parties.
2. **Democratic Resilience:** Hong Kong youth and those born in Hong Kong support democracy more than other Hong Kongers. They were also more willing to admit to participating in pro-democracy activities.
3. **An Endangered Movement:** In a stark majority, 75 percent of respondents aged 18 to 24 reported they would or would possibly leave Hong Kong. Those born in Hong Kong were much more likely to express a desire to leave Hong Kong. As these two demographic groups were most likely to express pro-democracy views, this endangers any remnants of the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong.

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Introduction

On July 1, 2021, patriotic crowds in Beijing gathered to celebrate the centennial of the Chinese Communist Party. Simultaneously, it was the anniversary of the British handover of Hong Kong to China 24 years earlier. The day was also the first anniversary of the first full day of a new Hong Kong under the Beijing imposed National Security Law, which came into effect at 11 p.m. on June 30, 2020. Since Beijing promulgated the NSL onto Hong Kong, democratic governance and fundamental freedoms stipulated in international law and the Basic Law have acutely eroded Hong Kong into a closed society. On January 6, 2021, 55 prominent pro-democracy activists and politicians were arrested by Hong Kong authorities for their participation in unofficial primaries held in July 2020 in advance of a now-postponed Legislative Council (LegCo) election. In total, the Hong Kong police have arrested over 100 people for NSL-related offenses and over 10,000 Hong Kongers were arrested in connection to the 2019 anti-extradition law protests.¹

In March 2021, China's National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) approved sweeping reforms of Hong Kong's electoral system. Under the reforms, a new vetting committee will have the authority to identify and disqualify candidates based on their political views and past actions. In addition, it will reduce the number of directly elected officials in the LegCo from 35 to 20 to represent a population of 7.5 million people. Simultaneously, it will increase the legislature from 70 to 90 seats and raise the number of election committee members from 300 to 1,500, further reducing representation. Chinese officials have argued such measures are necessary to close "loopholes and deficiencies" that threaten national security so that only "patriots" govern Hong Kong.² Further emphasizing the new strategy of using national security as a rationale for suppressing democratic voices in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong government promoted its Secretary for Security to the second most powerful seat in government as the city's Chief Secretary in June 2021.

In response to the precarious political environment in Hong Kong, this survey was conducted to capture Hong Konger sentiments surrounding livelihood and governance issues in April 2021. Through evidence-based reports, NDI aims to continue creating platforms and thereby space for Hong Kongers to freely express their perspectives on policy and democracy issues in the city. This report captures quantitative data that global policymakers can take into consideration when formulating policies on Hong Kong to ensure democratic voices are taken into consideration despite suppression of democratic voices in Hong Kong.

Methodology

The National Democratic Institute commissioned a study on Hong Kong citizens' perceptions on political developments in Hong Kong using anonymous opt-in surveys online. When users stumble upon one of the hundred of thousands of domains, these random, non-incentivized users are filtered through a series of proprietary algorithms to ensure there are no non-human respondents, and then invited to participate in a survey.

The anonymous survey provides insight into life in Hong Kong in a post-NSL society and public confidence in Hong Kong institutions, as well as views on politics and democracy, civic engagement, and Hong Kong's future. Data was collected in Hong Kong from April 7 to April 29, 2021, receiving over 5,000 responses. For more details regarding the methodology, refer to Appendix A.

¹ "Dismantling a Free Society." Human Rights Watch, June 28, 2021. <https://www.hrw.org/feature/2021/06/25/dismantling-free-society/hong-kong-one-year-after-national-security-law>.

² "Chinese Official Says Hong Kong Electoral Changes Will 'Protect' International Role." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, March 9, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-hongkong-security-idUKKBN2B107R>.

Overview of Results

Life in Hong Kong

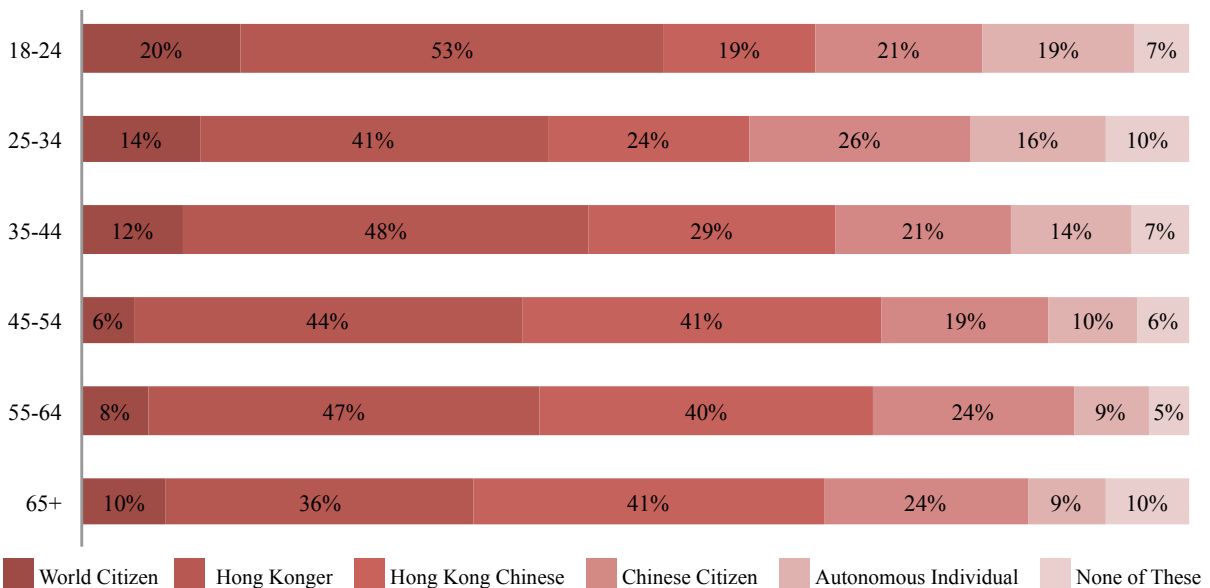
Those born in Hong Kong were more likely to choose political issues as the most important problem facing Hong Kong (33 percent) compared to only 26 percent of those born outside the city. Thirty-two percent of youth born in Hong Kong aged 18-24, identified political issues as the most important problem hindering the city. Those born outside Hong Kong were more likely to choose public health/COVID-19 as the most important issue (30 percent).

Self-Identification Preferences

Respondents more often self-identified as a Hong Konger (35 percent) over identifying as Hong Kong Chinese (27 percent), a Chinese citizen (25 percent), a world citizen (12 percent) or an autonomous individual (12 percent).³ Those born in Hong Kong were much more likely to identify as a Hong Konger (47 percent) in comparison to those born elsewhere (18 percent), who self-identified more often as a Chinese citizen (35 percent). Women were more likely to identify as a Hong Konger (41 percent) rather than as a Chinese citizen (20 percent), whereas men were almost equally likely to identify as a Hong Konger (30 percent) or as a Chinese citizen (29 percent). Of those born in Hong Kong, respondents aged 18 to 24 were the most likely to self-identify as a Hong Konger (53 percent) and the least likely to identify as Hong Kong Chinese (19 percent).

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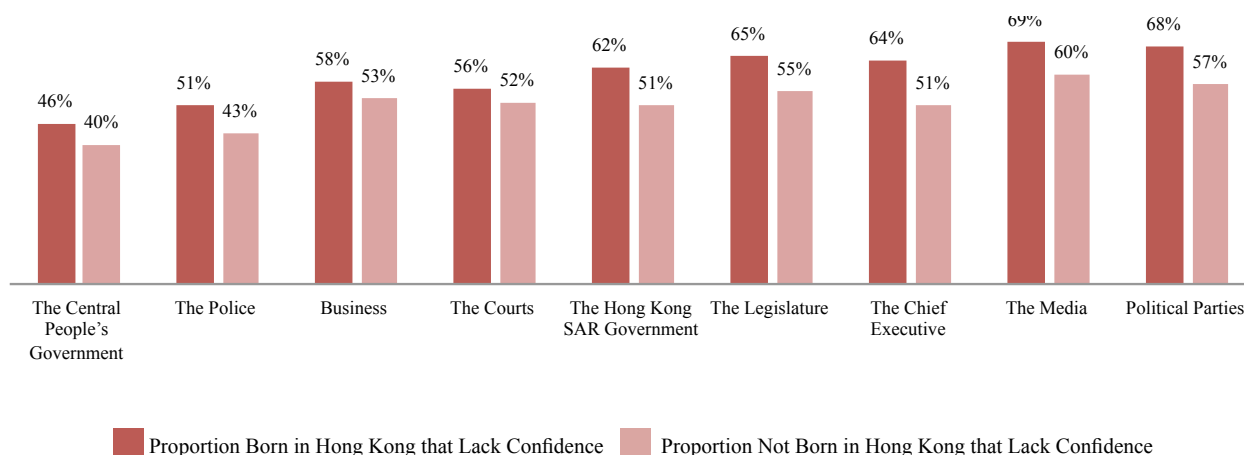
Those Born in Hong Kong and Aged 18-24 Most Likely to Identify as Hong Konger



³ Thirteen percent of respondents did not identify as any of the provided options.

Mentality Towards Hong Kong Institutions and Politics

Those Born in Hong Kong are Less Confident in Hong Kong Institutions



Confidence in Hong Kong Institutions and Satisfaction with Democracy

Overall, those born in Hong Kong had less confidence in all institutions compared to those born outside the city. Respondents born in Hong Kong highly distrust the Hong Kong SAR government (62 percent) and its Chief Executive, Carrie Lam (64 percent). Satisfaction with Hong Kong democracy was low among respondents with 59 percent claiming to not be very satisfied or not satisfied at all.

Overall, those born in Hong Kong had less confidence in all institutions compared to those born outside the city.

Interest in Politics

Over two-thirds of respondents indicated they were not very (44 percent) or not at all (25 percent) interested in politics. Individuals aged 18 to 34 were more likely to claim they were somewhat or very interested in politics, 37 percent of 18-24 year olds and 36 percent of 25-34 year olds compared to 29 percent of those aged 45-54 and 26 percent of those aged 55-64. Interestingly, among those born outside Hong Kong, those who have lived in Hong Kong for two to four years or four to eight years reported higher interest in politics, with 40 and 42 percent saying very or somewhat interested, respectively. The timeline coincides with the 2014 Umbrella Movement when tens of thousands of Hong Kong citizens, namely student activists, staged a 79-day protest against proposed reforms to Hong Kong's electoral system by China's Standing Committee of the National People's Congress.⁴ The Umbrella Movement ultimately signalled a significant shift in youth political participation in Hong Kong.

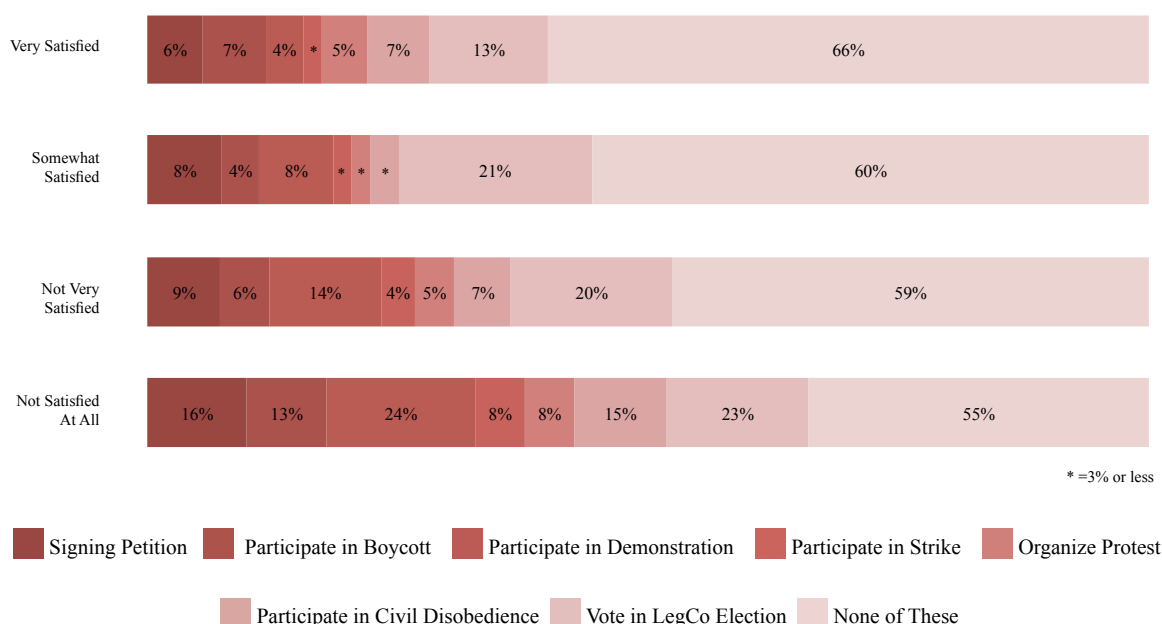
Interestingly, among those born outside Hong Kong, those who have lived in Hong Kong for two to four years or four to eight years reported higher interest in politics, with 40 and 42 percent saying very or somewhat interested, respectively.

⁴ Gunia, Amy. "A Brief History of Protest in Post-Handover Hong Kong." Time. Time, June 20, 2019. <https://time.com/5606212/hong-kong-history-mass-demonstrations-protest/>.

Participation in Civic Activities

Respondents were asked about their political participation through formal and informal activities such as: signing a petition; voting in a LegCo election; participating in a boycott, peaceful demonstration, strike and/or peaceful acts of civil disobedience; and organizing a protest using social media. People born in Hong Kong were more likely to say they have or would participate in the listed activities, with 47 percent choosing at least one action, compared to 37 percent of those born elsewhere. Those not satisfied at all with Hong Kong democracy were more likely to sign petitions, 16 percent compared to 6 percent of people very satisfied. Those not at all satisfied were also more likely to participate in a demonstration, 24 percent compared to 4 percent of those very satisfied. Twenty percent of those who say Hong Kong should be more distant from mainland China have or would participate in civil disobedience, compared to only 3 percent of those who say Hong Kong should be closer to China saying the same.

Satisfaction with Hong Kong's Democracy and Political Participation

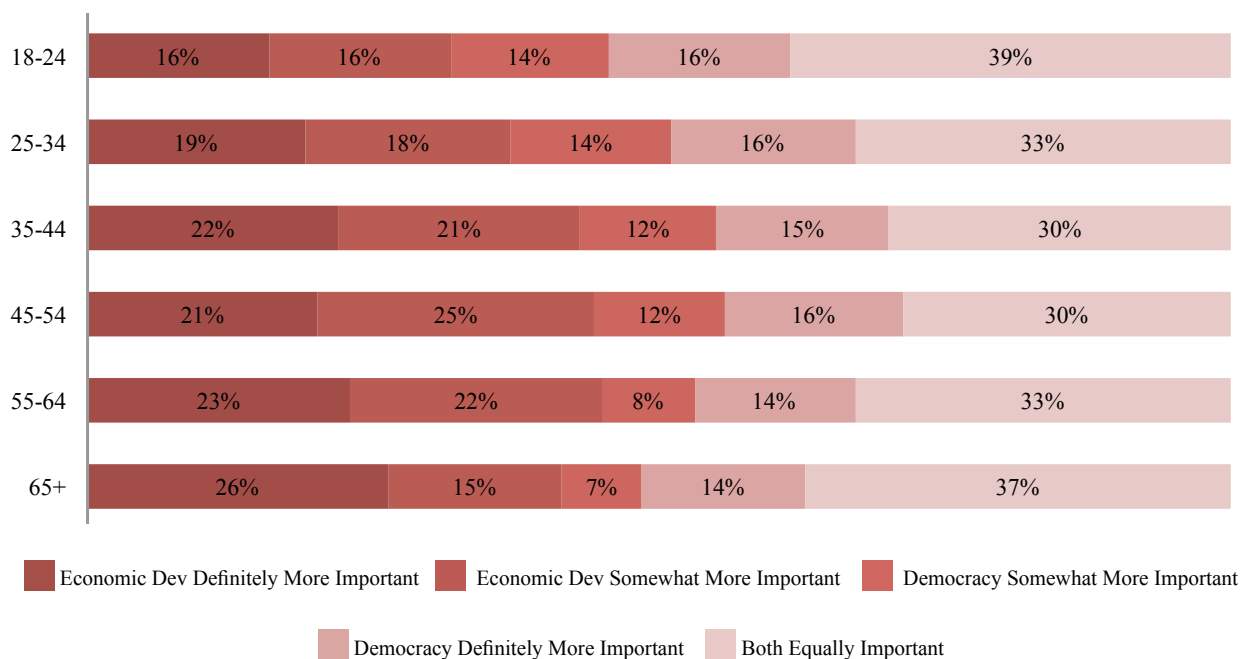


Sentiment Towards Democracy

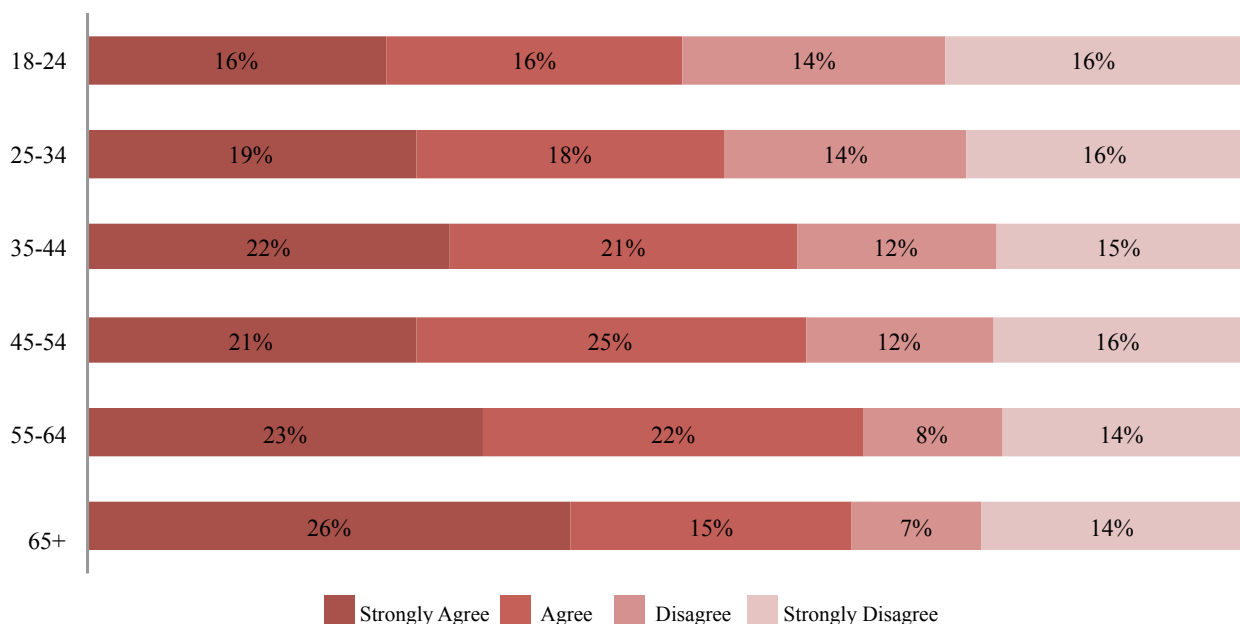
Overall a slight majority of all respondents expressed pro-democracy opinions on democracy's ability to maintain order (51 percent) and agreed that it is the best form of government (52 percent). However, respondents overall were more likely to consider economic development to be equal to or more important than democracy. But, youth respondents, aged 18 to 24, expressed pro-democracy views more often than other age groups with 60 percent having confidence in democracy's ability to maintain order. They were also more likely to view democracy as equal to or more important than economic development (69 percent). Furthermore, and of particular concern to the pro-democracy movement, youth and those born in Hong Kong were more likely to express a desire to leave the city at 75 percent and 62 percent, respectively, claiming they would or perhaps would leave Hong Kong. These results indicate a society polarized around the importance and efficacy of a democratic system of governance in Hong Kong.

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Those Aged 18-24 Were the Least Likely to Say Economic Development is More Important



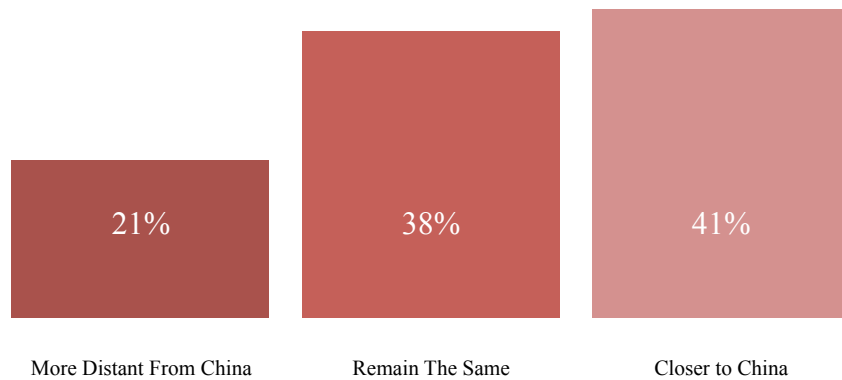
Younger Respondents More Likely to Disagree with the Statement “Democracies Are Not Good at Maintaining Order”



Relationship with Mainland China

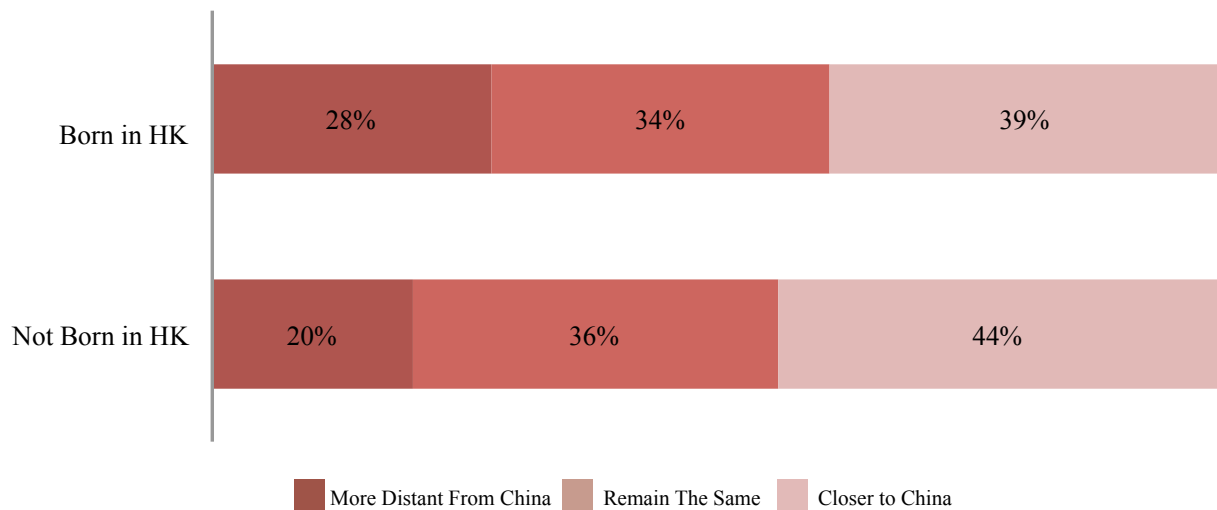
At the time of this survey, a majority of respondents prefer a status quo or more distant relationship with China, with 59 percent responding that Hong Kong’s relationship with mainland China should remain the same or be more distant. When considering place of birth, 39 percent of people born in Hong Kong preferred a closer relationship with mainland China, compared to 48 percent of those born elsewhere.

Majority of People Want Hong Kong's Relationship with China to Remain the Same* or be More Distant from China



*means relationship prior to April 2021

Those Born in Hong Kong Are Least Likely to Believe Hong Kong's Relationship with China Should be Closer



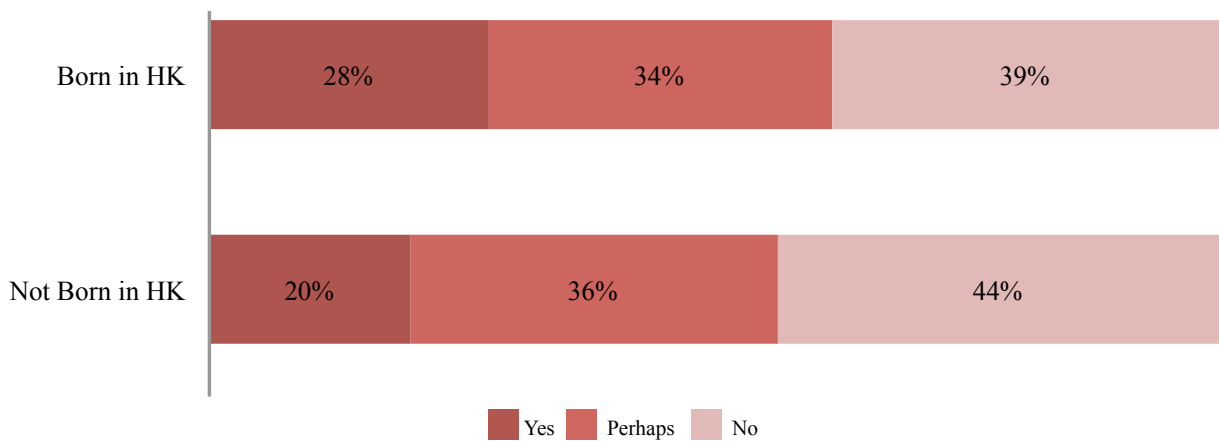
Space to Voice Dissent in Hong Kong Elections

Forty-seven percent of respondents agreed with the statement: “People who have views that the government considers “unacceptable” should not be allowed to stand for elections.” The more satisfied people were with democracy in Hong Kong, the more likely they were to agree with the statement. Sixty-two percent of those not at all satisfied strongly disagreed with the statement. The majority of youth aged 18 to 24 in Hong Kong disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement (57 percent).

Leaving Hong Kong

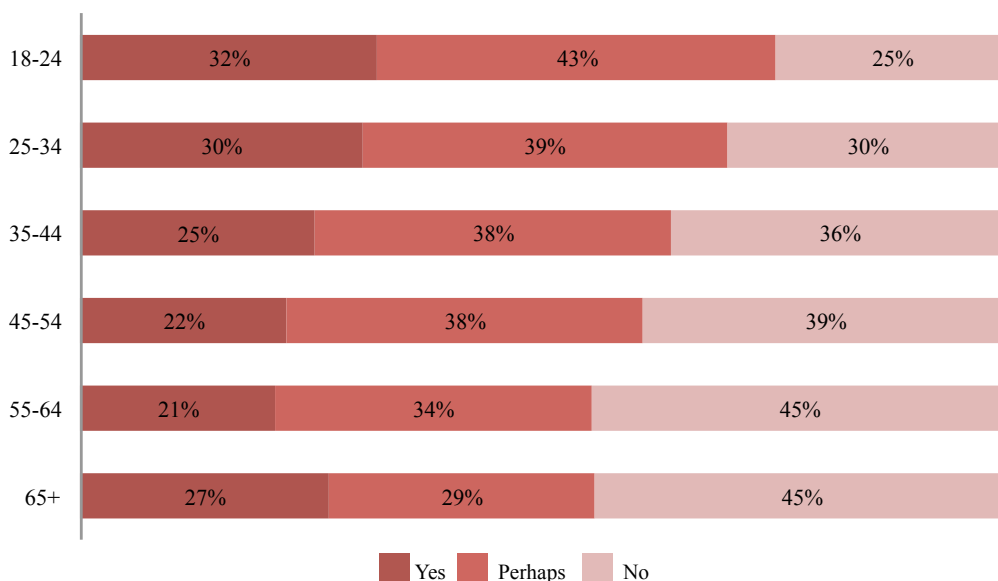
In a stark majority, 75 percent of respondents aged 18 to 24 reported they would or would possibly leave Hong Kong if they had the resources. Furthermore, those born in Hong Kong were more likely to express an interest in leaving the city (62 percent). Overall, roughly a quarter of respondents stated they would leave Hong Kong if they had the resources to do so (26 percent), 36 percent said “perhaps” and 36 percent would not consider leaving Hong Kong. NDI survey results from early 2020 show that 37 percent of citizens said they would leave if they had the resources to do so while 37 percent of citizens said they would not leave. Women were more likely than men to claim they would or perhaps would leave Hong Kong, (65 percent and 59 percent, respectively). Satisfaction with democracy in Hong Kong was correlated with respondents desire to leave. Seventy-six percent of those not at all satisfied with Hong Kong democracy said they would or perhaps would consider leaving.

Those Born in Hong Kong are More Likely to Consider Leaving Hong Kong



In a stark majority, 75 percent of respondents aged 18 to 24 reported they would or would possibly leave Hong Kong if they had the resources.

The Younger People Are, the More Likely They Are to Consider Leaving Hong Kong



Conclusion

The past year in Hong Kong has brought severe political and legal changes that impact not only how the city is run but also how people in the city live. Societal expectations are being forced to change to match perspectives more aligned with government decisions. It is simultaneously becoming more challenging to collect information on varying perspectives and to interact with the international community freely. Under the backdrop of pressure to reshape Hong Kong's social, legal and political environment, the Institute decided to conduct a survey of Hong Kongers' perspectives on Hong Kong's society, governance, democracy and future outlook.

The Institute found that not only is there a great level of variety in perspectives within Hong Kong, however, there are key trends that are important to research further to determine their full meaning and impact. Young Hong Kongers and those born in Hong Kong were more likely to express pro-democracy views such as valuing democracy over economic growth, identifying as a Hong Konger instead of as a Chinese Hong Konger or Chinese citizen or expressing greater interest in politics and in political civic participation. Furthermore, some trends were particularly concerning. A large majority of young respondents and those born in Hong Kong expressed a desire to leave the city. Their exit would be detrimental to the remaining domestic pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, which in many aspects is a youth-led movement. There was also an overall decline in trust towards Hong Kong's Institutions which points to potential societal disagreement with the actions of or towards institutions like the police, media, the Courts and Hong Kong SAR government, among others. The continuous changes occurring in Hong Kong make it important to analyze the complex political developments and the opinions of Hong Kongers on the changes in the city. As the international community analyzes policies on Hong Kong, such information can be incorporated to inform areas of focus and areas of concern to Hong Kongers.



May 15, 2020: Check-in hall of Hong Kong International Airport (HKG)
Photo credit: Yu Chun Christopher Wong / Shutterstock.com

Appendix A: Methodology

Overview

The technology for this survey allows for the rapid capture and assessment of large samples of broad, truly randomized opinion and perception data on an ongoing basis. It delivers anonymous opt-in surveys to online users, with access to the entire global internet population. When users stumble upon one of the hundred of thousands of domains, these random, non-incentivized users are filtered through a series of proprietary algorithms to ensure there are no non-human respondents, and then invited to participate in a survey.

The technology geo-targets respondents automatically and provides participants with a context-appropriate survey. This survey methodology has been successfully deployed in mainland China, Myanmar, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Azerbaijan and other closed or closing spaces. Any web-enabled devices can access surveys and the technology cannot be blocked by state surveillance, internet controls and ad-block technologies. Although the survey collects and reports the age, gender and geo-location of all respondents, no personally identifiable information is ever collected or reported. No enticements are used and participants can easily exit the survey at any time. Furthermore, demographic information for Hong Kong from the U.S. Census Bureau's International Data Base was used to weight data by age and gender post-stratification using a raking algorithm to estimate what the nationally-representative population perceives.⁵

Anonymity & Security of Respondent

The survey employs strategic security measures at all levels of the survey design, respondent experience, and data storage. Security measures are specific to the topic and region of deployment and can be adjusted as new information and geopolitical developments unfold. These security measures ensure no response is traceable to an individual. All respondents are informed of their anonymity, security, and privacy when they randomly access a survey, which assists in the collection of otherwise sensitive and unsafe answers, or socially undesirable perceptions.

Limitations

Due to the scale of internet users, and the ability to randomly sample the entire internet-using population of a country, it is possible to achieve very large samples in a short amount of time. It is also able to engage previously marginalized voices in data collection as respondents are not part of a panel or discussion group, who usually come from specific demographic subsets. Further, anonymity makes it possible to ask extremely sensitive questions, garner honest responses, and maintain respondent safety.

The benefits are simultaneously the draw-backs. As an internet based technology, it cannot reach those without internet access. As no identifiable information is known about a respondent, it is not possible to follow up with a respondent. Finally, since respondents are not incentivized or pressured to remain, some leave the survey. Many measures and strategies are used to engage and retain participants, including optimizing the survey instrument for ease of participation on all device screens and bandwidths, as well as clear, concise language for immediate comprehension.

Other methodologies are best suited for research that requires long term follow-up, group discussions, interviews with known key informants, known participants or those who have absolutely no access to the internet, or a minuscule demographic subset of the population (e.g. women police officers with three or more children). However, the benefit of anonymous, safe, honest responses to sensitive questions and a truly random sample of the internet population, including voices in closed or closing spaces, counteract the limitations.

No one methodology is perfectly representative or accurate in its findings. This data is one stream of insight and should be understood in tandem with other sources of data to collectively uncover the larger reality. These findings can suggest how to nuance or adjust current efforts to better reflect what Hong Kongers reveal are their values, priorities, and perceptions.

⁵ <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/international-programs/about/idb.html>

Demographics

The demographic tables below outline the unweighted and weighted breakdown of respondents by age and gender. Respondent demographics fit the expected range based on the natural population breakdown of internet users. The majority of survey respondents were born in Hong Kong (62 percent). Twenty-seven percent of those born outside of Hong Kong lived in Hong Kong for less than one year and 24 percent lived in Hong Kong for more than 24 years. The majority of those born outside Hong Kong were born in mainland China (58 percent).

Age	Unweighted	Weighted
18-24	26%	7%
25-34	31%	15%
35-44	18%	17%
45-54	10%	18%
55-64	7%	20%
65+	8%	23%
n =	28423	

Table 1. Breakdown of respondents by age categories showing unweighted and weighted data.

Gender	Unweighted	Weighted
Men	73%	45%
Women	27%	55%
n =	28423	

Table 2. Breakdown of respondents by gender showing both unweighted and weighted data.

Survey Questions

0	What is your age and gender?
	Male
	Female
1	All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?
	1 - Completely dissatisfied
	2
	3
	4
	5 - Completely satisfied
2	In general, what do you think is the most important problem facing Hong Kong today?
	Housing shortage / prices
	Political issues
	Economy

	Public health / COVID-19
3-6	How confident are you in the following institution of Hong Kong:
	The Police
	The Media
	The Legislature
	The Chief Executive
	The Hong Kong SAR Government
	The Central People's Government
	Business
	The Courts
	Political Parties
	Very confident
	Confident
	Not very confident
	Not at all confident
	Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
7	Men make better political leaders than women
	Strongly agree
	Agree
	Disagree
	Strongly disagree
8	In general, how interested are you in politics?
	Very interested
	Somewhat interested
	Not very interested
	Not interested at all
	Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
9	Democracies are not good at maintaining order
10	Democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government
	Strongly agree
	Agree
	Disagree
	Strongly disagree
11	If you had to choose between democracy and economic development, which would you say is more important?
	Economic development is definitely more important

	Economic development is somewhat more important
	Democracy is somewhat more important
	Democracy is definitely more important
	They are both equally important
12	In general, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Hong Kong?
	Very satisfied
	Somewhat satisfied
	Not very satisfied
	Not satisfied at all
13	Which of the following do you identify as? Select all that apply
	A world citizen
	A Hong Konger
	A Hong Kong Chinese
	A Chinese citizen
	An autonomous individual
	None of the above
	No more, continue
14	Would you leave Hong Kong if you had the resources to do so?
	Yes
	Perhaps
Skip 14a	No
14a	If you left Hong Kong, where would you move to? Select all that apply.
	United States
	United Kingdom
	Australia
	Canada
	European Union
	Taiwan
	Mainland China
	Other
	No more, continue
15	Which of the following have you done or would do? Select all that apply.
	Signing a petition
	Participating in a boycott
	Participating in a peaceful demonstration

	Participating in a strike
	Organizing a protest using social media
	Participating in peaceful acts of civil disobedience
	Vote in a Legislative Election
	None of the above
	No more, continue
16	In your view, do you think Hong Kong's relationship to the People's Republic of China should be closer, more distant, or about the same as now?
	Closer to China
	More distant from China
	Remain the same as now
17	Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
	People who have views that the government considers "unacceptable" should not be allowed to stand for elections
	Strongly agree
	Agree
	Disagree
	Strongly disagree
18	Were you born in Hong Kong?
Skip 18a & 18b	Yes
	No
18b	Where were you born?
	United States
	United Kingdom
	Australia
	Canada
	European Union
	Taiwan
	Mainland China
	Southeast Asia
	Other
18a	How long have you lived here?
	Less than 1 year
	1-2 years
	2-4 years
	4-8 years

	8-24 years
	More than 24 years
19	What is the highest level of formal education you have received?
	Primary education or lower
	Secondary education
	Tertiary (non-degree)
	Bachelor's degree
	Postgraduate studies (Master's degree or above)
20	What is your monthly income?
	Less than HK \$9,999
	HK \$10,000-\$13,999
	HK \$14,000-\$18,999
	HK \$19,000-\$29,999
	HK \$30,000-\$44,999
	HK \$45,000-\$59,999
	HK \$60,000 and above

The National Democratic Institute:

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization working to strengthen and respond to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. Founded in 1983, NDI has worked with local partners in 156 countries and territories, bringing together individuals and groups to share ideas, knowledge, experiences and expertise. NDI works with political parties, civic groups, parliaments, and other organizations and individuals to strengthen democratic institutions, safeguard elections, advance citizen engagement, and promote open and accountable government. NDI's multinational approach reinforces the message that while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles are shared by all democracies.



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