

CENTRE FOR COMPARATIVE AND PUBLIC LAW  
AT THE FACULTY OF LAW, THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG



# Future Directions in Hong Kong's Governance

April 2018

**Youth Perspectives**



## Project Team and Methodology

As a research center based at the University of Hong Kong, housed in the Faculty of Law, the Center for Comparative and Public Law (CCPL) engages in systematic, evidence-based, objective scientific research. Over the past twenty-three years, CCPL has specialized in research on comparative and public law, including Hong Kong's political development, reform, and the transition from Hong Kong's status as a colony to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China.

This study examines the nexus between various demographic factors and youth attitudes and aspirations towards politics, governance, priorities and life satisfaction. The survey tool used is based on research instruments that are global in nature but adapted to the Hong Kong context. These include, for example, the Asian Barometer Survey, which itself is a derivative of the World Values Survey that has been carried out in 84 countries and carries global weight and rigour.

CCPL enlisted specialist collaborators to bring the project to fruition. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a non-profit, non-partisan and non-governmental organization which has supported democratic institutions and practices worldwide for more than three decades. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to establish and strengthen civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness, and accountability in government. Professor Neil Nevitte of the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Toronto, Canada specializes in the development, administration, execution, and analysis of instruments for research in these fields and has supported surveys around the world. Professor Nevitte's expert guidance during each phase of the study was instrumental in giving shape to the project from its early inception to its conclusion.

CCPL commissioned Policy 21, a Hong Kong based research center, to collect field data as part of this project. Policy 21 is regularly commissioned by government, private entities, universities and other persons to conduct wide-scale research using various research methods and tools across the territory.

The principal project investigator, Puja Kapai, Associate Professor of Law, former Director of the Centre for Comparative and Public Law (2013-2017) and Convenor of the Women's Studies Research Centre conceptualized, directed, and conducted this research study. She is grateful for the extensive advice, mentorship, guidance and support she received from the NDI team, comprising Adam Nelson, Roy White, Elizabeth Ludan, Maeve Whelan-Wuest and Professor Nevitte. She is also thankful to Steven Ka Ming Chan, Eric Ho Lai Yan, Johnson Yeung, and Emily Law Yee Wing for their research support.

This report documents findings from the *Future Directions in Hong Kong's Governance* survey, led by CCPL, and conducted between August and September 2017 with a sample of 500 randomly selected respondents aged 18 or above living in Hong Kong.

## Introduction

As the first post-handover generation comes of age, young people have grown more vocal within the political arena in recent years. While prominent political activists from across generations and the political spectrum have leveraged various public platforms to voice their concerns, the opinions and actions of their non-activist peers also play a critical role in signalling their desires and hopes for Hong Kong's future. This is particularly important as the political spectrum itself has evolved from its traditional binary representation of pro-establishment and pan-democrat supporters into plural voices seeking particular outcomes for Hong Kong. The *Future Directions in Hong Kong's Governance* survey explores the views of this diverse group of stakeholders and in this report, offers a focused review of youth voices in Hong Kong.

Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor's first policy address on 11 October 2017 as Chief Executive spoke directly to this important constituency. Lam pledged that her government would assist young people as they seek to improve their prospects for "education, career pursuit and home ownership," and encourage "their participation in politics as well as public policy discussion and debate." However, on political reform, the Chief Executive emphasised that a "good atmosphere" would be vital to pursuing this endeavour and she would wait until the conditions for such discussion in the community were ripe. Instead, Lam has focused on economic and livelihood issues given the significant pressures faced by many Hong Kongers as a trust-building mechanism and to garner support from young and old alike.

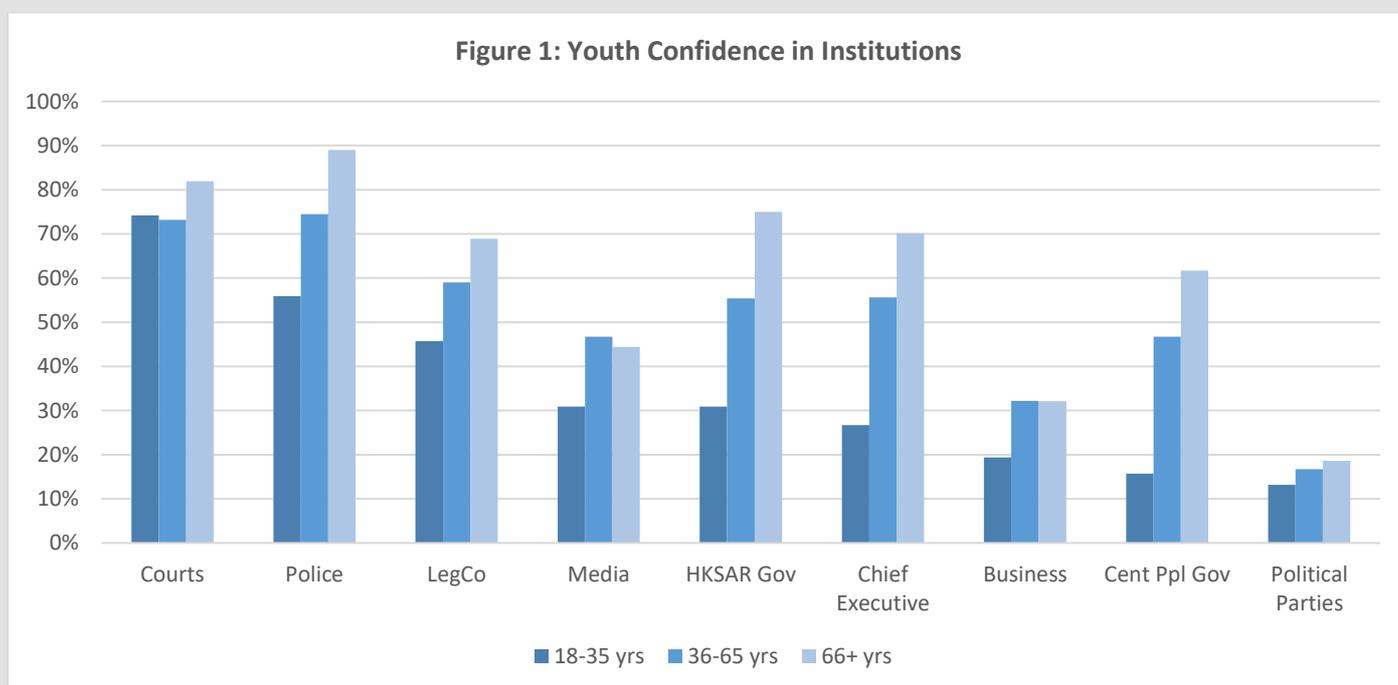
Chief Executive Carrie Lam has also indicated that her government will pursue a policy agenda addressing various economic and livelihood issues. As income inequality rises and the housing shortage continues to drive up home ownership prices, Hong Kong is certainly in need of policy-driven solutions that are pragmatic and tackle these challenges head-on. However, while Hong Kong people are concerned with the economy, their confidence and trust in the HKSAR government, its political institutions and its electoral systems are low. Further, as this report details, younger respondents express lower levels of satisfaction with the HKSAR government, its political institutions and electoral systems and the state of Hong Kong's democracy. However, Carrie Lam's administration can potentially increase satisfaction levels and people's confidence in Hong Kong's political system. That, in turn, could create the necessary momentum for cultivating higher levels of trust across the political spectrum but most crucially, within broader society and with the HKSAR and Beijing governments.

This report underscores Hong Kong youth's concerns in light of recent political, economic, and social developments. It highlights their desires and expectations for improved economic and livelihood conditions and greater political participation, which continues to deeply influence their sense of confidence and trust towards the Hong Kong government and public institutions. While the survey findings confirm what is widely known - that young people are concerned about economic and livelihood issues and prioritise these as areas for government action - the results emphasise that concerns about the prospects of democratic development are at least equally important to this constituency. Contrary to the popular narrative about Hong Kong youth, most young people do not support radical tactics in electoral or non-electoral political activities. The majority of youth participate in political engagement through the ordinary lawful channels. These findings offer useful insights into the nuances of Hong Kong youth's attitudes towards the future governance of Hong Kong and warrant a deeper analysis and reflection to help foreshadow effective engagement of Hong Kong's youth going forward. This is critical to the betterment of Hong Kong's governance.

## Youth Confidence in Institutions of Governance

The survey asked a wide array of questions to gain an understanding of participants' perspectives on political and economic issues facing Hong Kong. Young people, aged 18-35 for the purposes of the survey, exhibited certain proclivities towards confidence in and satisfaction with the government and political institutions.

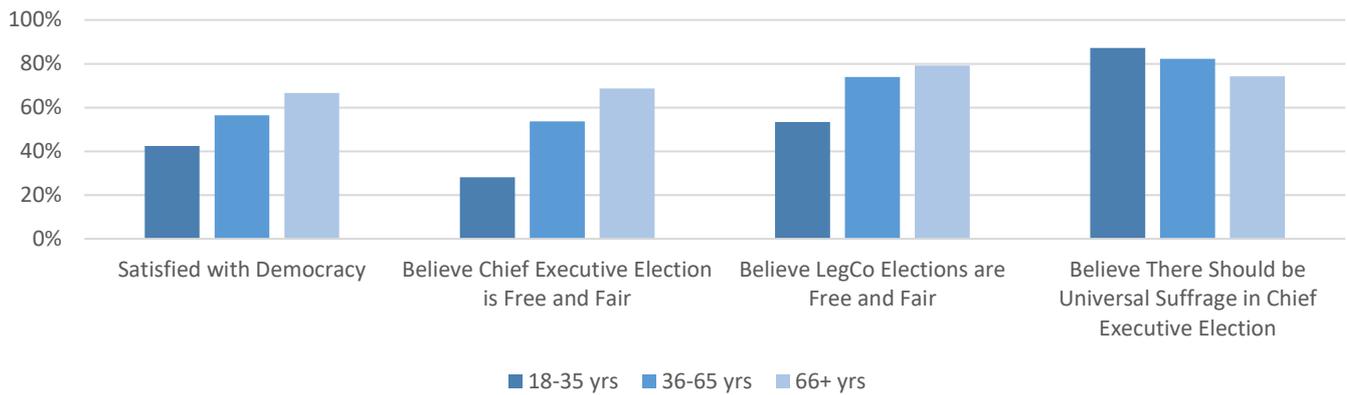
As seen in Figure 1, in terms of institutions, young people had the most confidence in Hong Kong courts (74.2%) and the police (55.9%), while a majority displayed less confidence in the media, the Legislative Council, Chief Executive, HKSAR government, Central People's government, businesses, and political parties. Further, a majority of the youth (80.2%) expressed dissatisfaction with the CY Leung administration compared to the 59.64% dissatisfaction rate on average across all age groups. Significantly higher levels of confidence were expressed in Carrie Lam's administration among the youth compared with the figures for Leung's administration, but they still remained a minority, with 37.4% expressing confidence compared to an average confidence level of 56.6% across all age groups. Finally, a majority of the youth (57.6%) expressed dissatisfaction towards the state of democracy in Hong Kong, compared with 40.4% dissatisfaction levels on average.



## Youth Satisfaction with Political Participation

Young people expressed less confidence in certain governmental institutions, but they did not seem completely disillusioned with all aspects of Hong Kong's political system. With regards to electoral fairness, when asked whether the 2016 Legislative Council elections were fair, a slight majority responded yes (53.4%). Further, 59.8% expressed support for the continuation of the functional constituency system in LegCo. The sticking point appears to be the election of the Chief Executive. When asked about their views on the fairness of the 2017 elections for the office of Chief Executive, a significant majority (71.9%) of young people responded that it was unfair. A substantial majority (87.2%) thought that the Chief Executive should be elected through universal suffrage.

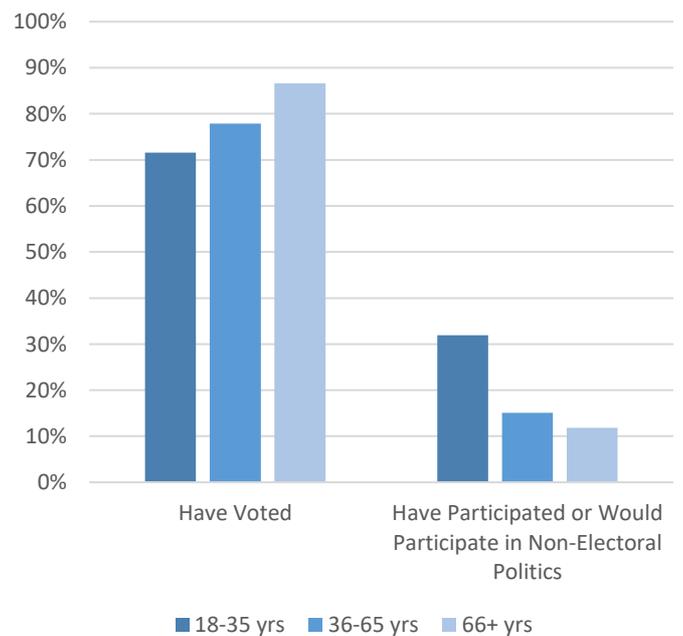
**Figure 2: Youth Satisfaction with Political Participation**



## Youth Political Participation in Hong Kong

With respect to questions examining respondents' political participation and political expression, the responses of youth respondents stand out in several ways. Among respondents who had voted in the 2016 LegCo election, only 71% of those aged 18 to 35 voted compared to 77.6% of those aged 36 to 65 and 86.6% of those aged 66 or above. The lower rates of electoral participation among the youth may be explained by the following comment expressed by a respondent in the youth focus group: "I am feeling powerless. Although I have the right to vote, it is useless, because politics is just a game with a group of people manipulating the outcome." However, 20.9% of young people reported they had participated in non-electoral forms of political activity and 11% said they would participate in such activities in the future, including for example, taking part in a peaceful march or rally, gathering and protesting in public areas, signing a petition, contacting government, legislative or district officials or participating in an unlawful assembly.

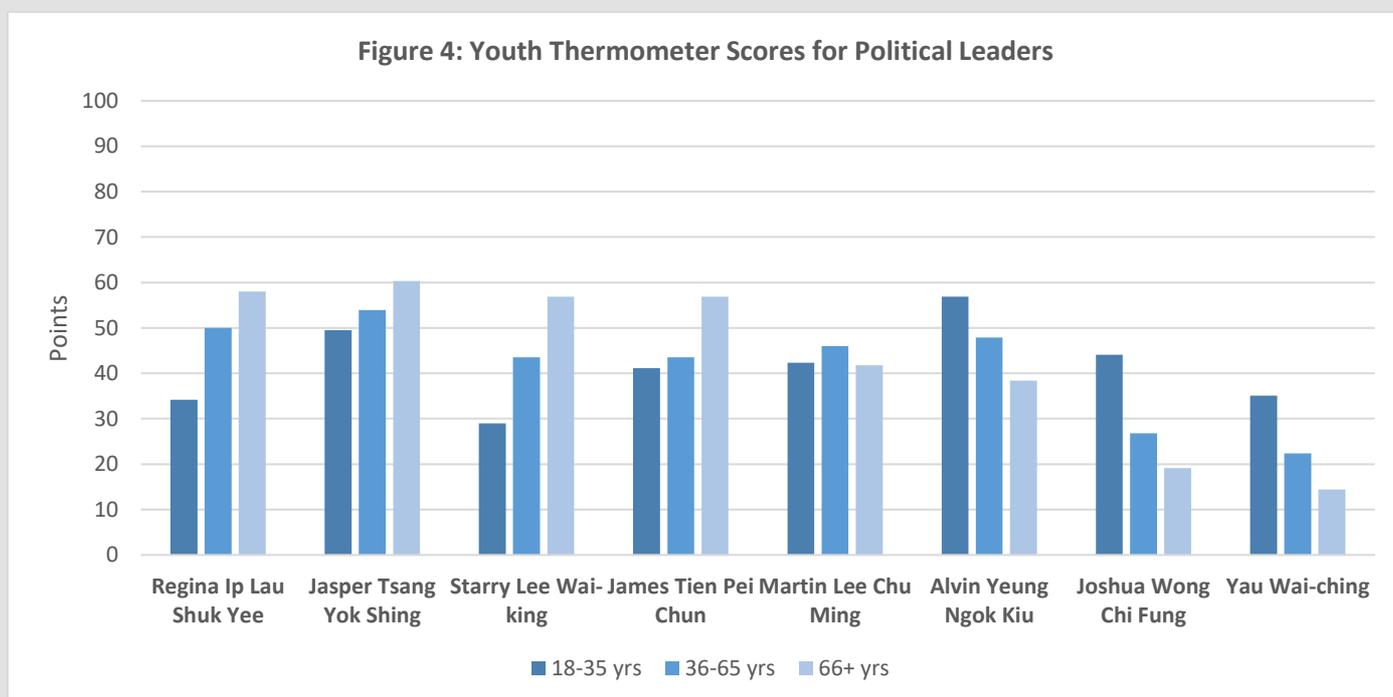
**Figure 3: Youth Participation in Political Activities**



These findings reflect that the youth are twice as likely to participate in such non-electoral forms of political action when compared to the general population (10.8% compared with 5.5%, respectively). Generally, respondents who were more dissatisfied with their lives (23%) displayed a greater propensity to participate in non-electoral political activities than those who were satisfied (14%).

## Youth Sentiments Towards Political Leadership

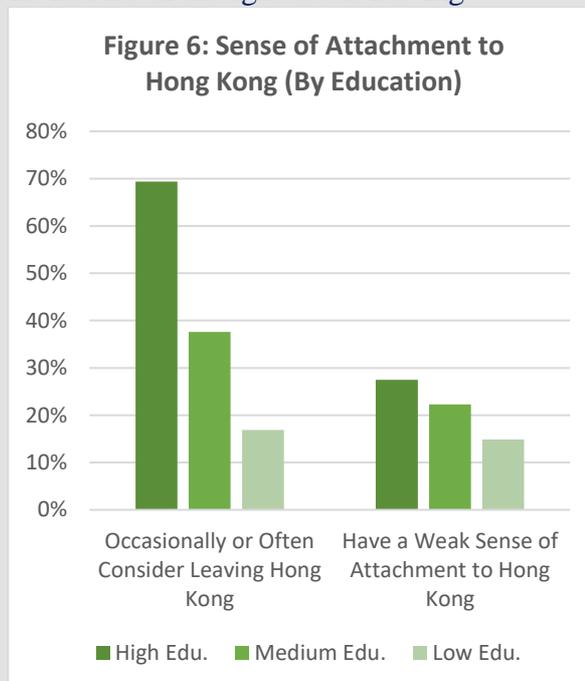
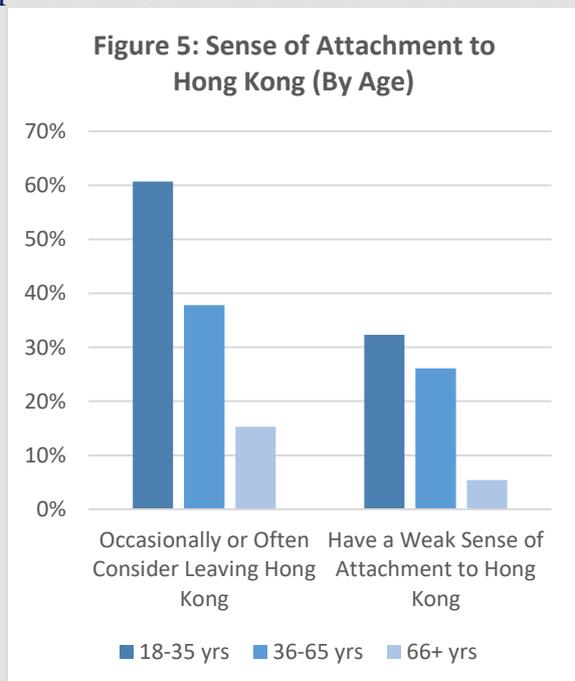
The survey provided a thermometer score for respondents to represent their views on political leaders in Hong Kong. On a scale where 1 point represents the most cold and negative feelings, and 100 points represents the most warm and positive feelings, young people’s views toward leaders on both ends of the political spectrum (pro-Beijing and pan-democratic) were comparably low. As seen in Figure 4, Alvin Yeung, leader of the Civic Party, is most popular among youth respondents to the survey, scoring 56.9 points, higher than the average score (47.3 points) across groups by nearly 10 points. Former LegCo president Jasper Tsang scored 49 points ranking second most popular among this age group (although ranked around 5 points below the average score (54.8 points) he received) and Joshua Wong came in at number three with the youth at 44.1 points (compared with a 30.7 point score on average). On the other end of the spectrum, Yau Wai-ching, recently disqualified LegCo member hailing from the Umbrella-movement inspired Youngspiration party, scored 35.1 points (more than 10 points higher than the average score at 22.7 points), while Regina Ip, LegCo member and founder of New People’s Party, scored 34.2 points (more than 10 points below the average score at 46.9 points) and coming in least popular, was Starry Lee, chair of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong Party, at 29 points among the youth and 42.5 points on average.



That these political leaders attracted generally poor thermometer scores among this demographic irrespective of political affiliation illustrates that the youth generally do not feel represented by parties or politicians across the existing political landscape. Further, the scores reflect that the youth broadly are less satisfied than their older peers with the political agendas or tactics deployed by Hong Kong’s political leaders and parties. This may also explain why youth were less active in voting in elections and more likely to participate in particular forms of non-electoral activities. In summary, young people do not see voting as the only vehicle for political expression; they are more willing to engage in other forms of political participation to express their views. Indeed, youth levels of dissatisfaction with the existing state of politics is directly correlated with their likelihood to participate in these forms of political expression and activities.

## Brain Drain and Attachment

The survey asked respondents to indicate whether they had ever considered leaving Hong Kong and to describe the strength of their attachment here. Nearly two-thirds (60.7%) of the youth expressed a desire to leave Hong Kong, saying they occasionally or often consider leaving Hong Kong, a significantly higher rate than any other age group – see Figure 5. This stood in stark contrast with the nearly two-thirds (63.7%) average for all respondents who expressed that they had never considered leaving Hong Kong. Along with young people, highly educated Hong Kongers displayed a greater desire to leave compared with less well-educated groups. Almost 70% of highly educated Hong Kongers expressed that they had thought about leaving, 45.2% of them having occasionally thought about it and 24.2% having thought about it often, compared with 83.1% in the less well-educated cohort, who had never thought about leaving.

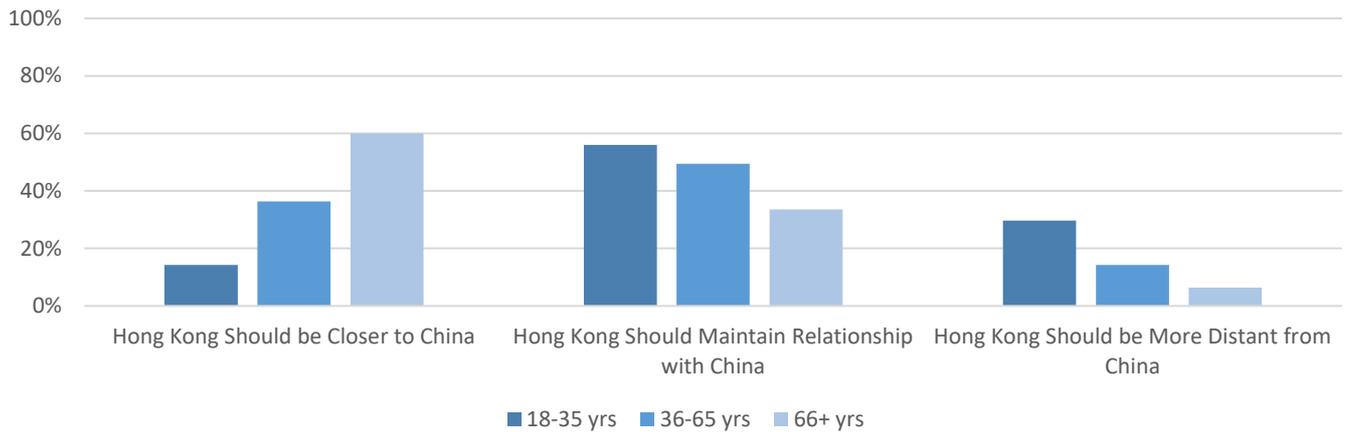


Similarly, in terms of strength of attachment to Hong Kong, just over two-thirds of the youth (67.7%) expressed strong attachment, whereas nearly one-third of the youth expressed weak attachment (32.3%) to Hong Kong. This is compared with almost four-fifths who expressed strong attachment on average (78.8%) relative to just over one-fifth among all age groups who expressed a weak attachment (21.2%). Again, the well-educated cohort displayed the weakest levels of attachment (albeit, still a majority with 71% expressing a strong attachment compared to 91.9% for their less well-educated counterparts). The sense of attachment to Hong Kong could have effects beyond a brain drain and impact how young people choose to participate in the political process. One focus group participant expressed: “The sense of attachment of Hong Kong people to Hong Kong is not high, and it affects the political participation of Hong Kong people.” With younger and more educated Hong Kongers expressing a higher inclination to leave Hong Kong, it is in the government’s interest to address the issues that alienate this important constituency.

## Relationship with Mainland China

On the question of Hong Kong’s relationship with China, a majority of the youth (56%) think Hong Kong should maintain the status quo compared with 48.2% on average across age groups. Fewer young respondents (29.7%) expressed Hong Kong should be more distant from China, twice the average rate of 14.6%. Only 14.3% of the youth proposed Hong Kong should be closer to China, compared with 37.2% on average across the age groups.

**Figure 7: Youth Views on Hong Kong's Relationship with Mainland China**

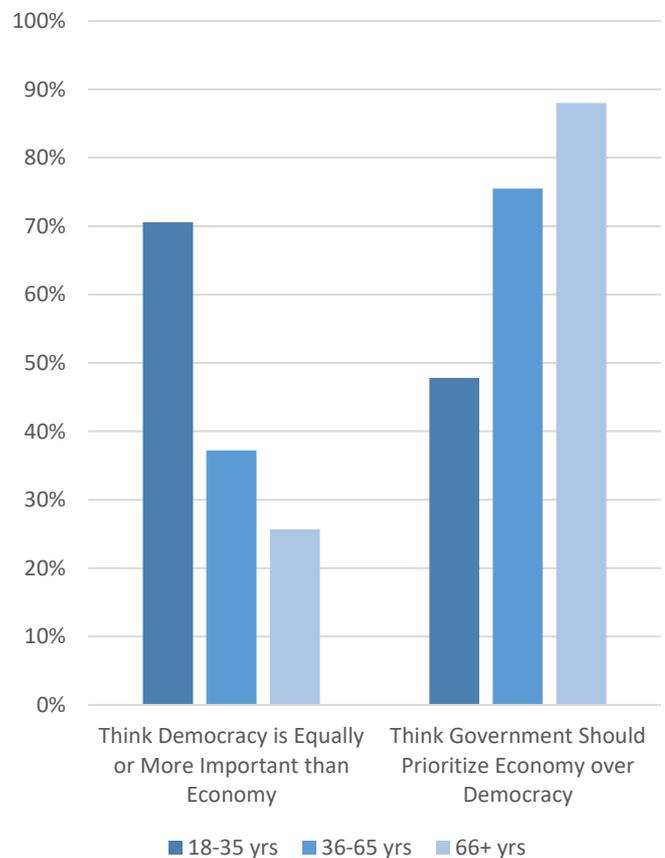


## Priorities: Economy & Livelihood versus Democracy

Since 1997, each HKSAR administration has had to balance between pursuing democratic reforms as laid out in the Basic Law, while trying to provide the necessary support for Hong Kong people to thrive economically. Chief Executive Carrie Lam places economic and livelihood issues at the top of her policy agenda, having signalled that these will take precedence over political reform during her term. Young people are certainly frustrated with the economic challenges facing them. Their primary concerns centre on unaffordable housing, unemployment and stagnant wages, as affirmed by the survey findings. Even so, the findings also reveal that democratic development also remains a key priority for youth.

When asked whether economy or democracy was more important, more than two-thirds of the youth (70.6%) responded that democracy is equally or more important than economic development. This contrasts with just over one third of the respondents aged 36 to 65 (37.2%) and one quarter of respondents aged 66 and above (25.7%), who responded that democracy is equally or more important than the economy. Likewise, in terms of whether the government should prioritize economic policy over democracy, a majority of the youth (52.2%) disagreed, while only one quarter (24.5%) of the respondents aged 36 to 65 years and only 12% of those aged over 66 disagreed. For greater context, on average, 72.7% of all respondents agreed that the economy should be prioritized, while 27.3% disagreed. As in many countries, the sentiments of Hong Kong's youth are not typical of the general population. In this case, the young are considerably more disposed to the government pursuing democratic development over, or alongside, economic issues. As one youth respondent stated in the focus group: "I think democracy is a means to construct a better society. The economic issue is not a pressing need at the moment." In a sense, this highlights how democratic reform is perceived as a pathway to strengthening economic development in the city.

**Figure 8: Youth Views on the Economy vs. Democracy**



## Recommendations

Youth outlooks are critical in all societies; they represent the future and merit special attention and policy focus. Their perceptions, sense of wellbeing and satisfaction and belonging to the community are a litmus test and useful indicia for what the future holds. Their views significantly influence the developmental path for both the future of governance in Hong Kong and the flourishing of Hong Kong society as a whole. It is critical that the Hong Kong government, especially early on in its current term, takes steps that do not alienate the youth or dismiss their views. To the contrary, the findings of this survey signal the importance of adopting policies to engage the youth, identify people at greater risk of alienation or disengagement, and work towards cultivating a greater sense of belonging and connectedness among Hong Kong youth.

- **Create space for representative political participation:** Young people are politically active and seek ways to engage in both electoral and non-electoral political activities. They have shown a propensity to contact government and legislative officials, sign petitions, and partake in lawful and unlawful protests and assemblies. The government, therefore, should help funnel their energy into productive forms of engagement and signal that it is willing to listen. This could take form, perhaps, through the establishment of in-person or online town halls or including youth in advisory capacities across a range of government bodies. Providing alternative engagement mechanisms can empower and assuage young people who may be frustrated with the lack of political reform and the long wait to have their voices included in governance. It is vital that the government involves a diversity of voices and perspectives to secure the youth's confidence in political processes and institutions. This is particularly significant if these channels are designed to influence policies impacting the youth directly.
- **Promote attachment and belonging through effective communication mechanisms:** Developing improved feedback loops can help foster an environment more conducive to building confidence among Hong Kong youth. Young people, especially those who are more educated, represent the next generation of Hong Kong business, civil society, and public leaders. For Hong Kong youth to be prepared for their future roles as empathetic and effective leaders, they need to develop a healthy sense of community identity so that they connect the success of Hong Kong people with the success of Hong Kong and vice versa. The government must take urgent measures to address young people's frustrations to reduce the likelihood that these smart and capable citizens will leave.
- **Acknowledge young people's grievances on political reform:** While economic policies can mollify youth frustrations and concerns on certain livelihood issues, these policies alone are inadequate to their development into productive and active citizens engaged in contributing to Hong Kong society. Political reform of some kind must also be on the table. This recommendation works in concert with the first recommendation of creating more space for political engagement. If young people sense that the government is discussing and looking into ways for democratic reform, then they will find ways to engage constructively and positively. Establishing the aforementioned mechanisms will foster greater communication, trust and confidence in the government overall and will help address the tensions that undermine one's sense of belonging and confidence in the future of Hong Kong society.

## Conclusion

Since the 1980s when the Basic Law Consultative Committee first convened, Hong Kong has been on a slow, but steady path of democratic development. After the abrupt shift following the events of 2014, however, the society and government must now figure out how to tackle these political challenges while simultaneously confronting a difficult economic environment. Following the failed political reform efforts in 2015, Hong Kong finds itself at a critical juncture. Young people are important because they represent the future of Hong Kong and their perspectives towards and expectations of Hong Kong's political and economic development contrast with those of middle-aged and older generations. This divergence is of critical importance because it signals a key area for government focus going forward. Simply hoping that the passage of time and economic development and opportunities will gradually allay their political frustrations is unlikely to earn their trust or effectively cultivate their sense of loyalty to Hong Kong and its model of governance.

Along with its agenda to pursue economic development and improve the livelihood of Hong Kong people, the Lam administration must also address young people's concerns by engaging with them on the terms of political reform and create space for constructive dialogue and engagement with the government to showcase their distinct views. This would represent a practical and meaningful opportunity for the youth to experience inclusive political engagement with a stake in the future. Their journey in the coming years must bear the hallmarks of a transformed political sphere in which their voice matters.

