

## **Another Dynamics of Contention in Hong Kong: Dimensionality in Roll Call Voting in the 6th Term Legislative Council, 2016-2020**

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### **Abstract**

To understand the current political landscape in Hong Kong, this paper investigates the dynamics of contention in the Legislative Council. A dimensional analysis of roll call voting presents that this formal representative body is heavily dominated by the main dimension of politics. Unlike the previous terms, its unidimensionality is generally applied both for the directly elected politicians and the representatives of functional constituencies. The marginal variation beyond the primary cleavage is mainly driven by the Liberal Party members, while other major parties, such as the Democratic Party and the DAB, are stick with the issues of democracy and Hong Kong-Beijing issue. Toward a better working collective decision-making body to address the problems and issues in Hong Kong, its elite politics is needed to be equipped with more room for collaboration and deliberation.

**Keywords:** *political cleavage, legislative representation, dimensionality, roll call voting, the Legislative Council, Hong Kong*

## 1. Introduction

Contemporary Hong Kong is at risk with conflicting values. A society definitely has different ideas and interests that may lead to strife and struggle, and it should be solved or relieved by politics. If we want to find a formal place for people to gather, deliberate, and make a series of decisions on the issues and problems in Hong Kong, the Legislative Council (LegCo) should be the one, or at least one of them. The LegCo may have not served for this congressional ideal of problem-solving sufficiently. Nevertheless, there remain the roles and functions as the representative body that the LegCo has played in these days of political unrest.

To understand the current political landscape in the LegCo, this paper takes a quantitative analysis of roll call voting. There are multiple forms of political behavior that can be made in legislature (Gallagher and Holiday, 2003; Gu, 2015; Jang, 2018a, 2018b), but this collective decision-making in which each of the representatives reveals his/her preference on the given agenda has been considered as fundamental in legislative politics (e.g., Carey, 2008; Clausen, 1973; Cox and McCubbins, 1991, 2005; Key, 1961; MacRae, 1958; Mayhew, 1966; Poole and Rosenthal, 2011).

Specifically, this paper focuses on the question of dimensionality in the 6th LegCo. To what extent, in what ways, the political cleavage of localism, democracy, and Beijing issues dominate elite politics in Hong Kong? To answer this question, I collected the roll call voting data of the 6th LegCo members and employed the Optimal Classification to estimate the degree of saliency of the primary dimension in roll call voting (Poole, 2005). This dimensional analysis provides an empirical evidence that the formal representative body is heavily dominated by the main dimension of politics. In comparison with the earlier LegCos, this unidimensionality is generally applied both for the directly elected

politicians and the representatives of functional constituencies. The marginal variation beyond the main dimension is mainly driven by the Liberal Party (自由黨) members, while other major parties, such as the Democratic Party (民主黨) and the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB, 民主建港協進聯盟 / 民建聯) are stuck with the main political cleavage.

This paper continues with a description of the current status of representative politics in Hong Kong with a focus on the LegCo. The subsequent section then introduces the roll call voting data of the 6th LegCo. After that, a detailed analysis of 6th LegCo politics is conducted. The final section reflects on some inconclusive, but hopefully useful implications toward a better future of Hong Kong from this paper's empirical analysis.

## **2. Representative Politics in Hong Kong**

The LegCo is made of individual politicians who have different routes to get a seat. The Basic Law, Hong Kong's mini-constitution enacted under the Sino-British Joint Declaration, provides a general principal and guideline of its recruiting method toward universal suffrage. Its Annex II and Amendment to Annex II Instrument 4 further define the formation method of the 6th LegCo composed of 70 political elites.

Half of the LegCo members are elected in the five geographical constituencies, including Kowloon East (九龍東), Kowloon West (九龍西), New Territories East (新界東), New Territories West (新界西), and Hong Kong Island (香港島). It takes list proportional representation using the Hare Quota and Largest Remainders formula, leaning toward political fragmentation by penalizing a party list with a large size of vote on seat allocation (Carey, 2016). The electoral observers have reported consistently that the campaign process has been

conducted in a free and fair way (e.g., Baum, 2000; Cheng, 2010; Ho, 1999; Kuan *et al.* (eds.), 1999; Ma, 2002, 2005, 2015; Ma and Choy, 2003; Wong, 2015; Yip and Yeung, 2014).

The other half of the seats are assigned to the representatives who are selected in functional constituencies (FCs). This FC system is an indirect method of recruiting the LegCo members representing narrowly defined professional or special interest groups. Currently, there are 29 FCs to fill the 35 seats in the LegCo. Most of the FCs select one to serve for the LegCo, while the Labour FC and the District Council (Second) recruit three and five FC members, respectively. An individual or a group related to each FC can register to vote for his/her/its preferred representative(s) and the selection methods vary across different FCs (Kwok, 2006; Loh and Civic Exchange (eds.), 2006; Zhang, 2011).

In Hong Kong's history after the handover, the major political actors in the LegCo have been the Democratic Party and the DAB. However, no political party has ever gained the majority of seats to operate the LegCo, which is due to the electoral rules and other constraints serving Beijing's intention to avoid strong party politics (Lau and Kuan, 2000; Ma, 2001, 2007). Other political parties and independents, still mainly characterized by their attitudes toward the democracy vs. Beijing issue, have filled the other seats (Lo, 2010; Sing (ed.), 2009). These major and minor parties have shown strong party unity in the LegCo (Wang and Peng, 2016). Various ideas of localism were also brought into the 6th LegCo (Cheng, 2014; Kaeding, 2017), but due to a series of disqualification of these radical politicians, they were relatively marginalized. Another dimension of politics that has been traditionally considered is an economic left-right one (Smyth *et al.*, 2019; Ma, 2007; Wong, 2020). Tam (2017) discovers that gender politics can be another lens to understand legislative politics in Hong Kong.

### **3. Roll Call Voting in the 6th Legislative Council**

To assess the nature of the 6th LegCo politics, I collected the roll call voting data from the official website of the Legislative Council (last accessed on August 5th, 2020). It spans the four parliamentary years from October 2016 through July 2020. Given the extension of the 6th LegCo, related to the 7th term legislative election postponement, the data cannot fully represent the 6th LegCo politics but can still serve the scopes and aims of this study sufficiently.

The total number of representatives from the data is 75. The original size of the LegCo is 70 and there are several membership changes through the four years for various reasons. This political history returns the total number of the LegCo members from the 6th legislative election to the most recent LegCo meeting to be 75. The other five representatives who assumed office in the middle of the 6th LegCo include Gary FAN Kwok-wai (范國威), AU Nok-hin (區諾軒), Vincent CHENG Wing-shun (鄭泳舜), Tony TSE Wai-chuen (謝偉銓), and CHAN Hoi-yan (陳凱欣).

The total number of roll call voting from the data is 795. On every roll call voting, each attending representative may cast a vote in favor (贊成), opposed (反對), and 15 abstained (棄權) on the agenda. The only exception is the LegCo President (主席) Andrew LEUNG Kwan-yuen (梁君彥), whose role under Hong Kong's mini-constitution is to perform the administrative and procedural functions (Article 72, Hong Kong Basic Law). All of his voting records have been recorded as present (出席).

**Figure 1** Participation Rate in Roll Call Voting by the 6th LegCo Members

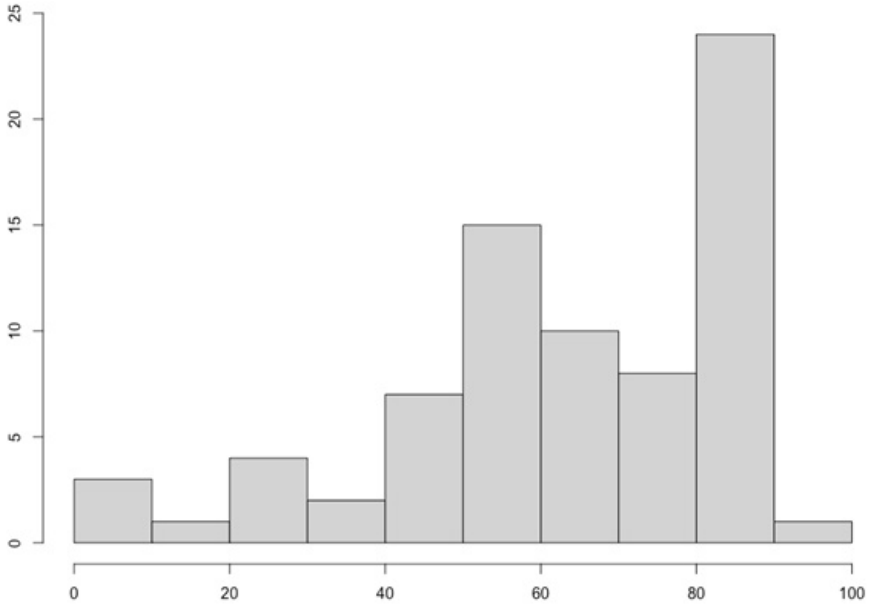


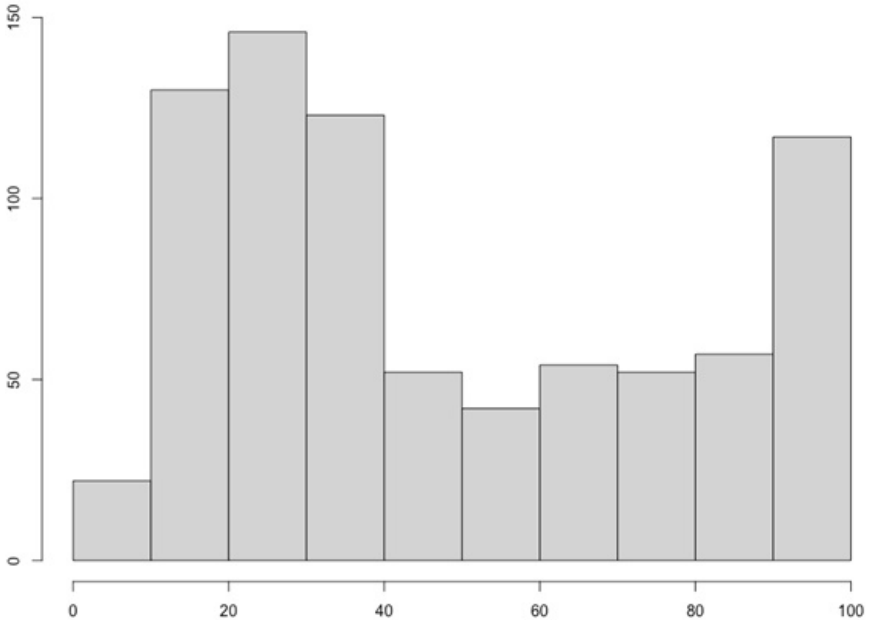
Figure 1 provides a simple description of the 6th LegCo members' involvement in roll call voting. In this case, I just count Yes and No choices and divide it by the total number of the bills. The median and mean participation scores are 66.16 and 62.77, respectively. It also presents a wide variation (standard deviation is 23.18). Most of the LegCo members who are less engaged in roll call voting are either the representatives who left the seats in the middle of the 6th LegCo or the newcomers replacing them.

Annex II of the Basic Law defines the two main ways of determining roll call voting result. If the government introduces a bill, it requires a simple majority of the present LegCo members. For the case of the agenda initiated by individual members, it needs a majority vote among the geographical constituency members as well as one among the functional constituency LegCo representatives.

In the 6th LegCo, 98 bills (12.32%) and 697 bills (87.58%) were introduced by the government and by the LegCo members, respectively. For the executive branch's policy agenda, almost all of them were passed and only two bills were rejected. In contrast, about one fifth of the bills of the LegCo members' motions were passed (129 bills, 18.51%), while 568 bills (81.49%) failed to pass the floor voting. Among these 568 bills that failed to get the two majority voting results, 450 agendas (79.23%) were rejected by both types of representatives. Eighty (14.08%) and 38 (6.69%) bills were only able to be supported by the representatives elected from the Geographical Constituencies and the members of the Functional Constituencies, respectively, but not from the other side.

Figure 2 presents the distribution of roll call voting choice at bill level. For this visualization, I simply calculate every bill's percentage of yes votes out of yes or no votes. The overall voting patterns are widely scattered (standard deviation is 29.73) and its median and mean are 37.78 and 48.42, respectively. Fifty-eight bills were passed unanimously, and among them, 31 and 27 agendas were moved by individual LegCo members and the government, respectively.

**Figure 2** Distribution of Bill-level Roll Call Voting Choice (Percentage of Yes)



#### 4. Dimensional Analysis of the 6th Legislative Council

To assess the dimensional structure of the 6th LegCo politics, I utilized roll call voting data described in the previous section. The main point of interest here is to examine whether individual LegCo members have played in a single dimensional roll call voting stage or it can be more than one dimension beyond the pro- and anti-Beijing political cleavage. After this overarching investigation, an individual level of variation in dimensionality of roll call voting can be discovered.



For this purpose, I employed the Optimal Classification (OC), one of the classical applications in spatial model of legislative politics (Poole, 2005). It assumes that all of the individual legislators have symmetric and single-peaked preference structure along a specified number of dimensions and estimates the ideal position of the representatives that maximizes the explanatory power of legislative choices in roll call voting. This technique further provides a series of quantitative scores to gauge the dimensionality in roll call voting at aggregate level as well as individual level.

I applied a unidimensional OC model for the 6th LegCo roll call voting data. I only selected the 72 legislators with a sufficient number of roll call voting history, following the conventional minimum of 20 votes. It is also noted that 727 roll call votes were used and the other 68 were dropped, as they were either unanimous ones or lop-sided. For comparison, I also employed a two-dimensional OC model as well as utilized the roll call voting data of the previous terms, part of which was from Jang (2016).

**Table 1** Dimensionality of Roll Call Voting in the 6th Legislative Council

	1D OC	2D OC	2D – 1D
Correct Classification (%)	98.9	99.4	0.5
Correct Classification, Yes (%)	98.8	99.3	0.5
Correct Classification, No (%)	98.9	99.4	0.5
APRE	0.957	0.976	0.019

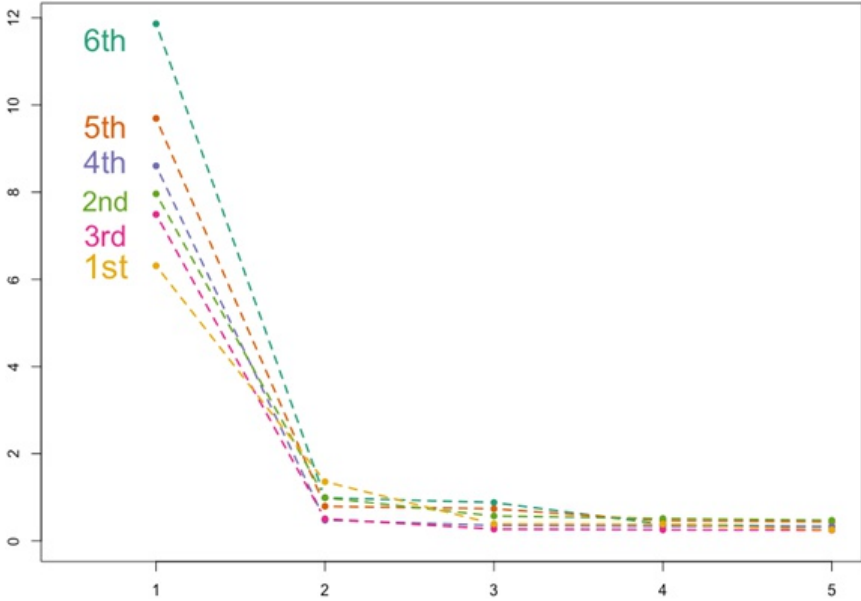
Table 1 provides a set of useful diagnostic statistical information of the basic issue space of the 6th LegCo. It basically demonstrates that a one-dimensional spatial model is enough to explain Hong Kong's

representative politics in the form of floor voting. One dimensional OC model is able to classify overall LegCo members' voting decision at about 98.9% (98.8% for Yes and 98.9% for No choices). Another useful information: the aggregate proportional reduction in error (APRE), a model-fit statistic that weights the OC's classifier performance by ease of the task, ranging from zero to one, is 0.957.

Adding another dimension, in addition to the main issue space, does not improve the model's explanatory power remarkably. As Table 1 shows, the explanatory power of the second dimension is less than one percent for correct classification. It can additionally classify 76 Yes votes and 98 No votes out of 37,426 roll call voting decisions on the Yes and No options. In other words, the second dimension can be useful for explaining 0.47% of roll call voting decisions in the 6th LegCo. To sum up, 6th LegCo politics is shaped along one powerful dimension, while other potential issue spaces are marginalized.

Figure 3 presents a comparative visualization of dimensionality in the LegCo after the handover. The horizontal axis represents the top five potential dimensions and the vertical axis is about the amount of information in the form of eigenvalues that can be explained by each dimension. As shown, the first-dimension accounts for a significant size of LegCo politics for all the six terms. The other dimensions are relatively marginalized without much explanatory power for capturing a meaningful variation of roll call voting data. This unidimensionality is not a unique phenomenon, as similar patterns of congressional voting can be observed in almost all of the representative bodies around the world (Poole and Rosenthal, 2011). But the remarkable pattern from Figure 3 is that Hong Kong's representative politics has been increasingly shaped by the main political cleavage, with a minor exception of the 3rd term. And the 6th LegCo has been exceptionally oriented toward this dimension of politics.

**Figure 3** Comparison of Dimensionality in the Legislative Council since the Handover



Based on this aggregate level of unidimensionality in the 6th LegCo, I further investigate an individual level of dimensionality in Hong Kong’s elite politics. As the unit of analysis is switched to individual LegCo members, I prepared an individual legislator’s Correct Classification Rate, simply calculated as the total number of incorrectly classified votes by one-dimensional OC model divided by the total number of votes that the legislator made in the 6th LegCo.

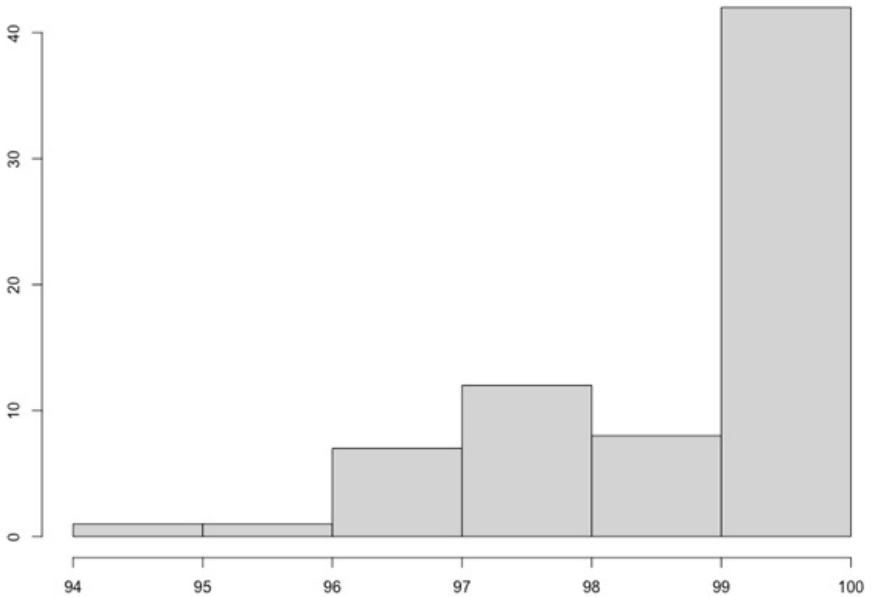
**Figure 4** Dimensionality in Roll Call Voting by the 6th LegCo Members

Figure 4 describes its distribution. As the 6th LegCo politics has been dominated by the main cleavage, individual representatives have also played mostly along this dimension, and therefore, it is not surprising that this individualized measure of dimensionality is also highly skewed toward a perfect classification (median: 99.42, and mean: 98.75). At the same time, however, there is still a considerable variation among the politicians. The one-dimensional OC model does not capture some roll call votes of the legislators, which means that these choices were made beyond the main dimension of politics.

To examine if these misspecifications are just random or there are some systematic patterns, I ran a series of regressions. The dependent variable is the Correct Classification Rate of the individual LegCo members. It ranges from 0 to 100, and higher value represents means greater unidimensionality of the legislator. For independent variable, I mainly consider electoral rules and party affiliations. Reflecting Hong Kong's unique electoral system, I first prepare a binary variable, capturing Functional Constituency or Geographical Constituency. The other further breaks down the five geographical electoral districts with the baseline of Functional Constituency. In regard to political parties, I include the six major political parties, including the Civic Party (公民黨), the DAB (民建聯), the Democratic Party (民主黨), the Liberal Party (自由黨), the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (工聯會), and the Business and Professionals Alliance for Hong Kong (經民聯). The baseline for this party affiliation variable is independents and minor party members.

Table 2 summarizes the statistical results from the five OLS models. The two key findings from Table 2 are as follows. First, the type of methods by which the individual politicians are recruited to the LegCo is not related to their dimensionality in roll call voting. The LegCo members who are chosen by electoral competition do not have a significant difference from the Functional Constituency members. The comparison between Functional Constituency with the five geographical constituencies presents similar and consistent results. At best, it is noted that the LegCo members from the Kowloon West and Hong Kong Island districts tend to be based on the main dimension, while the representatives from New Territories are less likely to be associated. However, this trend based on the direction of estimated coefficients from model 2 and 5 is not statistically significant at all.

**Table 2** Dimensionality of Roll Call Voting by the 6th LegCo Members

	Dependent variable				
	Correct Classification Rate				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
地方選區	0.110 (0.319)			-0.167 (0.290)	
九龍東		0.074 (0.652)			-0.716 (0.559)
九龍西		0.467 (0.564)			0.189 (0.469)
新界東		-0.196 (0.509)			-0.273 (0.431)
新界西		-0.182 (0.509)			-0.225 (0.434)
香港島		0.621 (0.602)			0.047 (0.520)
公民黨			1.217** (0.563)	1.294** (0.581)	1.427** (0.606)
民建聯			1.826*** (0.382)	1.819*** (0.385)	1.801*** (0.400)
民主黨			1.393*** (0.418)	1.427*** (0.424)	1.427*** (0.442)
自由黨			-1.300** (0.563)	-1.390** (0.587)	-1.381** (0.596)
工聯會			1.342** (0.563)	1.334** (0.566)	1.495** (0.592)
經民聯			1.096** (0.471)	1.005** (0.499)	1.015** (0.507)
Constant	98.696*** (0.227)	98.696*** (0.230)	98.174*** (0.180)	98.264*** (0.240)	98.255*** (0.245)
Observations	71	71	71	71	71
R <sup>2</sup>	0.002	0.034	0.418	0.421	0.442
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	-0.013	-0.040	0.363	0.357	0.338
Residual Std. Error	1.345 (df = 69)	1.363 (df = 65)	1.066 (df = 64)	1.072 (df = 63)	1.087 (df = 59)
F Statistic	0.119 (df = 1; 69)	0.462 (df = 5; 65)	7.660*** (df = 6; 64)	6.545*** (df = 7; 63)	4.250*** (df = 11; 59)

Note: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

In contrast, party affiliations have a meaningful effect on the outcome variable. All of the binary variables indicating the five major political parties are statistically significant at 0.05 level, meaning that these party members' roll call voting decision is different from that of the LegCo members from minor parties and independents. And these party affiliation variables are accountable for more than 40% of the dimensionality in roll call voting, based on the coefficients of determination (R-squared statistics). Specifically, the politicians from the Civic Party (公民黨), the DAB (民建聯), the Democratic Party (民主黨), the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (工聯會) and the Business and Professionals Alliance for Hong Kong (經民聯) are more likely to stick with the main political cleavage. In contrast, the Liberal Party (自由黨) members take some other considerations on their roll call voting decision, and therefore they are less aligned with the first dimension.

The above results present a change and continuity in Hong Kong's elite politics in terms of dimensionality of roll call voting. In Jang (2016), the electoral rule is one of the important explanatory factors in dimensionality in the first four LegCos. It provides an empirical evidence that those who are elected from Geographical Constituencies are less aligned to the main dimension. However, for the 6th LegCo's case, that diverging pattern no longer exists. In contrast, the effect of party politics on dimensionality has been maintained. It is also noted that the Liberal Party (自由黨) variable in the regression model on the earlier LegCos data does not make a difference from the minor party members and independents. But it becomes a unique one diverging from the main dimension of politics. However, all of the interpretations from the statistical analysis should be carefully made, as most of the roll call voting activities is now swamped by the main dimension and the

regression models can marginally discover minor variation of roll call voting in the 6th LegCo.

## 5. Discussion

In political science and related disciplines, one of the commonly shared understandings would be the simple statement: institutions matter. However, the current status of Hong Kong may not convincingly support this mantra. As this paper shows, even with a limited representation from the radical side, its politics is heavily dominated by the primary cleavage with a lack of other potential ideas and beliefs to make a series of authoritative decisions on Hong Kong affairs in its formal institution. If we still believe that institutional settings can shape the incentive structure of political players into generally behaving in predictable ways, we may consider some minor institutional engineering that can facilitate a constructive discussion for Hong Kongers within a short period of time.

The LegCo has evolved after the handover with several institutional changes. For example, it removed the Election Committee representation, increased the number of LegCo seats, and modified the functional constituencies. Continuing its institutional reform to address the demands of the people would be adequate for Hong Kong to be Hong Kong and for letting institutions matter. In this regard, recent studies provide remarkable implications for the LegCo reform (e.g., Carey, 2016; Malesky *et al.*, 2012; Scheiner *et al.*, 2008). Particularly, the discovery of Malesky and his colleagues (2012) that institutional openness may not always return to achieve a better governance also demonstrates that reformers and scholars should be exceedingly careful about hidden assumptions within a reform package.



To my best knowledge, this paper is the first attempt, or at least one of the earliest ones, to unfold the 6th LegCo politics with a comprehensive data analysis. However, to reach a fuller understanding of Hong Kong politics, a further point needs to be made with regard to a more comprehensive perspective of Congressional decision-making. Admittedly, I limit this paper to roll call voting and restrict the scope of analysis by focusing on dimensionality. Clearly this narrow point of view is speculative, but at the very least, it is my hope that this work can serve as a stepping stone toward a richer and more inclusive empirical research on the LegCo politics and contemporary Hong Kong.

## Note

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# Postscript

