

Attitudes towards 2004 Legislative Council Election
Civic Exchange's Preliminary Analysis of Polling Results
31 May 2004

Independent public policy think tank, **Civic Exchange**, and the **Public Opinion Programme (POP)** at the University of Hong Kong released a new public opinion survey report today that aimed to find out Hong Kong people's attitudes towards the upcoming Legislative Council election in September 2004. A total of 1,039 Hong Kong residents who are 18 or above were surveyed between 18 May and 20 May 2004.

The full survey report is available at www.civic-exchange.org after 6pm on Monday, 31 May 2004. For enquiries, please call Ms. Christine LOH at 9802 8888 or Ms. YIP Yanyan at 2893 0213.

While the survey results speak for themselves, there are **FIVE** aspects of the results that Civic Exchange feels need explaining:

1. Will more people vote in the 2004 LegCo election?

While it is still early days to make an accurate prediction, this survey showed that the voter turnout rate for the upcoming election could be high. A highly charged political environment could have a positive or negative impact on voters. In Hong Kong's experience, the turnout rate has been high on past occasions when the environment was highly politicised. This was the case with the 2003 District Council election when memories of the Article 23 controversy were still fresh in the public's mind. Today's political environment is equally if not even more highly charged with the SCNPC's interpretation in March and decision in April, as well as the recent concerns about the freedom of speech over a number of radio hosts resigning due to political pressure.

People who are most likely to vote at the 12 September election are those who had voted before, as they have developed a habit of voting. Thus, 90% of those who said they voted in previous elections said they would vote again this year. Conversely, those who did not vote in the past were more likely to say they would not vote this time even though they had registered to vote.

Thus, it will be crucial for the candidates and political parties to ensure that those who said they would probably vote (24%), those who said they would probably not vote (4%) and those who didn't know or hadn't decided whether to vote (14%) will turn out to vote for them. In what is expected to be a tightly fought election this year, the candidates and parties cannot afford to be complacent. They need to find the right message to get voters to turn out for them.

2. How many people will join the 1 July march this year?

The survey shows that approximately half of the respondents who said that they took part in last year's 1 July Article 23 protest said they would take part or probably take part again this year. The proportion of those respondents who said they would probably take part in this year's protest are likely to be watching circumstances in the run-up to 1 July 2004 and a highly charged political environment may well draw them out, as was the case last year. This figure should be an indication for the HKSAR Government that it must monitor the situation carefully as the level of political discontent in Hong Kong appears to remain high.

3. Are the parties and candidates missing something with voters?

Consistent with past survey results, Hong Kong people said they preferred independent candidates (65%) as supposed to those with party affiliations (19%). However, the majority of the respondents also identified the bigger political parties (DP, DAB, LP) as reflecting their views on livelihood (20%, 9%, 8% = 37%) and political (24%, 9% 6% = 39%) issues.

Yet, in a POP survey released on 18 May 2004, the Article 45 Concern Group, which is a relatively new group made up of individual lawyers, with two legislators and two likely candidates for the September election, had the highest popularity rating of all political parties and groups. In the Civic Exchange-POP survey, less than 1% of the respondents said that the Article 45 Concern Group most reflected their views on livelihood issues and about 1% of the respondents said the group reflected their views on political issues.

However, it must be noted that 31% of the respondents thought none of the parties, groups and candidates represented their views on livelihood issues and 26% likewise on political issues. Moreover, 29% said they didn't know who most reflected their views on livelihood issues and 30% said the same on political issues.

It should also be taken into account that 32% of the respondents said they regarded themselves as "pro-democracy", 30% thought they were "middle of the road", 5% said they were "pro-Beijing", and 26% said they didn't have any political preference or they didn't align themselves to any camp.

These conflicting messages can possibly be explained as follows:

- While a large number of people identify on livelihood and political issues with the two largest parties (DP and DAB), even more people feel their views are not matched by the political parties, groups and candidates, which indicate that the parties, groups and individuals are not perceived to represent certain issues that people are interested in.
- While voters may not identify with a party or candidate, many of them nevertheless align themselves with certain values or aspirations politically and this determines how they will vote. In this sense, Hong Kong voters are not much different from voters elsewhere.
- A sizable group of people are prepared to give their support to individual politicians whom they trust to represent their values and aspirations, particularly when these individuals are charismatic.
- The parties, groups and candidates can expand their voter base by trying to understand where public sentiments stand on a wider range of policy areas than they are currently focussing on.

4. How important are economic issues?

More than 70% of the respondents said that they would like the new LegCo to address economic issues and employment-related issues while 9% of the people would like the new LegCo to address constitutional reform issues.

The message from this part of the survey may be interpreted thus when other parts of the survey are also taken into account, including recent survey results from the Hong Kong Transition Project (*Political Tsunami* – November 2003; *Listening to the wisdom of the masses* – January 2004), which explores changing trends and sentiments:

- Since voters have to vote based on candidates standing for election, they will choose those whom they can most trust and can identify with as explained in the previous section;
- A substantial number of voters expect legislators to focus on economic issues when they are in office (this is consistent with voters elsewhere);
- This does not mean that voters are unconcerned about political and other issues since the candidates they vote for already embody certain issues and stance and voters expect them to carry on with those issues but they also want legislators to focus on economic issues.
- As the Hong Kong economy improves, people have become less concerned about the state of the economy. In November 2003 when people's level of political discontent was high, it was already clear that people were expecting their family financial situation to improve. This trend has continued.

There are in fact no parties, groups and candidates who have strong backgrounds in economic, financial and public finance policies. To spend more time in this area will make good sense for all the parties, groups and candidates.

5. How well do people understand the Geographical Constituency election this year?

The HKSAR Government still has some way to go to inform voters for the upcoming election. 68% of the respondents claimed that they knew a little or nothing about the voting system. Three quarters of the respondents said they did not know the number of legislators to be returned by direct election at the September election. About 87% of the people did not know the number of seats returned by each geographical constituency. These high percentages reflect that respondents generally lacked knowledge on the LegCo election.

It is interesting to note that among the 703 respondents who did not know much about the voting system, about 40% of them expressed a view on a follow-up question indicating whether they thought the voting system should be retained in Hong Kong. This probably indicates that while voters do not fully understand the geographical election system, many of them do not have a sense that the geographical constituency election system is a bad system.