

United Front Organizations as a Political Machine Political Clientelism, Authoritarian Elections, and Electoral Breakthrough in Hong Kong

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Abstract

The political machine that supports political clientelism in Hong Kong is adapted from united front organizations, which are the party-state's institutional infrastructure for exercising indirect rule over Hong Kong. As machinery intended for penetrating society and building social alliances in support of the party-state, it is readily adaptable for the purpose of building clientelistic networks for electoral purposes. The necessary and massive human, financial, and organizational resources, in short, the penetrative capacity of united front organizations, compensate for the weak dependency of voters on patronage goods and the limited availability of state resources for political patronage. The electoral breakthrough in the 2019 District Council elections revealed the limitations of weak dependency and, hence, the unviability of the political machine.

Keywords: Authoritarian elections, electoral breakthrough, Hong Kong, political clientelism, united front organizations.

In Hong Kong, political clientelism in elections has been on the rise in the past decade. Ridiculed as *shezhaibingzong* (the Chinese acronym for snake soup, vegetarian banquet, Mid-Autumn Festival mooncake, and Dragon Boat Festival dumpling) by its critics, material favors are regularly offered by politicians to residents in the community, from food, gift packs, group tours, banquets, stationery packages for students, basic health care (such as free blood pressure checks for the elderly or consultations for traditional Chinese medicine), to household services, and more. Such favors are widely extended by pro-Beijing political parties, and the general perception is that they have become an

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important pillar of electoral success.¹ Owing to their importance in attracting voters, opposition parties, under the pressure of electoral competition, have increased their investment in similar clientelist practices.

It is widely understood that the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR "Liaison Office") has been the key institution in building this powerful political machine. To date, several studies have been conducted on the phenomenon. Bruce Kam-kwan Kwong used surveys and interviews to study how patron-clientelism affected the chances of a candidate winning in the Legislative Council and District Council elections.² Stan Hok-wui Wong's empirical study offered an important glimpse of the coordinating role of the Liaison Office in elections, the party-state's united front policy at the grassroots level, and its strategy in securing voters' support.³ What is still missing in these studies are the institutional and structural conditions that have enabled the Liaison Office to successfully institute political clientelism in Hong Kong, as well as the limits of its operation.

On the surface, the conditions in Hong Kong seem quite at odds with the usual favorable factors identified in the literature. To begin with, there was almost no history of such clientelist practices prior to the development of party politics in the early 1990s. The highly urbanized setting means that traditional ties are supposed to be weak and ineffective as the basis for building clientelist networks. The government provides a reasonable level of programmatic goods to all citizens, particularly in education, welfare, public health care, public housing, and so on. At the community level, social services are provided by government-funded nonprofit organizations in the areas of family, youth, and elderly services. While the income gap is very high (the Gini Coefficient was 0.539 in 2016), the living conditions of the poor are far from those found in many third-world countries where basic food and security are not available to much of the population. A modern, rule-based public administrative system generally ensures that services are offered to citizens in a fair and transparent manner, without their having to resort to personal or political connections. The entrenched meritocratic system means that political patronage extended through civil service jobs is basically nonexistent. In short, given that political parties do not really have control over vital state resources that they can distribute to voters in a particularistic manner, the latter are not compelled to vote out of dependency on their patrons.

¹ Brian Fong, "In-between Liberal Authoritarianism and Electoral Authoritarianism: Hong Kong's Democratization under Chinese Sovereignty, 1997–2016," *Democratization* 24 (2016): 724–750, and Stan Hok-wui Wong, *Electoral Politics in Post-1997 Hong Kong: Protest, Patronage, and the Media* (Singapore: Springer Science+Business Media, 2015).

² Bruce Kam-kwan Kwong, *Patron–Client Politics and Elections in Hong Kong* (London: Routledge, 2010).

³ Wong, *Electoral Politics in Post-1997 Hong Kong*.

The argument made in this essay is that the political machine that supports political clientelism in Hong Kong is adapted from united front organizations. As machinery intended to penetrate society and build social alliances in support of the party-state, it is readily adaptable to building a clientelistic network for elections. Its success is mainly attributed to its penetrative capacity that is supported by abundant human, financial, and organizational resources.

Political Clientelism

The extant literature generally regards clientelism as a relationship based on dependency, the exchange of benefits, particularism, and interpersonal bonds. Clientelism has been found in many traditional and modern societies and in different historical periods. In many third-world countries, people's welfare security relies upon various clientelist relationships.⁴ In electoral politics, political clientelism refers to the exchange relationship between politicians and voters, often mediated by political brokers, where material rewards are offered by the former in return for the vote (vote buying) or turnout (turnout buying) of the latter. It is distinguished from programmatic distribution in that there are no public rules of distribution.⁵ In this essay, clientelism also is distinguished from pork-barrel politics, as the latter is perks offered to a whole constituency and not on an individual basis.

Political clientelism is not a necessary by-product of elections. Instead, it emerges and declines under specific conditions. Structural-level studies focus on the "macro-dynamics" affecting the emergence and decline of clientelism in electoral politics (i.e., why it endures in some countries but not in others).⁶ Cross-national data affirm that there is a negative correlation between the prevalence of clientelism and the country's per capita GDP, supporting the common perception that the practice is closely associated with poverty. They also show, based on the historical experience of Britain and the United States where clientelism was prevalent in the nineteenth century, how such practices declined with industrialization and economic growth. Simply put, population growth and urbanization brought about a larger electorate and made political brokerage more costly and the tracking of voters more difficult, while the rise in income made largesse less attractive to voters. Political parties thus became more incentivized to attract voters through competition over programmatic policies.⁷ An important related issue is the problem of monitoring brokers

⁴ Geof Wood and Ian Gough, "A Comparative Welfare Regime Approach to Global Social Policy," *World Development* 34 (2006): 1696-1712.

⁵ Susan C. Stokes, Thad Dunning, Marcelo Nazareno, and Valeria Brusco, *Brokers, Voters, and Clientelism: The Puzzle of Distributive Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

that is crucial for effective use of resources to secure votes. As the clientelist network expands, it becomes difficult for politicians to monitor their brokers' performance, creating opportunities for rent-seeking behavior from the latter.⁸

A related cluster of work focused on political patronage as the allocation of government jobs to loyal supporters, and attempted to explain why the civil-service positions in the public bureaucracy were captured by political parties for patronage purposes in some countries but not in others. For instance, in Southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain), there is extensive compromise of meritocracy in civil service recruitment. Dimitri Sotiropoulos attributed such marked differences to the variant paths of democratization, namely, that the prolonged period of authoritarian rule in Southern European states provided fertile ground for the entrenchment of patron—clientelist practices, and that the process of democratic transition has afforded little time for the development of a modern Weberian bureaucracy.⁹

In sum, the literature on political clientelism shows that the practice tends to be prevalent in countries where there is serious poverty and a lack of basic government services, and where a modern Weberian-type meritocratic bureaucracy remained underdeveloped when elections were introduced. At a macro level, clientelism is found to be negatively correlated with economic development and urbanization, when political parties switch to programmatic politics as a way to attract votes.

The Role of Political Clientelism in Authoritarian Elections and Hybrid Regimes

Another commonly discussed dimension is the particular role of political clientelism in authoritarian elections and hybrid regimes. Observations in the literature on authoritarian elections and hybrid regimes share many overlapping concerns and commonalities. At the risk of oversimplification, the literature on hybrid regimes emphasizes the lack of a level playing field in electoral competition and manipulation by the ruling party of these regimes.¹⁰ The literature on authoritarian elections cautions against “broad-stroke distinctions [that] mask important differences in the structure of authoritarian elections.”¹¹ Ellen Lust-Okar’s study of elections in the Middle East and North Africa region shows that for some of these countries, such as Jordan, elections are “not generally manipulated” and are not “meaningless staged events,”

⁸ Ibid., 75-76.

⁹ Dimitri A. Sotiropoulos, “Southern European Public Bureaucracies in Comparative Perspective,” *West European Politics* 27 (2004): 405-422.

¹⁰ Andreas Schedler, *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006).

¹¹ Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust-Okar, “Elections under Authoritarianism,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009): 403-422.

as “there is a significant amount of competition.”¹² Rather, the problem of these elections is that they are not about competition over policymaking, as the legislature is weak and overpowered by a strong executive (which often is unelected). Instead, elections are “competitive clientelism” (i.e., “competitions over access to state resources”).¹³

The above different emphases notwithstanding, scholars converge on the importance of elections as a mechanism for the allocation of spoils among incumbent elites and the distribution of patronage goods to voters.¹⁴ Poor voters will be their major supporters and are more likely to turn out to vote. Whereas urban, middle-class voters may vote for the opposition to show their dissatisfaction, they are less likely to turn out to vote unless the opposition’s victory is likely. As a result, elections do not lead to democratic transition. Elections become critical only when there are political or economic crises.¹⁵ As such, elections and political clientelism go hand in hand with maintaining an authoritarian regime. These characteristics are confirmed by case studies of Middle East and North African countries, Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and other regions.¹⁶

Explaining Political Clientelism in Hong Kong

Hong Kong’s political system currently consists of an unelected chief executive, a legislature (the Legislative Council), with half of its seats returned through direct election, and fully elected District Councils at the local level. In elections, there is multiparty competition between the pro-Beijing camp (which is very close to the Chinese party-state [the “party-state”]) and the prodemocracy camp (which has a contentious relationship with the party-state). The system is

¹² Ellen Lust-Okar, “Elections under Authoritarianism: Preliminary Lessons from Jordan,” *Democratization* 13, no. 3 (2006): 458-459.

¹³ Ellen Lust, “Democratization by Elections? Competitive Clientelism in the Middle East,” *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2009): 124.

¹⁴ Gandhi and Lust-Okar, “Elections under Authoritarianism,” and Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski, “Authoritarian Institutions and the Survival of Autocrats,” *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 11 (2007): 1279-1301.

¹⁵ Gandhi and Lust-Okar, “Elections under Authoritarianism”; Lust, “Democratization by Elections?”; and Schedler, *Electoral Authoritarianism*.

¹⁶ Lust, “Democratization by Elections?”; Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai and Sam Hickey, “The Politics of Development under Competitive Clientelism: Insights from Ghana’s Education Sector,” *African Affairs* (2016): 44-72; Abu Elias Sarker, “Patron—Client Politics and Its Implications for Good Governance in Bangladesh,” *International Journal of Public Administration* 31, no. 12 (2008): 1416-1440; Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, “Oligarchic Patrimonialism, Bossism, Electoral Clientelism, and Contested Democracy in the Philippines,” *Comparative Politics* 37, no. 2 (2005): 229-250; Ward Berenschot, “The Political Economy of Clientelism: A Comparative Study of Indonesia’s Patronage Democracy,” *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 12 (2018): 1563-1593; and Javier Auyero, *Poor People’s Politics: Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

executive-dominant and policymaking power is overwhelmingly in the hands of the executive branch. District Councils assume a mostly advisory role and do not enjoy much executive power. Therefore, Hong Kong fits quite well into the authoritarian election model, in which there is multiparty competition in an election that is not about choosing a government and has no important role for political parties concerning setting the policy agenda.¹⁷

One direct consequence is that voter turnout has tended to be low, as many citizens have not regard elections as effective for initiating policy change. This is particularly evident in District Council elections, as these local councils are advisory in nature and their executive power is miniscule. Thus, voter turnout has ranged from 35.8 to 47 percent since the handover (until the electoral breakthrough in 2019, described below). Voter turnout for the Legislative Council elections, which have tended to attract more voters, has ranged from 43.57 to 58.28 percent.¹⁸ The conventional wisdom in Hong Kong's elections is that low voter turnout favors the pro-Beijing political parties and politicians, as their nonsupporters simply do not turn out to vote. This provides a favorable condition for the rise of political clientelism, in which supporters are largely mobilized through the political machine. The effectiveness of this mobilization can be illustrated by the growth of the pro-Beijing camp in elections: since the 1990s, data show that it has increased its seats substantially compared to the prodemocracy camp. In District Council elections, from 2003 to 2015, the popular vote for the pro-Beijing camp increased from around 52 percent to 76 percent (and that of the prodemocracy camp decreased from 48 percent to 23 percent). Similarly, in Legislative Council elections, the popular vote for the prodemocracy camp dropped from 63 percent in 2004 to 51 percent in 2012.¹⁹ No doubt during this period other manipulative tactics were used. Besides vote rigging and gerrymandering, there have been reports of employees of Mainland Chinese enterprises being pressured to vote for pro-Beijing candidates.²⁰ Since 2016, elected candidates from the opposition camp have been disqualified from assuming office and their candidates have been barred from running in elections. In addition to further study of these changes on Hong Kong's political environment, more comprehensive data analysis is needed to ascertain the impact of political clientelism on electoral outcome. One can establish at this point that the increase in the number of seats won by

¹⁷ Gandhi and Lust-Okar, "Elections under Authoritarianism"; Lust-Okar, "Elections under Authoritarianism"; and Lust, "Democratization by Elections?"

¹⁸ The data are obtained from the Electoral Affairs Commission, www.eac.hk (accessed July 15, 2020).

¹⁹ Fong, "In-between Liberal Authoritarianism and Electoral Authoritarianism."

²⁰ Clare Jim and Venus Wu, "Exclusive—Chinese State Enterprise Workers in Hong Kong Given Voting Guidance Ahead of Poll," Reuters (September 3, 2016), <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-hongkong-election-companies/exclusive-chinese-state-enterprise-workers-in-hong-kong-given-voting-guidance-ahead-of-poll-idUKKCN1182E5> (accessed July 15, 2020).

the pro-Beijing camp over the past decade has coincided with the expansion of political clientelism.

What remains unanswered, however, is the cause of the success of the political machine. As discussed, the extant literature reveals that clientelism tends to flourish under certain conditions. One such condition is when the state fails to provide the most basic social safety net to the needy and political brokers become the only major source of welfare or even goods needed for subsistence. For politicians, the cost of buying these voters' support is low (or the marginal utility of the patronage goods is high for the voters). An example is Argentina, where clientelism arose in urban neighborhoods having a very high unemployment rate and under retrenchment of the welfare system. The urban poor joined the clientelist network because that was where they could obtain basic food supplies (such as bread and milk), access to health care, and public-sector jobs. Political brokers, controlling access to these vital resources, awarded them to those who supported their party and withheld them from those who did not.²¹ Additionally, political clientelism most often entails the capturing of state resources by political elites, who distribute them to their supporters as patronage goods. This includes offering jobs in the civil service through by-passing competitive entrance examinations. In Italy, for instance, more civil-service jobs have been filled by means of patronage than through the regular recruitment process. More importantly, citizens have no choice but to turn to political brokers who have the right "connections" within the public bureaucracy in order to obtain various public services, such as listing on the roster for social-welfare benefits or obtaining a business license.²²

Thus, the success of political clientelism hinges not merely on the provision of material benefits and favors, but also on the voters' dependency on the political brokers as the sole source of vital livelihood support and public services. Strictly speaking, the conditions for such a relationship of dependency do not exist in Hong Kong, where education, health care, public housing, and social welfare are available to citizens as programmatic goods. Equally important, meritocracy is well-entrenched in the public administrative system and public services are offered to citizens in a reasonably transparent, fair, and efficient manner. While poverty and income inequality are a problem in Hong Kong, compared with third-world countries, the objective factors supporting dependency are largely absent. Thus, the viability of political clientelism as a means to attract voters is something that should be investigated but not assumed.

The following offers an overview of the evolution and operation of the political machine constructed by the Liaison Office through adaption of the

²¹ Auyero, *Poor People's Politics*.

²² Konstantinos J. Papadoulis, "Clientelism, Corruption and Patronage in Greece: A Public Administration Approach," *Teaching Public Administration* 26, no. 1 (2006): 13-24.

united front organizations, whose function has been threefold: to penetrate society, form a social alliance in support of the party-state, and build a clientelistic network.

United Front Organizations as a Political Machine

The party-state has a long history of penetrating Hong Kong society, dating back to the early years of British colonial rule. It created united front organizations as a way to establish its social basis of support for the Chinese Community Party (CCP) and to recruit underground members.²³ United front tactics have their roots in Leninism, and refer to “a limited and temporary alignment between a Communist party or state and one or more non-Communist political units with the dual purpose...of confronting a common enemy and furthering the revolutionary cause.”²⁴ United front tactics have evolved historically. During the political transition period, the major united front work carried out by the Xinhua News Agency (新華社, the de facto representative of the party-state in Hong Kong) was the co-optation of business and political elites. As a tactic, co-optation focused on winning over potential opposition groups through power-sharing arrangements or particular benefits.²⁵ Many of the targeted elites were long-time coalition partners of the British colonial government. The co-optation tactic successfully converted them from pro-British to pro-China allies, many of them assuming important official positions. Part of this tactic also was consistent with Deng Xiaoping’s emphasis on utilizing businesspeople to contribute to China’s economic development.

In the early 1990s, there was aggressive growth in the number of united front organizations.²⁶ With the introduction of popular elections for the Legislative Council, pro-Beijing political parties were established. The Xinhua News Agency started to assist these parties to mobilize support, notably through traditional united front organizations, such as the Federation of Trade Unions (the FTU, formed in 1948), that had established bases in the community. These organizations often were the source of iron-clad votes as their members were politically loyal to the party-state. By 1997, a range of new united front organizations had been set up, ostensibly civic associations, entailing labor unions, business associations, alumni associations, women’s organizations, youth organizations, arts and cultural organizations, recreational

²³ Christine Loh, *Underground Front: The Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 55-78.

²⁴ James D. Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy: Chinese Foreign Policy and the United Front Doctrine* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 13.

²⁵ The definition is adopted from Yuen Yuen Ang, “Co-optation & Clientelism: Nested Distributive Politics in China’s Single-Party Dictatorship,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 51 (2016): 235-256.

²⁶ Alvin Y. So, *Hong Kong’s Embattled Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 65-66.

clubs, and more, allowing the party-state to penetrate into all walks of society and establish a broad alliance in support of the political regime of Hong Kong.

After 1997, the Liaison Office succeeded the Xinhua News Agency as the agent of the Chinese party-state in Hong Kong. The mass rally on July 1, 2003, commonly identified as a watershed for civil society development and the interventionist turn of the party-state's policy for Hong Kong, was of fundamental significance in changing the role of the Liaison Office.²⁷ Besides being designated as the second governance center, it was tasked with upgrading the political machine after the major electoral defeat of the pro-Beijing camp following the mass rally. Clientelism was extensively used to gain voters' support. The political machine was strengthened through expanding the size and number of united front organizations.²⁸

United front organizations are integrated through "federations," a structure reminiscent of mass organizations in China and traditional leftist organizations such as the FTU.²⁹ New federations were formed during the political transition toward 1997, with several types found to be heavily involved in clientelism and elections. The first type is formed by regional federations, each with hundreds of affiliated united front organizations and hundreds of thousands of members. The affiliated organizations are an assortment of various district-, community-, and neighborhood-based organizations, together with associations that focus on sports, recreation, culture, women, youth, the elderly, and so on. The three regional-based federations are the New Territories Association of Societies, the Kowloon Federation of Associations, and the Hong Kong Island Federation. Together, they have 800 affiliated organizations and individual membership totaling 600,000.³⁰ Equally important is capacity-building at the grassroots level. New neighborhood-based organizations (NBOs) have been extensively organized in residential neighborhoods. As organizational members of regional federations, these NBOs form coordinated networks that are valuable organizational resources for electioneering, including campaigns and voter mobilization. Political ties also have been formed with traditional NBOs such

²⁷ The 2003 mass rally was triggered by the HKSAR government's attempt to pass legislation concerning national security, which was required by Article 23 of the Basic Law. The National Security Bill, introduced to the Legislative Council, was severely criticized by the public as endangering Hong Kong people's human rights, and led to a record turnout of half a million protestors on the street on July 1, 2003.

²⁸ Eliza W. Y. Lee, "United Front, Clientelism, and Indirect Rule: Theorizing the Role of the 'Liaison Office' in Hong Kong," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29 (2020): 763-775.

²⁹ The leaders of the FTU were among the founding members of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB, formed in 1992). In the past decade, the FTU has fielded candidates for election under its own banner.

³⁰ The figures are compiled by the author from data available on the organizations' websites. See: New Territories Association of Societies, <http://www.ntas.org.hk>; Kowloon Federation of Associations, <https://klnfas.hk>; Hong Kong Island Federation of Associations, <http://www.hk-if.org>; Federation of Guangdong Community Organizations, <http://www.guangdong.com.hk>; and Federation of Trade Unions, <http://www.ftu.org.hk/en/> (accessed June 9, 2020).

as Mutual Aid Committees and Home Ownership Corporations—the ground zero for connecting to the urban population—that crucially facilitate political brokerage work.³¹

The second type of federation comprises hometown associations (*tongxianghui*), which have a long history of existence in Hong Kong and other overseas Chinese communities, where migrants and sojourners from the same hometown or ethnic group in China form associations for the purpose of self-help. These organizations were quite active in the early colonial years but steadily declined with the aging of the first-generation migrants and the growing numbers of their Hong Kong-born offspring who have weaker links with their parents' hometowns. The revival of these associations and their rapid expansion in size and number in the past decade is thus notable. The party-state's infiltration is evident in how the new generation of leaders are dominated by pro-Beijing people, and in how they are managed through their being organized as federations. Among the major ones is the Federation of Guangdong Community Organizations, which has 350 affiliated organizations and 620,000 members. These associations bring together new migrants who still have close connections with their hometowns in Mainland China, older people who left Mainland China many years previously, and businesspeople looking for opportunities in their own hometowns. The latter are also sponsors of these associations. These hometown associations are bases for distributing generous patronage goods such as banquets, gifts, or even cash. Some have been found to be rather loose in their criteria for admission, boosting membership through admitting people from outside their hometown.

Nonprofit organizations form the third type of federation, many of which are formally registered as charitable organizations under the Inland Revenue Ordinance, thus enjoying tax exemption and eligibility for various kinds of government funding (detailed later). One major example is the Hong Kong Volunteers Federation. Established through the support of the business sector (its significance is explained below), it sends numerous volunteer teams into the community to offer services to the elderly, the poor, the disabled, grassroots family and children, and others, and also organizes operations for disaster relief.³² Another organization, the New Home Association, targeting new migrants from Mainland China, opens shops that sell daily necessities to their members at greatly discounted prices, and offers to new members free health and life insurance as a welcome gift as well as discount cards for department stores and household electrical appliance shops, free second-

³¹ The importance of Mutual Aid Committees and Home Ownership Corporations in elections has been studied and discussed in Kwong, *Patron—Client Politics and Elections in Hong Kong*.

³² For details about the Hong Kong Volunteers Forum and its work, see <https://www.hkvf.hk/news/sidelights> (accessed June 9, 2020).

hand computers, and more.³³ Yet another recently established organization is the Hong Kong Poverty Alleviation Association Limited, which treats grassroots families to free hotel buffets as part of their Mid-Autumn Festival celebrations.³⁴ In addition, many united front organizations, such as the FTU and some of the regional-based federations mentioned above, have created their own social service arms and registered them as charitable organizations, directly infiltrating social groups that are both their service recipients and their potential voters.

There is considerable evidence of the strong association between such organizations and the party-state. They commonly have officials from the Liaison Office as honorary patrons and as regular guests at their activities. Leading officials are often delegates of the National People's Congress (NPC) or members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) at the national or subnational levels. They have a unified political identity as pro-Beijing organizations, through making explicit their support for the HKSAR government and the party-state—in short, their patriotism—in their mission statements. Hometown associations in particular are found to be closely connected to the United Front Department of the CCP. For instance, according to the webpage of the Foshan Federation of Organizations, it was established with the “support” of Foshan Municipal Committee United Front Department officials. Its opening ceremony was attended by party secretaries, United Front Department officials, and Liaison Office officials. An investigatory report found that provincial- and municipal-level United Front Department officials were guests of honor at a free banquet in Hong Kong offered to its members, and that one major theme of their speeches was to call for the support of candidates who “love China, love Hong Kong” in an upcoming election.³⁵

With their strong capacity to infiltrate society, much of the political-brokerage work, including building strong ties between brokers and voters, occurs through such loyalist organizations' reaching out to their service clients and members, establishing regularized contact through organizing various kinds of activities, and distributing patronage goods. During elections, leaders of

³³ For details of the New Home Association, see its website, <http://www.nha.org.hk/>; for an investigatory report, see “Xinjiayuan caiyuan bujue hongde hou zhu jianzhi yingqu xinyimin ren xin” [New Home Association: Unlimited financial resources help pro-establishment parties win the hearts of new migrants], p. 137, *U-beat Magazine* (October 30, 2018), http://ubeat.com.cuhk.edu.hk/137_newhome/ (accessed June 5, 2020).

³⁴ For details about the Hong Kong Poverty Alleviation Association Limited, see <https://www.hkpa.com.hk/blog/enlightenment-buffet/> (accessed June 5, 2020).

³⁵ “Tongzhanbu guanyuan lai gang dushi cuipiao” [United Front Department officials came to Hong Kong to monitor the election campaign], *Apple Daily* (September 1, 2016), <https://hk.news.appledaily.com/local/daily/article/20160901/19756583> (accessed June 5, 2020).

united front organizations are commonly seen on the campaign trail.³⁶ Political brokers systematically track down their clients and make certain that they turn out to vote on election day. As mentioned, the grassroots, new migrants, and the elderly are their major clients. These social groups are targeted not only because they are socioeconomically disadvantaged and thus more attracted to patronage goods, but also because they tend to be more conservative in their political outlook.³⁷ The elderly, in particular, are highly vulnerable to manipulation. “Volunteers” (who might actually be paid workers) often pay frequent visits to nursing homes, offering gifts to the elderly and “helping” them register as voters. On voting day, these volunteers ferry the elderly from their nursing homes, some in wheelchairs, to polling stations and have even instructed them for whom to vote by having the candidate’s number written on a palm of their hands.³⁸

The united front organizations are closely associated with pro-Beijing political parties through interlocking personnel, as party members often hold official positions in the organizations. They regularly collaborate in organizing activities, reaching out to citizens, and establishing social connections with them. While pro-Beijing political parties and politicians have their own brokers, many of them being local-level politicians (i.e., District Councillors), their capacity is much augmented by the united front organizations, which are capable of penetrating deeply into society through their sheer quantity, their close-knit relationship, and their abundant manpower and material resources.

Such an operation has several advantages for the party-state. First, united front organizations, from behind their civic association façade and/or by being registered as charitable organizations, are eligible for various kinds of government funding not available to political parties (described more fully ahead). They also exploit gray areas in order to avoid massive amounts of spending being counted as election campaign expenditures. Second, the approach facilitates the establishment of ties with potential voters, as united

³⁶ “Ge da shetuan dalao mabutingti benzhou gangjiuxinjie wuqu zhuxuan” [Leaders of various social organizations busily canvassing nonstop in the five districts of Hong Kong, Kowloon, and New Territories], *Wenweipao* (September 4, 2016), <http://news.wenweipo.com/2016/09/04/IN1609040057.htm> (accessed June 5, 2020).

³⁷ For a discussion of the political attitude of Mainland Chinese migrants, see Stan Hok-Wui Wong, Ngok Ma, and Wai-man Lam, “Immigrants as Voters in Electoral Autocracies: The Case of Mainland Chinese Immigrants in Hong Kong,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 18 (2018): 67–95. The effect of age and educational attainment on political attitude is evident in controversial political issues, such as the Occupy Central movement of 2014. See Public Opinion and Political Development in Hong Kong Survey Results, Centre for Communication and Opinion Survey, Chinese University of Hong Kong (September 21, 2014), http://www.com.cuhk.edu.hk/ccpos/research/TaskForce_PressRelease_English_140920c.pdf (accessed July 14, 2020).

³⁸ “Exposed: Pro-establishment Supporters Bussed Elderly People to Polling Stations and Directed Them to Vote in Hong Kong Elections,” *South China Morning Post* (November 22, 2015), <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/1881785/hong-kong-district-council-elections-elderly-people-bussed> (accessed June 9, 2020).

front organizations are portrayed as nonpartisan, thus lowering the resistance and vigilance of the citizens who are targeted. Third, and most important, the united front organizations constitute a huge political machine that is institutionally separate from the political parties. This is crucial in enabling the Liaison Office to secure its kingmaker role, which, through controlling and monitoring both united front organizations and political parties, has the power to decide how and to which candidate(s) votes will be allocated. In the Legislative Council by-election in November 2018, pro-Beijing candidate Rebecca Hoi-yan Chan, who ran for election for the first time with no formal party affiliation and who was little known to the public, was allegedly fielded by the Liaison Office. The electoral campaign “informally” started off with the Kowloon Federation of Associations appointing Chan as “health ambassador” and running a large billboard advertisement in a very high-priced location to boost her visibility before her formal announcement to join the race.³⁹ She was able to gain the support of all the pro-Beijing political parties, with the Fujian Hometown Association assuming a major campaign role,⁴⁰ and finally won the seat with 106,457 votes. The case is an indication of not only the financial and mobilization capacity of the political machine, but also the power of the Liaison Office to thoroughly dictate both the fielding of a candidate and the deployment of united front organizations for campaign purposes.

Another illustration of the capacity of the political machine is the membership of united front organizations: while the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB), the largest pro-Beijing political party, has 42,596 members (as of August 2019),⁴¹ the largest five united front federations, namely, the New Territories Association of Societies, the Kowloon Federation of Associations, the Hong Kong Island Federation of Associations, the Federation of Guangdong Community Organizations, and the Federation of Trade Unions, have a total of 1,400 affiliated organizations and 1.6 million members. Even discounting overlapping membership and probable inflation of figures, their coverage is still impressively large in a city of 7.8 million people. A quick glance at the number of votes obtained by the pro-Beijing camp in the latest elections will show how the institutional strength of the united front organizations could well cover the voters: in the

³⁹ “Billboard outside Hong Kong Tunnel Sparks Controversy in Run-Up to Legislative Council By-Election,” *South China Morning Post* (August 27, 2018), <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2161420/billboard-outside-hong-kong-tunnel-sparks-controversy-run> (accessed June 9, 2020).

⁴⁰ “Fujian shetuan lianhui yu xiangqin juankuan chang Chen Kaixin” [Fujian Federation of Associations appealed to their natives to donate and support Chan Hoi-yan], *Citizen News* (November 13, 2018), <https://www.hknews.com/article/16389/陳凱欣-福建社團聯會-立法會補選-16389/福建社團聯會籲鄉親捐款撐陳凱欣:每人最多999上報入數紙> (accessed June 9, 2020).

⁴¹ The figure is obtained from the DAB’s official website, <http://www.eng.dab.org.hk/about-dab/basic-info/> (accessed June 9, 2020).

last District Council elections in 2015, the pro-Beijing camp obtained 788,000 votes (54 percent of the popular vote), enough to win 69 percent of the seats. In the 2016 Legislative Council Election, it won a total of 871,000 votes (40.3 percent of the popular vote), enabling it to fill 45.7 percent of the popularly elected seats.⁴²

***From Market Clientelism to Political Clientelism:
Businesspeople as an Important Source of Financing Patronage Goods***

The process of upgrading the political machine occurred at the critical moment of economic integration between Hong Kong and Mainland China. Businesspeople readily became the willing sponsors of united front organizations, frequently holding leading official positions in them. In return, they expected to be rewarded with status and honors from the party-state, routinely through the recommendation of the Liaison Office, including official membership in the Political Consultative Conferences or the People's Congresses at the national or local levels. These appointments are priced according to their importance for doing business in Mainland China. Business operations in China have been characterized as "market clientelism," as entrepreneurs operate their businesses through cultivating clientelist ties with local cadres (as "patrons"), which is necessary due to the underdevelopment of a well-functioning market system.⁴³ Membership in the CPPCC has been recognized as "a mechanism for offering material benefits to the regime's most loyal and trustworthy collaborators."⁴⁴ In a similar vein, participation in the NPC provides "platforms that allow officials and entrepreneurs to interact regularly, thus reinforcing mutual trust and producing iterations of exchange."⁴⁵ In short, the need for businesspeople to establish relationships with state officials prompts them to sponsor united

⁴² According to the Electoral Commission, the total number of votes cast in the 2015 District Council elections was 1.7 million, <https://www.elections.gov.hk/dc2015/eng/turnout.html?1558359785920> (accessed September 4, 2020); the total number of votes cast in the 2016 Legislative Council election was 2.2 million, <https://www.elections.gov.hk/legco2016/eng/turnout.html?1558360538974> (accessed September 4, 2020). Figures on the votes obtained by the pro-Beijing camp are from Suzanne Pepper, "District Council Election Results: A Referendum on Occupy? *The Stand News* (November 27, 2015), <https://www.thestandnews.com/politics/區選結果-佔領行動的一次公投/> (accessed September 4, 2020), and id., "Hong Kong Voters Sent a Message to Beijing, but Will China Soften Its Stance or Crack Down Further?" *Hong Kong Free Press* (September 25, 2016), <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/09/25/hong-kong-voters-sent-a-message-to-beijing-but-will-china-soften-its-stance-or-crack-down-further/> (accessed June 9, 2020).

⁴³ David Wank, "The Institutional Process of Market Clientelism: Guanxi and Private Business in a South China City," *China Quarterly* 147 (1996): 820-838.

⁴⁴ Xiaojun Yan, "Regime Inclusion and the Resilience of Authoritarianism: The Local People's Political Consultative Conference in Post-Mao Chinese Politics," *China Journal* 66 (July 2011): 53-75.

⁴⁵ Xin Sun, Jiangnan Zhu, and Yiping Wu, "Organizational Clientelism: An Analysis of Private Entrepreneurs in Chinese Local Legislatures," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 14, no. 1 (2014): 14.

front organizations in Hong Kong. Another totally different category of funding comes from Chinese business enterprises with business operations in Hong Kong. Understandably, they are even more accessible to the Liaison Office, which can readily summon their material contributions and coordinate their deployment for patronage and election purposes. An example is the New Home Association that has garnered sponsorship from multiple businesses with a Mainland Chinese capital background to offer shoppers' discounts to members. Many united front organizations have office premises owned by Mainland Chinese entrepreneurs; one report even shows that their company cars were drafted to help transport wheelchair-bound elderly to polling stations on voting day.⁴⁶

While there is no official figure showing the total contribution from the business sector, scattered information suggests that the amount is huge. The most prominent example is the political donations received by the DAB (the largest pro-Beijing political party). Official data show that it has been able to raise HKD0.96 billion in the past ten years, estimated to be ten times the amount raised by the Democratic Party (the largest prodemocracy party).⁴⁷ Incidents have been reported of businesspeople readily donating many millions of dollars for the art work or singing performances of senior Liaison Office officials at annual fund-raising dinners.⁴⁸ The New Home Association that targeted new migrants (mentioned above) has raised hundreds of millions of dollars in donations from businesspeople, and has garnered sponsorship from multiple businesses with a Mainland Chinese capital background.⁴⁹

As discussed, the local state of the HKSAR has not been the major source of patronage goods. Since the 1970s, the government has been providing programmatic goods in education, health care, housing, and social welfare to the population. The eradication of syndicated corruption and the establishment of an entrenched rule-based governance system has worked integrally to guarantee procedural equity in the allocation of services to the public. While some of these services are provided by nonprofit organizations under government funding, which means that the state has the discretion to exclude nonprofit organizations it deems unacceptable, by-and-large the criteria of inclusion

⁴⁶ "Car Owned by China Construction Bank Transporting Voters on Election Day—FactWire," *Hong Kong Free Press* (March 13, 2018), <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2018/03/13/car-owned-china-construction-bank-transporting-voters-election-day-factwire/> (accessed July 15, 2020).

⁴⁷ Fong, "In-between Liberal Authoritarianism and Electoral Authoritarianism."

⁴⁸ "HK413.8m Buys 'Successful Future' Calligraphy by Beijing's Top Representative in Hong Kong," *South China Morning Post* (April 16, 2018), <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1483750/hk138m-bid-successful-future-calligraphy-beijings-top-representative> (accessed July 15, 2020).

⁴⁹ "Xinjiayuan caiyuan bujue hongde hou zhu jianzhi yingqu xinyimin ren xin" [New Home Association: Unlimited financial resources help pro-establishment parties win the hearts of new migrants], *U-Best Magazine*.

have not been based on partisan considerations. Additionally, the performance standard required for these services means that the funded organizations must meet certain levels of formalization and professionalization.

However, there is an emerging trend of spoils being offered by the Hong Kong government through new categories of funding. One prominent avenue is through the appropriation to District Councils. Since 2008, an annual fund under the name of “Community Involvement” has been offered to all District Councils. In the financial year 2018 to 2019, this amounted to HKD3.4 billion. With pro-Beijing parties holding the majority of seats in the District Councils, an ample amount of funds was allocated to community- and neighborhood-level united front organizations (often created for cultural and recreational activities) for organizing events and activities. Practically, these are opportunities for distributing material favors (in the form of picnics, tours, banquets, food, gifts, and so forth) to voters. Other types of funding have been created for which many nonprofit organizations can apply, but united front organizations have gained a substantial share. For instance, the Employee Retraining Scheme was vastly expanded in 2007 to fund retraining courses offered by nonprofit organizations to workers or welfare recipients.⁵⁰ Among the largest recipients of the funding are organizations that are known to be part of the United Front.⁵¹ Another example is the promotion of civic education and exchange programs. The Committee on the Promotion of Civic Education was first established in the late 1980s to promote education regarding civic citizenship. While the focus before 1997 was to promote liberal ideas such as human rights and the rule of law, in recent years, emphasis has turned to the endorsement of patriotism, the Basic Law (the mini-constitution of Hong Kong), and Beijing’s “Belt-and-Road” initiatives, all of which are in line with the Central Government’s requirement for Hong Kong people to increase their political loyalty to China. Along similar lines is the generous funding offered by the Youth Development Commission for organizing study tours and exchange programs with Mainland China and “Belt-and-Road” countries. United front organizations are among the major recipients of these funds. Thus, these programs greatly assist them in expanding their resources and, in the process of service delivery, provide opportunities for them to establish strong ties with potential voters.

⁵⁰ The Scheme was supported by the Employees Retraining Fund, created with the injection of the sum of HKD15 billion by the government.

⁵¹ For details, please see “Replies to Initial Written Questions Raised by Finance Committee Members in Examining the Estimates of Expenditure 2014–15,” Legislative Council LWB(L)127, https://www.legco.gov.hk/yr13-14/english/fc/fc/w_q/lwb-l-e.pdf (accessed June 9, 2020). A prominent example is the Hong Kong College of Technology, which was originally an evening school closely tied to the party-state in the 1950s for low-skilled laborers. Other organizations include the nonprofit arms of the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions and the New Territories Association of Societies.

Beyond the Hong Kong businesspeople and government, the party-state is believed to have supplied many of the financial resources for the operation of the pro-Beijing political parties and united front organizations. The highly opaque operation of party-state agencies makes it difficult to estimate the extent of their support. It is largely understood that many of the resources are channeled through the Liaison Office and the United Front Department of the Chinese Communist Party.⁵²

Electoral Breakthrough in the 2019 District Council Elections

The “electoral breakthrough” in the 2019 District Council elections was the outcome of an episodic event. The attempt of the Hong Kong government to push through an amendment to an existing law, allowing it to extradite Hong Kong residents to Mainland China, triggered massive protests of over a million people. The amendment was eventually halted after serious violent confrontations between protestors and the police. The movement, however, escalated into popular insurgency, with protestors demanding that the government investigate police brutality and kickstart democratization. The Hong Kong government, allegedly at the behest of Beijing, refused to yield to any popular demand, and instead adopted a repressive approach toward the disruptive street-level protests, in which youth heavily participated. The outraged public pushed the voter turnout for the 2019 District Council elections to a record high of 71.23 percent (2.94 million voters). According to an opinion poll conducted by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, 87.8 percent of the supporters of the prodemocracy camp and 49.2 percent of the supporters of the pro-Beijing camp regarded the elections as a de facto referendum against the government’s handling of the anti-extradition bill movement.⁵³

The 2019 elections exhibit some characteristics of a critical election: electoral breakthrough was brought about by a united opposition, highly

⁵² One possible indication is the annual spending by Guangdong province for the maintenance of stability. Reports have shown that Guangdong had the highest spending per capita among all the Mainland provinces. As observers have suspected, the high level of spending could be attributed to Hong Kong. See Adrian Zenz, “China’s Domestic Security Spending: An Analysis of Available Data,” *China Brief: A Journal of Analysis and Information* 18, no. 4 (March 2018): 6-11, and Lu Bingquan, “Zhongguo difang weiwai fei zai baoguang” [China’s local spending on stability maintenance is further uncovered], *Mingpao Daily* (March 11, 2020), [https://news.mingpao.com/ins/文摘/article/20200311/s00022/1583854369603/中國地方維穩費再曝光\(文-呂秉權\)](https://news.mingpao.com/ins/文摘/article/20200311/s00022/1583854369603/中國地方維穩費再曝光(文-呂秉權)) (accessed July 16, 2020).

⁵³ Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, “Quexuan mi tu jihau yanjiu baogao” [“DE Way Out” Project Research Report] (December 6, 2019), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cfd1ba6a7117c000170d7aa/t/5dea25e6eeb28742ae621669/1575626232071/sp_rpt_dewayout_2019dec05_CHI_v1.1-merged.pdf (accessed June 8, 2020).

mobilized voters, and strong collaboration with civil society.⁵⁴ The electoral breakthrough did not lead to regime transition, however, as they were only local-level elections and Hong Kong's eighteen District Councils have almost no executive power. The landslide victory mainly served to (1) undermine the legitimacy of the government; (2) offer a platform from which the opposition could represent public opinion and demand political accountability; and (3) make it difficult for the government to mobilize grassroots support through the pro-Beijing parties.

The electoral breakthrough is consistent with the argument that political clientelism in Hong Kong is based on weak dependency and can help pro-Beijing candidates to win an election only when voters are relatively demobilized. Exceptional political mobilization will trump the political machine. Paradoxically, because District Councils are quite powerless and irrelevant to public policymaking, the governance ability of political parties or candidates is not an important factor affecting voters' choice. Consequently, for this type of election (local institutions with little formal power), both demobilization and mobilization can happen quite readily, depending on the political circumstances.

Because Hong Kong's District Councils are non-executive bodies, an electoral breakthrough would not by itself lead to regime change, as the opposition would not gain the power to govern through winning. So far, it has weakened the political machine of the pro-Beijing camp due to its clientelist networks being undermined by the loss of resources at the district and neighborhood levels, including the salary, subsidy, and control over funding to the District Councils that formerly were used for allocating patronage goods to voters. As compensation, the government has offered spoils through other channels, such as appointing defeated pro-Beijing politicians to major executive positions. To lessen the impact of the opposition's electoral victory, it has cut back the funding to District Councils and retracted administrative support to them to make it difficult for the political opposition to achieve performance.

Analysis and Conclusion

In Hong Kong, clientelism entails political brokers actively building effective and instrumental ties with voters, but the level of dependency of the latter on the former is weak. An important question is how patronage goods can be used to secure voters' support when people's basic needs have been fulfilled through social programs. The patronage goods, such as banquets, group tours, and

⁵⁴ Valerie J. Bunce and Sharon L. Wolchik, "Defeating Dictators: Electoral Change and Stability in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes," *World Politics* 62, no. 1 (January 2010): 43-86, and Andreas Ufen, "Opposition in Transition: Pre-electoral Coalitions and the 2018 Electoral Breakthrough in Malaysia," *Democratization* 27, no. 2 (2020): 167-184.

holiday packages, are often more “luxurious” than subsistence-level goods. While it is still persons with low income who are attracted to these perks, the votes are not “cheap” to buy and not all voters are reliable, therefore, resources might be wasted due to leakage (in the sense that some voters will not vote according to the instructions of the broker). But these are not unsurmountable obstacles when the incumbents are cash-rich and can support such resource-intensive operations.

The massive human, financial, and institutional resources are made possible through the party-state’s united front operations in Hong Kong. The huge number of united front organizations, built to facilitate social control and mobilize societal support for the regime, enables deep penetration into various sectors of the community. This machinery has been adapted to function as a political machine for election purposes. The Liaison Office’s control over the distribution of clientelist goods and the political machine ensures that both the political parties and brokers are under its power. In other words, the Liaison Office (or its officials) is the real party boss.

Finance-wise, massive funds have been garnered from the business community to support the Liaison Office’s process. Businesspeople are major sponsors of the clientelist operation, in terms of funding both united front organizations and patronage goods. One fundamental reason for their willingness is the close economic relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China. Under market clientelism, Hong Kong businesspeople are dependent on the patronage of Mainland officials. Their political rent-seeking behavior in Hong Kong (i.e., sponsoring united front organizations in return for political positions and honors) is thus incentivized by the pursuit of economic rents in Mainland China. Part of the financial resource comes from the Hong Kong government, which has been increasing its distribution of the spoils to pro-Beijing elites, who in turn use the goods to gain voters’ support (in the case of District Councils) and/or expand clientelist networks (especially in the case of united front organizations). Since the chief executive is not popularly elected and his or her power comes from the Central Government, this official does not need to distribute patronage goods directly to voters to gain their electoral support. Rather, the executive counts on the support of the pro-Beijing parties in the Legislative Council and the District Councils to govern effectively.

In sum, political clientelism in Hong Kong is unique in that its political machine is adapted from the party-state’s institutional infrastructure of indirect rule over Hong Kong. Unlike other places, patronage goods do not come mainly from the ruling incumbent’s capture of vital state resources. This explains how clientelism can exist alongside a meritocratic civil-service, rule-based, public administrative system. The penetrative capacity of united front organizations compensates for the weak dependency of voters on patronage goods and the limited availability of state resources for political patronage.

It is such characteristics that pose limitations for the further expansion of political clientelism, if not actually determining its vulnerability. The 2019 District Council elections show how an exceptionally high voter turnout in response to a major political crisis can trump the political machine. The electoral breakthrough, however, did not lead to regime change due to the nonexecutive nature of the District Councils. Nevertheless, the opposition and civil-society activists, building on the success of the 2019 elections, continued working together to push for another electoral breakthrough in the Legislative Council election scheduled for September 6, 2020. The forecast was that results of this election would be another major test of the viability of the party-state's political machine. The unity of the political opposition effectively facilitated a successful primary election within the prodemocracy camp in early July, in which over 600,000 voters turned out. The party-state apparently was alarmed that the pro-Beijing camp might suffer another landslide defeat. On July 31, 2020, Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced that the election would be postponed for a year, citing the resurgence of Covid-19 cases as the cause of the deferral. Critics, however, regarded the one-year postponement as excessive and that the pandemic was merely an excuse to halt a critical election. This shows that, where political clientelism ceased to secure incumbent victory, the authoritarian party-state would resort to manipulative measures to prevent the opposition from winning the majority in the legislature and hence keep Hong Kong under its control.