

# **The Impact of POP's Election Polls in Hong Kong**

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### **Abstract**

As an independent researcher, the Public Opinion Programme (POP) at the University of Hong Kong conducted a series of instant polls, tracking polls, and rolling polls for both the Chief Executive election and the Legislative Council election, while exit polls were also conducted on the Legislative Council election day. Most polls were sponsored by the local media, both print and electronic, and many of them were reported as headline stories. This manuscript lists out POP's election polls conducted in 2012 and examines how they were used by the local media, both sponsors and non-sponsors. Their degree of impact on the public is assessed, and discussed on the proper and improper use of them by the media. In addition, we illustrate how POP polls were faced by different challenges from the media and public, as well as give a brief account of the future directions of POP with the goal to continue to implement professional and accountable opinion research to benefit the Hong Kong society.

*Keywords: Hong Kong, HKU POP, election polls, media sponsors, media coverage, exit polls, public participation*

## **The Impact of POP's Election Polls in Hong Kong**

### **I. Introduction**

2012 was an election year for Hong Kong. There were two major elections, namely, the Chief Executive election and the Legislative Council election. The former occurs once every five years, and caught the city's spotlight in early 2012 because two of the three candidates belong to the same pro-establishment camp. The latter takes place once every four years, and became controversial because of some changes in the election system.

As an independent research organization, the Public Opinion Programme (POP) at the University of Hong Kong conducted a series of instant polls, tracking polls, and rolling polls for both the Chief Executive (CE) election and the Legislative Council (LC) election, while exit polls were also conducted on the LC election day. Most of the polls were sponsored by local media, both print and electronic, and many of them were reported as major headline stories.

This paper lists out POP's polls related to the two major elections in 2012 and examines how they were used by the local media, both sponsors and non-sponsors. Their degree of impact on the public is assessed, and the proper and improper use by the media are also discussed. In addition, we illustrate how opinion polls were faced by different challenges from the media and public, as well as give a brief account of the future directions of POP for the benefit of the Hong Kong society.

## **II. Background of POP polls on major elections in 2012**

### ***CE Election in 2012***

The Hong Kong Chief Executive election of 2012 was an election by a 1,200-member Election Committee held on 25 March 2012. The winner was Leung Chun-ying, former convener of the Executive Council, who defeated former Chief Secretary for Administration Henry Tang and Democratic Party legislator Albert Ho.

Although it was widely expected that a pro-establishment candidate would win in a landslide, a number of controversies erupted involving the two pro-establishment candidates Henry Tang and Leung Chun-ying even before the opening of nominations. The campaigns were marked by scandals, dirty tactics and smears. Both Tang and Leung were attacked for their integrity and credibility. As a result their popularities experienced great fluctuations and finally plummeted by end of the election. For example, Leung's support rate dropped from over 50% to around 30% while Tang's even dropped to less 20%. Since the CE election was not by universal suffrage, over 90% of the Hong Kong population was just bystanders with no say. All they could do was to pay attention to opinion polls, especially those conducted by independent academic polling institutes.

### ***POP's CE election polls***

As part of its self-defined duty to the community as an independent research organization, POP conducted a variety of opinion polls before and after the 2012 CE election. All of them were funded by the media (including both print and electronic) and other sponsors. The sampling framework was general citizens of age 18 or above, regardless of being registered voters or not. As a general principle of POP, all survey results would be placed in the public domain eventually, but project sponsors had the priority to report the

findings first. Since the support rate of the three CE candidates was such a hot topic during the election, many local media funded the POP polls, including tracking, rolling and ad hoc polls, summarized as follows:

**[Table 1 POP polls for CE Election in 2012]**

Type	Sponsors	Questions covered	How frequent	Number of polls
Tracking polls	3 print (Appledaily, Mingpao, SCMP) and 1 electronic media (Now TV)	Hypothetical voting among various potential CE candidates	Once per week before the nomination period ended	More than 20
Rolling polls	1 electronic (Cable TV)	Hypothetical voting among the 3 candidates; expected outcome of CE election	Everyday (once the CE candidates became official)	25
Ad hoc polls	2 (Now TV and Appledaily)	Impression on scandals of the candidates; support of the candidates' replacement	During the campaign	3
Follow-up polls	None	Support of CE-elect; confidence in future	A few days after the election	1
Total				> 50

### ***Impact of CE election polls***

As seen from Table 1, POP altogether conducted more than 50 polls regarding the CE election in 2012, with about 30 public releases. Among the more than 250 news reports from both print and electronic media, about 40 of them were reported as featured stories with coverage of survey results, methods and commentaries. Besides, there were 35 feature stories reported as headline stories (printed on pages A1 to A3) by newspaper sponsors MingPao and Appledaily on POP's tracking polls. This reveals that the media (mostly newspapers) tended to magnify the impact of opinion polls. This was particularly so before the nomination period of CE election, when there were many "potential CE candidates". After that, the election campaign was overwhelmed by negative news such as the scandals and misconducts of

candidates CY Leung and Henry Tang, especially around television debates slightly before the election day of 25 March 2012.

Apart from the purely factual reports, many media also included commentaries on the survey findings, and a few negative comments of POP. However, as an independent polling institute, POP seldom responded to these attacks. At times, some of these “unfriendly” media would selectively use POP’s findings when they became favorable to them. Generally speaking, the news reports on POP polls were mostly factual and the results properly cited.

When speaking of how the media and public closely monitored the credibility of opinion polls, one must take note of the “[Zhao Xinshu polling incident of the Hong Kong Baptist University](#)” (HKBU). On 14 January 2012, the School of Communication of HKBU released an unfinished report of “Survey on CE Candidates”. The result showed that the popularity of Leung Chun-ying and Henry Tang was just 6 percentage points apart, meaning that Tang might have a chance to overtake Leung in terms of popularity. Three days later, the completed survey result showed the discrepancy was actually 9 percentage points, and Leung showed better performance in various parts. It was later discovered that the election campaign office of Tang had earlier enquired the HKBU research officers for the result, and was thus suspected to have affected the autonomy of the researcher. Prof. Zhao Xinshu, Dean of the School of Communication, admitted that the early release of unfinished survey result was to “break the news” and to avoid the head-to-head clash with stories of Taiwan presidential election. The incident had a huge impact on the political and academic sectors, and received much criticism on the violation of academic professionalism. Although there were no evidence of interference on academic freedom in the end, Zhao took full responsibility for the mistake and resigned from the post.

***LC Election 2012***

The 2012 Hong Kong Legislative Council Election was held on 9 September 2012 for the fifth Legislative Council (LC) since the handover of Hong Kong in 1997. The election brought some changes: there were 70 seats in LC, ten more than before, with 35 members elected in geographical constituencies (GCs) through direct elections, and 35 members in functional constituencies. While the electoral methods in the 30 “traditional” FC seats remained unchanged, the five new seats formed a new functional constituency called the “District Council (Second)”, whereby the candidates were nominated by popularly elected District Councillors, and elected by voters who did not belong to any other FCs. This created the largest constituency with more than 3.2 million eligible electors. The vote counting system used was the same as that in the GCs: the party-list proportional representation with the largest remainder method and Hare quota. With all these latest changes and record-high number of candidates, this year’s LC election became unpredictable and much attention was put on scientific opinion polls before the election.

***POP’s LC election polls***

In response to this general election occurring once every four years, POP conducted a variety of opinion polls before and after the LC election. Like the CE election, most of the LC election polls were funded by the media (both print and electronic), summarized as follow:

**[Table 2 POP polls for LC Election in 2012]**

Type	Sponsors	Questions covered	How frequent	Number of polls
Tracking polls	None	Awareness of LC election upcoming; tendency to vote, etc.	Every two weeks	2
Rolling polls	2 electronic (Cable TV and Now TV)	Tendency to vote; choice of LC candidates in their respective geographical constituencies, etc.	Every day	38

Ad hoc polls	1 print (Mingpao)	Tendency to vote in DC (second) functional constituency; and why not	Once	1
Exit polls	4 electronic media (Cable TV, Now TV, ATV and RTHK)	Choice of LC candidates in both geographical and District Council (second) function constituencies; reasons for such choices	On election day only	1
Total				42

### *Impact of LC election polls*

Table 2 shows that POP conducted about 40 polls regarding the LC election in 2012. There were total 7 releases of survey results by POP. Among the over 230 news reports from both print and electronic media, 33 of them were featured headline stories printed on the first three pages (pages A1 to A3). As the election was fast approaching in August, two electronic media Cable TV and Now TV funded POP for its rolling surveys. It is worth to note that both media used different angles to report the figures: Cable TV cited the popularity of respective candidates based on the full base, i.e. figures including “undecided” and “don’t know”; Now TV chose to drop these invalid votes and report the actual vote shares of smaller samples. It was interesting to see that the discrepancy confused the public and the local media for a while, but very few doubted the credibility of POP polls.

Undoubtedly, what really caught people’s attention was the use of opinion polls for election engineering by a particular political camp. Even before the election day, there were arguments that POP polls, as single source of the LC candidates’ support, would encourage strategic voting. Moreover, POP made to the spotlight when it announced that it would continue to conduct exit polls on the election day. It became controversial because POP previously had hesitation to do so in view of the improper use of exit poll result for election engineering by some political parties, but it decided to proceed anyway. This issue will be discussed in the next section.

### **III. Challenges from media and local community**

As pioneers of introducing different types of opinion polls to Hong Kong, POP faced many challenges, especially in the eventful year of 2012. Two examples were: (1) the lack of trust in exit polls, and (2) the attack on e-platform of the 3.23 Civil Referendum project.

#### ***Exit polls in Hong Kong***

POP has been conducting exit polls for over 20 years, not only for early call of election results, otherwise its questionnaire would not have been more than 20 questions. Exit polls not only allow the media to correctly gauge public sentiment and voting behavior, for general public to know more about the election results, but also to provide the academics and election experts with valuable research materials in constructing a scientific base of social development.

One major issue in the development of exit polls in Hong Kong is the partisan use of some exit polls for election campaigning and engineering. Due to the partisan nature of some exit polls, some political groups came to call for a boycott on all exit polls in 2008. The controversy of exit polls had intensified since then. Some candidates even boycotted or even interfered the operation of exit poll. When examining the reasons behind, one could conclude that vested interests had overridden professional development. Those who had benefited would not change, and those who upheld integrity and honesty became victims. As a result, the controversy got larger and larger.

In response to these immoral and undesirable development, POP has emphasized over the years on three principles in managing both exit polls and general opinion polls: 1) the

fewer legal restrictions the better; 2) the more publicly available information the better; 3) the earlier the establishment of professional codes the better.

***POP's actions in 2012 LC election exit poll:***

On the LC Election Day of 9 September 2012, POP selected over 100 polling stations and dispatched around 200 interviewers that day to conduct exit polls collecting voters' choice of candidates as well as their opinion towards the LC election. POP emphasized that exit polling was strictly neutral and would never give any part of the information to any candidates or related organizations both directly and indirectly or to help them with their electioneering.

POP also called for citizens' help in defending academic integrity and building a civilized society together by supporting professional and independent exit polls. POP interviewers put on a grey vest printed with "HKUPOP" and wore a working permit issued by the Registration and Electoral Office as clear identification. In order to enhance the credibility of exit polls, POP adopted the following measures in 2012:

- 1) Informed all surveyed voters explicitly that the information gathered will **not be used for electioneering**.
- 2) Strengthened the operation by requiring POP interviewers to **keep a distance** from interviewers from other research organizations to **prevent information leakage**.
- 3) Required all sponsoring institutions to sign a pledge, stating when they need the findings and for what purpose.
- 4) Provided the surveyed voters with more options, like conducting the interview far away from the polling station and to process their data only after the end of the voting period.
- 5) Remained conservative in calling the winners.

In the long run, the healthy development of exit polls in Hong Kong relies on the attitude of all stakeholders including academics, politicians, government officials and polling institutes, on whether they are prepared to contribute to the development of exit polls from a broad international perspective.

### ***3.23 Civil Referendum (PopVote)***

To echo with the 2012 CE election held on 25 March, POP organized a mock civil referendum entitled “3.23 Civil Referendum” (PopVote) on 23 March to let the general public express their support towards different candidates. This was not a scientific opinion poll, but an opinion gathering exercise aimed at constructing a civil society via civil participation.

To facilitate a large-scale election for public, public donations of almost a million Hong Kong dollars (around 110 thousands US dollars) were received from citizens. With unprecedented help from civil organizations, voting platforms were constructed including 15 physical polling stations, an online platform for Internet voting, plus a smartphone application for voting, were open to use from the first hour of 23 March 2012. It was intended for participation by 50,000 citizens.

Soon after the online voting began to operate, the servers at [popvote.hk](http://popvote.hk) registered abnormal traffic. As only IP numbers from abroad were allowed access, POP believed it was "systematic attack" from within Hong Kong, aiming to prevent people from voting. Voting at physical polling stations was downgraded to paper mode, as citizens were flocked to cast their votes at the physical polling stations. Politicians blamed the attacks on "powerful forces who want to prevent people from expressing their views". Surprisingly, the online attack had

an opposite effect – it triggered enormous public support. On 23 March, all physical stations were jammed with citizens till the stations closed at 22:00. In response to the massive public support, POP decided to extend the voting period for one extra day, with 17 polling stations across the territory opening again on 24 March 2012 until 16:00.

In the end, 222,990 votes were collected from the public: 85,154 from the Internet, 71,831 from smart phones users and 66,005 physical voters over the two-day polling period. The poll results were as follows:

**[Table 3 Voting Result of 3.23 Civil Referendum]**

Date conducted	Abstention	Leung Chun-ying	Henry Tang	Albert Ho
23-24 March 2012	121,580 (54.6%)	39,614 (17.8%)	36,226 (16.3%)	25,452 (11.4%)

With more than half of the votes being “abstention” (or blank votes), the voting result clearly indicated people’s dissatisfaction with the real CE election. The event and voting result were widely covered by local and global media, with many of them (over 25%) praised POP for giving citizens a say in the CE election. Overall, the activity demonstrated to the world how civilized Hong Kong people could be. It was another record after of massive civil participation after the July 1 Rally of 2003, whereby about 500,000 people took to the street to express their dissatisfaction.

#### IV. Moving Forward

Looking ahead, POP has set five directions of development as follows:

1. **Strengthen the development of regular scientific opinion polls:** POP has conducted tens of thousands of surveys since its establishment in 1991. It now aims at setting even higher standards in conducting mainstream telephone surveys.
2. **Establish deliberative opinion research based on quality opinions:** As a mature international city, Hong Kong has lots of potential in developing this type of quality scientific research as another way to map public opinions. In recent years, POP has actively conducted small-scale deliberative forums and workshops with the local media.
3. **Promote public engagement:** Due to the lack of referendum, POP sees the need of organizing events to increase public engagement. The 3.23 Civil Referendum mentioned is one such example.
4. **Establish online platform:** Since 2010, POP has launched an online platform called **POPCON** which stands for “Public Opinion Platform for Consultation”. It serves as an interactive platform for internet users to express their opinions on various social issues and participate in our quizzes and guessing games. By earning certain amount of credits (called “PopCoins”), users can win prizes in each round of game cycle.
5. **Connect to the world:** POP aspires to establishing its influence beyond Hong Kong, especially for neighboring Chinese societies like Mainland China, Macau and Taiwan.

Recently we have extended our networks to Asia by helping to form the Asian Network on Public Opinion Research (ANPOR).

On the last point, POP was actually the organizer of the 65th WAPOR Annual Conference, which was held at the University of Hong Kong from 14-16 June 2012. This was the first time for WAPOR to hold this Annual Conference outside Europe and North America since its establishment 65 years ago. Over 220 delegates attended this event in Hong Kong, and over 130 papers were presented. The theme of the conference was "The New World of Public Opinion Research". Highlights included the release of the fifth survey on "Freedom to Publish Opinion Polls Results", discussions on the "Jasmine Revolution", "Ethics for Exit Polls", "E-democracy" and so on, by top scholars.

## **V. Conclusion**

Hong Kong still has a long way to go in achieving democracy; despite Hong Kong people's effort for many decades. Before that day comes, opinion polls on election and social issues will continue to play a vital role for Hong Kong people and POP will continue to provide society with scientific data and professional expertise. POP will continue to uphold its integrity and quality in conducting mainstream election polls, explore innovative and more-engaging polling methods, upgrade local polling standards and ensure the proper use of poll results by the media. There are bound to be obstacles, but POP will see them as necessary challenges, and overcome them with pride and diligence. The story of POP is not just a story of a research programme, it is the story of a society in the making.

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