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Political contestation and democratic identity formation: empirical evidence from Hong Kong and Taiwan

Drawing on data from the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) and employing latent path analysis, this study explores the complex relationship between political contestation and democratic identity formation in Hong Kong and Taiwan. It measures geopolitical antagonism through negative public perceptions of China's influence and examines how these perceptions affect support for democracy via political action, trust in institutions, and changing social values. The findings reveal divergent outcomes: in Taiwan, external threats have strengthened civic identity and democratic resilience, while in Hong Kong, the internalization of authority loss under Chinese control has eroded institutional trust and autonomy. Despite these differences, rejection of authoritarianism remains high in both contexts with Chinese antagonism playing a pivotal role in democratic identity formation. By highlighting this dynamic, the article advances broader debates on democratization in contested polities and the conditions under which they can sustain legitimacy and effective institutional functioning.

Introduction

Political contestation arising from asymmetric power relations between a sub-state entity and a parent state or central authority not only affects a territory's diplomatic standing and international recognition, but also deeply influences the political consciousness and democratic aspirations of its people.¹ This article addresses the cases of Hong Kong and Taiwan, two polities that exist in the shadow of contested claims by the People's Republic of China (PRC). While both differ significantly in their historical trajectories and legal statuses, their experiences illustrate how political contestation can serve as both a constraint and a catalyst for democratic mobilisation, political identity formation, and self-determination.

Hong Kong's experience with political contestation is rooted in its colonial history and the 'one country, two systems' arrangement formalized in the Sino-British Joint Declaration and implemented upon its handover to China in 1997.² Despite the legal transfer of sovereignty, the people of Hong Kong have increasingly questioned the legitimacy of Chinese rule. The gradual erosion of civil liberties, suppression of dissent, and failure to implement universal suffrage—as promised in Hong Kong's Basic Law—have fuelled a powerful democratic movement. The 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019 anti-extradition protests reflect a growing disillusionment with Beijing's encroachment and a corresponding intensification of democratic desires among Hong Kong's population.³

The paradox of Hong Kong's situation lies in its proclaimed political autonomy coupled with the absence of sovereign self-determination. This creates a political identity crisis: the people of Hong Kong are culturally and politically distinct from the identity propagated by the PRC government, yet they lack the legal or institutional mechanisms to fully assert that difference. This disjuncture has deepened political polarisation and given rise to a *localist* discourse that increasingly views democracy not merely as a political reform but as a shield against assimilation.⁴ Scholars like Veg and Ortmann argue that Hong Kong's democratic aspirations must be understood within the context of resistance

to sovereign domination. In this reading, the pursuit of democracy is not just about procedural governance, but it is about safeguarding a distinct identity and way of life.⁵ As the PRC government has tightened its grip—especially with the imposition of the National Security Law in 2020—the political space for dissent has dramatically shrunk, yet the symbolic power of democracy as a form of defiance remains potent.⁶

Taiwan represents a very different case of political contestation—one where the absence of international recognition has coincided with the successful consolidation of democratic governance. Since the end of martial law in 1987, Taiwan has undergone a dramatic transformation from a one-party authoritarian regime under the Kuomintang (KMT) to one of Asia’s most vibrant democracies.⁷

As in the case of Hong Kong, the connection between political contestation and democratic desires in Taiwan can be understood through the lens of *existential politics*. As Rowen and Rowen argue, Taiwan’s democracy is not only about institutional procedures but about survival and identity. The ever-present threat of Chinese military aggression and diplomatic isolation creates a sense of urgency that permeates political discourse. Under these conditions, democracy becomes both a mechanism of resistance and a symbol of autonomy.⁸ Rawnsley notes that Taiwan’s democratic development has served as a form of soft power—a way to distinguish itself from authoritarian China and gain normative legitimacy on the world stage.⁹ Democratization has played a pivotal role in the island republic’s broader nation-building project, reinforcing the narrative that Taiwan is a separate polity with its own political destiny.¹⁰

The dynamics in Hong Kong and Taiwan demonstrate that political contestation can sharpen democratic desires, especially when the sovereign power is perceived as authoritarian and illegitimate. Even without formal independence or international recognition, popular democratic demands can become more salient and urgent when meaningful political representation is blocked.¹¹ The suppression of democratic aspirations has thus turned PRC governance itself into a site of political struggle, wherein the demand for autonomy becomes indistinguishable from the demand for democracy.¹²

However, rather than being exceptional cases in international politics, Taiwan and Hong Kong should be seen in the broader context of a substantial paradigmatic shift in the politics of recognition that evolved in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia during the Balkan crisis of the 1990s.¹³ More specifically, the international recognition of Kosovo, though controversial and incomplete, marked a significant moment in which democratic governance became a central concern in the recognition process.¹⁴ Unlike previous secessionist movements that relied heavily on appeals to historical grievances, ethnic victimhood, or violations of human rights, Kosovo’s leaders increasingly emphasized democratic credentials as a route to legitimacy.¹⁵ The emphasis on democratic norms inspired other unrecognized or partially recognized entities—such as Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Somaliland—to adopt similar strategies.¹⁶ These regions began to pursue what has been termed *earned sovereignty*—a normative framework in which sovereignty is not seen as an inherent right but as something to be achieved by demonstrating effective democratic governance and adherence to international norms.¹⁷

Earned sovereignty operates as a form of *contingent democratization*—a process shaped not by idealistic commitments to liberal values but by a convergence of pragmatic, strategic, and identity-based factors. More specifically, the need for international

recognition motivates elite actors to adopt democratic rhetoric and institutions.¹⁸ At the same time, the siege mentality generated by external threats fosters popular identification with the state. Together, these forces can create a feedback loop in which both internal legitimacy and external validation depend on the successful implementation of democratic practices.¹⁹ Contested entities are thus compelled to navigate a delicate balance between internal consolidation and external legitimation. Some may succeed in building robust, quasi-democratic systems that offer real political competition and civil liberties. Others may stagnate or regress into authoritarianism cloaked in democratic rhetoric.²⁰

Empirical examples illustrate both possibilities. Somaliland, for instance, has frequently been cited as a case of successful bottom-up democratization despite its lack of international recognition. Through relatively free elections, power transitions, and the integration of traditional and modern institutions, Somaliland has built a governance system that rivals or surpasses that of many recognized states in the region.²¹ In contrast, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have struggled with democratic backsliding, elite dominance, and heavy dependence on patron states like Russia, limiting their political autonomy and democratic development.²² These contrasting trajectories underscore the fact that democratization in contested entities is neither inevitable nor uniform. It depends on a range of contextual factors, including internal leadership, access to resources, the role of civil society, and the nature of external support or interference.

Research on democratic development in contested entities is inherently more intricate than in cases of recognized statehood. This complexity stems from the multifaceted nature of asymmetric power relations between a sub-state entity and a parent state or central authority, which demand a broader and more nuanced range of data to capture the full spectrum of variables influencing democratization. Such comprehensive data is, however, often scarce in newly emerging or partially recognized polities, limiting empirical insight. Consequently, much of the existing scholarship focuses on macro-level factors—such as institutions, electoral systems, and governance structures—while largely overlooking micro-level dynamics, including individual political behaviour, attitudes, and identity formation.

This oversight is significant. Without a clear understanding of how individuals perceive and respond to the conditions of political contestation, it becomes difficult to accurately assess its impact on democratic development. The presence of democratic institutions alone does not reveal whether democratic norms are internalized by the population or whether popular support for democracy is driven, in part, by external threats or perceived existential insecurity. In particular, the role of external antagonism—such as that posed by an occupying power or a parent state—in shaping democratic aspirations and fostering a civic commitment to democratic values remains underexplored. Thus, a critical gap persists in the current literature: the lack of robust, quantitative evidence linking political contestation to democratic development at the societal level. Without this empirical foundation, theoretical claims about its transformative effects on democracy remain largely speculative.

In this context, Taiwan and Hong Kong offer compelling case studies for examining these effects. Unlike many political entities facing political contestation with a parent state or central authority, Taiwan and Hong Kong have comprehensive capabilities to implement socio-economic policies and are economically well integrated into the global supply chain and thus less susceptible to sudden supply shocks. This stable setting allows for the

application of a much more parsimonious research approach—of a constraint model of democracy-through-political-contestation. More importantly, standardized survey data are available for both societies to quantify and validate the theoretical underpinnings of the model.

Using data of the latest waves of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) for Hong Kong and Taiwan, the aim of the study is to examine the relationship between political contestation and democratic identity formation through the application of latent path analysis. More specifically, the study addresses the following set of questions: First, to what extent does political contestation directly impact popular support for democracy? Second, what mediating factors exist? Third, how strongly are they affected by the contestation? Fourth, how much do the mediating factors contribute to the overall effect on democratic identity formation? Fifth, what are the key differences between Taiwan and Hong Kong in terms of total and mediated effects and how do we account for them?

The article proceeds as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework and hypotheses used in the study. The measures used in the empirical analysis are outlined in the second section. The results of the latent path analysis are presented in the third section, followed by a discussion that situates the results within the broader literature on democratic identity formation and political contestation. The study concludes with implications for democratic resilience and offers suggestions for further research. Throughout this article, “China” denotes the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) unless otherwise noted.

Figure 1 goes here

Conceptualizing the democracy-through-political-contestation model

Figure 1 presents a path model hypothesizing how political contestation, understood as geopolitical antagonism, affects democratic development through a series of mediating variables. This model builds on studies dealing with *earned sovereignty*,²³ statehood and recognition,²⁴ and democratization theory.²⁵ At the foundation of the model lies the concept of political contestation between a sub-state entity and a parent state or central authority. Such contestation emerges from asymmetric power relations and may be driven by demands for greater autonomy or even independence, generating significant tensions between local and central authorities. Prominent examples include Catalonia and Hong Kong.²⁶ In other cases, such as Somaliland and Taiwan, political entities exercise a high degree of domestic sovereignty: they possess the capacity to govern and maintain effective control within their territories but lack full international legal recognition.²⁷ As a result, their de facto statehood remains contested.

In both cases, political contestation exerts significant influence on domestic political institutions and citizen behaviour. They may undermine institutional legitimacy if citizens perceive the state as incapable of securing autonomy or delivering on democratic promises.²⁸ On the other hand, they may as well mobilize democratic fervour as a form of resistance or identity assertion. That is, the precarious geopolitical condition may act as a

catalyst for democratization.²⁹ These dynamics can be conceptualized as a sequential process:

Structural constraints: Political contestation engenders isolation, insecurity, and economic deprivation, restricting access to trade, investment, and development financing.³⁰ Dependence on patron states or central authorities remains precarious.³¹ These dynamics generate an international “legitimacy deficit,” casting de facto statehood or autonomy as provisional and vulnerable to coercion or reintegration.³²

Psychological responses: Structural marginalization induces insecurity, humiliation, and antagonism toward parent states or central authorities. Collective trauma rooted in past repression normalizes existential threat, while exclusion intensifies humiliation and grievance.³³

Identity consolidation: Exclusion sharpens in-group boundaries, with narratives of victimhood and collective memory embedding national identification.³⁴

Democracy as strategy: Antagonism fosters democratic aspirations, where democracy functions both as symbolic opposition to authoritarian coercion and as a strategic claim to sovereignty or autonomy, gradually institutionalizing pluralist norms.³⁵

Antagonism as driver

Antagonism toward the parent state or central authority is central: it is the *cognitive translation* of political contestation into public opinion. It should be understood as a perceptual mechanism rather than identical to actual legal or political status. Antagonism produces urgency and prompts reinterpretation of values, identities, and strategies. Through it, democracy becomes a rational aspiration, enhancing participation, acceptance of democratic norms, and trust in institutions.³⁶ How does this process unfold?

According to democratization theory, political trust shapes the form of political engagement, while liberal values provide the normative foundation for why individuals participate in politics.³⁷ Together, political trust, liberal values, and participation interact to determine whether support for democracy is resilient or vulnerable to erosion.³⁸

In our model, antagonism operates through these three pathways (Figure 1). First, external threats heighten democratic values, as citizens emphasize autonomy, freedom, and self-determination.³⁹ Second, it motivates protest and mobilization,⁴⁰ with activism deepening participatory orientations.⁴¹ Third, it shapes political trust: imposed institutions breed distrust, while institutions defending autonomy reinforce legitimacy.⁴²

These pathways explain why antagonism toward the parent state or central authority can strengthen democratic support both directly and indirectly through values, action, and trust. They also allow us to evaluate not only whether antagonism strengthens democracy, but also how it does so in distinct institutional and cultural contexts. Accordingly, we derive several hypotheses regarding the cases of Taiwan and Hong Kong in the following section of this article.

Chinese antagonism

In contexts where sovereignty or autonomy is disputed, citizens' sense of antagonism is the mechanism through which political contestation becomes politically meaningful. That is, support for democracy depends less on legal arrangements than on how people *experience* contestation. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, antagonism toward the PRC government reflects perceptions of the Chinese central authority as threatening or obstructive to their socio-political lives, translating political contestation into public support for democracy.⁴³ Hence, it is hypothesized that:

H1: Chinese antagonism (CA) has a significant positive effect on popular support for democracy (DS).

H2A: Chinese antagonism (CA) has a significant positive effect on popular trust in Taiwan's current democratic institutions (PT).

H2B: Chinese antagonism (CA) has a significant negative effect on popular trust in Hong Kong's current illiberal institutions (PT).

H3: Chinese antagonism (CA) has a significant positive effect on political action (PA).

H4: Chinese antagonism (CA) has a significant positive effect on emancipative values (EV).

Political Trust

Trust serves as a fundamental component of political culture and civic life, influencing attitudes toward governance structures, participation in democratic processes, and the perceived legitimacy of democratic regimes.⁴⁴ However, the relationship between trust and support for democracy is not unidirectional or universally positive. In authoritarian or hybrid regimes, for instance, high trust in incumbent institutions may inhibit democratic change by legitimizing undemocratic rule, while distrust may serve as a catalyst for reformist mobilisation.⁴⁵ As such, political trust has different trajectories in the cases of Taiwan and Hong Kong. Taiwan's current political system is democratic. Popular trust in institutions should thus positively influence popular support for democracy. Hence, it is hypothesized that:

H5A: Political trust (PT) has a significant positive effect on democratic support (DS) in Taiwan.

As for Hong Kong, political trust most likely negatively affects democratic support, since those citizens exhibiting high levels of trust in Hong Kong's PRC-led institutions are likely to support the current illiberal system. Hence, it is hypothesized that:

H5B: Political trust (PT) has a significant negative effect on democratic support (DS) in Hong Kong.

Political participation

Political participation is often assumed to be inherently democratic; participatory theory posits that active civic engagement fosters democratic norms, political efficacy, and pluralism.⁴⁶ Empirically, scholars have found that participation can enhance feelings of political competence, foster deliberation, and promote democratic values.⁴⁷ However, participation does not always translate into democratic consolidation. Participation may be driven by non-democratic motivations or channelled through undemocratic institutions, resulting in ambivalent or even negative effects on support for democracy.⁴⁸

Citizenship norms provide an alternative, complementary lens through which to assess the effects of political participation on democratic development. Classical conceptions of citizenship emphasized dutifulness, including voting, obeying the law, and respecting authority—traits that align with what Dalton describes as *duty-based citizenship*. However, contemporary democratic theorists and empirical researchers have noted the rise of *engaged citizenship*, marked by autonomous political activity, critical engagement with institutions, and support for participatory forms of governance.⁴⁹ Empirical studies have shown that *engaged citizenship* with its more assertive forms of political participation, such as taking part in demonstrations or signing petitions, is instrumental in bringing about and sustaining democratic development.⁵⁰ Hence, it is hypothesized that:

H6: Political action (PA) has a significant positive effect on democratic support (DS).

Democratic Values

A pivotal factor shaping individual democratic preferences is modernisation and its transformational effect on social values. Inglehart and Welzel distinguish between modernized social values (*emancipative values*) and pre-modern values (*survival values*). The former type prioritizes individual autonomy, equality, freedom of expression, and participatory engagement in society, while the latter emphasizes economic and physical security, conformity, and authority.⁵¹ Modernization, through increased education, economic development, and social mobility, tends to shift societies from survival values toward emancipative values. As people's existential conditions improve, they become more likely to support self-expression and political participation. This cultural shift enhances the demand for democratic institutions and strengthens civic engagement. Cross-national survey studies have shown that societies with high levels of *emancipative values* tend to report stronger preferences for democratic governance and greater resistance to authoritarian alternatives.⁵²

Therefore, *emancipative values* play a critical role in fostering and sustaining democratic development, while survival values are more compatible with authoritarian governance. As such, it is hypothesized that:

H7: Emancipative values (EV) a significant positive effect on democratic support (DS).

Mediating effects on democratic support (DS)

Apart from the direct effect of Chinese antagonism (CA) on democratic support (DS), there are also indirect effects (partial mediation) through the latent constructs *political trust* (PT), *emancipative values* (EV) and *political action* (PA). As discussed in the previous section of the article, antagonism heightens *emancipative values*, mobilizes *political action*, and reshapes *political trust*, each of which serves as a pathway linking external threat perceptions to democratic commitment (Figure 1).

Hence it is, it is hypothesized that:

H8: Emancipative values (EV) mediate the effect of Chinese antagonism (CA) on democratic support (DS).

H9: Political action (PA) mediates the effect of Chinese antagonism (CA) on democratic support (DS).

H10: Political trust (PT) mediates the effect of Chinese antagonism (CA) on democratic support (DS).

In this study, support for democracy (DS) is understood as the *rejection* of any non-democratic political system, such as one-party state or military government.

Methodology

Data and measurement

Data of Wave 5 (Hong Kong) and Wave 6 (Taiwan) of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) were applied in the study. Results were weighted to represent the demographic characteristics of the national population. In the latent path analysis, five measures were used (Table 1):

Chinese Antagonism (CA): The scale probes into the respondent's perception of China's influence across three spatial levels: global, regional (Asia), and domestic. The first item (CA1) was coded on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from "much more good than harm" to "much more harm than good". As for CA2, Wave 5 of the ABS (Hong Kong) originally uses a scale of 1 (highly negative) to 10 (highly positive) for measuring popular perceptions of Chinese influence on current world affairs. The scale was inverted and recoded by collapsing categories (1=highly positive; 5=highly negative). Wave 6 (Taiwan) uses a scale from 1 (very positive) to 6 (very negative) for CA2. The third item (CA3) uses a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from very positive to very negative. In sum, both societies exhibit Chinese antagonism, but the form and focus differ. Hongkongers view China's global impact as slightly positive yet problematic locally, while Taiwanese perceive China's global and local influence as overwhelmingly negative (Table 1).

Support for Democracy (SD): The second measure used in the latent path analysis consists of four items identifying the respondents' rejection of authoritarian alternatives. Each item was coded on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. As shown in Table 1, the relatively high means on all items reveal that the people

of Hong Kong and Taiwan are overwhelming committed to democratic ideals, strongly opposing authoritarian alternatives.

Political Trust (PT): The third measure consists of four items taken from the ABS battery on regime preference. Responses were coded on 4-point Likert scales, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The relatively low means indicate a general scepticism toward political institutions in both Hong Kong and Taiwan. However, there is widespread support for the current form of government (PT3) in Taiwan (mean=2.83), whereas in Hong Kong (mean=2.45) respondents are considerably more supportive of alternative political systems.

Political Activism (PA): The measure probes into the actual and intended participation in nonconventional forms of political participation, such as demonstrations. Responses were coded on a 5-point scale and scored from ‘more than three times’ to ‘never done and will never do’. Inverted scales were used in the analysis. Respondents in Hong Kong reported much higher levels of political activism across all items than activists in Taiwan.

Emancipative Values (EV): The scale comprises twelve items from the ABS measuring adherence to traditional social values on 4-point Likert scales (1=strongly agree; 4=strongly disagree). The means hover around 2.9, suggesting that respondents generally disagree with traditional family hierarchies, indicating the prevalence of modern value orientations that form a cultural foundation for democratic governance and individual rights.

Table 1

Analysis

A latent variable path analysis was conducted using structural equation modelling (SEM). Each variable in the model is conceptualized as a latent construct measured by multiple indicators. Indicator variables are observed (manifest) variables. Structural equation modelling (SEM) incorporates latent variables to account for measurement errors on manifest variables. It allows for simultaneous estimation of measurement models and structural models, i.e. the structural paths between latent constructs. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) establishes convergent and discriminant validity in the proposed model, whereas path analysis investigates the predictive relationships among latent constructs.⁵³ Convergent validity refers to the extent to which multiple indicators of the same construct are highly correlated, demonstrating that they consistently measure the intended concept. Discriminant validity ensures that constructs that are theoretically distinct are not excessively correlated, confirming their empirical uniqueness.⁵⁴

Weighted least square mean and variance adjusted (WLSMV) estimation was used in the analysis. WLSMV does not assume normal distribution for the underlying latent variables and provides more accurate estimates of factor loadings compared to conventional maximum likelihood (ML) approaches. It is particularly beneficial when

dealing with ordinal data.⁵⁵ Multiple imputation (MI) was administered to account for missing data.⁵⁶

Table 2

Results

Table 2 shows the estimates of the measurement model and fit indices. The model shows an approximate fit to the data, with the computed Goodness-of Fit-Index (GFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) higher than 0.9, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) indices lower than 0.08.⁵⁷ CFI and SRMR confirm the one-dimensionality of all constructs. A strong convergent validity is confirmed by the fact that all factor loadings are higher than 0.5,⁵⁸ all average variance extracted (AVE) values are higher than 0.5⁵⁹ and all composite reliabilities (CR) are higher than 0.7.⁶⁰ A strong convergent validity implies that the indicators of a construct share a high proportion of variance, confirming they consistently represent the same underlying concept.⁶¹ Discriminant validity was assessed based on the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). As shown in Table 3, the computed HTMT ratios were below the threshold of 0.85, indicating that discriminant validity can be regarded as established. That is, the constructs used in the model are sufficiently distinct from one another.⁶²

Table 3

Structural path analysis

The structural part of the model examines the direct and indirect relationships between Chinese Antagonism (CA) and Democratic Support (DS), with Political Trust (PT), Emancipative Values (EV) and Political Action (PA) as potential mediators. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the results of the analysis. The results of the structural path analysis should be interpreted considering heightened political tensions at the time the surveys were conducted. In Hong Kong, respondents were affected by the structural shock of major protests in 2019 and subsequent government crackdowns in 2020, the year the survey was administered. In Taiwan, Chinese antagonism reached a new peak in 2022, the survey year, driven by spillover effects from Hong Kong and intensified economic coercion, diplomatic isolation, and military intimidation by China.

Figure 2

Figure 3

Emancipative Values (EV): CA significantly predicts EV for both Taiwan ($\beta = 0.303$, $p < .001$) and Hong Kong ($\beta = 0.487$, $p < .001$), suggesting that greater perceptions of Chinese antagonism are associated with stronger emancipative values. This supports theoretical propositions that external threat can activate liberal or democratic identities in contrast to the perceived authoritarian outgroup. EV itself has a significant effect on support for democratic governance in both polities, with the magnitude of such effect being considerably larger in Taiwan ($\beta = 0.409$, $p < .001$) than in Hong Kong ($\beta = 0.119$, $p < .001$).

Political Action (PA): CA significantly predicts political action in the cases of Taiwan ($\beta = 0.192$, $p < .001$) and Hong Kong ($\beta = 0.665$, $p < .001$) with the effect being more substantive in the latter case. The results indicate that perceived threats from China mobilizes civic engagement or protest behaviour, potentially as a form of defensive or identity-based political expression. The direct effect of political action on democratic support in Taiwan is statistically significant and substantial ($\beta = 0.299$, $p < .001$), whereas no significant effect could be established in the case of Hong Kong. Political trust and emancipative values appear to be stronger predictors of democratic regime support, marginalizing the effects of political action.

Political Trust (PT): The effect of CA on political trust in Taiwan is statistically significant but relatively small ($\beta = 0.087$, $p < .05$). As for Hong Kong, political trust is the most affected variable construct of the model ($\beta = -0.747$, $p < .001$). The high negative value indicates that antagonism causes very strong popular rejection of the current political system. Political trust has a negative effect on democratic support in both polities. While the effect is marginal in Taiwan ($\beta = -0.079$, $p < .05$), it is quite substantial in the case of Hong Kong ($\beta = -0.222$, $p < .001$) and suggests that citizens who exhibit high levels of trust in Hong Kong’s current (nondemocratic) institutions reject democratic governance.

Democratic Support (DS): Importantly, Chinese antagonism directly enhances support for democratic governance in Taiwan ($\beta = 0.158$, $p < .001$) as well as Hong Kong ($\beta = 0.342$, $p < .001$), suggesting that perceived threats from China increase the public’s democratic resilience.

Table 4

Table 5

The model specifies multiple mediated pathways through which CA influences democratic regime support (Tables 4 and 5):

Mediation via Emancipative Values (CA → EV → DS): This path constitutes the strongest indirect effect ($\beta = 0.124$, $p < .001$) in the case of Taiwan. It highlights that CA fosters emancipative values, which in turn significantly strengthen democratic resilience (β of EV on DR = 0.409, $p < .001$). This pathway underscores the central role of values in shaping democratic fortitude and suggests that existential threats may catalyse a normative

commitment to democracy. It plays a less important role in the case of Hong Kong ($\beta = 0.058, p < .001$).

Mediation via Political Action (CA → PA → DS): The second significant indirect effect in the Taiwan model is through political action ($\beta = 0.058, p < .001$). This reflects the idea that CA mobilizes civic engagement, which then reinforces democratic resilience (β of PA on DR = 0.299, $p < .001$). This is consistent with the view that participatory engagement is a pillar of resilient democracies. In Hong Kong, this effect is non-significant, suggesting that EV and PT play a more substantive role in the formation of popular support for democracy under the current institutional environment.

Mediation via Political Trust (CA → PT → DS): This pathway is statistically insignificant for Taiwan ($\beta = -0.007, p = .12$), indicating that there is no mediation through political trust (PT) in the model. However, political trust appears to be the strongest mediator in Hong Kong ($\beta = 0.166, p = .001$).

As shown in Tables 4 and 5, the magnitude of the total indirect and direct effects is substantially higher for Hong Kong ($\beta = 0.270, p = .001$; $\beta = 0.612, p = .001$) than it is for Taiwan ($\beta = 0.175, p = .001$; $\beta = 0.333, p = .001$). Domestic political autonomy seems to act as a moderator in the model, which may also explain the diverging outcomes in terms of political trust and political actions for the two polities—hypotheses H6, H9 and H10.

Overall, the results provide robust support for the notion that perceived external threats—such as antagonism from China—can enhance democratic resilience. Importantly, this occurs not only through a direct psychological bolstering of democratic resolve but also through indirect mechanisms involving value internalisation (EV), civic engagement (PA) and institutional trust (PT). These findings align with those of previous research on earned sovereignty or defensive democratization, where threats from autocratic powers reinforce public attachment to democratic norms and practices.⁶³

The following section places the findings within the broader scholarly context of democratic support in contested polities and elaborates on the role of domestic political autonomy in explaining the observed differences in mediated and direct effects between Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Discussion

One of the most significant obstacles to researching political contestation is the scarcity and unreliability of empirical data. Many of these polities are either politically isolated, under international embargo, or wary of external scrutiny, resulting in a lack of open, systematic data collection. Key measures of democratic development such as electoral quality, civil liberties, media freedom, and public opinion often rely on institutional transparency and third-party monitoring—conditions rarely met in these regions.⁶⁴ Most studies on contested entities therefore tend to be qualitative in nature and focus on macro-level aspects of democratization rather than exploring democratic regime support at the individual level. This study however uses data from the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) for Hong Kong and Taiwan and applies multivariate data analysis techniques to assess the relationship between political contestation and democratic development at the societal level.

Figure 4 (Political contestation and democracy – Hong Kong) goes here

Figure 5 (Political contestation and democracy – Taiwan) goes here

In our model, political contestation in the form of Chinese antagonism is measured through (negative) public perceptions of China’s influence. Since the third wave of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), respondents have been asked to evaluate the influence China has on their polity on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from very positive to very negative. Figures 4 and 5 visualize the relationship between Chinese antagonism and democratic development in Hong Kong and Taiwan, respectively. Negative perceptions of Chinese influence have intensified in both Hong Kong and Taiwan over the past two decades, coinciding with major political disruptions. In Hong Kong, this trend was shaped by recurring protest cycles culminating in the 2019 mass mobilizations and the subsequent crackdowns in 2020, which marked a decisive structural shock.⁶⁵ These developments not only transformed Hong Kong’s political environment but also influenced perceptions of China in Taiwan. Beyond this spillover effect, rising antagonism in Taiwan has been driven by China’s increasing diplomatic isolation, economic coercion, and military intimidation since 2016.⁶⁶ Despite the shared impact of Hong Kong’s repression, the increase in Chinese antagonism has been considerably sharper in Taiwan (Figure 5). This divergence reflects Taiwan’s sustained improvements in civil liberties and political rights, which externalize China as a growing authoritarian threat, in contrast to Hong Kong, where political contestation has been internalized through the steady erosion of institutional autonomy under Chinese control (Figure 4). While Hong Kong’s democratic institutions have weakened, popular rejection of authoritarianism remains strong in both polities, with overwhelming opposition to one-party rule (Figures 4 and 5).

But there still is the question of how much of this resilience comes from Chinese antagonism? The relationship between political contestation and popular support for democracy is complex and not as straightforward as it may appear from a theoretical point of view. As such, this study offers a more comprehensive, layered approach to understanding and measuring the multifaceted effects of external constraints on a set of latent variables – variables that are intertwined with processes of individual-level democratic support in normal states, such as political participation, trust in institutions, and emancipative values. More specifically, latent path analysis was applied to assess the statistical significance and magnitude of all direct and mediated effects within this model of contingent democratization. The method proved particularly effective in uncovering hidden behavioural structures, going beyond conventional methods of merely analysing descriptive statistics of individual observed manifest variables.

According to the results of the analysis, there are statistically significant direct and partially mediated effects of political contestation in the form of Chinese antagonism on popular support for democracy. The findings also show that domestic institutional autonomy appears to condition the nature and scope of these effects. Even though the perceived Chinese threat level is much higher in Taiwan (78%) than in Hong Kong (36%), the total effect of that perceived threat on popular support for democracy in Hong Kong (β

= 0.612) is almost twice as high as it is in the case of Taiwan ($\beta = 0.333$). That is, domestic political autonomy—high levels of political rights and civil liberties—appear to have a moderating effect. Moreover, autonomy also determines *how* the effect is mediated through the latent constructs of political action (PA), emancipative values (EV), and political trust (PT).

Figure 6

For example, citizens in Hong Kong have a relatively high level of public participation in political protests (Figure 6). Although Chinese antagonism is a pivotal factor behind such forms of political action in Hong Kong ($\beta = 0.665$), its effect on popular support for democracy is statistically insignificant ($\beta = 0.070$; $p = .224$) once the effects of political trust and emancipative values are accounted for. That is, political action in Hong Kong is foremost a symbol of resistance against Chinese authoritarianism, while political trust constitutes the most important mediating latent construct in terms of popular support for democracy. The 2020 implementation of the National Security Law, coupled with the dismantling of independent media and civil society, marked not only a full-scale authoritarian turn,⁶⁷ but also deepened popular distrust in Hong Kong’s political system as shown in the large negative effect of Chinese antagonism on political trust ($\beta = -0.747$). Moreover, the study shows that high trust in Hong Kong’s illiberal political system directly translates into the rejection of democratic governance ($\beta = -0.222$). That is, those citizens with high levels of trust in the current system exhibit high probabilities of support for authoritarianism.

In terms of mediation, the situation in Taiwan contrasts sharply with Hong Kong’s trajectories. Being a *de facto* independent state, Chinese irredentism differently affects the latent constructs within the model. Social values in the form of emancipative values followed by political action play the most pivotal role in mediation (Figure 3). That is, Taiwan’s democratic identity formation is substantially affected by changing social values ($\beta = 0.409$)—a change partially triggered by sovereignty issues ($\beta = 0.303$). The effect of Chinese antagonism on political trust is however marginal ($\beta = 0.087$), while trust itself exerts a neglecting negative effect on democratic support ($\beta = -0.079$). The latter may be seen as a sign of instrumental support for democracy or ethnic nationalism.

However, the relatively weak negative effect of political trust (PT) on the rejection of authoritarianism (DS) suggests that democratic contestation over national identity has contributed to the island’s evolving self-identification as an independent state, while diminishing the influence of primordial attachments.⁶⁸

Our study highlights important implications for political research. To start with, institutions in contexts of political contestation are not politically neutral; rather, they are perceived by citizens as embodying either self-determination or external domination. Such perceptions shape both their legitimacy and their role in democratic development. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, state institutions established through Russian intervention remain heavily dependent on a patron and are widely regarded as instruments of imposed sovereignty, reinforcing elite dominance and democratic backsliding. A comparable trajectory is evident in Hong Kong, where institutions once associated with autonomy

under ‘One Country, Two Systems’ have progressively been reinterpreted as extensions of Beijing’s authoritarian control. As their legitimacy erodes, they have become sites of political contestation and focal points of democratic regression.

By contrast, Taiwan illustrates how institutions rooted in an externally imposed regime can be indigenized through democratization, transforming them into vehicles of local sovereignty, civic mobilization, and a resilient democratic identity. Here, diplomatic isolation and Chinese antagonism have reinforced democratic consolidation, allowing Taiwan to project democracy as both domestic shield and international signal. These comparisons underscore that political contestation is neither inherently conducive nor detrimental to democracy. Rather, outcomes depend on internal agency, the scope of autonomy, and the broader geopolitical environment.

Moreover, the findings of the study also highlight the role of political contestation in forming democratic identities. More specifically, previous theories of democratic development typically assume stable statehood and international recognition as prerequisites for institutional legitimacy and successful democratic transition.⁶⁹ Post-nationalist frameworks, such as cosmopolitanism⁷⁰ and Habermas’s constitutional patriotism, further suggest that democracy can transcend national attachments.⁷¹ These approaches often overlook the fact that nations function not only as arenas for politics but also as constitutive elements of political content itself.⁷² The intertwined trajectories of national identity and democratization are particularly evident in Taiwan and Hong Kong. The experiences of Taiwan and Hong Kong demonstrate how geopolitical pressures profoundly shape democratic dynamics. Incorporating societal perceptions of external threats may therefore provide clearer understanding of democratization processes. Even recognized states, such as Mongolia, remain vulnerable to coercive pressures, underscoring the broader significance of these dynamics for future research.

The dynamics observed in Taiwan and Hong Kong should not be assumed to apply uniformly across all cases of political contestation. Our framework is most relevant where political authority is contested by an authoritarian power and where democracy provides a primary basis of legitimation and identity. By contrast, in cases of disputes involving democratic powers—for example, Puerto Rico’s relationship with the United States or French Polynesia’s status within France—the effects may differ. Antagonism in these settings may not sharpen democratic identity in the same way, since democracy is not at stake as a contested value. Instead, contestation may revolve around economic rights, cultural autonomy, or federal integration.

Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the ABS data used in the study bears limitations. Survey items may not align perfectly with the study’s focus, which may lead to issues of construct validity. Moreover, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) tests whether observed data are consistent with a hypothesized system of causal relationships, it does not prove causality. Future research may thus use panel data or experimental designs to improve construct validity and corroborate causality.

Conclusion

This study explores how political contestation with the PRC government shapes democratic identity in Taiwan and Hong Kong, offering empirical evidence and theoretical insight into the contingent nature of democratization. Using Asian Barometer Survey data and latent

path analysis, it examines how perceptions of Chinese antagonism influence democratic support through political trust, emancipative values, and political action. The findings show that political contestation is not inherently supportive or harmful to democracy; its effects depend on domestic autonomy and civic mobilization.

In Taiwan, Chinese antagonism has strengthened civic identity rooted in competition, transparency, and civil liberties. political contestation remains external, fostering unity and democratic consolidation as both self-assertion and defence. Emancipative values and political participation, rather than trust, drive democratic support. In Hong Kong, limited autonomy has internalized contestation, eroding trust and institutional guarantees. Democratic aspirations clash with authoritarian backlash, making political action symbolic but constrained. Without democratic institutions, resilience remains fragile.

The study advances broader debates on democratization by illuminating the conditions under which contested polities may sustain legitimacy or experience erosion, and how institutions can become focal points of either support or contestation.

Notes

- 1 Voller, "Contested Sovereignty"; Kolstø and Blakkisrud, "De Facto States and Democracy."
- 2 Tsang, *Modern History of Hong Kong*.
- 3 Ortmann, "Constructive Identity"; Veg, "Rise of 'Localism'."
- 4 Ma, "Rise of 'Anti-China' Sentiments."
- 5 Veg, "Rise of 'Localism'"; Ortmann, "Constructive Identity."
- 6 Tang and Cheng, "Politicization."
- 7 Fell, *Government and Politics*.
- 8 Rowen and Rowen, "Truth and Reconciliation Committee."
- 9 Rawnsley, "Soft Power."
- 10 Phillips, "Democracy and National Destinies."
- 11 Kwong, "Growth of 'Localism'."
- 12 Chong and Pan, "Evolution of Our Times."
- 13 Caplan, *The Recognition of New States*.
- 14 Newman and Visoka, "Practice of State Recognition."
- 15 Kyris, "State-Building and Recognition."
- 16 Caspersen, "(Lack of) Sovereignty."
- 17 Ibid.; Williams and Pecci, "Earned Sovereignty."
- 18 Voller, "Contested Sovereignty."
- 19 Fabry, "Unrecognized States and National Identity."
- 20 Geldenhuys, *Contested States in World Politics*; von Steinsdorff, "Incomplete State Building."
- 21 Siborutorop, "State, Development, Democracy, and Peace."
- 22 Arakelyan, "Kremlin's Reverse Democracy"; Sieniawski, "Abkhazia and South Ossetia"; Souleimanov et al., "Coercive Diplomacy."
- 23 Williams and Pecci, "Earned Sovereignty."
- 24 Pegg, *International Society*; Caspersen, "(Lack of) Sovereignty."
- 25 Dalton, "Citizenship Norms"; Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernisation*.
- 26 Flores Juberías, "Autonomy of Catalonia"; Ortmann, "Lack of Sovereignty."
- 27 Siborutorop, "State, Development, Democracy, and Peace"; Krasner, *Sovereignty*.
- 28 Kolstø and Blakkisrud, "De Facto States and Democracy."
- 29 Voller, "Contested Sovereignty"; Fabry, "Unrecognized States and National Identity."
- 30 Ker-Lindsay, "Stigmatisation of De Facto States."

- 31 Isachenko, *Making of Informal States*.
- 32 Caspersen, “(Lack of) Sovereignty.”; Kolstø and Blakkisrud, “De Facto States and Democracy.”
- 33 Bar-Tal, *Intractable Conflicts*; Lindner, “Dynamics of Humiliation.”
- 34 Tajfel and Turner, “Social Identity Theory.”
- 35 Williams and Pecci, “Earned Sovereignty”; Voller, “Contested Sovereignty.”
- 36 Ibid.; Caspersen, “(Lack of) Sovereignty.”
- 37 Dalton, “Citizenship Norms”; Norris, *Democratic Deficit*.
- 38 Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernisation*; Letki, “Trust.”
- 39 Fabry, “Unrecognized States and National Identity.”
- 40 Tarrow, *Strangers at the Gates*.
- 41 Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernisation*.
- 42 Catterberg and Moreno, “Political Trust.”
- 43 Chong and Pan, “Evolution”; Fell, *Government and Politics in Taiwan*.
- 44 Mishler and Rose, “Origins”; Letki, “Trust in Newly Democratic Regimes.”
- 45 Catterberg and Moreno, “Individual Bases.”
- 46 Pateman, “Participatory Democracy Revisited.”
- 47 Dalton, “Citizenship Norms.”
- 48 Bratton, “Democratic Consolidation.”
- 49 Micheletti and McFarland, *Creative Participation*; Dalton, “Citizenship Norms.”
- 50 Ibid.; Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernisation*.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Ibid.; Welzel, *Freedom Rising*.
- 53 Loehlin, *Latent Variable Models*.
- 54 Bagozzi, Yi, and Phillips, “Assessing Construct Validity.”
- 55 Li, “Confirmatory Factor Analysis.”
- 56 Asparouhov and Muthén, “Weighted Least Squares Estimation.”
- 57 Asparouhov and Muthén, “SRMR in Mplus.”
- 58 Bagozzi, Yi, and Phillips, “Assessing Construct Validity.”
- 59 Fornell and Larcker, “Evaluating Structural Equation Models.”
- 60 Hair et al., *Multivariate Data Analysis*.
- 61 Bagozzi, Yi, and Phillips, “Assessing Construct Validity.”
- 62 Henseler, Ringle, and Sarstedt, “Discriminant Validity.”
- 63 Voller, “Contested Sovereignty”; Kolstø and Blakkisrud, “De Facto States and Democracy”; Schafferer, “Defensive Democratization.”
- 64 Caspersen, “(Lack of) Sovereignty.”
- 65 Ortmann, “Constructive Identity”; Veg, “Rise of ‘Localism’.”
- 66 Wang, “Taiwan in 2021.”
- 67 Chopra and Pils, “National Security Law.”
- 68 Wong, “Civic Nationalism.”
- 69 Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*.
- 70 Calhoun, “Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism.”
- 71 Habermas, *Inclusion of the Other*.
- 72 Machin, *Nations and Democracy*, 119.

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Figure 1: Political Contestation and Democratic Development

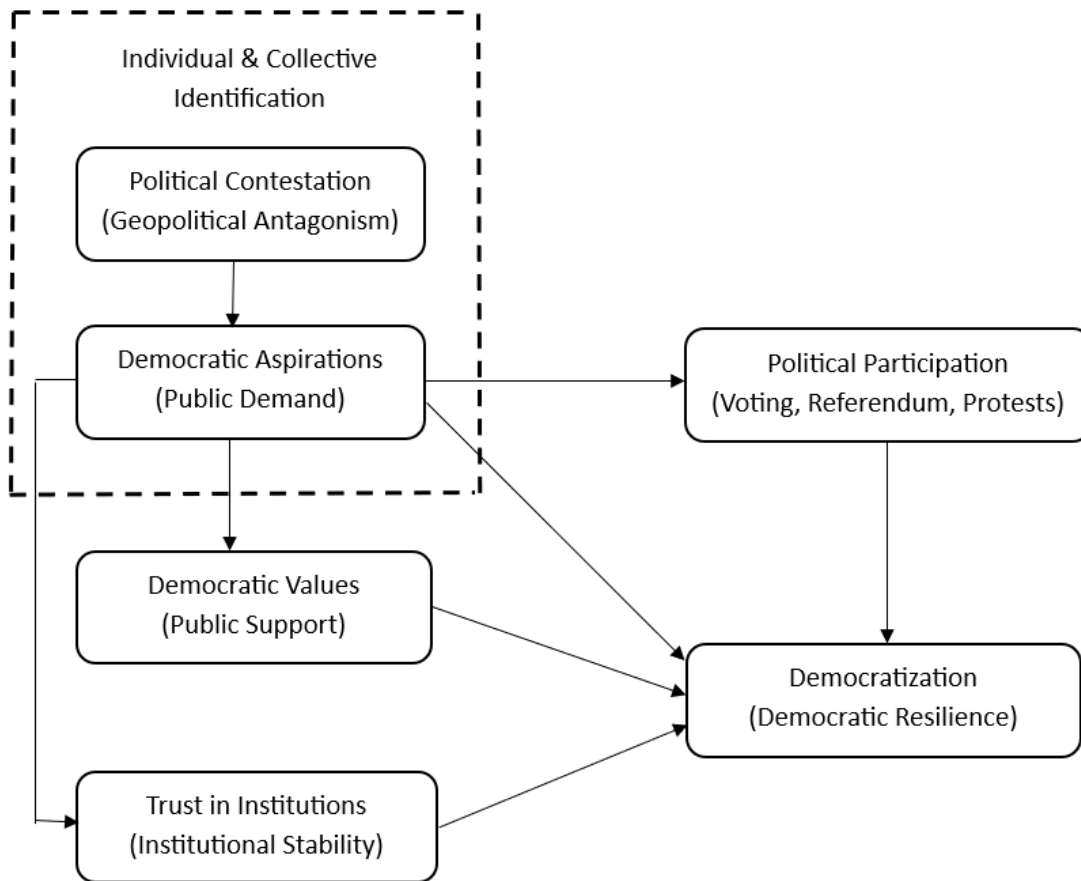


Table 1: Measurements used in the analysis

	Mean (Std. Dev.)	
	Hong Kong	Taiwan
<i>Chinese Antagonism (CA)</i>		
CA1: Does China do more good or harm to Asia?	2.27 (0.62)	2.82 (0.74)
CA2: Generally speaking, the influence China today has on world affairs is?	2.62 (0.85) ¹	4.27 (1.18) ²
CA3: Generally speaking, the influence China has on our country is? ³	3.14 (1.39)	4.23 (1.15)
<i>Support for Democracy (SD)</i>		
SD1: We should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things	3.18 (0.62)	3.11 (0.71)
SD2: Only one political party should be allowed to stand for election and hold office.	3.27 (0.59)	3.36 (0.62)
SD3: The army (military) should come in to govern the country.	3.49 (0.56)	3.49 (0.59)
SD4: We should get rid of elections and parliaments and have experts make decisions on behalf of the people.	3.23 (0.61)	3.25 (0.65)
<i>Political Trust (PT)</i>		
PT1: Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government.	2.17 (0.76)	2.52 (0.67)
PT2: A system like ours, even if it runs into problems, deserves the people's support.	2.17 (0.74)	2.55 (0.66)
PT3: I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of.	2.45 (0.75)	2.84 (0.63)
PT4: Over the long run, our system of government is capable of solving the problems our country faces.	2.28 (0.74)	2.46 (0.67)
<i>Political Activism (PA)</i>		
PA1: Signed a paper or online petition.	1.81 (1.19)	1.72 (0.91)
PA2: Used the Internet including social media networks to express opinions about politics and government.	1.77 (1.28)	1.62 (0.95)
PA3: Joined a group to actively support a cause (including online).	1.71 (1.16)	1.45 (0.76)
PA4: Attended a demonstration or protest march.	1.74 (1.26)	1.36 (0.65)
<i>Emancipative Values (EV)</i>		
EV1: Even if parents' demands are unreasonable, children should still do what they ask.	2.90 (0.64)	2.83 (0.65)
EV2: When a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law come into conflict, even if the mother-in-law is in the wrong, the husband should still persuade his wife to obey his mother.	2.90 (0.64)	2.95 (0.68)

Source: ABS Wave 5 (Hong Kong) and 6 (Taiwan)

¹ Scale 1-5

² Scale 1-6

³ Our country: Hong Kong and Taiwan, respectively

Table 2: Measurement model estimates and reliability of scales

	Hong Kong				Taiwan			
	λ	AVE	CR	α	λ	AVE	CR	α
(CA)		0.62	0.83	0.74		0.70	0.82	0.77
CA1	0.83							
CA2	0.89				0.78			
CA3	0.60				0.89			
(SD)		0.70	0.90	0.84		0.70	0.90	0.83
SD1	0.88				0.80			
SD2	0.90				0.89			
SD3	0.78				0.87			
SD4	0.78				0.77			
(PT)		0.87	0.95	0.91		0.80	0.92	0.87
PT1	0.97							
PT2	0.95				0.95			
PT3	0.87				0.88			
PT4					0.85			
(PA)		0.82	0.90	0.80		0.67	0.86	0.75
PA1					0.79			
PA2					0.87			
PA3	0.82				0.80			
PA4	0.97							
(EV)		0.67	0.80	0.74		0.69	0.81	0.72
EV1	0.86				0.73			
EV2	0.78				0.92			
	X2=168.97				X2=125.51			
	df=67				df=67			
	x2/df=2.52				x2/df=1.87			
	RMSEA=0.04				RMSEA=0.024			
	CFI=0.995				CFI=0.997			
	TLI=0.994				TLI=0.995			
	SRMR=0.027				SRMR=0.021			

CA=Chinese Antagonism; SD=Support for Democracy; PT=Political Trust; PA=Political Action; EV=Emancipative Values; AVE= Average Variance Extracted; CR=Composite Reliability
 Source: Author; Data: ABS Wave 5 (Hong Kong) and Wave 6 (Taiwan)

Table 3: HTMT – Discriminant validity assessment

		Hong Kong				
		CA	PA	EV	DS	PT
Taiwan	CA		0.589	0.378	0.575	0.659
	PA	0.149		0.273	0.418	0.539
	EV	0.283	0.135		0.347	0.411
	DS	0.370	0.047	0.437		0.513
	PT	0.173	0.033	0.248	0.322	

Source: Author

Figure 2: Structural Equation Model – Hong Kong

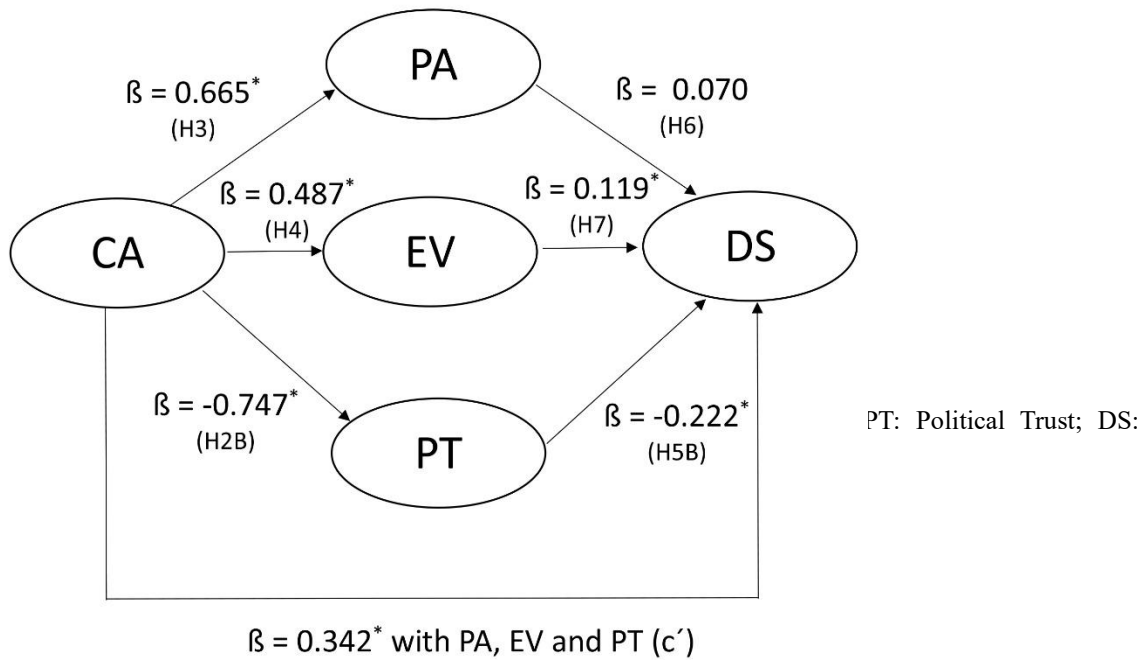


Figure 3: Structural Equation Model - Taiwan

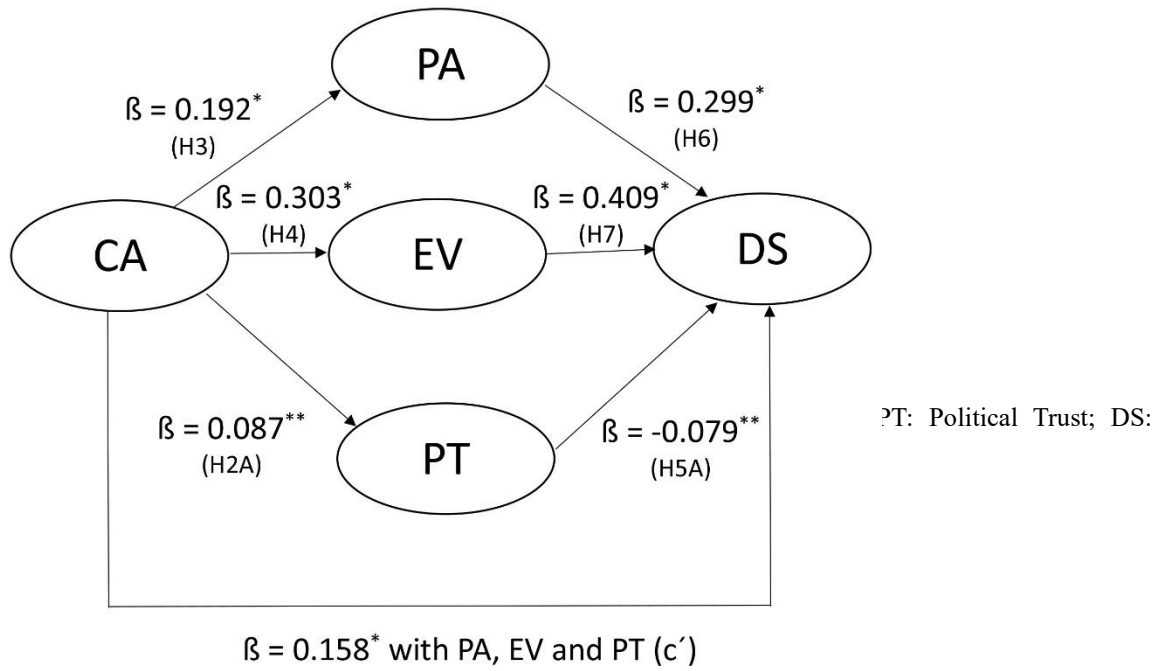


Table 4: Standardized direct and indirect effects from CA to DS (Hong Kong)

	Estimate	S.E.	P-Value	CI 95%
Effects from CA to DS				
Total	0.612	0.033	0.000	[0.548; 0.676]
Total indirect	0.270	0.080	0.001	[0.113; 0.427]
Specific indirect 1 (H8)				
CA→EV→DS	0.058	0.022	0.007	[0.015; 0.100]
Specific indirect 2 (H9)				
CA→PT→DS	0.166	0.047	0.000	[0.073; 0.258]
Specific indirect 3 (H10)				
CA→PA→DS	0.047	0.038	0.224	[-0.029; 0.122]
Direct (H1)				
CA→DS	0.342	0.102	0.001	[0.142; 0.542]

Table 5: Standardized direct and indirect effects from CA to DS (Taiwan)

	Estimate	S.E.	P-Value	CI 95%
Effects from CA to DS				
Total	0.333	0.035	0.000	[0.265; 0.401]
Total indirect	0.175	0.026	0.000	[0.123; 0.226]
Specific indirect 1 (H8)				
CA→EV→DS	0.124	0.019	0.000	[0.086; 0.162]
Specific indirect 2 (H9)				
CA→PT→DS	-0.007	0.004	0.118	[-0.016; 0.002]
Specific indirect 3 (H10)				
CA→PA→DS	0.058	0.014	0.000	[0.030; 0.085]
Direct (H1)				
CA→DS	0.158	0.040	0.000	[0.079; 0.237]

Figure 4: Political contestation and democracy (Hong Kong)

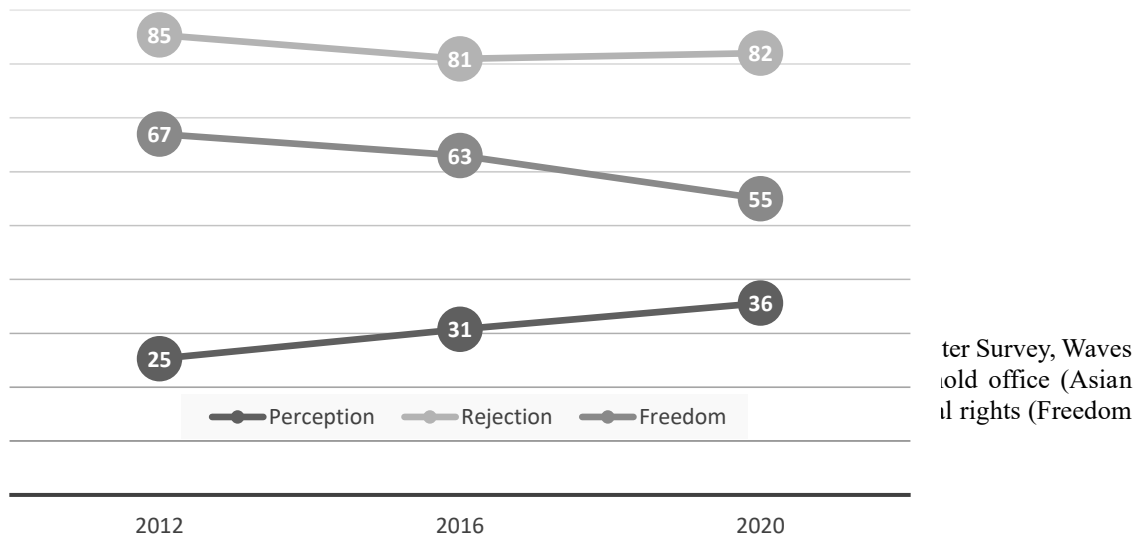


Figure 5: Political contestation and democracy (Taiwan)

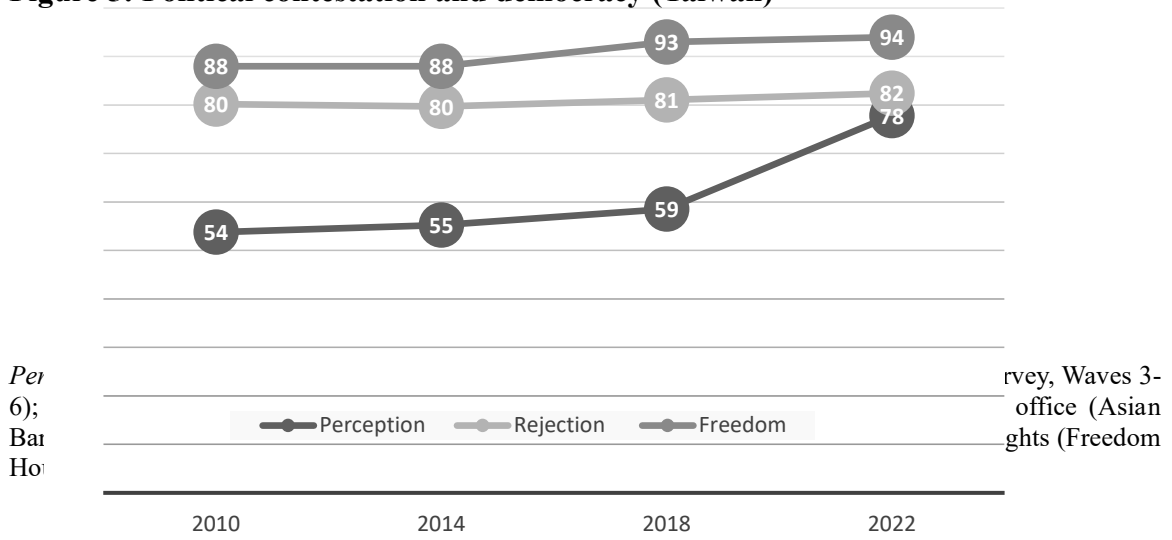
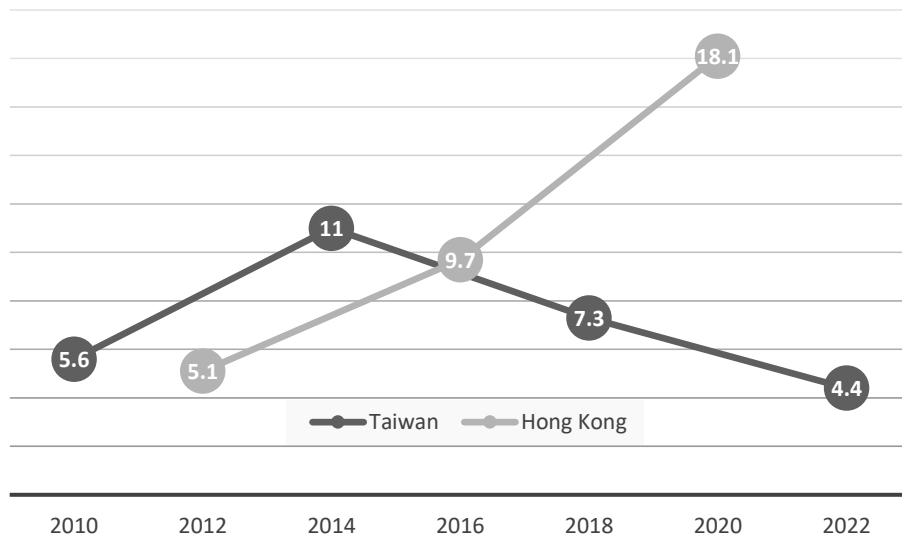


Figure 6: Public participation in demonstrations or protests (percentage)



Source: Asian Barometer Survey, Waves 3-6