

COMMENTHK

Yang Sheng

Legitimacy of polls not gained by copycatting Western-style democracy

Yang Sheng says critics of new electoral system are applying the same twisted logic as those who have doggedly picked on National Security Law for HK



To the disappointment of the critics, only one of the 154 aspirants running in the upcoming Legislative Council election has failed to pass the candidacy vetting process because of a nonpolitical reason.

A key takeaway of the composition of the 153 candidates is that the election will witness robust competition, judging from the diversity of the candidate mix which covers a wide political spectrum. This is a slap in the face for the critics who have been peddling the notion that the LegCo election will be one without competition and thus lack legitimacy.

The truth is the legitimacy of the LegCo election comes from the fact that it is being prepared and will be held in strict accordance with the mechanism prescribed by the Basic Law and the relevant decisions made by the National People's Congress or its Standing Committee.

The myth that copycatting Western-style democracy is the only way to give an election legitimacy has long been busted, not least because the curses of vetocracy and plutocracy have taken root in that system, causing innumerable socioeconomic and political problems as well as withering confidence in Western-style democracy. Take the United States for example. The 42nd Harvard Youth Poll, released by Harvard Kennedy School's Institute of Politics on Dec 1, found a striking lack of confidence in US democracy among young Americans. Only 7 percent of young Americans view the US as a "healthy democracy", and 52 percent believe that democracy is either "in trouble" or "failing".

Moreover, Western-style democracy has never become a universally accept-

ed or practiced political model in the world, notwithstanding the fact that it has been desperately promoted by its feverous disciples for decades — in many cases through various sanctions, "color revolutions" or regime changes supported and/or orchestrated by foreign intelligent agents under various guises.

While democratic elections around the world vary in form and mechanism, they have one thing in common, that is, the maximization of people's overall well-being should be the ultimate objective. In that sense, the legitimacy of the upcoming LegCo election will be boosted rather than diminished by the recent electoral system revamp aimed at ensuring "patriots administering Hong Kong" and excluding the subversives who had doggedly pursued their own political agenda at the expense of the overall interest of society.

The overhaul of the special administrative region's old electoral system, initiated by the NPC, China's top legislature, was intended to help the region put an end to the toxic politics that had plagued the city for about two decades, especially in recent years, by denying the subversives the chance to sneak into the region's governance structure and sabotage the establishment from within.

The flaws in the old electoral system had allowed the subversives to gain so much power inside LegCo that they had made it dysfunctional numerous times by employing various filibustering ploys in their attempt to advance their political agenda over the years. Hong Kong people were the victims of a dysfunctional legislature not only because policies aimed at tackling social problems, developing the economy and improving livelihoods were delayed, derailed or blocked altogether, but also because the rowdysm of those wayward lawmakers repeatedly displayed inside the legislature chamber had poisoned the minds of many young people, contributing to the polarization of society, which ultimately led to the political showdown in 2019, the dubbed "black revolution",

whose harmful repercussions continue in the form of many youngsters' contempt for the law and the rule of law.

Yet the critics of the revamped electoral system are, in effect, claiming that allowing the subversives to enter the legislature through the election and continue with their sabotage and toxic politics in the years to come is to secure the legislature's legitimacy, and that their absence from the legislature will deprive the latter of its legitimacy. This is no doubt an insult to every sane person's intelligence.

Conspicuously, the critics of Hong Kong's new electoral system are applying the same twisted logic in assailing the new system as those who have doggedly picked on the National Security Law for Hong Kong since its promulgation in June 2020.

The security law continues to be ruthlessly assailed by its foreign and local critics who have come up with various gloomy predictions about Hong Kong's future. This despite the fact that the law has been instrumental in bringing Hong Kong back to stability and security after being devastated by the riots in 2019, putting the region back on track, and restoring investors' confidence in the international financial center's future.

Whatever the China bashers have said of the security law and however hard they have been trying to vilify the legislation as well as the revamped election systems, they have failed to convince people of a gloomy future for Hong Kong. Numbers have overwhelmingly refuted their babble. For example, Hong Kong has seen a resurgence in IPOs, which raised over HK\$500 billion (\$64.1 billion) in the 12 months to June, up over 50 percent from the previous 12 months, when Hong Kong was still reeling from the 2019 "black revolution". This attests to the strong confidence of businesses and investors in Hong Kong.

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A warning to foreign adversaries



Liu Guangyuan, commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, speaks on the essence of democracy on Thursday in a seminar co-organized by the central government's Liaison Office and the Office of the Commissioner of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the HKSAR. Liu warned that any attempt by foreign forces to interfere in Hong Kong's upcoming Legislative Council elections will be beaten back by the Chinese government. His remarks coincided with the start of the "Summit for Democracy", hosted by US President Joe Biden's administration. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Vocational training is no bad thing for HK

To me, every human life has value, but we are clearly not all the same. I personally strongly believe in diversity, equality and equal opportunity. They should go hand in hand. Most of us are engaged in different professions and trades, but they all deserve respect and they all contribute to society, even if receiving different levels of remuneration. This respect should not be affected by race, religion, sexual orientation or political persuasion.



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However, equality of opportunity is not the same as equality of outcome, a distinction that is sometimes overlooked. A woman of 1.35 meters will not be able to reach the same high shelf in a kitchen as a woman of 1.91 meters. A man who trains every day for a marathon would go quicker and farther than a couch potato. So physical attributes also matter in terms of manual dexterity and what we can all do with our bodies and this usually leads to diverse outcomes. Similarly, we are not all gifted with the same mental faculties, which can range between genius level and those who may be impaired. This diversity in physical and mental attributes should not constitute a hindrance to expression of human development. We should all do our best given what we have been endowed with. It is true income levels are largely determined by market forces, productivity and perceived societal value of a given activity and skill. A brain surgeon obviously requires far more talent and training than a shoe store clerk. This is reflected in their pay.

Our lives depend on these individual human faculties and physical characteristics. How we live can usually be chosen, at least at some level, and according to our own codes, ethics, cultures, traditions, religions and capacities. It can also though be imposed by circumstances we cannot control and opportunities we are never allowed to access. However, with all these diverse influences and constraints of life, there is still much the state can do in creating more opportunities so that each of us can develop to our maximum potential.

The state has an indispensable role to play in improving our lives. This is perhaps no more so than in the education of our children and the opportunities it then gives them to contribute meaningfully to society in the future and hopefully in whatever way that makes best use of their innate talents.

Hong Kong is blessed to have excellent schools and universities, some rated among the best in the world, and all enjoying decent government support. But education is also a lifelong learning process, which does not end upon graduation. There is more than majoring in a special course of study. A rounded education also requires at least some understanding of the fine arts to give more meaning to their lives.

In this piece though I would also like to focus on more vocational options in nurturing talent, in particular in working with your hands. This may include such activities as turning wood and making furniture, fixing mechanical devices, manufacturing objects, doing plumbing, building houses, being a coffee barista, cooking a meal, pouring cement (or a beer) and painting, whether it be artworks (sometimes even with your feet) or walls. There is societal value in all such things, but do we appreciate them as we should?

I support the old Chinese wisdom of finding and cultivating talent wherever it can be found and in whatever form it may take, regardless of social standing and the talent itself.

Today the challenge is for diverse talent to be recognized and appreciated when there seems so much focus and reward on pure academic performance across standard curricula in schools and universities. In contrast, hands-on vocational pursuits are often underappreciated. I remember one of the most enduring memories of my first visit to Hong Kong in the 1980s was the incredible bamboo scaffolding on buildings reaching up to the sky. I am still in awe today of the scaffolding workers' ability to perform this architectural gymnastic feat which is also said to be more economical and more environmentally friendly than erecting a comparable tubular metal frame to wrap around the building. There is a coffee barista at one of the HKU coffee shops that puts works of art into the crema on my coffee, be it a panda, a tree or abstract art. It makes me smile and brightens my day, and I appreciate the talent displayed.

Albert Einstein started as a second-class patent officer in Bern, Switzerland, before emerging as one of the greatest scientists that has ever lived by following his true calling. In early life he was even asked to leave school as he did not fit expectations of a "standard" student while his father simply wanted him to finish school and get his diploma. Talent can emerge at different stages of one's life, sometimes requiring a conflu-

ence of events for them to shine through. This is the conundrum of diverse talent and in harnessing it to the best effect in a city such as ours and how we even recognize and judge success.

Many students come to me at HKU asking for career advice, choices they should make and options they might have for their futures. Just the other day a student asked me what to do for his double major. He was doing chemistry and his parents wanted his second choice to be business but his heart said physics. Far be it for me to go against parental hopes for their offspring but in this instance, I advised the student to follow his heart. If your heart is in something the chances of success greatly improve. Even more important is that one would end up plying a trade one enjoys. Otherwise, one risks ending up being disillusioned, disappointed, depressed, bored and ultimately unfulfilled, which no amount of pay can make up for.

Interestingly, a survey from 2019 (yes before COVID-19) found almost half of Hong Kong employees were unhappy with their careers. Interestingly, only 1 in 5 said a pay hike will make them happier. Clearly there is a greater malaise at play. I believe much has to do with the heart and how people feel about what they do and its relevance to their core values. Many do things purely for financial gain or to satisfy the expectations of others. Indeed, too many hardworking "successful" people learn to their dismay that money cannot buy happiness as they could not derive it from their work. It's an object lesson for us all that we should listen more to our hearts instead of being swayed too much by external attractions. Curiously, the COVID-19 lockdowns are proving to be a blessing in disguise as they force people to take stock of their lives and review their priorities. Many are increasingly reluctant to go back to their old jobs while they seek broader happiness, meaning and fulfilment in other, less-academic-based vocations and workplace drudgery they were never really interested in.

In Hong Kong society and on the Chinese mainland more generally, well-meaning parents want the best for their children. This is laudable of course. However, there is often also strong pressure for their children to perform well at school, cram after school and to go into what they see are the best careers for their future economic well-being. (Sadly, this may not dovetail with their offspring's personal interests.) In Hong Kong this often means finance, business, accounting, law and medicine. But what if this is contrary to what the students either want or excel in or is beyond their capabilities?

Are the pressures to conform to parental views and perform in certain ways always in the best interests of society and the students themselves where failure can lead to resentment, disillusionment or worse? Indeed, many students are not academically gifted but have other talents best suited to other equally worthwhile career paths. Such intentions can be supported from the more vocationally oriented training facilities available, such as Hong Kong's own Institute of Vocational Education, spread across 10 locations, and the Vocational Training Council that comprises 13 member institutions. How many of us have even heard of IVE or VTC whereas HKU, CUHK, HKUST and many other universities are common knowledge? Where is the plethora of vocational training awards, prizes and recognition in Hong Kong that we have in Australia? It's worth noting that the backbone of Germany's economic success was the high esteem the graduates of their technical and vocational training schools enjoy. In Hong Kong, we can do better by appreciating more the contributions of those in the supposedly less-glamorous industries and trades — the graduates of our vocational and technical schools — and signal to all young people that they should listen more to their hearts and consider too the hidden talent that's in their hands and in their choice of study and career. So, with hand on heart, I salute these unsung vocational heroes of Hong Kong who make this vibrant city what it is at a more human level than the gloss and sparkle of global finance.

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