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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Legislative Politics under "One Country, Two Systems": Evidence from Macau, 2013–2021

Daina Chiba, Meng U Ieong and Jiying Jiang

Department of Government and Public Administration, University of Macau, Taipa, Macau SAR, China
Corresponding author: Daina Chiba; Email: dchiba@um.edu.mo

Abstract
This paper investigates the dynamics of legislative politics within the unique political context of the Macau Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China. Drawing on recently collected data from roll-call votes and committee deliberations taken during the fifth and sixth legislative assemblies, this study shifts the focus from electoral processes and resolution proposals to an analysis of bill proposals with the potential to become law. The findings reveal a structural dichotomy between a large, cohesive pro-establishment faction and a smaller, more fragmented opposition, which contrasts with the findings of previous research that suggest a more balanced opposition. Further analysis of committee deliberations indicates that this stable dichotomy allows regime loyalists to voice dissent without appearing rebellious, enabling ruling elites to gauge and respond to constituents' preferences on non-sensitive issues. This dynamic highlights the distinct legislative practices of Macau SAR under the "one country, two systems" framework.

摘要
本文聚焦中国澳门特别行政区特有政治背景下的立法动态。通过系统收集并分析第五届和第六届立法会的点名表决与委员会审议数据,本研究将关注点从选举过程与决议提案转向对法律草案的深入分析。研究发现,立法会内部呈现结构性二元分化:一方是规模较大且团结的建制阵营,另一方则是规模较小且碎片化的反对力量。这一发现修正了既往研究中关于双方势力相对均衡的观点。对委员会审议数据的进一步分析表明,这种稳定的二元结构使建制派成员得以在维持整体和谐的前提下表达政策异议,从而使执政精英能够就非敏感性议题有效吸纳并回应选民偏好。这一动态揭示了澳门特别行政区在"一国两制"框架下独特的立法实践特征。

Keywords: Macau Legislative Assembly; "one country, two systems"; authoritarian legislatures; roll-call votes; ideal point estimation

关键词: 澳门立法会; "一国两制"; 威权立法机构; 点名表决; 理想点估计

Macau, a Chinese city located on the western side of the Pearl River Delta, was under Portuguese colonial rule for over four centuries. After the handover of sovereignty in 1999, it became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the "one country, two systems" framework. Unlike its fellow SAR, Hong Kong – which has experienced frequent protests in recent decades[1] – Macau has maintained a relatively stable political environment, receiving less attention from media and academia. This stability is often attributed to the absence of a strong opposition, a legacy of pro-establishment and pro-Beijing dominance since colonial times, the government's co-optation of emerging elites, and institutional mechanisms that ensure executive control over the

1 Fong 2013; Cheung 2014.

legislative and judicial branches.[2] Within this executive-led structure, Macau's Legislative Assembly is often dismissed as a "rubber stamp" or mere window dressing.[3]

Nevertheless, studies reveal that various societal forces compete for legislative representation in Macau, often employing clientelist electoral tactics.[4] The co-optation theory, in particular, frames the legislature and elections as tools for the regime to identify and integrate opposition groups that could threaten stability.[5] Indeed, many studies on Macau politics reference government co-optation strategies. In this framework, the legislature enables opposition legislators to access rents and influence policies. However, combining existing evidence with co-optation theory raises two questions. First, who is co-opted? It is unclear which political forces in Macau are powerful enough to warrant co-optation rather than repression. Second, while co-optation assumes legislators represent constituents post-election, few studies examine legislative activity, making it difficult to assess such representation.

We address these questions using original datasets on legislative activities, including roll-call voting records and committee deliberation durations for the fifth (2013–2017) and sixth (2017–2021) legislative terms. Our analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we use voting similarity and ideal point estimation to identify legislators' ideological positions. This reveals the dominance of pro-establishment forces alongside small, variable opposition groups, aligning with conventional understandings but contradicting one prior systematic study.[6] This illustrates the extent of legislative contestation acceptable under the "one country, two systems" framework. Indeed, in 2017, a top Chinese official praised Macau as a model SAR for adhering to "one country" while utilizing "two systems."[7]

Building on these findings, we examine how bill deliberation reflects the functional logics of authoritarian legislatures. Beyond co-optation, we consider two additional frameworks: the information-collection framework, which views legislatures as conduits for relaying constituents' grievances on non-sensitive issues,[8] and the elite-bargaining framework, which highlights legislatures as arenas for regime insiders to reveal positions and influence outcomes.[9] Our analysis shows that bills facing dissent from pro-establishment legislators undergo longer deliberation than those opposed by opposition members. These findings suggest elite bargaining and intra-regime information sharing are at work in Macau's Legislative Assembly rather than definitively refuting co-optation. Co-optation may operate via alternative mechanisms, such as distributing economic rents, which lie beyond this article's scope.[10]

Our study contributes to several pieces of literature. First, it adds to research on meaningful representation in competitive authoritarian regimes.[11] Second, it offers the first systematic analysis of legislative voting and deliberation in Macau, addressing post-election legislative behaviour that prior studies have largely overlooked. Third, Macau, as one of 14 autonomous regions globally, provides an important benchmark for comparative studies.[12] For regions navigating between secession and unification, autonomy may offer a viable alternative.

2 Lo 1989; 2007; Hao, Yufan, Sheng and Pan 2017; Kwong 2017; Wong and Kwong 2020.
3 "The Macau precedent." *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 March 2009, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123714953109134025. Accessed 7 September 2025.
4 Yee 1997; 2005; Chou 2005; 2015; Yu 2007; Chong 2016; Lo and Chong 2016.
5 Gandhi 2008; Magaloni 2008; Malesky and Schuler 2010; Schuler and Malesky 2014.
6 Jang 2018.
7 "Zhang Dejiang gaodu kending Aomen: jianchi 'yiguo' zhi benshan yong 'liang zhi' zhi li" (Zhang Dejiang highly recognizes Macau: adhering to the principle of "one country" and making good use of the benefits of "two systems"). *Ta Kung Pao*, 9 May 2017, https://www.takungpao.com.hk/hongkong/text/2017/0509/80082.html. Accessed 23 May 2024.
8 Truex 2016.
9 Lü, Liu and Li 2020; Noble 2020.
10 Truex 2014.
11 Malesky and Schuler 2010; Kamo and Takeuchi 2013; Manion 2014; 2015; Truex 2016; Liu 2023; Malesky, Todd and Tran 2023.
12 Ghai and Woodman 2013.

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This article proceeds as follows. We first outline the Macau legislature's institutional rules and review prior studies of this institution and its counterparts. Next, we present descriptive analyses of roll-call voting data, uncovering patterns of contestation that inform our analysis of committee deliberation. Finally, we analyse deliberation durations and connect our findings to theories of authoritarian legislatures.

The Legislative Assembly of Macau

Macau's electoral representation dates back to 1583, when Portuguese settlers established the Loyal Senate (*Leal Senado*).[13] The Senate comprised six representatives who were elected every three years, but suffrage was restricted to Portuguese residents, primarily men, thereby excluding the majority Chinese residents.[14] Following Portugal's 1974 Carnation Revolution, which sparked global democratization, the Macau legislature began to modernize. In 1976, Macau held its first legislative election that allowed Chinese residents to vote.[15]

The current Legislative Assembly was established in 1999, when sovereignty was handed over to China. Before the handovers of Hong Kong (1997) and Macau (1999), China's National People's Congress (NPC) enacted the Basic Laws for the respective SARs, granting them a high degree of autonomy under the "one country, two systems" framework. These laws stipulate that Macau and Hong Kong should maintain their socio-economic systems for at least 50 years. The Basic Laws grant SARs legislative power, ensuring national laws (enacted by the NPC) are not applied, except those listed in Annex III.[16] However, Macau's political system is executive-led, with power concentrated in the chief executive. As an appointed official of the PRC central government, the chief executive ensures Macau's laws and policies align with national directives. Several institutional features further weaken the legislature's power, contributing to executive dominance.

First, while law-making is shared between the legislature and executive, the legislature's ability to propose bills is limited. Legislators cannot propose bills related to public expenditure, political structure or government operations without the consent of the chief executive.[17] Although bills can pass with a simple majority,[18] the chief executive can return bills deemed incompatible with SAR interests.[19] Consequently, over 80 per cent of the bills submitted between 1999 and 2023 originated from the executive, with 95 per cent of passed bills being executive proposals.

Second, less than half of the legislature's members are directly elected. The legislature comprises 33 members: 14 (42.4 per cent) are directly elected, 12 (36.4 per cent) are indirectly elected as functional representatives and 7 (21.2 per cent) are appointed by the chief executive. As shown in Figure 1, the number of direct and indirect seats has increased from 8 each to 14 and 12, respectively, while the number of appointed seats remains unchanged at 7. However, frequent uncontested elections in indirect constituencies suggest limited competitive representation. Additionally, a 2016 amendment to Macau's Electoral Law granted the executive authority to disqualify candidates who are considered to be disloyal to the Macau SAR or its Basic Law.[20] This clause was first invoked in the 2021

13 Mendes 2013. It was called "loyal" because Macau remained loyal to Portugal, not Spain, during the Iberian Union (1580–1640).

14 Hao, Zhidong 2020.

15 Yee 1999.

16 See Art. 18 of the Basic Law. All references to Macau's Basic Law are based on the official Chinese-language version at https://www.basiclaw.gov.mo/. Accessed 7 April 2025.

17 Art. 75 of the Basic Law.

18 In contrast, Hong Kong's legislature requires legislator-sponsored bills to have majority support in both geographic and functional constituencies.

19 Art. 51 of the Basic Law. If the legislature passes the bill again with a two-thirds majority, the chief executive must promulgate it.

20 See Art. 6, Clause 8 of Law 9/2016. Macau SAR Government Printing Bureau, https://bo.io.gov.mo/bo/i/2016/52/lei09_cn.asp. Accessed 7 April 2025.

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legislative election, disqualifying numerous candidates on political grounds and effectively enabling the executive to screen candidates. While this study focuses on legislative data up to 2021, the introduction of this clause may have created additional pressure for legislators to avoid actions perceived as disloyal to the executive, even before its enforcement.

Third, both direct and indirect elections use a proportional representation system via the modified D'Hondt method,[21] which penalizes larger political groups.[22] This system promotes diverse representation but hinders the formation of a unified opposition. As shown in Figure 1, seats are held by various political forces, including prominent organizations like the Macau Chamber of Commerce (*Aomen Zhonghua zongshanghui* 澳門中華總商會), the General Union of Neighbourhood Associations of Macau (*Aomen jiefanghui lianhe zonghui* 澳門街坊會聯合總會), and the Macau Federation of Trade Unions (*Aomen gonghui lianhe zonghui* 澳門工會聯合總會). Despite their pro-establishment and pro-Beijing stances, these organizations represent distinct interests – business, neighbourhoods, and trade unions, respectively. They secure representation through elections and appointments. Other forces include the gaming industry, pro-democracy groups[23] and "hometown associations" (*tongxianghui* 同乡会) linking residents to ancestral hometowns.[24]

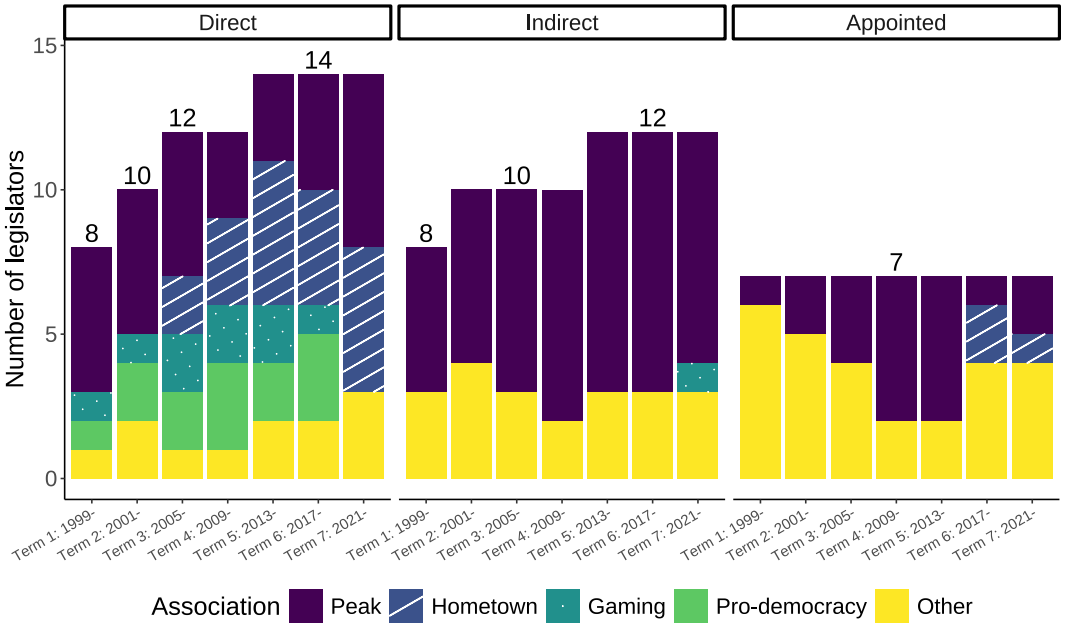

Figure 1. Distribution of Legislators' Selection Methods and Political Affiliations
Notes: The x-axis shows legislative terms since 1999, while the y-axis shows the number of legislators. The distribution changed from 8-8-7 in 1999 to 14-12-7 in 2013.

Fourth, Macau's institutional framework reinforces the chief executive's power by incorporating legislators who align with government policies.[25] This includes the seven appointed members and legislators serving on the Executive Council, which is a policymaking body, as defined in Article 56 of the Basic Law, comprising top-ranking executive officials, at least two Assembly members, and community leaders.

21 Macau's method divides votes by $2^{(n-1)}$ (1, 2, 4, 8, …), imposing larger penalties on larger parties.
22 Macau lacks political "parties"; instead, political associations (*zhengtuan*) submit candidate lists before elections.
23 We classify legislators from the New Macau Association as pro-democracy.
24 Chong 2016; Lo and Chong 2016. Major associations include the Macau-Guangdong Union (led by the Jiangmen Hometown Association) and the Macau United Citizens Association (led by the Fujian Hometown Association).
25 Hao, Yufan, Sheng and Pan 2017, 168.

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Studies on the legislature in Macau and other authoritarian regimes

Previous studies of the Macau legislature have focused primarily on legislative elections, highlighting how societal groups mobilize through clientelist electoral strategies.[26] However, these studies offer limited insights into post-election legislative activities and how legislators represent constituents' interests. This oversight reflects a common perception of the Macau legislature as a rubber-stamping body that primarily endorses the chief executive's decisions. Yet, if the legislature serves only symbolic purposes, it raises the question of why political groups invest resources in securing legislative seats.

Recent studies on authoritarian legislatures that challenge the rubber-stamp view identify three key functions that facilitate authoritarian rule: co-optation, information collection and elite bargaining. The co-optation theory frames legislatures as mechanisms through which rulers incorporate opposition forces via rent distribution and policy concessions, neutralizing potential threats.[27] The information-collection theory posits that autocrats use loyal legislators to learn about and respond to citizen grievances before such issues escalate, thereby mitigating the elite–mass information asymmetries.[28] Finally, the elite-bargaining theory sees legislatures as arenas for negotiating policies and resolving disputes among regime insiders, addressing monitoring and commitment problems.[29] In this context, dissent from allied legislators on government proposals serves as a credible signal. Open intra-coalition discord can damage the regime's reputation by exposing vulnerabilities and emboldening opposition forces.[30] Despite their distinct focuses, these three functions are not mutually exclusive: while the information-collection framework focuses on channelling constituent demands, such information also facilitates co-optation and elite bargaining, demonstrating how legislatures can fulfil multiple roles simultaneously.

Given these insights, focusing narrowly on legislators' selection processes has left an underdeveloped understanding of Macau's legislature. Key questions remain unanswered. Which political forces win seats and are co-opted by the ruling elite? Figure 1 shows nominal representation, but it provides little insight into contestation patterns between the ruling elites and legislators. Who are the opposition legislators strong enough for co-optation yet loyal enough to be included? Do legislators represent their constituents' interests? Addressing these questions is essential for advancing our understanding of Macau's legislative politics.

To systematically analyse legislative activities in Macau, roll-call voting data offer a valuable starting point. Roll-call votes record each member's position on bills or resolutions, providing insights into legislators' preferences and alignments.[31] While roll-call voting analyses have commonly focused on democratic contexts, they are equally relevant for competitive authoritarian legislatures with available voting records. For example, studies of Hong Kong's Legislative Council have used roll-call votes to analyse party cohesion and political cleavages.[32] Macau's legislature exhibits similar characteristics, making roll-call analysis just as pertinent.[33]

In this context, Jinhyeok Jang's analysis of roll-call data is a valuable first step.[34] The study is notable for finding intense contestation between two coalitions of similar size, contradicting conventional views. However, this finding stems from using roll-call data on resolutions, which have less

26 Lo 1993; Yee 1997; 2005; Chou 2005; 2015; Yu 2007; 2011a; Chong 2016; Lo and Chong 2016.
27 Lust-Okar 2006; Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Gandhi 2008; Blaydes 2010; Malesky and Schuler 2010.
28 Manion 2015; Truex 2016; 2020; Liu 2023.
29 Svolik 2009; 2012; Boix and Svolik 2013. Studies show that disadvantaged bureaucratic actors can use the legislature to advance their agendas and challenge dominant factions. Noble 2017; 2020; Lü, Liu and Li 2020; Jiang 2024.
30 Gandhi, Noble and Svolik 2020, 1373; Przeworski 1991.
31 Clinton 2012; Armstrong et al. 2021.
32 Jang 2016; Wang and Peng 2016; Jang 2020.
33 Moreover, the Macau legislature uses roll-call votes on all legislative bills, which avoids selection bias presenting when only selective votes are recorded. Carrubba et al. 2006; Hug 2010; Ainsley et al. 2020.
34 Jang 2018. Additionally, Shiode 2021 analyses sixth-term roll-call data but is limited in scope and accessibility.

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impact than bills on law and policy. Uncooperative voting stakes are higher in bill votes, which provide a more accurate picture of parliamentary contestation. As we demonstrate, our analysis reveals a distinctly different pattern among legislators.

Our findings also provide a foundation for analysing legislative activities beyond floor voting. Owing to frequent unanimity and difficulty obtaining records, recent studies of authoritarian legislatures focus on pre-voting processes.[35] Following these studies, future research in Macau could examine pre-voting activities such as public hearings, debates and amendments. As a preliminary analysis, we investigate committee deliberation data, focusing on how opposition patterns influence deliberation duration.

Roll-call Voting Analysis

This section analyses roll-call voting data from the Macau Legislative Assembly, which uses majority roll-call votes to decide all resolutions and bills. Resolutions address procedural matters, while bills are proposed laws that become binding upon legislative approval and endorsement by the chief executive. Unlike previous studies focusing on resolutions, we examine the more impactful roll-call voting records on bills.[36] Systematic online archives of voting records have been available only since the fifth term (2013–2017).[37] Therefore, our analysis focuses on the fifth and sixth terms (2013–2021). We collected data by downloading all roll-call vote PDFs from the official website and manually recording votes for each legislative bill.

Voting at the legislature

Bills may be introduced by the executive branch, by individual legislators or jointly by up to nine legislators. Initially, a bill undergoes general voting to determine if it should proceed for further scrutiny. Approved bills are assigned to one of three standing committees, comprising 10–11 legislators, for closed-door review. Next, the bill proceeds to detailed voting, where each article or set of articles is subject to public roll-call votes in plenary sessions. During the fifth and sixth terms, the number of roll-call votes per bill at this stage ranged from 1 to 65, with an average of 11 and a median of 8. All decisions require a simple majority. If approved at the detailed voting stage, the bill is sent to the chief executive for approval or veto. Should the chief executive refuse to sign, the bill returns to the legislature for reconsideration. A two-thirds majority vote is required to override the veto, as stipulated by Article 51 of the Basic Law.

Legislators vote in favour (Yea), against (Nay) or abstain (Abstention). Abstentions, which are common in the Macau legislature, are treated as an intermediate position, reflecting mild dissent compared to outright opposition. This interpretation aligns with ideal point estimation applications across various contexts, including position-taking by political parties,[38] by US solicitors general,[39] by organized interest groups[40] and by UN member states.[41] Legislators absent or unavailable for a vote are recorded as not available (NA). Treating abstentions as part of the ordinal structure ensures that their substantive meaning is incorporated into the analysis. This avoids the potential biases that could arise from treating them as missing data, particularly given that abstentions are relatively frequent in the Macau legislature.[42]

35 Malesky and Schuler 2010; Gandhi, Noble and Svolik 2020; Lü, Liu and Li 2020; Schuler 2020; Truex 2020.
36 Jang 2018; Shiode 2021.
37 The Legislative Assembly website, https://www.al.gov.mo/. Accessed 7 April 2025.
38 Louwerse and Pellikaan 2018.
39 Hansford, Depaoli and Canelo 2019.
40 Hansford, Depaoli and Canelo 2022.
41 Bailey, Strezhnev and Voeten 2017.
42 Rosas, Shomer and Haptonstahl 2015. During the fifth and sixth terms, there were 320 Abstentions compared to 1,146 Nay votes.

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Table 1. Roll-call Record for Bill Voting during the Fifth and Sixth Terms

		General Voting					Detailed Voting				
Term	*Proposer*	*Unanim.*	*Divided*		*Total*		*Unanim.*	*Divided*		*Total*	
5	Govt.	35	16	(16)	51	(51)	289	99	(97)	388	(386)
	Legis.	1	19	(1)	20	(2)	9	9	(7)	18	(16)
	Total	36	35	(17)	71	(53)	298	108	(104)	406	(402)
6	Govt.	55	30	(30)	85	(85)	982	170	(169)	1,152	(1,151)
	Legis.	0	7	(0)	7	(0)	0	0	(0)	0	(0)
	Total	55	37	(30)	92	(85)	982	170	(169)	1,152	(1,151)
Total	Govt.	90	46	(46)	136	(136)	1,271	269	(266)	1,540	(1,537)
	Legis.	1	26	(1)	27	(2)	9	9	(7)	18	(16)
	Total	91	72	(47)	163	(138)	1,280	278	(273)	1,558	(1,553)

Source: Authors' count. Numbers in parentheses show bills and articles that were approved.

Table 1 summarizes the roll-call voting results for all bills during the fifth and sixth terms. "Unanim." columns indicate proposals receiving unanimous Yea votes, while "Divided" columns reflect votes with Nay or Abstentions. The legislature considered 163 bills, 136 (83 per cent) of which were proposed by the executive ("Govt." rows). All 136 government-sponsored bills passed the general voting stage, with around two-thirds (90) passing unanimously and one-third (46) facing dissent. Conversely, only 2 of 27 legislator-sponsored bills ("Legis." rows) were approved. At the detailed voting stage, 1,558 voting opportunities arose across 138 bills.

The 7 per cent passage rate for legislator-sponsored bills, compared to the 100 per cent passage rate for government-sponsored bills, reinforces perceptions of the legislature as limited in influence. However, dissent does occur. Over 30 per cent of government-proposed bills (46 of 136) faced non-unanimous votes. Public dissent carries reputational costs, exposing legislators to risks in an autocratic setting.[43]

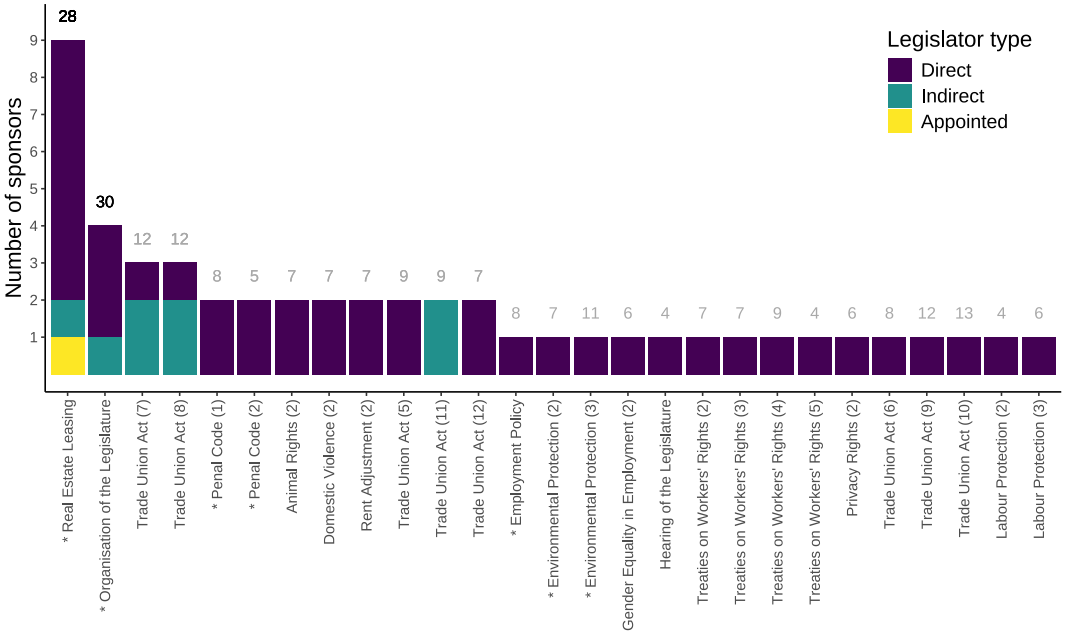

Figure 2. Sponsors and Supporters of 27 Legislator-proposed Bills in the Fifth and Sixth Terms
Notes: The bar height shows sponsors per bill; numbers above bars indicate Yea votes at the general voting stage. Numbers in parentheses after a bill's name denote how many similar bills have been submitted since the first term. An asterisk (*) indicates an amendment to existing law

Legislators also propose bills to reveal policy positions. Figure 2 shows the sponsors and supporters of the 27 legislator-sponsored bills during the fifth and sixth terms. Two bills passed, both co-sponsored by multiple legislators across political associations. The first, addressing real estate leasing, was co-sponsored by nine legislators from six associations. The second, an amendment to the Assembly's organic laws, had four co-sponsors from four associations.

Even failed bills influence policymaking. Of 25 failed legislator proposals, 16 addressed workers' rights. Notably, the Trade Union Act was proposed 12 times between 2005 and 2020; it was consistently rejected but sometimes only narrowly.[44] This led to a government-proposed version in

43 Desposato 2001; Magaloni 2006, 9.
44 The 10th proposal had 13 Yea and 16 Nay votes.

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2024.[45] Similarly, a bill to criminalize domestic violence failed twice before the government enacted its own version.[46] Roll-call votes thus serve as tools for legislators to signal positions to constituents and ruling elites. The following analysis explores these dynamics using voting similarity visualization and ideal point estimation.

Co-voting network analysis

This subsection examines co-voting network graphs to identify groups of legislators with similar voting records. We focus on non-unanimous voting records, as unanimous votes do not reveal ideological differences. As shown in Table 1, there were 143 non-unanimous votes (35 General and 108 Detailed) in the fifth term and 207 (37 General and 170 Detailed) in the sixth term. These data form $n_5 = 32$ by $k_5 = 143$ and $n_6 = 33$ by $k_6 = 207$ voting matrices, where n_j denotes the number of legislators in term j, and k_j denotes the number of voting opportunities.[47] Each cell in these matrices represents a legislator's vote (Yea, Nay or Abstain). Abstentions are treated as part of the ordinal voting structure, consistent with their treatment in the ideal point estimation framework. Using these voting records, we construct n_j by n_j voting similarity matrices, where each entry is the Spearman rank correlation between two legislators' voting records. Figures 3 and 4 visualize these matrices for the fifth and sixth terms, respectively. Nodes represent legislators, and edges indicate positive correlations.[48] Edge thickness reflects the strength of the voting similarity.

The network graphs reveal a consistent structural dichotomy across both terms. On the left, a large, dense pro-establishment group includes all appointed legislators and representatives from hometown associations and the gaming industry. These legislators typically support government-sponsored bills and oppose legislator-sponsored bills. On the right, a smaller, loosely connected opposition group includes two pro-democracy legislators in the fifth term (three in the sixth) and a few others. The median correlation among pro-establishment legislators is approximately 0.6, compared to 0.3 within the opposition group, reflecting weaker internal cohesion. The median correlation between the two groups is −0.14, highlighting distinct patterns of voting behaviour.

The term "opposition group" is used in a relative sense, referring to legislators less supportive of the executive compared to their pro-establishment counterparts. Owing to Macau's institutional constraints, even opposition legislators must demonstrate loyalty to the government to qualify for election. Unlike opposition parties in competitive democracies, Macau's opposition group is defined by relative independence and a tendency to support legislator-sponsored bills while opposing government-sponsored ones more frequently.

This structural dichotomy contrasts with Jang's analysis, which describes "two distinct groups of approximately equal size."[49] His opposition group includes 15 legislators, which is more than double our six-member group in Figure 3.[50] This discrepancy likely arises from differences in vote types analysed. Jang focuses on resolution votes, where dissent is less consequential, potentially overestimating

45 https://bo.io.gov.mo/bo/i/2024/17/lei06_cn.asp.
46 https://bo.io.gov.mo/bo/i/2016/23/lei02_cn.asp.
47 As the president typically does not vote, there are 32 voting legislators. However, in the sixth term, the president, Ho Iat Seng, resigned to run for chief executive, and a new legislator joined in December 2019, bringing the total to 33.
48 Negative correlations are omitted for simplicity.
49 Jang 2018, 514.
50 His opposition group includes our six members plus nine others: Chan Hong, Chan Mei Yi, Chan Meng Kam, Ho Ion Sang, Lam Heong Sang, Leonel Alberto Alves, Si Ka Lon, Song Pek Kei and Wong Kit Cheng.

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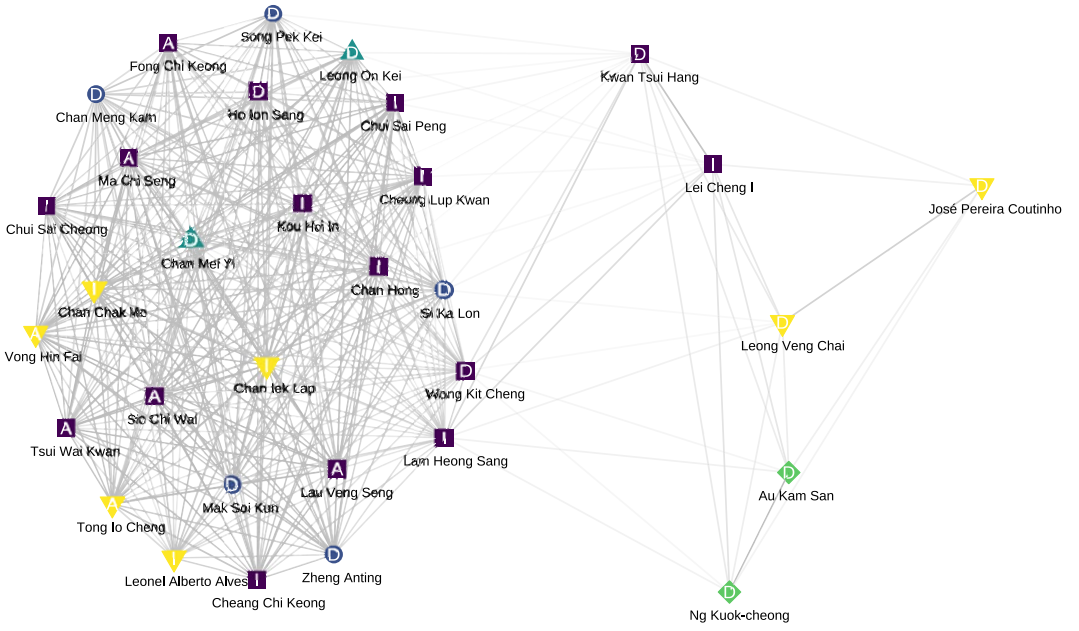

Figure 3. Co-voting Network for the Fifth Term, 2013–2017
Notes: Different shapes represent different types of political associations. Letters denote selection methods: "D" (directly elected), "I" (indirectly elected) and "A" (appointed). Edges indicate positive correlations, with thicker edges representing stronger similarities.

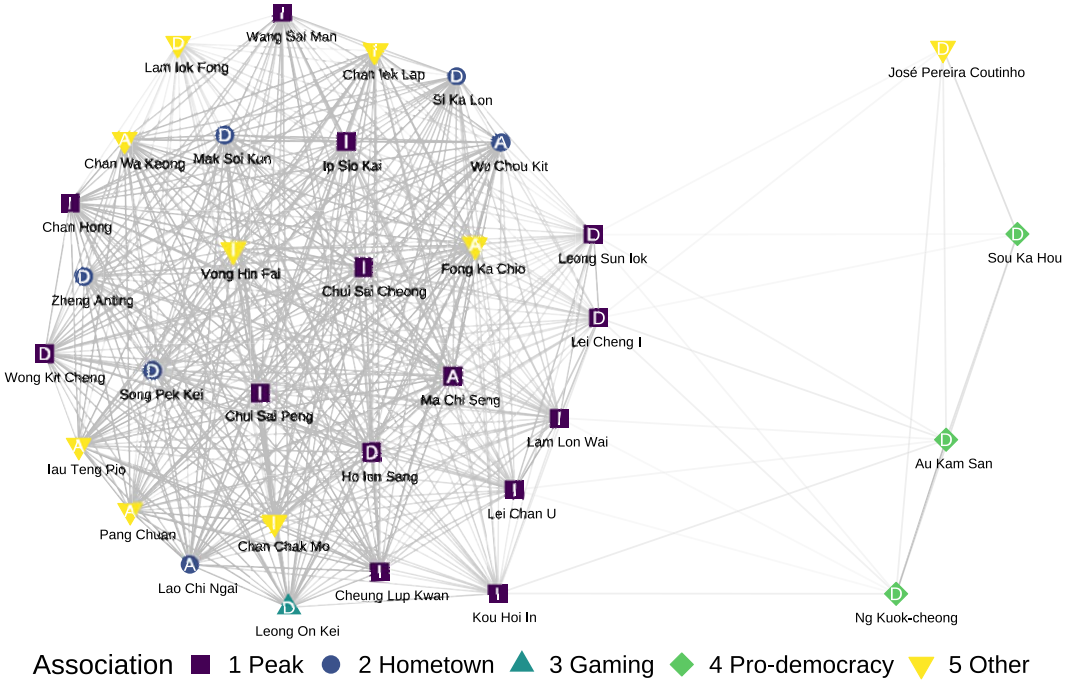

Figure 4. Co-voting Network for the Sixth Term, 2017–2021
Notes: Please refer to Figure 3 for details.

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opposition size. In contrast, our analysis of bill voting, where dissent has greater stakes, yields a smaller opposition group.

Examining the networks, legislators from the same political associations generally cluster together, with some exceptions. Pro-democracy legislators (two in the fifth term, three in the sixth) are adjacent in both terms. José Pereira Coutinho 高天賜, a prominent opposition member from New Hope (*Xin xiwang* 新希望), representing civil servants and Portuguese and Macanese residents, is positioned next to Leong Veng Chai 梁榮仔, another New Hope legislator. In the sixth term, New Hope held only one seat.

However, members of some peak organizations do not consistently cluster. For example, in the fifth term, two women legislators from the Trade Union, Kwan Tsui Hang 關翠杏 and Lei Cheng I 李靜儀, align with the opposition, while their colleague, Lam Heong Sang 林香生, is pro-establishment. This divergence partly reflects their voting on the 2013 domestic violence prevention bill: Kwan and Lei voted Yea, while Lam abstained, along with nine others.[51] In the sixth term, Lei Cheng I aligns with the pro-establishment group, clustering with Trade Union representatives Lam Lon Wai 林倫偉, Lei Chan U 李振宇 and Leong Sun Iok 梁孫旭. Their pro-labour stance positions them closer than other pro-establishment members to the opposition group.

In summary, the network graphs reveal distinct voting blocs, with a cohesive pro-establishment majority and a smaller, less unified opposition. While this aligns with the common understanding of Macau's legislature,[52] correlation-based analyses have limitations. They do not account for the relative importance of bills or variation in observation counts across legislator pairs. To address these, we turn to ideal point estimation in the next subsection.

Ideal Point Estimation

This subsection presents ideal point estimation to infer legislators' ideological positions based on roll-call votes.[53] The method employs a spatial model of parliamentary voting, assuming legislators decide their votes by comparing their ideological positions with those of proposed bills within a unidimensional policy space. Lower values represent pro-establishment positions, while higher values correspond to anti-establishment (i.e. opposition) positions.[54]

While the unidimensional framework provides a parsimonious way to model legislative behaviour, we recognize that it reflects a simplification of the complexities inherent in policymaking. This approach assumes that much of the variation in roll-call voting can be captured by a single underlying dimension of conflict, such as the divide between pro- and anti-establishment stances. However, legislators may also hold issue-specific stances that deviate from this primary dimension, such as economic priorities or social policy preferences. In our case, the unidimensional model was chosen because it aligns well with the dominant pattern of legislative conflict and provides a superior model fit compared to multidimensional alternatives.[55] Nevertheless, we acknowledge that this approach does not preclude the existence of issue-specific variation, which could be explored with more complex models in future research.

The analysis estimates three parameters: legislator-level ideal points, bill-level difficulty (representing the ideological position of bills) and bill-level discrimination (capturing bill saliency).[56] The sign of the discrimination parameter allows us to infer a bill's pro-establishment tendency from the

51 Of five other women legislators in the fifth term, one voted Yea, three abstained and one was absent.

52 Hao, Yufan, Sheng and Pan 2017.

53 Poole 2005; Clinton 2012; Armstrong et al. 2021.

54 The terms anti-establishment and opposition are used interchangeably.

55 Specifically, we estimated two-dimensional models, but these models exhibit poor model fit compared with unidimensional models based on Bayesian information criteria.

56 In addition, the model estimates two cut points: the first distinguishes between Yea and Abstain, and the second between Abstain and Nay. In our data, these cut points are statistically distinguishable from each other for both the fifth and sixth terms, providing empirical support for our use of trichotomous coding of votes.

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data. A positive discrimination value indicates that legislators with stronger pro-establishment preferences are more likely to vote positively (i.e. Yea over Abstain, or Abstain over Nay), while those with anti-establishment preferences are more likely to vote negatively on the same bill. The model is identified by imposing unit variance on legislators' ideal points and setting pro-establishment positions as lower than pro-government positions.

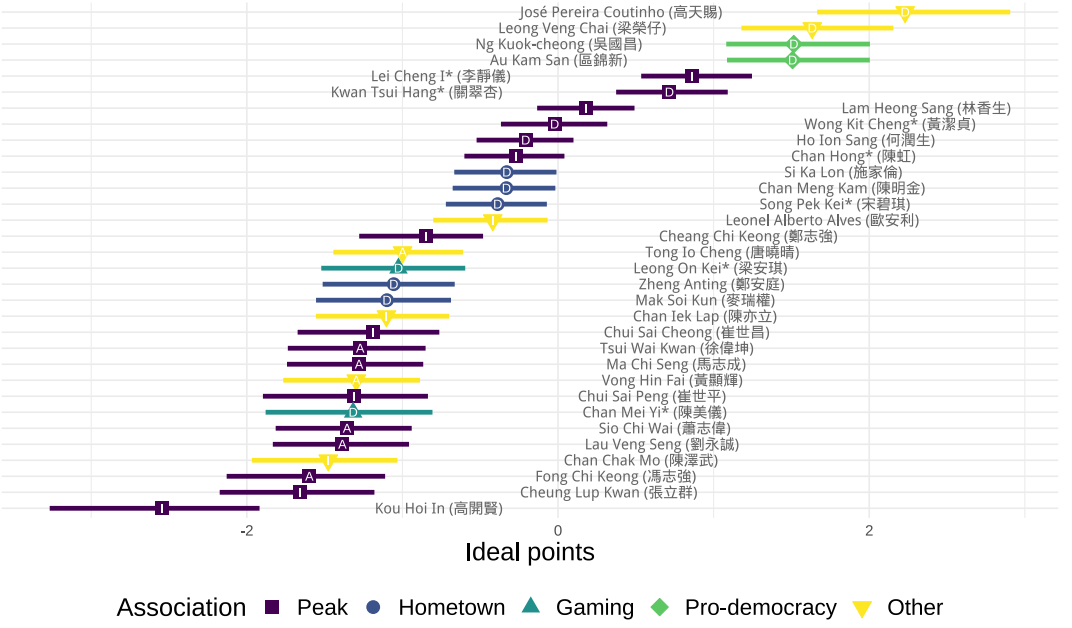

Figure 5. Estimated Ideal Points of Legislators for the Fifth Term, 2013–2017
Notes: Different shapes represent different types of political associations. Letters denote selection methods: "D" (directly elected), "I" (indirectly elected) and "A" (appointed). Lower values indicate pro-establishment positions; higher values indicate anti-establishment positions. Horizontal lines show 95% Bayesian credible intervals. Women legislators are denoted with an asterisk.

Figure 5 shows the estimated ideal points for the fifth term, with legislators ordered from pro-establishment (left) to anti-establishment (right). Consistent with the co-voting network (Figure 3), the six opposition legislators appear on the right. Lam Heong Sang, a Trade Union representative classified as pro-establishment, is positioned closest to the opposition, reflecting voting overlaps on specific bills. Three legislators from the Union for Promoting Progress (*Qunli cujinhui* 群力促進會) – Ho Ion Sang 何潤生, Wong Kit Cheng 黃潔貞 and Chan Hong 陳虹 – are also located near the boundary between the two groups. Although they are pro-establishment, their relative independence is evident in their voting behaviour. Similarly, legislators representing the Macau United Citizens Association (Fujian hometown association) occupy mid-range pro-establishment positions, while Macau-Guangdong Union legislators Zheng Anting 鄭安庭 and Mak Soi Kun 麥瑞權 hold more pro-establishment stances.

Interestingly, appointed legislators, who are typically assumed to be the most pro-establishment, do not uniformly hold the lowest positions. Two indirectly elected legislators, including Kou Hoi In 高開賢 (Macau Chamber of Commerce), are more pro-establishment than any appointed member. Furthermore, legislators serving on the Executive Council – Chan Meng Kam 陳明金, Leonel Alberto Alves 歐安利, Cheang Chi Keong 鄭志強 and Chan Chak Mo 陳澤武 – do not consistently adopt the most pro-establishment stances. Notably, Chan Meng Kam and Leonel Alberto Alves align closer to the opposition, challenging conventional assumptions about the strongest government supporters.[57]

57 Hao, Yufan, Sheng and Pan 2017, 168.

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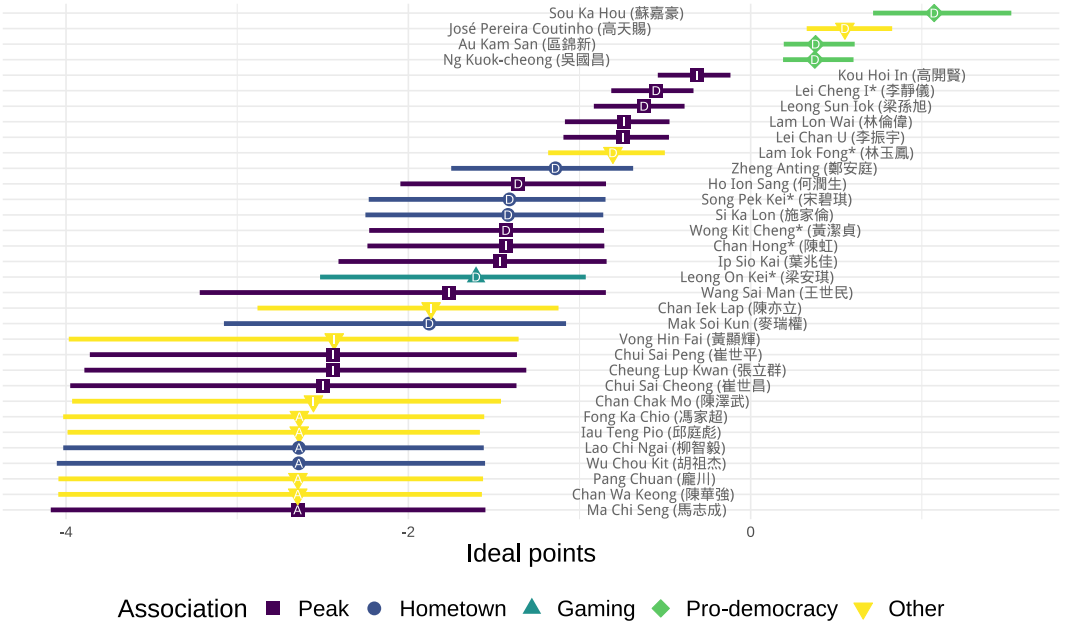

Figure 6. Estimated Ideal Points of Legislators for the Sixth Term, 2017–2021
Notes: See Figure 5 for details.

Figure 6 presents the results for the sixth term, showing a sharper divide between the pro- and anti-establishment groups. The seven appointed legislators, including Executive Council members Chan Chak Mo and Iau Teng Pio 邱庭彪, occupy the most pro-establishment positions. The opposition group consists of three pro-democracy legislators and José Pereira Coutinho from New Hope. The increased isolation of the opposition group reflects both a smaller group size and a wider ideological gap between the two camps. Among the pro-establishment bloc, voting records for 12 legislators (displayed at the bottom of the figure) were highly similar, with ten casting identical votes on all roll-call opportunities, resulting in wider credible intervals for these legislators.

A notable shift is observed in Kou Hoi In's position. Previously the most pro-establishment legislator in the fifth term, his position moves to the least pro-establishment within the pro-government camp in the sixth term. Kou Hoi In became president of the legislature during this term, which resulted in fewer voting opportunities.[58] However, his reduced participation does not fully explain his shift. Kou opposed government proposals four times and abstained 17 times, diverging from the stronger pro-government stance of most appointed and indirectly elected legislators.[59]

In summary, ideal point estimation models legislators' ideological positions based on roll-call votes, capturing the primary divide between pro- and anti-establishment camps. While the unidimensional framework simplifies policymaking complexities, it aligns well with the dominant pattern of legislative conflict. The results reveal ideological variation within the pro-establishment bloc and shifts in individual legislators' positions across terms, reflecting both structural alignments and independent voting behaviour.

58 Of 207 non-unanimous votes, Kou Hoi In participated in 141 (68%).
59 These proposals included amendments to the Stamp Duty Law, Employment of Foreign Employees Law and Labour Relations Law.

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Committee Deliberation Analysis

Using our classifications of pro-establishment and opposition legislators, we extend our analysis to non-voting legislative activities, focusing on committee deliberation. While a comprehensive analysis is beyond this article's scope, this preliminary examination highlights the utility of our results in understanding legislative processes. Committee deliberation occurs between the general and detailed voting stages, where legislative committee members and executive agents discuss and potentially amend bills. The duration of this process, measured as the time between these two stages, serves as a proxy for the effort spent reviewing and modifying legislation. Between 2013 and 2021, deliberation durations for 121 government-sponsored bills ranged from 22 days to 33 months, with a mean of 246 days. Figure 7 shows the distribution of deliberation durations, with nearly half of the bills resolved within six months but over 20 per cent taking more than a year.[60]

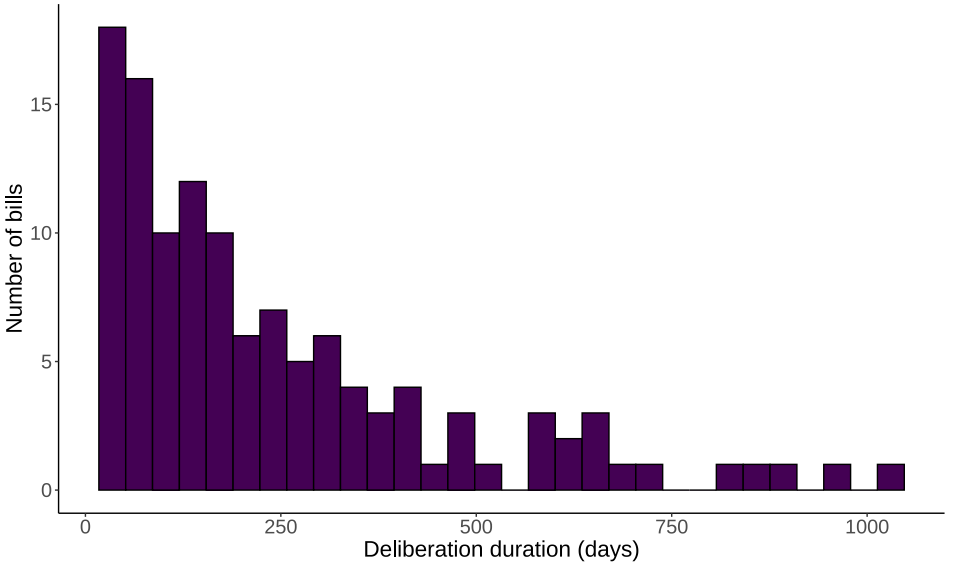

Figure 7. Committee Deliberation Durations for Government-sponsored Bills
Notes: Committee deliberation durations are shown in days, measured as the time between the general voting and detailed voting stages.

To explore the variation in deliberation durations, we use Cox proportional hazard models, with opposition patterns as key explanatory variables. Specifically, we include two binary indicators for dissent during general voting:

1. **Nay or Abstain from Pro-Establishment Legislators**: coded as 1 if any pro-establishment legislators cast dissenting votes, and 0 otherwise.[61]
2. **Nay or Abstain from Opposition Legislators**: coded as 1 if only opposition legislators cast dissenting votes, and 0 otherwise.[62]

These variables are mutually exclusive and both equal 0 for unanimously supported bills. We estimate three models: one with each variable separately and one with both jointly. Control variables include:

60 Deliberation duration is observed only for bills assigned to standing committees. Urgent bills, such as budget amendments or updates to the list of prohibited drugs, bypass committee deliberation.

61 This occurs in ten bills, five of which faced dissent from both pro-establishment and opposition legislators, while the others faced dissent only from pro-establishment legislators. The regression results reported in Table 2 remain robust when only Nay votes are considered as dissenting votes.

62 This occurs in 33 bills.

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- **Sixth Term**: a binary variable distinguishing between the fifth and sixth legislative terms.
- **Bill Length**: a proxy for bill complexity, measured as the natural logarithm of the number of pages in the initial proposal.
- **Days Left in Term**: the remaining days in the legislative session, as a time-varying variable.
- **Number of Bills per Committee**: capturing committee workload, also as a time-varying variable.

Table 2 presents the results, where positive coefficients indicate an increase in the hazard of deliberation termination, which corresponds to shorter deliberation durations, while negative coefficients indicate a decrease in the hazard, leading to longer durations.[63]

Table 2. Cox Proportional Hazard Models of Committee Deliberation Durations

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Nay or abstain from pro-establishment legislators	−1.143***		−1.076***
	(0.384)		(0.392)
Nay or abstain from opposition legislators		0.494***	0.362**
		(0.178)	(0.184)
Sixth term	0.469**	0.426*	0.415*
	(0.233)	(0.237)	(0.232)
Bill length (logged)	−1.027***	−0.949***	−1.066***
	(0.109)	(0.131)	(0.107)
Days left in term (logged)	−1.065***	−1.016***	−1.084***
	(0.139)	(0.131)	(0.135)
Number of bills per committee	0.063	0.022	0.052
	(0.070)	(0.071)	(0.068)
Number of government-sponsored bills	121	121	121
Time at risk	29,735	29,735	29,735
Log likelihood	−414.3	−418.5	−413.1

Notes: $^{*}p < 0.10$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{***}p < 0.01$. Hazard rate coefficients are reported, with robust standard errors clustered by bills in parentheses. Positive values indicate shorter durations.

Dissent from pro-establishment legislators significantly increases deliberation durations, as indicated by the negative coefficients in Models (1) and (3). For example, the coefficient of −1.143 in Model (1) implies that such dissent reduces the hazard of deliberation termination by 68 per cent, leading to longer deliberations.[64] This finding aligns with two key theories of authoritarian legislative politics: elite bargaining and information provision. Dissent from pro-establishment legislators serves as a credible signal of policy disagreements, prompting extended intra-elite negotiations to maintain coalition stability.[65] Additionally, committee deliberations provide a forum for gathering critical feedback from professionals and stakeholders, requiring the government to invest time in addressing public inputs.

Qualitative evidence supports these interpretations. During the plenary session on the Amendment to Law No. 5/2011 (Smoking Prevention and Control System), dissenting pro-establishment legislators Kou Hoi In and Zheng Anting raised concerns about the economic impact of banning smoking in casinos. Their opposition during general voting triggered two years of

63 The estimation results remain robust when relaxing the proportional hazard assumption by introducing an interaction term between time and any offending covariate.

64 Hazard ratio: $e^{-1.143} = 0.32$, implying a 1 - 0.32 = 68% reduction.

65 Gandhi, Noble and Svolik 2020, 1373; Przeworski 1991.

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committee deliberations, during which legislators negotiated concessions with government representatives that ultimately allowed for smoking rooms in casinos. Additionally, the committee report on the Smoking Prevention and Control System bill documented efforts to consider input from casino staff associations, public health specialists and tobacco retailers.[66] This case demonstrates the dual roles of Macau's legislature: its committee deliberations serve as venues for resolving intra-elite disagreements and as channels for incorporating feedback from societal groups.

In contrast, dissent from opposition legislators is associated with shorter deliberation durations, as indicated by the positive coefficients in Models (2) and (3). This suggests that the co-optation mechanism does not operate as effectively in this context. The executive appears less accommodating to opposition demands, particularly on bills addressing issues central to regime survival (i.e. political reform). For example, opposition legislators often vote against such bills, but the government accelerates deliberations to assert its authority, sidelining opposition grievances.[67] This finding underscores the limited influence of opposition legislators in Macau's legislative process, where the ruling coalition prioritizes its core interests over accommodating dissent from opposition groups.[68]

Conclusion

Using novel datasets of roll-call votes and committee deliberations from the Macau Legislative Assembly (2013–2021), this study analyses legislative politics in the Macau SAR. Our findings reveal a structural dichotomy: a dominant, cohesive pro-establishment faction and a smaller, fragmented opposition group. Some elected legislators exhibit behaviour consistent with co-optation theory, actively performing representative functions through bill sponsorship and dissent. While the opposition has limited influence – evidenced by the rejection of nearly all legislator-sponsored bills – their position-taking actions allow them to communicate to constituents.[69] Motivated by re-election incentives, these legislators use proposals and negative votes to differentiate themselves, similar to their democratic counterparts.[70]

Contrary to the presumption that appointed legislators align uniformly with the executive, our analysis reveals instances where they diverge from government positions. This highlights the importance of considering intra-regime discord in analysing legislative policymaking, even in an executive-dominant authoritarian regime. The ruling coalition, while powerful over opposition forces, is not monolithic.[71] Ally legislators are not mere "clerks" but political actors with policy preferences, capable of influencing legislation. Divergences within the coalition arise from competing interests, fostering intra-elite negotiations.[72] While ruling elites aim to incorporate ally preferences during bill formation, information gaps persist due to the relative privacy of executive rooms.[73] Legislative institutions compensate for this by facilitating information sharing, effective monitoring and credible policy communication.[74]

66 See the Committee Report, https://www.al.gov.mo/uploads/attachment/2017-07/73167595c6650eb56b.pdf. Accessed 7 April 2025.

67 This finding is consistent with Truex 2016.

68 We conducted separate analyses for the fifth and sixth terms to assess whether the relationships between dissent and deliberation duration varied across terms. Owing to the limited sample sizes (45 bills in the fifth term and 76 in the sixth), the results were not robust: pro-establishment dissent was significant only in the sixth term, while opposition dissent was significant only in the fifth. These findings should be interpreted with caution, and we rely on the full dataset for more robust results.

69 Huber 1996.

70 Desposato 2001; Malesky and Schuler 2010. For example, some Macau legislators lost re-election for failing to take positions on key issues. See Yu 2011b, 67–68.

71 Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988.

72 Williamson and Magaloni 2020, 1527.

73 Lü, Liu and Li 2020, 1385.

74 See Lü, Liu and Li 2020; Noble 2020; Schuler 2020; Jiang 2024.

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In Macau's legislature, pro-establishment legislators signal disagreement through dissenting votes, which often prompt amendments. Our analysis of deliberation durations supports both elite-bargaining and information theories: the executive learns about ally preferences through legislative processes and takes them more seriously than the preferences of opposition legislators. Although opposition behaviour aligns with co-optation logic, the government appears reluctant to accommodate dissent and instead prioritizes cohesion within the pro-establishment coalition.[75]

While the Macau Legislative Assembly remains a "rubber stamp" in that the legislative outcomes are tightly controlled and no government bills are rejected, this label obscures significant activity and contestation. Recent studies suggest authoritarian legislatures are "places of action,"[76] where members actively engage in queries, proposals, debates and amendments.[77] Our study contributes to this literature by demonstrating how mechanisms of co-optation, elite bargaining and information sharing operate in Macau's legislature through detailed analyses of roll-call votes and committee deliberations.

Comparatively, Macau occupies a unique position within the "one country, two systems" framework and the broader Chinese political system. It represents a mid-point on the spectrum between China's People's Congress system (PC system) and Hong Kong's Legislative Council (LegCo): more open than the PC system in electoral competition and opposition participation but less so than the pre-2021 LegCo. For example, unlike the PC system, where formal opposition is virtually absent, Macau's legislature includes directly elected legislators who can voice dissent and engage in position-taking. However, unlike the pre-2021 LegCo, where opposition legislators held veto potential, Macau allocates less than half of its legislative seats to direct elections, ensuring institutionalized executive control. The 2021 electoral reforms in Hong Kong – which expanded the LegCo from 70 to 90 seats while reducing the proportion of directly elected seats from 50 per cent to 22 per cent and introducing a screening committee to vet candidates – might have brought the LegCo closer to Macau's legislature in terms of contestation and executive dominance.[78]

Beyond Macau, our findings contribute to comparative research on legislative politics in electoral authoritarian regimes and autonomous regions. Macau's legislature offers a valuable case for scholars of Hong Kong politics to study how representative structures and legislative rules adapt to regime control.[79] Future research could leverage high-quality records from Macau's Legislative Assembly and Hong Kong's Legislative Council to explore legislators' representation styles, amendment processes and the government's responsiveness. A promising avenue for further study involves micro-level analyses comparing these two regions to gain deeper insights into legislative dynamics under the "one country, two systems" framework.

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75 Our analysis of committee deliberation is not a definitive test of co-optation; the executive may prioritize rent-based co-optation over policy concessions to opposition legislators.

76 Truex 2014, 235.

77 See Gandhi, Noble and Svolik 2020; Williamson and Magaloni 2020.

78 For a detailed discussion of the 2021 reform of Hong Kong's electoral system, see Wei and Hu 2021.

79 See, e.g., Smyth, Bianco and Chan 2019.

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Daina CHIBA is an associate professor in the department of government and public administration at the University of Macau. His research interests lie at the intersection of data science, comparative politics and international relations. His work has appeared in the *American Political Science Review, American Journal of Political Science* and *Political Analysis*, among other journals.

Meng U IEONG is an assistant professor in the department of government and public administration at the University of Macau. His work has appeared in *Review of Policy Research, Journal of Asian Public Policy, Asian Survey* and *The China Review*, among other journals. He is also the editor of *Macau Twenty Years after the Handover: Changes and Challenges under the "One Country, Two Systems."*

Jiying JIANG is an assistant professor in the department of government and public administration at the University of Macau. She received her PhD in political science from the University of California, San Diego. Her research focuses on legislative politics and lawmaking, with a regional specialization in China. She uses large collections of texts on legislative and policy processes to answer questions of how public policy is formulated and how policy power is shared within the regime. Her recent work employs text-as-data methods to explore the dynamics of bill change in China.

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