

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Taiwan's Local Elections: Defeat of the Ruling DPP Amidst Negative Campaigns

Kai-Ping Huang
(National Taiwan University)

On November 26, Taiwan held its “nine-in-one” local elections, with 11,023 positions up for grabs (excluding those at the national level.) Though the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) lost many seats amidst negative campaigns directed against it by opposition parties, the election’s biggest loser was ultimately the electorate, who did not receive quality campaigns. Because the lead up to the election was stifled by negative campaigns and trivial accusations, voters were largely mobilized out of fear and outrage, leaving little room to collectively conceptualize and discuss practical policy considerations. Turnout fell from around 66% in 2018 to just under 60% in 2022, the lowest voting turnout in 14 years. Independents chose not to vote, moreover, indicating apathy toward the elections.

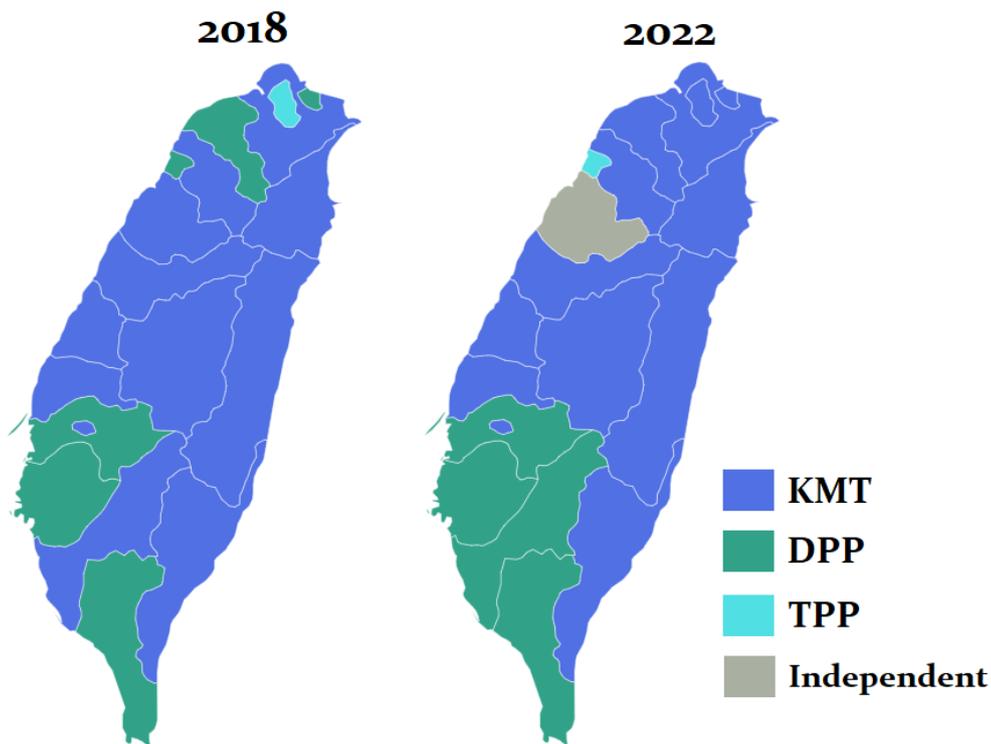
Election Results

Substantial interest in the electoral competitions typically surround six municipalities, including the capital Taipei city. This year, Hsinchu city unexpectedly received much media attention, topping the news almost every day since the election commenced. Because the mayors of New Taipei, Taichung, Tainan, and Kaohsiung sought re-election, their incumbent advantages made competition less intense than those for open seats in Taipei and Taoyuan. The Taiwan People’s Party (TPP), a third party led by Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-che, endorsed Huang Shan-shan, a former city councilor and deputy mayor, to continue his work. The tripartite race, including the candidate nominated by the governing Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Chen Shih-chung, and the KMT's Wayne Chiang, has been highly unpredictable. A tripartite contest was also held in Hsinchu city, with the DPP, KMT, and TPP all having nominated candidates for the open seat. Hsinchu, though not a municipality, hosts Taiwan’s ‘Silicon Valley,’ an industrial park led by Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), which has helped make Hsinchu become Taiwan’s most prosperous city. Given that Cheng Wen-tsan, the current mayor of Taoyuan, was popular and Lin Chih-chien (the mayor of Hsinchu who have served two terms) was a rising star within the DPP and backed by President Tsai Ing-wen, the electoral competition in Taoyuan was assumed to not be a contentious one. After plagiarism scandals forced

Lin to withdraw from the contest, the KMT's candidate Simon Chang increasingly gained momentum in the election, subsequently making the competition considerably more intense and unpredictable.

The KMT emerged as the winner of the election, while the DPP received the poorest record in its history. Though the TPP made some progress in these elections, the KMT and DPP certainly remain the most dominant forces in Taiwan's political landscape. As shown in Figure 1, the DPP's support shrank and became concentrated to southern Taiwan. The KMT, in contrast, saw itself retake three cities in the north, including the capital city, which was previously ruled by Ko Wen-chie of the TPP. Hsinchu, however, was secured by the TPP. Although the electoral results confirmed pre-election predictions, the DPP was shocked by the party's disappointing results. A subsequent soul-searching process was initiated by the DPP after its chairman, President Tsai Ing-wen, resigned from the position.

[Figure 1] Comparisons of Electoral Results in 2018 and 2022



Source: Central Election Commission

Major Election Issues

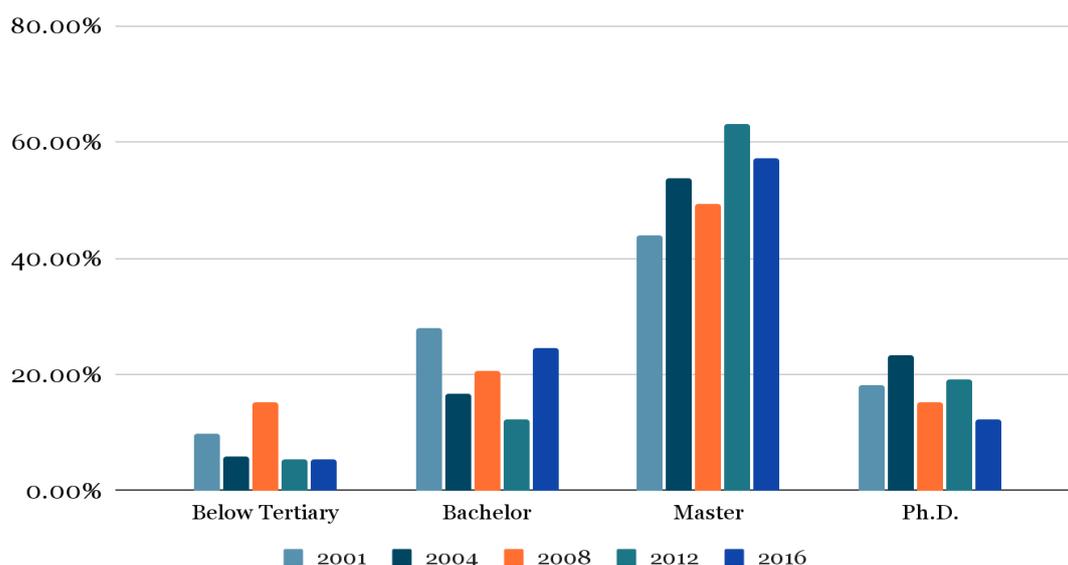
Topics covering governance, infrastructure, and social policies usually dominate Taiwanese local elections. Four years ago, Han Kuo-yu's declared a candid but accurate statement about Kaohsiung as being "old and poor". During his campaign, therefore, Han ran on an optimistic platform that promised to restore the city's prosperity, so residents could once again feel proud of their city. News coverage over this year's election, however, was dominated less by policy-driven agendas but by negative campaigns, particularly character attacks on the TPP's nominee for Hsinchu mayor, Ann Kao. At the beginning of the campaign season, the DPP held a relative advantage over the KMT, since

the party had won two by-elections and referendums in the previous two years. Confidence, however, began to wane when the DPP's Taoyuan mayor nominee Lin Chih-chien was accused of plagiarism in his master's thesis. As such, the first half of the campaign was dominated by accusations of plagiarism and concerns over credible credentials. A number of policy attacks also undermined the DPP's support and the fortunes of its nominees. The campaign's major issues are outlined below.

Scandals of Plagiarism

Political meritocracy, as Bovens and Wille articulate, has proliferated within most Western democracies.¹ Nowadays, a person's merit is reflected by their highest diploma, indicating their intelligence and effort. Prolonged academic training demonstrates an individual's capability and endurance for dealing with complex political and social issues. Although modern democracies tend to be disproportionately governed by citizens with the highest educational credentials, empirical research findings suggests that politicians with college degrees are neither more capable of governing nor less corrupt than those with a lower educational background.² As Figure 2 depicts, the majority of Taiwan's Legislative Yuan members hold at least a bachelor's degree. Since 2001, over 40% possess a master's degree and 15% hold doctorates.

[Figure 2] Distribution of Legislators' Highest Education



Source: Central Election Commission.

Due an expansion in higher education, a bachelor's degree is no longer sufficient to demonstrate one's merit, making a master's degree appear an increasingly necessary qualification in gaining an edge on Taiwan's electoral stage. As a result, it is understandable that Taiwanese politicians emphasize their obtainment of a master's degree or higher. For example, former Hsinchu mayor Lin Chih-chien, who was the nominee for the Taoyuan municipality contest, held two master's degrees, including one from

¹ Bovens, Mark, and Anchrit Wille. 2017. *Diploma Democracy: The Rise of Political Meritocracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

² Carnes, Nicholas, and Noam Lupu. 2016. "What Good Is a College Degree? Education and Leader Quality Reconsidered." *The Journal of Politics* 78 (1): 35–49.

a top Taiwanese university. However, they were both rescinded after being found guilty of serious plagiarism, forcing Lin to eventually withdraw from the contest. In counterattack operations, supporters of the DPP accused opposition candidates of committing similar frauds. Despite such allegations making politicians more wary of promoting their academic credentials, a positive aspect of this incident is that universities are forced to reconsider their degree-granting processes.

Poor Quality of Infrastructure

It is the responsibility of local governments to provide quality basic infrastructure. Local governments, however, are dependent on the central government due to latter's command over the distribution of tax revenues. The DPP government passed a special act to improve infrastructure in 2017, spending approximately USD 28 billion (NTD 880 billion). Most local governments use this budget to build stadiums, sports centers, irrigation systems, public transportation, etc. Concerns over the quality over such projects, however, have increasingly been raised. The 1.2 billion cost of renovating the Hsinchu Baseball Stadium, for example, were found to be below standard, with several baseball players being injured in its first two games after reopening. Taoyuan, another municipality ruled by the DPP, faced similar problems. CNN reported the collapse of a ceiling in a sports center when covering the severity of earthquakes at the time, even though the tremor in Taoyuan was relatively minor. Because of poor public work, opposition parties in Hsinchu and Taoyuan have implied the poor quality of such infrastructure as indicative of governmental corruption.

Discredited Pandemic Control Performance

Former Central Epidemic Command Center commander, Chen Shih-chung, was nominated to be Taipei's mayor by the DPP. Thanks to Chen's prompt decision to prohibit travelers from mainland China at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, Taiwan topped the resilience list in 2020, holding the lowest infection and mortality rates. As such, the DPP should have had a better chance of capturing the capital in 24 years. In May 2021, however, a pandemic broke out as cases suddenly spiked in Taipei. Local governments in Taipei and New Taipei especially, were put on the front lines to rescue those infected. An official from the Command Center called the Wanhua district in Taipei, where the first cluster infection was detected, a "crack". This description angered Wanhua residents, who felt they were being scapegoated for the government's failure to prevent the virus' entry. There were also not enough vaccines at the Central Command Center, making Taiwan have to rely on foreign vaccine donations for some time. Chen's other measures and decisions as commander also faced criticism and controversy. As a result, his performance as commander raised doubt over his abilities to lead the capital.

Economic Difficulties and Anti-China Campaign Backlash

Service sectors were also hard hit by the pandemic since in-store dining was banned for a few months and people practiced self-imposed lockdowns by reducing outdoor activities. Service sector employees lost their jobs and became targets of organized crime. In addition, many young people were lured to work overseas and forced to commit scams. In Taiwan, more people were confined to small spaces and treated inhumanely by providing personal information for money laundering. With

President Tsai and her government preoccupied in campaigning for DPP candidates, such crimes and concerns for social safety went largely unnoticed.

With Taiwan under pressure from high house prices, inflation, and an aging population, many voters anticipated that electoral candidates would offer a variety of solutions for local governments in addressing issues related to public safety and public services. The DPP's candidates, however, largely acted on the defensive since most of these problems are related to central government policies. This is especially the case for housing, which has increasingly become a selling point in electoral politics as young voters are unable to afford to buy homes. President Tsai's failure to deliver on her promise to build 80 thousand public housing units can, in part, also explain why some party candidates who made similar promises in the election have been discredited.

As the campaign progressed, the DPP increasingly leaned on its anti-China sentiment, which was thought to be a winning strategy that could also help divert voters' attention from its poor handling of social and economic issues. Unfortunately for the DPP, voters were mainly concerned with addressing everyday domestic problems, making the party's anti-China orientation an ineffective electoral tool. In addition, following the visit of US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Chinese military drills around the island led many to believe war was imminent. The government's reaction, however, indicated that it was unprepared for such a conflict, with the US appearing hesitant to assist if needed. As a result, Taiwanese voters reconsidered whether pursuing an anti-China stance was the best strategy to assure Taiwan's security.

Unwise DPP Campaign Strategies

On the whole, the DPP was defeated by its own actions. Since the DPP controls the central government, local elections provided an important political avenue for voters in expressing discontent with the party's performance. Amidst this anti-DPP atmosphere, however, the party failed to offer voters with policy proposals that could rectify such issues or at least provide sincere apologies for its mistakes. A reliance on extremism, trolls, and negative campaigns has only strengthened anti-DPP sentiment, with the party's nominees suffering the consequences. There are two main reasons why the DPP lost the election.

Nomination strategy

While it was predicted that the DPP would not win much in this year's elections, the results were much worse than expected. To determine party nominees, the party used to hold open intra-party competitions, however Chairman Tsai broke with this setup by personally designating a number of key battlegrounds. In the first mishap, the party's nominee for Taoyuan withdrew from the contest due to plagiarism. Its negative effects spread to other contests in northern Taiwan. Second, the party's nominee for Taipei's contest was hampered by a record of policy failures, including the handling of vaccines and spending on pandemic control, thereby only fueling the KMT with further ammunition to attack the government. In opposition, Chen went on the defensive by attempting to stir up anti-China sentiment by arguing that a KMT victory would send a worrying message to the world that Taiwan would not stand firm against China. It can be argued that nominating Lin Chia-Lung, former Minister of Transportation and Communications and Mayor of Taichung municipality, would have

improved the DPP's performance. Yet with no chance of getting nominated, Lin was instead sent to challenge incumbent New Taipei mayor Hou Yu-ih. Overall, the DPP paid a heavy price for its problematic nomination strategy.

Extremists and Personal Attacks

Since 2019, the DPP has increasingly used extreme tactics and trolls to attack its opposition and critics. During this year's elections, extremists attacked KMT and TPP candidates on a wide variety of reasons, from their educational credentials to harboring suspicious ties with China sympathizers. A ridiculous accusation was made against Taipei mayoral candidate Wayne Chiang's father, in which a libel lawsuit was filed by an innocent citizen who was alleged to have had an affair with Chiang's father many years ago. Most of the personal attacks were directed at Hsinchu mayoral candidate Ann Kao. By the end of the election, extremists and trolls exaggerated any mistakes Kao had made, including her comments and leadership style. There was also an accusation involving Kao's former employer, the Institute for Information Industry (III). Despite not being a government agency, most of III's research grants come from the Ministry of Economic Affairs. III disclosed Kao's personal information at the request of the DPP caucus coordinator in the Legislative Yuan, however such a move was questioned on whether the coordinator had the authority to do so. The opposition accused the DPP of abusing its power by using the state's apparatus and authority to obtain personal information protected by law.

Implications for the 2024 Presidential Race

Despite being the winner in this election, it is too early to say whether the KMT will have an advantage in the upcoming presidential election, since it still faces a number of obstacles in regaining the presidency. To begin with, the KMT must clarify its position on national identity. During the 2020 presidential election, the majority of voters supported the safeguarding of Taiwan's sovereignty. This stance is unlikely to change in 2024. Despite its diminishing effect, the DPP's anti-China sentiment is likely to hurt the KMT unless the latter party can rid itself of its pro-China image. In addition, the KMT lacks a charismatic politician who can challenge William Lai, the current vice president and a possible DPP nominee in 2024. While Hou Yu-ih is popular within the KMT, he has only just won his second term as mayor of New Taipei and will have to overcome pressure to step down early. Additionally, current KMT chairman Eric Chu is likely to be his biggest challenge. To make the race more complicated, the TPP's chairman Ko Wen-che has already announced that he will run for president. It remains to be seen, therefore, how the KMT will manage such intra-party competition.

The TPP will also be tested by the 2024 presidential election. While the TPP was unable to extend its control over the capital, it won Hsinchu city, a part of the island whose high-tech companies immensely shape its internal well-being and international connectivity. While the TPP offers an alternative to the DPP and KMT by working to improve transparency, accountability, and governance, most observers are not optimistic about the party's future since most of Taiwan's third parties have historically subsided. TPP party officials were surprised when their endorsed candidate for Taipei trailed even the much-loathed DPP candidate. This demonstrates that Taipei's voters don't appreciate what the TPP has done to the capital, and most voters do not believe that the TPP provides a credible

replacement to the two mainstream parties. Since Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-che has served two terms, a power turnover is likely to occur, as it has in other open seat contests. The three parties have received 42.29% (KMT), 31.93% (DPP) and 25.14% (TPP) of Taipei's votes. According to these figures, the TPP holds at least one-quarter of loyal supporters in Taipei, not bad for a party that has only been around for three years. To heighten its electoral competitiveness and become a major political contender, however, the TPP will need to expand its support base beyond young, educated, and urban voters. Coordinating with the KMT to defeat the ruling DPP could be an option in achieving this. ■

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- **Kai-Ping Huang** is Associate Professor of Political Science at National Taiwan University. Her research interests include party systems, formal institutions, and democratization focusing on East and Southeast Asia. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Democracy*, *Comparative Politics*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, *Journal of East Asian Studies*, and several edited volumes.

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For inquiries:
Jinkyung Baek, Senior Researcher

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 209) j.baek@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
1, Sajik-ro 7-gil, Jongno-gu, Seoul 03028, Republic of Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr