

Taiwan after the KMT: Interpreting the 2016 Election

To be delivered at CSIS, Washington, DC, January 19, 2016

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How to read the election results

On January 16, the people in Taiwan went to the ballot booths to vote for a new administration and a new legislature. Just as pre-election polls have predicted, Dr. Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won the presidency in a decisive victory, and the DPP also scored a major victory in the Legislative elections. For the first time ever, both executive and legislative branches of the government will be in the hands of the DPP. (See Tables 1, 2, and 3.)

This has a significant meaning to Taiwan as a democracy. Since the first direct presidential election in 1996, there have already been three turnovers of political power in Taiwan and so Taiwan has generally been regarded as having a consolidated democracy. As the governments of the United States, Japan, and many others congratulate the people of Taiwan for exercising their democratic right to decide the government and the course of the country, the people in Taiwan also understand that this is the right they obtained after a long fight. Taiwan's democracy and its democratic way of life are what we are very proud of and would like to share with other people.

The election results are unprecedented, and signal some potentially historical shifts. It is traditionally believed among Taiwan observers that the pan-blue, the KMT-leaning support base, is significantly larger than the pan-green, the DPP-leaning support base, and as long as the competition is fierce enough, the blues will go for blue and greens will remain green with the result that the KMT will win. The traditional wisdom now requires a major reassessment.

Even though the DPP internal surveys showed that green support was larger than blue support after the fourth quarter 2012, it remains to be

seen and to be tested whether the election results, along with the 2014 local election result, represent a fundamental shift in Taiwan's political landscape. At least it looks like the trend may continue if the DPP does not commit major mistakes. (See table 4.)

Table 1. % Share of votes in the presidential elections since 1996

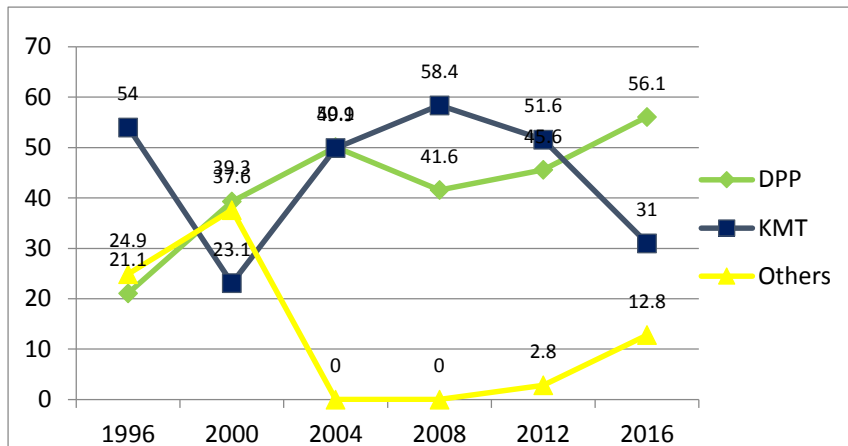


Table 2. % Share of votes in the LY district elections since 2001

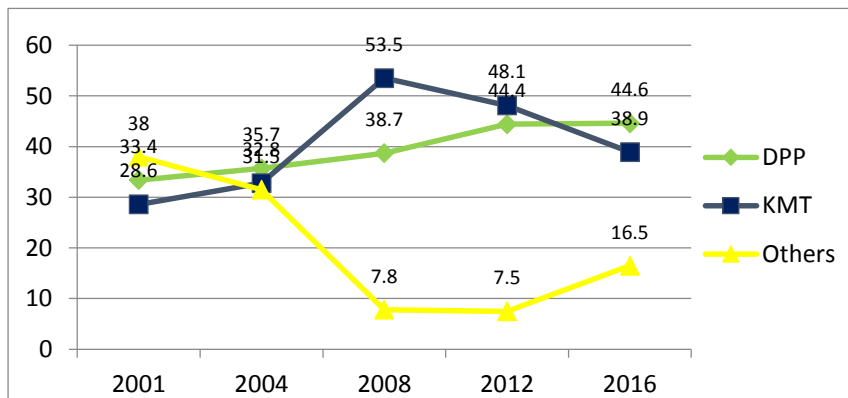


Table 3. % Share of seats by party in LY since 2001

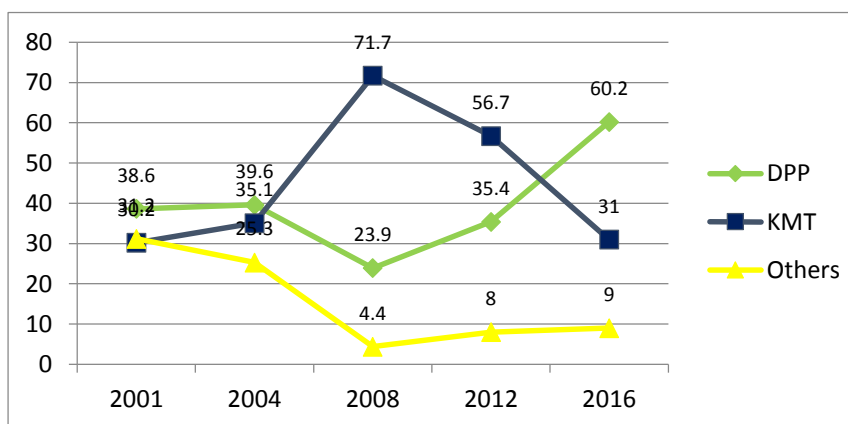
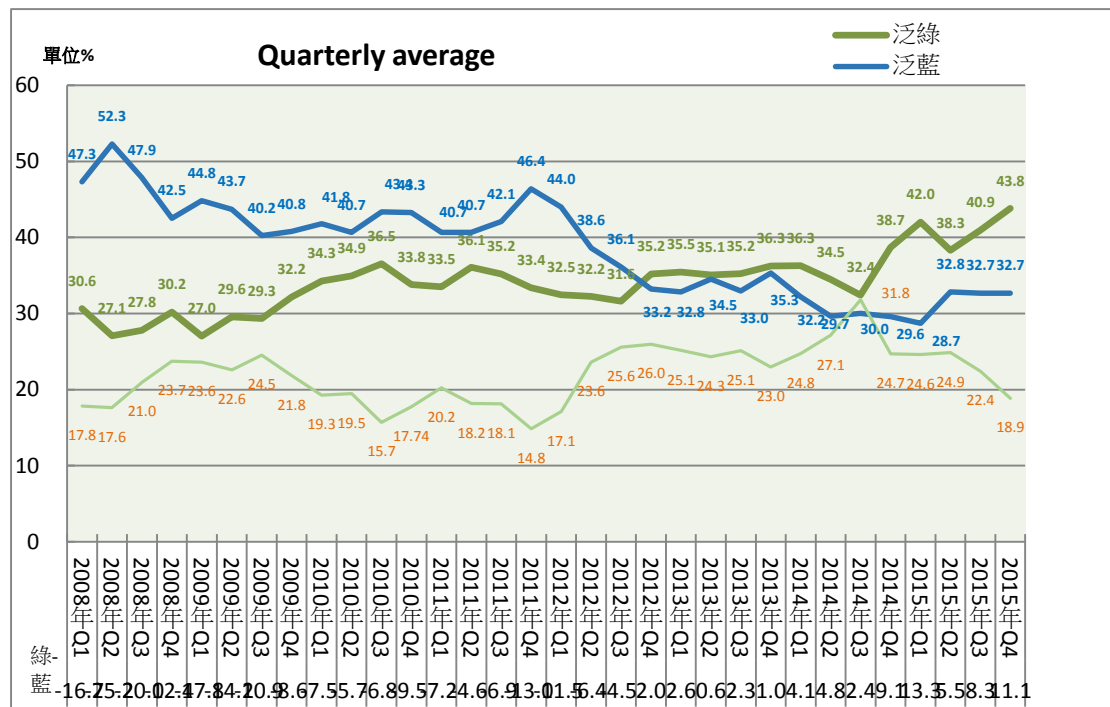


Table 4. Long-term trend of green/blue support



Main Factors in the election

Major national elections in Taiwan catch the attention, and often imagination, of the international community. Occasional observers may look at the Taiwan elections since its democratization through the independence/unification prism, with the DPP advocating independence and the KMT unification. This view might have had some degree of truth in the early years of democratization; however, it is overly simplistic and misleading to still read the elections in 2016 and their implications through this outdated perspective, as the voters in Taiwan no longer consider their voting decision based on such simple terms.

The DPP conducts regular surveys to understand the issues the public considers important, and they show that the public cares, not necessarily about highly political issues such as cross-strait relations and sovereignty, but more about the issues that concern them personally such as the economic situation, food safety, long-term care, income distribution, housing cost, pension reform, and social housing. Consequently, focusing on cross-strait relations as the salient issue in elections and ignoring other factors misses the nuances in the increasingly sophisticated voting behavior in Taiwan.

General take in Taiwan on the factors contributing to the election results, other than the KMT's own failure, include:

- @ **Young voters' discontent with the government.** This factor carried significant weight in the November 2014 local elections, and it carried over to the 2016 election with the DPP presidential candidate receiving overwhelming support among the voters 20-39 years of age throughout all surveys. In the LY elections, the New Power Party, which represents the Sunflower Movement in 2014, also scored a convincing victory in its debut.
- @ **Sharp contrast in the performance of the local administrations.** DPP local administrators are, in general, highly regarded and have out ranked their KMT peers in public opinion surveys. This gave voters confidence in voting for the DPP. It should be noted that Eric Chu as the Xinbei mayor ranked quite low in surveys.
- @ **DPP actively sought balanced positions on potentially confrontational issues,** including cross-strait relations, South China Sea tension, relations with Japan, and trade-related agricultural issues. This allowed the DPP to campaign beyond and above the traditional green-blue divide, appear moderate and responsible, stay on the high ground on political issues, and be able to garner the support of the middle majority. Despite the KMT's desire to maneuver the election into green-blue confrontation, even with the Ma-Xi meeting taking place at the height of the campaign, to provoke a dispute, it did not work as the DPP stayed moderate throughout the entire campaign cycle.
- @ **The DPP delivered policy platforms that addressed public concerns.** The proposed projects and measures included five innovative industry projects, food safety measures, long-term care policy, renewable energy, political and judicial reforms, a pension reform proposal, foreign policy and defense policy. In contrast, the KMT came into the picture of policy platforms late in the process, as Eric Chu did not become the KMT candidate until October 17, 2015, and was not successful in making an impact.

A Caution: A KMT defeat or China's defeat?

Some observers often interpret the defeat of the KMT in Taiwan's major elections as also China's defeat since the KMT is obviously China's favored choice. It could be a valid argument if China weighed in massively as it did in the 2012 presidential election. However, it might be inaccurate to read the 2016 election with the same interpretation. It should be noted that the cross-strait issue was not a salient issue in the campaign and therefore was not the issue defining the election result.

Throughout the campaign, neither the presidential candidate herself nor the entire DPP campaign team targeted China in any campaign rhetoric or slogans. Moreover, it appears that Beijing has prepared itself for a Tsai victory and for a DPP return to power following the presidential election. For this reason, the statements by Chinese officials asserting their position on the cross-strait question have been relatively reserved, so as to avoid producing a negative impact in Taiwan's election process.

Dr. Tsai visited Washington DC in June 2015. In her speech at CSIS, she laid out the principles in dealing with China. The DPP has adhered to these principles throughout the campaign. Even though President Ma decided to meet with Xi Jin-ping at the height of the election and the campaign could have been steered toward the cross-strait issue, it did not. The DPP position of not opposing cross-strait high-level meetings, under certain principles that signify cross-strait reconciliation and normalization of relations, cooled down the discussion of the meeting quickly. In short, neither China nor cross-strait relations were the focal point in the election except for the short interlude of the Ma-Xi meeting, and therefore it would be inaccurate to interpret the election as China's defeat.

What the DPP is ready to do in the new era

KMT infighting may dominate the domestic scene after the election, despite the fact that a strong opposition is the key to the vibrancy of Taiwan's democracy. It remains to be seen whether the KMT is able to hold itself together, or a top leader will emerge to regroup the party so that the incoming DPP Administration will have a good domestic partner for negotiations to resolve Taiwan's difficulties. This may affect the possibility for the DPP to seek reconciliation domestically, but the DPP is

ready to embark on the agenda to move Taiwan forward beginning with the transition period:

- @ **Stable majority in LY.** The DPP will seek cooperation at least with smaller parties in the Legislature such as the New Power Party and the People First Party to form a stable majority with the purpose of pushing for policies and legislation related to campaign platforms. After the LY speaker and committee chairs are elected, the initial rounds of consultation among the coalition partners will be sorting out the priority issues of the new session. The DPP will also seek cooperation with the KMT on issue-by-issue basis.

- @ **Domestic reconciliation.** The DPP believes a mood of reconciliation during the transition period is critical in shifting the national mood away from green-blue confrontation. The long transition until the inauguration on May 20 is a challenge to Taiwan, but it may also present an opportunity for the country to heal the wound of the long years of political dogfighting. The DPP leadership intends to form ad hoc committees manned by the incoming government, the outgoing government, and representatives from the major parties to deal with various pressing issues that Taiwan faces. Issues such as Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) participation, pension reform, and the cross-strait agreement oversight legislation.

- @ **Emphasis on economic structural reform.** The DPP ran on a major platform of bringing momentum back to Taiwan's economy by introducing five ambitious innovative industry projects: Asian Silicon Valley Project in Taoyuan, Bio-medical center in Taipei, renewable energy center in Tainan, center for smart machinery in Taichung, and defense industry centered in Kaohsiung, Taichung and Taipei. The DPP also made a pledge to run a national social housing project, ensure food safety, embark on long-term care, and salvage the pressing crises over various pension funds. These will be the top priorities of the new government to turn around the sluggish economic performance.

- @ **Friendship building as the guiding principle of external relations.** To pursue all the economic agenda, Taiwan under the DPP government

needs to have a friendly international environment, including its relations with China and the international community in general. This important consideration was stated in Dr. Tsai's April 15 nomination speech, and was also reflected in her June 3 speech in this very institution. In order for the DPP Administration to maintain friendly relations with the rest of the international community, it will undertake a low-key and surprise-free posture and make meaningful contribution to the needs of the international community, China included.

- @ **Cross-strait reconciliation.** Since the DPP and Dr. Tsai ran the campaign based on a platform that went above the green-blue line, a moderate and careful approach toward China will be pursued. In her visit to Washington DC last year, Dr. Tsai delivered a speech in CSIS on June 3 and made public her principles on cross-strait relations: to maintain the status quo, to pursue the development of cross-strait relations based on the ROC constitutional order and the public will of the Taiwan people, and to move forward cross-strait relations based upon the results of more than more than past 20 years of negotiations and exchanges between the two sides. **With regard to the question of the “1992 consensus”, as Dr. Tsai clearly stated during the televised presidential debates and policy presentation forums held in Taiwan prior to the election, the DPP has never denied the historical fact of the cross-strait dialogues that took place in 1992, and indeed acknowledges the shared desire of the two sides at that time to advance cross-strait relations by fostering mutual understanding. As for the specific phraseology of the “1992 consensus,” created by the KMT in the year 2000, she advocates a return to the original spirit of “setting aside differences to seek common ground” that formed the basis of the 1992 cross-strait meetings. Going forward, we will do our utmost to find a mutually acceptable mode of interaction between Taiwan and the mainland, one that avoids confrontation and prevents surprises. We will, in the new session of the legislature, put forward the Cross-Strait Agreement Oversight Legislation as a priority to highlight our interest in peaceful and stable relations with China.**

- @ **Foreign policy agenda.** Under the DPP, improving relations with China will not be at the cost of Taiwan's relations with the broader international community. By the same token, expanding relations with others will not be based on a zero-sum calculation. On the foreign policy side, the DPP will continue to strengthen relations with the US, Japan, the EU, and other like-minded states and expand trade and economic relations. We will also renew our effort to connect with neighbors south of our border for better economic, cultural and political ties. The new DPP Administration will also rigorously pursue participation in the second round of TPP negotiations and inclusion in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). In addition, it will seek opportunities to negotiate for more bilateral trade agreements. It will also work hard to be a responsible global citizen by contributing to the need of the international society such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. We will expand the operation of the disaster rescue center in central Taiwan to form a regional rescue network so that we can come to each other's assistance when there is a need for it. The incoming DPP Administration will also work with major international partners to ensure maritime safety by participating in joint search and rescue operations in the region. We will take part in the effort to eradicate transmittable diseases by providing relatively advanced medical resources. We will embark upon a project on digital opportunity to help the less fortunate countries.
- @ **Prospect on Taiwan-US relations.** Relations with the U.S. will be of utmost importance to the incoming DPP Administration in its foreign relations. We will continue to improve economic, security and political ties with the U.S. We will engage in an effort to reform legal infrastructure and make the necessary structural adjustment for Taiwan to be included in the second round of TPP negotiations. We will increase investment in the defense budget proportionate to Taiwan's economic growth, particularly increasing investment in Taiwan's indigenous defense programs for self-defense. We will adopt a consistent and predictable policy agenda with the US so that Taiwan can be regarded as a trustworthy strategic partner that makes a meaningful contribution to US global operations.

Conclusion

The DPP was established in 1986 when martial law was still in effect, and democracy, freedom, human rights and rule of law are an inalienable part of the party. The DPP is very proud that it was the key force for Taiwan's democratization, and will treasure the opportunity to be in the government again. We have engaged in soul searching about our past success and failure and this effort led to this January success. We will treasure the opportunity that the people, with great trust, rendered to us. We will shoulder our responsibilities again and move the country forward in a responsible manner. Three turnovers will certainly qualify Taiwan as a consolidated democracy, and we will demonstrate to others not only that democracy works, but works very well and as such Taiwan will serve as a role model for political and economic development.