Taiwan’s 2020 Election Analysis

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On January 11, 2020 Taiwan’s voters went to the polls for presidential and legislative elections. The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) retained both the presidency and a legislative majority of 61 out of 113 seats. The magnitude of the DPP’s victory was surprising; barely a year earlier it was drubbed in local elections. Between November 2018 and January 2020, domestic and external factors became far more favorable to the DPP and the incumbent president, Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文). Tsai and her party changed policy and personnel, whereas the KMT standard-bearer, Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜), failed to live up to expectations. Tsai’s robust defense against PRC pressure was an important factor, as it came at a time when Taiwanese voters’ perceptions of the PRC were being shaped by the upheaval in Hong Kong.

On January 11, 2020, Taiwanese cast ballots for four offices: president, district legislators (73), indigenous legislators (6), and party-list legislators (34).

Table 1: 2020 Presidential Election Result

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Candidate 1</th>
<th>Votes 2020</th>
<th>Percent 2020</th>
<th>Candidate 2</th>
<th>Votes 2016</th>
<th>Percent 2016</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DPP</td>
<td>Tsai Ing-wen</td>
<td>8,170,231</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>Lai Ching-teh</td>
<td>6,894,744</td>
<td>56.1%</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KMT</td>
<td>Han Kuo-yu</td>
<td>5,522,119</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>Chang San-cheng</td>
<td>3,813,365</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>+7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PFP</td>
<td>James Soong</td>
<td>608,590</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>Sandra Yu</td>
<td>1,576,861</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>-8.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Turnout

Compared to 2016, voter turnout increased sharply, with two million more votes cast, for a total turnout of 75 percent—similar to the pre-2016 trends.¹
The high turnout reflects the competitiveness of the race. Even as polls suggested Han was trailing by a wide margin, his core supporters remained enthusiastic and optimistic, turning out in huge numbers for rallies around the island. Han’s visible and motivated base created a sense of urgency in Tsai’s camp and drove a vigorous DPP get-out-the-vote campaign.

The DPP was especially keen to turn out young voters, who preferred Tsai by at least two to one. Over one million Taiwanese reached voting age between 2016 and 2020, so first-time presidential voters made up about 6 percent of the electorate. Mobilizing that group was a top priority for youth activists; one campus-based group raised over US$80,000 to subsidize young voters’ travel to go home to vote.

2. Presidential Results

Tsai Ing-wen’s vote share barely changed from 2016, but because of the high turnout she captured 1.25 million more votes than four years earlier, making her the first presidential candidate to break the 8-million-vote mark. Han Kuo-yu outperformed his predecessor, increasing the KMT’s vote total by 1.7 million votes and its share of the vote by 7.6 percentage points.

One non-factor in the race was veteran candidate James Soong (宋楚瑜), who returned for his fourth attempt for the presidency. Soong had quit the KMT in 2000 and later founded the People First Party (PFP, 親民黨), which is aligned with the KMT in the so-called “Blue Camp.” In 2016 Soong took a significant chunk of the Blue Camp vote, but this year most of those voters returned to the KMT. The PFP also lost its three legislative seats.

Tsai’s wide margin of victory and high vote total provide her with a clear mandate. Still, she improved only marginally from 2016 in percentage terms, and the legislative results, while positive on the whole, included some cautionary developments for the DPP.

3. Legislative Results

Taiwan’s legislative elections use a combination of first-past-the-post elections in geographic districts (73 seats), single non-transferrable voting to select representatives of the island’s indigenous people (6 seats), and party-list voting for representatives elected on a proportional basis (34 seats).

The KMT recovered some of the ground it had lost in the 2016 legislative elections, picking up three additional seats. However, the PFP lost three seats, leaving the Blue Camp’s overall representation seemingly unchanged. Seemingly unchanged, that is, because a newcomer to the party-list competition, Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) of the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP, 台灣民眾黨), picked up five seats.
Table 2: 2020 Legislative Election Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>Vote Share</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>Vote Share</th>
<th>Seats</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DPP</td>
<td>6,332,168</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>49</td>
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<tr>
<td>KMT</td>
<td>5,633,749</td>
<td>40.6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taiwan People's Party (new)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Power Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peoples First Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statebuilding Party (new)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NonPartisan Union</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>DPP</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>KMT</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>DPP</td>
<td>4,811,241</td>
<td>33.98</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>KMT</td>
<td>4,723,504</td>
<td>33.36</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taiwan People's Party</td>
<td>1,588,806</td>
<td>11.22</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Power Party</td>
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<td>7.75</td>
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<td>6.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peoples First Party</td>
<td>518,921</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Statebuilding Party</td>
<td>447,286</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>NonPartisan Union</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Change in Party Seat Share, 2016 to 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2020 Seats</th>
<th>2016 Seats</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DPP</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KMT</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan People's Party (new)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>+5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Power Party</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peoples First Party</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statebuilding Party (new)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NonPartisan Union</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ko Wen-je’s TPP claims to be neither Blue nor Green, and its leanings are truly difficult to parse. The DPP paved the way for Ko’s first mayoral victory in 2014 by not contesting the election, but their relations soon soured. Ko’s comment at a 2015 meeting in Shanghai that Taiwan and the PRC are “one family on two sides of the Strait” (兩岸一家親) was especially troubling to many DPP supporters.

Right up until the filing deadline in October there were rumors Ko might enter the presidential race, but in the end he heeded his own advice not to run without party backing. He had founded the TPP just six months before the election on a platform stressing public opinion, professionalism, and values, and eschewing ideology. It is thus unclear whether the TPP’s representatives will lean toward the Green or the Blue camp.

Given the magnitude of the KMT’s 2018 success, the DPP’s legislative majority was in doubt until late in the campaign. In the end, the party’s performance in the district elections was strong—it lost only three district seats. Of particular note was the ruling party’s performance in Kaohsiung City. Just one year earlier Han had won the mayorship by 10 percentage points; in 2020 the DPP swept all eight Kaohsiung legislative districts.

The picture is not entirely rosy for the DPP, however. Although Tsai won 57 percent of the presidential vote, DPP candidates captured less than 46 percent of the votes cast in the legislative districts. The most ominous result for the DPP, however, was the party-list voting, where it saw its vote share fall by 10 percentage points. In 2016 the DPP had crushed the KMT by 17 percentage points in the party-list voting, but this year the two parties were essentially tied, each winning 13 seats.

The message to the DPP is clear: The electorate rejected Han, but it did not embrace the DPP. The party list is an opportunity to show direct support for a political party, but an unprecedented number of Taiwanese abandoned the DPP in favor of third parties. The DPP won only 72 percent of the party-list votes cast for Green parties (DPP, NPP, the Statebuilding Party, and the Green Party), and about 14 percent of Tsai voters chose parties outside the Green Camp. In contrast, the KMT received 87 percent of the party-list votes cast for Blue Camp parties (KMT, PFP, and the New Party [NP]).

These results further reveal that about two-thirds of the TPP’s party vote came from Tsai Ing-wen supporters, and one-third came from Blue Camp voters.

Internal Factors Influencing the Election Results

1. Candidate and Party Factors: The DPP’s Return from the Brink

Almost as soon as she took office, Tsai’s approval rating began to decline; by November 2018 it was in the 20s. The voters showed their disapproval in the local elections held on November 24, 2018. The KMT won back seven executive posts from the DPP, ending up with a 15 to 6
advantage in the most important administrative positions below the presidency. The share of the KMT vote also increased in the 2016 legislative elections, from 38.9 percent to 48.8 percent. The DPP’s vote share fell from 44.6 percent to 39.2 percent.

Especially ominous for the DPP was the emergence of a popular new standard-bearer for the KMT, the newly elected Kaohsiung City mayor, Han Kuo-yu. Few expected the KMT to win in the DPP stronghold, but instead of a sacrificial lamb, Han Kuo-yu turned out to be a lion on the campaign trail. His folksy manner and promises of economic resurgence attracted disaffected voters who shared his righteous fury against the elites. From disgruntled KMT “iron ballots” looking for an alternative to their party’s increasingly out-of-touch leadership, to rural voters affiliated with KMT local factions, to Green Camp supporters who believed the DPP had abandoned them in order to cater to urban elites—Han appealed to them all. Han won the race with 54 percent of the vote, and the “Han Wave” (韓流) that he inspired also lifted other KMT candidates.¹¹

Tsai Ing-wen bore the brunt of her party’s dreadful performance. She came under attack from within the DPP, and her poll numbers continued to sink. On December 25 her approval rating fell to an all-time low: 24.3 percent. In the same poll, two-thirds of the respondents said they disapproved of her cross-Strait policy and they rated Han 20 points higher on a 100-point scale.¹²

In response to the local election debacle, both the DPP and the government made significant personnel and policy changes. Tsai stepped down as party chair and Lai Ching-te (賴清德) stepped down as premier. In his place, Tsai appointed Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌), one of the DPP’s most experienced politicians. Su’s first task was to persuade traumatized DPP legislators not to act like lame ducks.

Under Su, the DPP cabinet produced new policy initiatives. The most important was marriage equality. Tsai had fumbled that issue early on, giving opponents an opening to mobilize. Anti–same-sex marriage referenda passed by wide margins in November 2018, which put enormous pressure on DPP legislators to avoid a pro-marriage equality vote. Su, however, united his caucus behind the marriage equality bill, which passed on May 17.

The referendum process was a bruising experience for progressive activists. But to see marriage equality passed reawakened their hopes for the future—and their enthusiasm for Tsai Ing-wen.¹³

Paradoxically, attacks on Tsai from within the Green Camp (an open letter demanding she renounce reelection,¹⁴ a conspiracy theory alleging she never received a PhD, a primary challenge from former premier Lai) also helped Tsai’s reelection. This pushed her out of governing mode and into campaign mode so that by the time the KMT selected its candidate, Tsai was ready.

2. Candidate and Party Factors: The KMT’s Implosion
The 2020 presidential race looked like an easy win for the KMT. The local elections had given the party unprecedented momentum, so the only challenge was to find a nominee to ride that momentum to victory.

The KMT primary, which was decided by public opinion surveys, included five candidates: Han Kuo-yu (a late entrant); Eric Chu (朱立倫), the former mayor of Xinbei City and the party’s 2016 presidential nominee; Foxconn founder and chairman Terry Gou (郭台銘); and two others. Han finished first in the polling with 45 percent support, 17 points ahead of his closest opponent, Terry Gou. Chu, the establishment choice, finished third with 18 percent support. For many veteran KMT activists and supporters, Han’s swift ascent to the top post was difficult to accept. On the one hand, his performance in the mayoral election proved that the KMT could close the charisma gap with the DPP. On the other hand, the KMT doubted whether he had the experience, knowledge, or temperament for the presidency, and it was uncomfortable with his political style.

Han Kuo-yu is a classic populist politician. He claims moral authority and a unique ability to speak for ordinary citizens whose interests he says are ignored by the establishment elites. During the presidential campaign, Han introduced the term shumin (庶民) —“common people” —to describe his political base. He also identified himself as a shumin. His campaign sponsored massive rallies attended by wildly enthusiastic supporters, or “Han Fans” (韓粉). On social media, Han Fans shouted down criticism of their champion. Traditional media, too, were captivated by the “Han Wave,” in some cases actively promoting his campaign. Two television channels owned by a company with close links to the PRC devoted nearly all their election coverage to Han. As the Financial Times described it, “the two TV channels have given the 62-year-old former lawmaker nonstop coverage, helping to create the “Han Wave.”

Despite the KMT’s efforts to project a united front, it was impossible to hide the widespread disaffection with Han among mainstream KMT activists and staff. Some KMT activists—especially young people—openly opposed the nominee. KMT Party Chair Wu Dun-yih came under especially strong fire for mismanaging the process and allowing his own ambition to impede the party’s efforts to choose a candidate with broader appeal.

Adding to the outrage at Wu was his mishandling of the KMT’s party-list nominations. The list originally included Wu himself in a “safe position” (meaning the KMT expected to capture enough party-list seats for Wu to be elected) as well as two widely disliked KMT politicians, Chiu Yi and retired lieutenant general Wu Sz-huai. The list excluded up-and-coming figures such as Jason Hsu, a KMT party-list legislator elected in 2016 whose support for same-sex marriage made him a favorite among young voters.

The KMT’s problems accompanied a precipitous decline in Han’s popularity. In the end, the candidate who seemed poised to become the savior of the KMT turned out to be a disaster. It will take time to fully understand the reasons for Han’s poor performance, but six factors were evident even as the campaign was unfolding:
Han’s decision to set aside his duties as Kaohsiung mayor only a few months after taking office infuriated Kaohsiung residents, especially those who had voted for him believing he was a new kind of politician. Within thirteen months, Han’s vote share in Kaohsiung fell from 54 percent to 34 percent.

For voters outside of Kaohsiung, Han’s brief tenure as mayor did not produce a record of accomplishments that voters could use to judge his capability. He did gain a reputation during those early months, however, for working short hours and drinking too much.\(^\text{20}\) 

Han’s demeanor—his frequent use of insults and profanities, for example—struck many voters as unpresidential.

The “professional KMT”—the party leadership and paid staff—were ambivalent, at best, about his candidacy, and their conduct during the campaign suffered as a result.\(^\text{21}\) He also lost the support of a key ally, Wang Jin-pyng.

As voters got to know more about Han they discovered that he was not quite the shumin he claimed to be. Revelations that Han had traded in Taipei real estate undermined his claim to be an ordinary guy who needed nothing more than “a bottle of water and a bowl of stewed meat on rice.”\(^\text{22}\)

For Green Camp voters, in particular, Han’s statements during the mayoral campaign suggested he would prioritize cross-Strait relations ahead of Taiwan’s security. Han was mainly interested in leveraging his personal connections in mainland China to help Kaohsiung residents benefit from cross-Strait business ties, but PRC-skeptical voters found those connections—which included a meeting with the Beijing representative in Hong Kong during a March 2019 visit to the city—too close for comfort.

Han’s negatives were especially persuasive for young voters. Young people were turned off by Han’s “angry uncle” demeanor, his refusal to take a clear stance in favor of marriage equality, and his close connections with mainland China.

The diehard Han Fans never abandoned their candidate. His election-eve rally in Taipei was as big and raucous as a candidate could hope for. But ultimately he was unable to expand his support beyond his base.

3. Candidate and Party Factors: The Dogs that Didn’t Bark

As late as October, the possibility that one or more independent candidates would enter the race kept the Tsai and Han campaigns off-balance. The most likely entrants were Mayor Ko Wen-je or Foxconn founder Terry Gou, but the filing deadline passed without either man making a move to join. Other minor candidates—James Soong and former vice president Annette Lu (呂秀蓮) (she joined the race briefly)—had no impact on the outcome.

External Factors Influencing the Election Results

1. Xi Jinping’s New Year’s Speech

On January 2, 2019, PRC president Xi Jinping (習近平) gave a speech laying out Beijing’s Taiwan policy.\(^\text{23}\) It was largely boiler plate, affirming the PRC’s commitment to unification
under the “one country, two systems” formula. Nonetheless, it was interpreted in Taiwan (and by many international observers) as a stern warning to Taiwan.24

Tsai responded just hours later, and while her delivery was calm, her words were unyielding. She said, “Taiwan absolutely will not accept ‘one country, two systems’” and she reiterated her “Four Musts,” calling on the PRC to pursue relations with the Republic of China on an equal footing, to respect Taiwan’s democracy, and to use official channels.25

 Taiwanese welcomed Tsai’s strong response. Nevertheless, her approval rating remained low, recovering only marginally from its December 2018 low.26 There was nothing new in Tsai’s speech (her position on cross-Strait relations has been extremely consistent throughout her presidency); however, Taiwanese found it reassuring.

Tsai also used her January 2 speech as an opportunity to beat back against both the KMT and the Beijing government by calling attention to text linking the “1992 Consensus”27 to the one country, two systems formula. Tsai offered a new formulation: the 1992 Consensus is tantamount to one country, two systems. That, in turn, sharply increased the salience of Hong Kong for Taiwanese voters.

2. The Hong Kong Protests

The most important external factor shaping Taiwan’s elections was the upheaval in Hong Kong. It shifted the focus away from the domestic issues that had worked well for the KMT in the 2018 local elections and toward cross-Strait relations, which worked to the DPP’s advantage.

Ordinarily, Taiwanese pay little attention to Hong Kong, but the dueling speeches on January 2 reminded Taiwanese that in the eyes of Beijing, at least, the two places share a common destiny. Thus, when the Hong Kong government’s plan to introduce extradition legislation on April 3 provoked widespread resistance and protests, Taiwanese were primed to pay attention.

The 2019 Hong Kong protests had two features that made them especially relevant to Taiwanese:

First, the newly salient one country, two systems formula was at the center of the protests. Hong Kong people were protesting an attempt to align their “system” more closely with Beijing’s. From Taiwan’s perspective, the protests represented an indictment of one country, two systems.

Second, Taiwan’s 2014 Sunflower Movement and Hong Kong’s 2015 Umbrella Movement brought together activists from the two regions in unprecedented ways. This made Taiwanese youth attentive to the Hong Kong situation, with social media supplying a steady stream of sympathetic reports from the front lines.

As the protests sunk into increasingly violent confrontations between protesters and police, Taiwanese saw in Hong Kong a potential future for Taiwan.

From the beginning, Tsai showed strong support for the Hong Kong protesters.28 Han, in contrast, fumbled his early opportunities to position himself successfully on the issue.29
Most importantly, the Hong Kong protests upended the normal logic of Taiwan elections. In past elections, the cross-Strait issue benefited the KMT, which offered itself as the safe alternative to what it portrayed as a reckless, envelope-pushing DPP. In contrast, this year, cross-Strait relations worked against the KMT. To many voters, the idea that the PRC could be easily pacified was dangerously naïve. They rejected the KMT’s argument that the 1992 Consensus is a small concession that allows Beijing and Taipei to cooperate for the benefit of people on both sides. The DPP’s equation of the 1992 Consensus with one country, two systems—especially in the context of the blow-up in Hong Kong—undermined a key element in the KMT’s campaign strategy.

By late August, two months after the Hong Kong protests began, Tsai’s approval rating had risen to 50 percent.30

3. The Shifting Priorities of Washington and Beijing

Relations with the PRC, refracted through the lens of the Hong Kong protests, were a key issue in the 2020 elections, but U.S.-Taiwan relations were also important. Ko Wen-je called attention to the rising tensions over how to position Taiwan relative to the United States and the PRC when he coined the phrase “pro-American and China-friendly” (親美友中). According to Ko, the United States and Taiwan (and also Japan) share values, and Taiwan is “clearly standing in the U.S./Japan camp.”31 Tsai, said Ko, was leaning too far in the pro-U.S. direction; she was “pro-American and anti-China” (親美抗中).

Whether Tsai was responsible for the change is debatable, but there is no question that U.S. policy became much more pro-Taiwan during her first term in office. Whether we look at symbolic gestures like the (in)famous phone call with president-elect Donald Trump in December 2016; substantive moves such as the more than US$10 billion in arms sales approved in 2019; or congressional initiatives such as the Taiwan Travel Act and the Taiwan Assurance Act (currently under consideration), the cumulative effect of U.S. actions has been to convince most Taiwanese that Washington is comfortable with Tsai Ing-wen as Taiwan’s leader.

In a different year, there might have been room for debate over how to strike the right balance between Washington and Beijing, but not this year. Likewise, in past years the KMT could make the case that the DPP was putting up unnecessary barriers to good relations with the PRC, but there was little market for that argument this year. Xi Jinping’s government has taken a hard line against Taiwan, luring away diplomatic allies, squeezing Taiwan’s international space, intensifying its military intimidation, and more. At the same time, the economic benefits of engagement have diminished. Economic growth in the PRC is slowing, production costs are rising, and the trade war is making the PRC less attractive to Taiwanese firms.

4. Reports of PRC Interference

Yet another factor that benefited Tsai’s reelection was the widespread perception that the PRC was using underhanded methods to interfere in Taiwan’s domestic politics. Taiwanese are
accustomed to the PRC using policy to try to influence their elections, but 2020 was the first year in which PRC “sharp power” interventions drew broad attention (although much of the evidence for such interventions came from the 2018 elections).

Forensic investigations have focused on two forms of manipulation: politically motivated social media posts aimed at creating an impression of surging support for a particular candidate and the introduction of “fake news” into Taiwan’s media. Social media posts aimed at influencing Taiwan’s elections and sowing social divisions have been traced to sources in mainland China, Taiwan, and elsewhere. Meanwhile, organizations such as the Taiwan FactCheck Centre and Cofacts were formed to limit the spread of such information.

Taiwan’s traditional media have proven vulnerable to manipulation. Reporters carry a staggering workload in a hypercompetitive market; few have time to dig into a story that all the others are carrying, even if the source is sketchy. And some are not even trying. According to a July 2019 report in the Financial Times, editors at newspapers owned by a media company with business ties to the mainland take guidance directly from Taiwan affairs officials in the PRC.

**Implications for Policy and Politics**

Tsai’s campaign gave few cues as to her policy direction for the next four years beyond a continued emphasis on broadening Taiwan’s economic relationships, reducing economic dependence on the mainland, extending support for industrial innovation, and refusing the 1992 Consensus. Tsai will also continue to prioritize good relations with the United States; indeed, one of her first decisions after the election was to send her vice president–elect Lai Ching-te to Washington for meetings.

Politically, the 2020 election is notable for the way the fractured DPP pulled itself together in the wake of the local election defeat. The three key players, Tsai Ing-wen, Su Tseng-chang, and Lai Ching-te, also set aside past disagreements and competition to contest the election as a united front. But as soon as the votes were counted, political commentators were asking how long the united front could hold.

Su Tseng-chang’s agreement to stay on as premier during the transition is a harbinger of stability. Nonetheless, top DPP figures will be looking toward 2024, and speculation is rife. (For example, is Lai Ching-te eager to go to Washington to burnish his credentials for a 2024 presidential bid?) A simmering contest for the 2024 nomination could complicate Tsai’s second term.

Speculation will also continue about whether Terry Gou or Ko Wen-je—or both—will use the next four years to lay the groundwork for presidential runs. Ko now has a party behind him and a strong showing in the party-list race. However, to become a presidential candidate he will need to answer questions about cross-Strait relations that his “non-ideological” campaign allowed him to sidestep in 2020. As for Gou, it will be interesting to see whether he mends his relations with the KMT in the next two years.
One thing is for sure: the KMT faces a very tough slog. The party is currently snarled in a battle over the party chairmanship—a fight driven less by the various participants’ ambition than by the views of the different factions about which reforms have the best chance of allowing the party to survive until the 2024 elections. Ma Ying-jeou’s popularity allowed the KMT to skate on thinning ice for eight years; Han Kuo-yu’s unexpected success in 2018 looked like an opportunity for renewal. But the Han Wave has receded, leaving the party high and dry.

**Implications for Cross-Strait Relations and U.S.-Taiwan Ties**

Tsai Ing-wen’s election-night victory speech was unambiguous: she is not seeking conflict with Beijing, but neither will she bend to its demands. Summarizing her first term, she said, “In the face of China’s diplomatic pressure and military threats, we have maintained a non-provocative, non-adventurist attitude that has prevented serious conflict from breaking out in the Taiwan Strait.” However, she said, China’s “increasing pressure,” including its emphasis on the “one country, two systems,” compels Taiwan to strengthen its political and military defenses. Tsai repeated her formula for cross-Strait relations: peace (abandonment of the threat of force), parity (not denying the other’s side’s existence), democracy, and dialogue (和平，對等，民主，對話). She continued: “Democratic Taiwan, and our democratically elected government, will not concede to threats and intimidation. Positive cross-Strait interactions founded in mutual respect are the best way to serve our peoples. The results of this election have made that answer crystal clear.”

Tsai elaborated on her views several days later in an interview with the BBC. Asked how she expected Beijing to react to the election, Tsai suggested that the PRC government should reexamine its policy in view of an outcome that proved Taiwanese people “don’t like the idea of being threatened all the time.” Pressed to offer something to bring Beijing to the table, Tsai averred: “If they’re not prepared to face the reality,” she said, “whatever we offer won’t be satisfying to them.” Tsai also called attention to pressure from within Taiwan that she take a harder line against China. Despite that pressure, she said, “for more than three years, we have been telling China that maintaining the status quo remains our policy. I think that is a very friendly gesture.” Asked whether she favored independence “in principle,” Tsai again refused to take the bait: “Well, the idea is that we don’t have a need to declare ourselves an independent state. We are an independent country already and we call ourselves the Republic of China (Taiwan).”

Beijing’s response to Tsai’s reelection was relatively muted. A Xinhua commentary, published on January 11, accused Tsai Ing-wen, the DPP, and anti-China forces in the West of using underhanded methods and outside interference to produce an abnormal election that “deeply worries people who hope for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.” However, the commentary contained no suggestion that Beijing saw the election as necessitating a change in policy. On the contrary, it explicitly affirmed the current approach: “The trend of the times is irreversible. A momentary adverse trend is but a bubble on the tide of history. A single election cannot change the fundamental structure of cross-Strait relations. The power gap between the two sides is widening by the day, and the mainland side firmly controls the legitimacy and initiative of the process. Whether for the purpose of containing ‘Taiwan independence’ separatism, or bringing benefit to Taiwan compatriots, our policy toolbox is full.”
Subsequent statements from PRC sources also emphasized policy continuity. The 2020 meeting on Taiwan work was convened on January 19. According to Taiwan media, the speech at the meeting by vice head of the Central Taiwan Work Group, Wang Yang, stressed the need to increase the effectiveness of Beijing’s existing policy. In particular, Wang urged officials to improve cooperation on cross-Strait exchanges, deepen co-development measures, and safeguard the well-being of Taiwan compatriots. He also emphasized the importance of encouraging youth exchanges for study, internships, and careers. In a similar statement, former Taiwan Affairs Office vice chair Wang Zaixi told the Global Times (Chinese edition) that, “given Tsai’s reelection, cross-Strait relations will be deadlocked for the next four years. Cross-Strait relations cannot get better, but also they will not reach a showdown.” Fudan University Taiwan affairs specialist Song Luzheng offered a similar analysis in an interview with the Global Times (English edition): “If the US doesn't further interfere in the island's affairs, it is highly likely for the mainland to exercise restraint, and adhere to peace. … The ball is always in our court.”

These relatively mild reactions notwithstanding, there is little evidence to suggest that relations will improve or that the PRC will reduce its pressure on the Tsai administration. Beijing is likely to continue its campaign of both carrots (mainly inducements to Taiwanese to increase their investments and other activities on the mainland) and sticks (ranging from efforts to reduce Taiwan’s international space and poach Taiwan’s diplomatic partners to military activities aimed at eroding the island’s defenses).

That said, there are developments that could alter this calculus. Cross-Strait economic activity was already slowing even before the coronavirus outbreak due to rising production costs and the effects of the U.S.-China trade war, but the virus almost certainly will accelerate that trend. The longer production in the PRC is delayed and disrupted, the more pressure Taiwanese businesses will be under to find more reliable (or at least more diversified) manufacturing platforms. As Taiwanese businesses reduce their exposure to the PRC, Beijing’s leverage diminishes as well. Taiwanese are likely to continue to take advantage of the PRC’s incentive policies, but it seems unlikely that such a trend will produce significant political pressure on Tsai to agree to Beijing’s conditions for reopening contacts.

Three other potential risks could spark a downturn in cross-Strait relations over the next several months:

- In the near term, Tsai will face rising demands to pass a refugee law that will allow beleaguered Hong Kong activists to seek something akin to political asylum in Taiwan. There is enormous sympathy for the Hong Kong protests in Taiwan, especially among youth—an important constituency for Tsai. She will not want a repeat of her experience in her first term, when her failure to legalize same-sex marriage quickly led to a very public (if temporary) rift with young voters. So far, Tsai has not promoted such a law, in part because Beijing has repeatedly identified Taiwan as a “Black Hand” behind the protests. If Tsai agrees to shield protesters facing prosecution in Hong Kong, that will confirm mainlanders’ suspicions and could force Beijing to react. As
political analyst J. Michael Cole puts it, “If Beijing began to regard Taiwan as a springboard from which Hong Kong activists seek to ‘destabilise’ the [city] or China proper, Beijing could, in turn, decide to retaliate against Taiwan, a turn of events which would undermine Taiwan's national security.”

- Now that the election is over, some analysts believe Tsai will have a more difficult time resisting calls from within her own party for a stronger stance against the PRC. In particular, competition to become the DPP’s standard-bearer in 2024 could unleash a contest to see who can take the hardest line. Beijing will keep especially close watch on vice president-elect Lai Ching-te, whom it sees as an unreconstructed advocate for formal independence. Lai’s recent trip to Washington must have been a topic of concern in Beijing.

- If U.S.-Taiwan relations continue to improve, especially in a context of deteriorating U.S.-PRC relations, Beijing may decide it is necessary to take a harder line against the Tsai administration. Taiwan’s incorporation into the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy as a barrier to China’s military growth could pose a significant challenge to the PRC’s long-term strategy for Taiwan, as could progress toward a U.S.-Taiwan Free Trade Agreement. Both developments would face major obstacles in U.S. domestic politics as well as in U.S. foreign policy, but if they were to materialize, we should expect the PRC to intensify its pressure on Taiwan.

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Notes

The data suggest the high turnout benefited Tsai: the biggest increases in turnout were in cities where Tsai did better than average: Tainan (where Tsai won 67 percent of the vote) and Kaohsiung (62 percent). Turnout also increased more in localities with high proportions of young (ages 20–40) voters, another group that polls suggest favored Tsai. 王宏恩, “2020 年總統選舉投票率高達 75 %, 何而來?” 今周刊, January 4, 2020.


9 For Ko Wen-je’s speculation on this question, see “張立動民進黨國會過半？柯 P：沒過半也會很接近,” 中時電子報, January 7, 2020.


15 Details of the party primary can be found here: https://www.chinatimes.com/realtimenews/20190715000834-260407?chdtv.


21 Even before Han was confirmed as KMT nominee, a KMT legislator chastised his colleagues for their open disdain for Han, which he said would bring down the KMT. See [https://news.tvbs.com.tw/politics/1135610](https://news.tvbs.com.tw/politics/1135610).

22 黎冠志, “韓國瑜買千萬豪宅 專家：投資機率大”, 三立新聞網, November 6, 2019. [https://www.msn.com/zh-tw/news/living/%E9%9F%93%E5%9C%8B%E7%91%9C%E8%B2%B7%E5%8D%83%E8%90%AC%E8%B1%AA%E5%AE%85%E5%B0%88%E5%AE%B6%E6%8A%95%E8%B3%87%E6%A9%9F%E7%8E%87%E5%A4%A7/ar-AAJWzT3#image=1](https://www.msn.com/zh-tw/news/living/%E9%9F%93%E5%9C%8B%E7%91%9C%E8%B2%B7%E5%8D%83%E8%90%AC%E8%B1%AA%E5%AE%85%E5%B0%88%E5%AE%B6%E6%8A%95%E8%B3%87%E6%A9%9F%E7%8E%87%E5%A4%A7/ar-AAJWzT3#image=1).


24 For example, the *Financial Times* said it “ratcheted up the pressure on Taiwan” ([https://www.ft.com/content/fcabb7e8-0e45-11e9-a3aa-118c761d2745](https://www.ft.com/content/fcabb7e8-0e45-11e9-a3aa-118c761d2745)), while the Associated Press story described it as “tough talk.”

25 “China must face the reality of the existence of the Republic of China (Taiwan), and not deny the democratic system that the people of Taiwan have established together; second, must respect the commitment of the 23 million people of Taiwan to freedom and democracy, and not foster divisions and offer inducements to interfere with the choices made by the people of Taiwan; third, must handle cross-strait differences peacefully, on the basis of equality, instead of using suppression and intimidation to get Taiwanese to submit; fourth, it must be governments or government-authorized agencies that engage in negotiations. Any political consultations that are not authorized and monitored by the people cannot be called ‘democratic consultations.’” Tsai Ing-wen’s January 2, 2019 speech. English version: [https://english.president.gov.tw/News/5621](https://english.president.gov.tw/News/5621); Chinese version: [https://www.president.gov.tw/NEWS/24002](https://www.president.gov.tw/NEWS/24002).

26 According to a TVBS tracking poll, Tsai’s combined “satisfied and very satisfied” rating was 15 percent in late November, 23 percent in mid-January, and 36 percent in mid-May. [https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll_center/2019/20190517/923f82dcca3ac87e0a9d32f4980aa327.pdf](https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll_center/2019/20190517/923f82dcca3ac87e0a9d32f4980aa327.pdf).

27 A tacit agreement to disagree reached in the first round of cross-Strait negotiations in 1992. The two sides agreed that both affirmed the idea of one China but they further agreed to set aside the question of how that one China was to be defined. The KMT summarizes the consensus as “one China, each side with its own interpretation” (一個中國各自表述). The DPP has refused to affirm the 1992 Consensus, although Tsai Ing-wen refers to the 1992 talks as a “historical fact” that provide the political foundation for the development of cross-Strait relations. These ideas are summarized in Tsai’s first inaugural address. See: [https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/201605200008](https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/201605200008).

28 For example, in a June 9 Facebook post Tsai wrote, “We support all people who are seeking democracy and freedom and we believe the aspirations of the Hong Kong people should be respected.” [https://www.mac.gov.tw/cp.aspx?n=B3FBDF70D23B706E&s=75F54D3C12BC16A2](https://www.mac.gov.tw/cp.aspx?n=B3FBDF70D23B706E&s=75F54D3C12BC16A2).


The most prominent investigator is Puma Shen, a professor of criminology at National Taipei University. He provides a good overview of China’s “sharp power” efforts in Taiwan in an April 22, 2019 interview with the *Taipei Times*.


Kathrin Hille, “Taiwan Primaries Highlight Fears Over China’s Influence,” *Financial Times*, July 16, 2019. [https://www.ft.com/content/036b609a-a768-11e9-984c-fac8325aaa04](https://www.ft.com/content/036b609a-a768-11e9-984c-fac8325aaa04).

For a detailed account of the KMT’s current travails, see C. Donovan Smith, “Save the Sinking Ship: Can the KMT Reform?” *Ketagalan Media*, February 3, 2020.

[http://www.ketagalanmedia.com/2020/02/03/save-the-sinking-ship-can-the-kmt-reform/?fbclid=IwAR1tj0clh4pgcf2J0MCcbDgsYUri3Wfrhu1__S-RlihmFIWGmHBH-VApkM](http://www.ketagalanmedia.com/2020/02/03/save-the-sinking-ship-can-the-kmt-reform/?fbclid=IwAR1tj0clh4pgcf2J0MCcbDgsYUri3Wfrhu1__S-RlihmFIWGmHBH-VApkM).

For the full text of Tsai Ing-wen’s acceptance speech, see:

[https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202001110014](https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202001110014).


新华社北京 1 月 11 日电 题：莫道浮云终蔽日——台湾“大选”结果当何以看待.


