

## Challengers to Mainstream Parties in Taiwan's 2020 Elections Continuity Rather than the Expected Change

*Dafydd Fell*

### Abstract

Taiwan has had a highly stable party system since democratization, with the Kuomintang and Democratic Progressive Party dominating elections. Although they have faced a number of challengers over the last three decades, the two mainstream parties have always managed to maintain their dominance. However, in early 2019, it looked as though an earthquake election was in the cards in the upcoming January 2020 national elections. The mainstream parties faced unprecedented challenges both from within their own parties and from rival smaller challenger parties. What makes 2020 so puzzling is that it would ultimately be a maintaining election, with little change in both the parliamentary and presidential results compared to four years earlier. This essay tries to explain why 2020 featured continuity rather than the expected change in the party system. This is done with reference to (1) the China factor, (2) shortcomings in the challengers' campaigns, and (3) institutional factors.

**Keywords:** China factor, elections, electoral systems, party system, political parties, primaries, Taiwan.

---

Some elections bring change to a political system, while others are marked by continuity. The former are described by political scientists as earthquake or critical elections. Critical elections are defined by Geoffrey Evans and Pippa Norris as “Those exceptional contests which produce abrupt, significant and durable realignments in the electorate with major consequences for the long-term party order.”<sup>1</sup> We can contrast these contests with maintaining elections in which the party system status quo is largely left unchanged from the previous round of elections. Of course, most elections fall in between these two extremes of continuity and change. Taiwan's 2020 elections represent a case very close to the definition of a maintaining election, as not only did Tsai Ing-wen retain the presidency far more comfortably than any previous incumbent, but also there was only minimal change in the parliamentary seat share compared with four years earlier. What makes this election so puzzling is that at least for the first half of 2019 it appeared that an earthquake election looked far more likely.

For over three decades, Taiwan has had a remarkably stable party system.<sup>2</sup> Since the first democratic multiparty election in 1991, two mainstream parties have dominated every parliamentary and presidential contest. These are the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). This makes Taiwan quite distinct from the majority of new democracies that went through democratic transition in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which often have featured unstable party systems.

---

**Dafydd Fell** is a Reader in Comparative Politics in the Department of Politics and International Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. <df2@soas.ac.uk>

<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Evans and Pippa Norris eds., *Critical Elections: British Parties and Voters in Long-Term Perspective* (London: Sage, 1998), xxxi.

<sup>2</sup> Dafydd Fell, “Parties and Party Systems,” in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Taiwan*, ed. Gunter Schubert (London: Routledge, 2016), 78-103.

The mainstream parties in Taiwan have faced a variety of challengers since the 1990s, but always have managed to come through with their dominance intact. For instance, in the mid-1990s, the KMT was challenged by a splinter party, the New Party (NP). This party was mainly made up of politicians defecting from the KMT and it won about 13 percent of the votes and seats at its peak. However, by the late 1990s, the NP was in serious decline and, although the party still exists, it has long since ceased to be a threat to its parent party. A more severe threat to the KMT came in the form of its rebel presidential candidate, Soong Chu-yu, and the splinter People First Party (PFP) that he established in 2000. Although Soong did not win the presidential election in 2000, he came in second and his 36 percent of the vote far exceeded that of the official KMT candidate, Lien Chan. At its peak, the PFP occupied 20 percent of the parliamentary seats (2001–2004) and higher party identification levels than the KMT in both 2001 and 2002. However, the PFP, like the NP, gradually weakened and many of its politicians rejoined the KMT in the runup to the 2008 elections.<sup>3</sup>

The DPP also was challenged internally by rebels such as former party chair, Hsu Hsiang-liang, in the 2000 presidential election and by splinter parties in the late 1990s. However, dissenters posed far less of a threat to the DPP than to the KMT. In the case of both parties, they were able to cope with these insider challengers and splinter parties and eventually reintegrate most of these former defectors.

Movement parties, political parties that emerged from Taiwan's civil society, have also contested elections since the late 1980s.<sup>4</sup> However, for most of the last three decades, the movement parties have struggled to be competitive compared to the splinter parties. The first significant success was not until 2014, when the Green Party Taiwan (GPT) won seats at the local level, followed in 2016 when the New Power Party (NPP) became the first movement party to win national seats.

Many new democracies, especially ones with direct presidential elections, also have experienced political outsiders challenging mainstream parties. Such outsiders were able to win, or at least mount a challenge for power without the backing of established political parties, in South Korea and the Philippines.<sup>5</sup> Other political outsiders have managed to gain the nomination of mainstream parties and even take control of these parties. Such political outsiders often have relied on populist appeals. In contrast, almost all of Taiwan's presidential candidates have been nominated with extensive track records as national and/or local executives, as well as having party and parliamentary experience. Even the two early independent campaigns that did not have any party backing were led by establishment figures who already had extensive party and government experience.<sup>6</sup> In other words, presidential candidates in Taiwan have been party establishment figures and not political outsiders.<sup>7</sup>

In summary, over the last three decades, Taiwan's two leading parties have faced three kinds of challengers to their domination of the party system: splinters, rebels, and movement parties. And while at times their domination has appeared to be under threat, they always have managed to overcome these challenges.

---

<sup>3</sup> Dafydd Fell, "Measuring and Explaining the Electoral Fortunes of Small Parties in Taiwan's Party Politics," *Issues and Studies: An International Quarterly on China, Taiwan, and East Asian Affairs* 50, no. 1 (2014): 153-188.

<sup>4</sup> Ming-sho Ho and Chun-hao Huang, "Movement Parties in Taiwan, 1987–2016," *Asian Survey* 57, no. 2 (2017): 343-367.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Fukuyama, Bjorn Dressel, and Chang Boo-Seung, "Facing the Perils of Presidentialism?" *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 2 (April 2005): 102-116.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, the independent presidential candidate, Chen Lu-an, had been a KMT member over four decades and had served as Minister for Defense, Minister of Economic Affairs, and President of the Control Yuan in KMT governments.

<sup>7</sup> Prior to 2020, the only mainstream party candidate that did not have such a profile was the DPP's 1996 presidential candidate, Peng Ming-min.

## Challengers to Mainstream Parties in 2020

This essay addresses challengers to the mainstream parties in the 2020 election. The 2020 election is especially interesting in that the mainstream parties faced unprecedented challenges, yet, in the end, still managed to maintain their dominance in the party system. These challengers included both those originating from within the mainstream parties and those of splinter, movement, and populist parties. The goal of this essay is twofold. First, it outlines the substance of the challenges that the mainstream parties faced. Second, it assesses some of the potential explanations for the resilience of the mainstream parties in the face of these challenges. To what extent can past experience help us understand the patterns seen in 2020? Naturally, different variables will be more important for understanding various types of challenges to mainstream parties. The essay structures the analysis of why 2020 eventually saw continuity in the party system through the lenses of the China factor, shortcomings in the challengers' campaigns, and institutional factors.

The first set of challenges to be addressed is internal challengers. In the case of the DPP, one arose during the presidential primary in which the incumbent president, Tsai Ing-wen, was challenged by her former premier, Lai Ching-te. This was the first time that the formal nomination of an incumbent president had been challenged since 1996. Moreover, in that case, the KMT had not allowed a competitive nomination process and instead Lee Teng-hui's KMT rival, Lin Yang-kang, ran a rebel presidential campaign with the backing of the NP. When Lai initially announced his candidacy in early 2019, polls suggested that he had greater support than Tsai.<sup>8</sup> However, by the time the primary was held in early June 2019, Tsai was able to win by a margin of 8 percent.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the DPP primary did not end in a serious party split and Lai eventually agreed to serve as Tsai's vice presidential candidate.

The KMT also held a primary and this could be described as its first competitive primary for presidential nomination. In the past, both parties had nominated presidential candidates who were well prepared for the post, with extensive national or local government experience. However, in 2020, the KMT's nomination process produced a candidate who appeared largely unqualified for the role. There were three leading candidates in the KMT primary. The establishment candidate was Eric Chu, who had been the KMT's losing presidential candidate in 2016. Chu had extensive local executive experience, and had been a legislator, university professor, KMT chair, and vice premier. The first challenger was the CEO of Foxconn, Terry Gou. Although he had built his company to become the largest employer in Taiwan, he had no previous political experience. The third serious candidate was former legislator, Han Kuo-yu. Although he was less of an outsider than Gou, he had no central government experience and had been in the political wilderness for much of the previous two decades since leaving parliament in 2001. However, Han had shocked political analysts by his surprise success in winning the Kaohsiung mayoral election in November 2018. This was the first time the KMT had won control of Taiwan's second largest city since 1998. Thus, by the time Han announced that he was joining the KMT presidential primary, he had gained local executive experience for only a few months.

Although there were five candidates for the KMT presidential primary, it was essentially a battle between the semi-outsider Han and the outsider Gou. When the results were

---

<sup>8</sup> TVBS Poll Center, "Poll on Possible Presidential Candidates after Lai Ching-te Declares Candidacy" (賴清德宣布參選後 2020 總統可能人選民調) (March 20, 2019), [https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll\\_center/2019/20190321/4444eef51ba8ac3710ca51465ed2cb45.pdf](https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll_center/2019/20190321/4444eef51ba8ac3710ca51465ed2cb45.pdf) (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> Brian Hioe, "Tsai Ing-wen Wins DPP Presidential Nomination, Will Run Again as DPP's Presidential Candidate in 2020," *New Bloom Magazine* (June 13 2019), <https://newbloommag.net/2019/06/13/tsai-reelect-dpp/> (accessed December 12, 2020).

announced in July 2019, it was clear that Han had won comfortably with 44.8 percent of the vote, followed by Gou's 27.7 percent. The best qualified establishment candidate, Eric Chu, managed only a 17.9 percent support rate. In other words, the KMT's nomination process had allowed a challenger, who could be termed a semi-outsider, to be its presidential candidate. It is noteworthy, though, that despite the heated competition for presidential nomination in both leading parties, rebel candidates did not emerge among the unsuccessful candidates.

Therefore, the first puzzle to be addressed is why did the two parties' nomination processes have such different outcomes. In the DPP's case, the incumbent not only survived a primary challenge but also the party emerged strengthened and more united. In contrast, the KMT nomination process saw the establishment candidate roundly defeated by a populist candidate who had long been outside the party. Not only did he win the primary but also he appeared to have taken over the party.

In the majority of polls in the first half of 2019, Han's support rates were well above Tsai's. For instance, a poll in February gave Han 37 percent of voter support to only 16 percent for Tsai.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in mid-August, Tsai took the lead in the polls and saw this lead gradually expand during the campaign, so that by the end of December Tsai had a 16-point lead over Han (45 percent to 29 percent).<sup>11</sup> In the actual election, Tsai not only increased her vote share but also her vote total compared to 2016. Although Han narrowed the margin of Tsai's victory, she still won by almost 20 percent.

In addition to Han, there were other potential threats to Tsai's presidential re-election. The person with the most potential to undermine the DPP's campaign was the independent Taipei mayor, Ko Wen-je. In most polls in the first half of 2019, Ko's support rates were higher than Tsai's, and it appeared that his candidacy would be more damaging to the DPP than to the KMT. However, Ko's support appeared to decline in the summer of 2019 and he belatedly announced that he would not stand for election in September.<sup>12</sup> A further potential challenger was the PFP chair, Soong, who had almost won as a KMT rebel in 2000 and in 2016 had won almost 13 percent of the vote. Although Soong has tried to sell his party as an alternative to Blue-Green politics, in 2016, his candidacy was more damaging to the KMT campaign. In 2020, Soong's campaign did not take off and ultimately his vote share was only 4.26 percent, well below the 7–8 percent he had received in pre-election polls.

Therefore, the second puzzle is why did Tsai's two main presidential challengers go from leading in the polls to seeing their campaigns fall apart? In Ko's case, this led him to decide not to stand for election, while Han went from being the supposed savior of the KMT to becoming a liability.

When it comes to the parliamentary election, change also had appeared in the cards in the first half of 2019. It seemed unlikely that the DPP would hold onto its parliamentary majority. The KMT had been boosted by its local executive and council election victories in November 2018. Similarly, the movement parties that had evolved from the progressive side of Taiwan's civil society posed an even greater threat to the DPP than four years earlier. The NPP had ended its semi-alliance with the DPP from 2016 and also had performed well in the 2018 local council elections.

---

<sup>10</sup> TVBS Poll Center, "Poll on the Support Rate of Possible Presidential Candidates for 2020" (2020 總統可能人選支持度民調) (February 20, 2019), [https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll\\_center/2019/20190221/f9e86e1f970925d485787b5e42275c8c.pdf](https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll_center/2019/20190221/f9e86e1f970925d485787b5e42275c8c.pdf) (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> TVBS Poll Center, "Poll on the 2020 Presidential Election after the TV Debate" (電視辯論後, 2020 總統大選民調) (December 29, 2019), [https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll\\_center/2019/20191230/a136da8dbd0dd9b2ff1b35ebb05637e7.pdf](https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll_center/2019/20191230/a136da8dbd0dd9b2ff1b35ebb05637e7.pdf) (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Brian Hioe, "Annette Lu Unexpectedly Enters the Presidential Race, While Gou and Ko Withdraw," *New Bloom Magazine* (September 17, 2019), <https://newbloommag.net/2019/09/17/gou-lu-presidential-run/> (accessed December 12, 2020).

Lastly, although Ko eventually chose not to contest the presidency, his newly created Taiwan People's Party (TPP) represented the most significant challenge to the two mainstream parties since the height of the PFP in 2001–2002.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, polls suggested that the TPP posed more of a threat to the DPP in the single member district constituencies. Both the DPP and KMT also faced splinter parties, but as has long been the case, the splinter challenge was greater for the KMT than for the DPP. For instance, not only did the KMT face competition on the party list from the NP and the PFP, but also the PFP had a presidential candidate again.

In the end, however, the parliamentary results showed an unprecedented level of continuity. The balance between DPP and KMT seats was almost unchanged, with the DPP falling from sixty-eight to sixty-one seats and the KMT rising from thirty-five to thirty-eight seats. Instead, the biggest changes occurred on the margins of the party system, as the PFP lost its parliamentary representation and the TPP became the third largest party with five seats. Despite increasing its party list vote share, the NPP fell from five to three seats. Similarly, although the other two relevant movement-based parties, the GPT and the State Building Party (SBP), ran well-funded campaigns, they both failed to cross the 5 percent threshold needed for party list seats.<sup>14</sup> Although the total progressive movement party vote share and number of relevant parties increased, their number of seats was almost the same, falling from five in 2016 to four in 2020. Ultimately, the splinter parties were severely weakened and, for the first time since 1992, none of their candidates was elected to Taiwan's parliament.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, the third puzzle concerns why we also witnessed a maintaining election in Taiwan's parliamentary party system. The local elections in 2018 had suggested there would be a similar earthquake at the national level in 2020, but the outcome was one of continuity.

## The China Factor

Taiwan's election results are often oversimplified in both media and some academic accounts through the lens of the China factor. In other words, elections are understood as a referendum on Taiwan's relations with China or on unification versus independence. In their book *The Taiwan Voter*, Christopher Achen and TY Wang conclude, "The central finding is that one key dimension organizes Taiwan citizens' vote choices—the China factor."<sup>16</sup> But what exactly is the China factor and how should its impact on elections in Taiwan be best understood? Wu Jieh-min defined the China factor as "the process by which the PRC government utilizes capital and related resources to absorb other countries and 'offshore districts' (*jingwai diqu*, such as Hong Kong) into its sphere of economic influence, thereby making them economically dependent on China in order to further facilitate its political influence."<sup>17</sup> For the purpose of this essay, the China factor is considered more broadly to include the impact of developments and actors in the PRC on Taiwan's party and electoral politics. In other words, this can also include nongovernment actors in the PRC, such as Taishang, as well as developments in Hong Kong.

---

<sup>13</sup> Brian Hioe, "What Does the Formation of the Taiwan People's Party Mean for 2020 Elections?" *New Bloom Magazine* (August 6, 2019), <https://newbloommag.net/2019/08/06/tpp-party-formation/> (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> The State Building Party managed to win one district seat in which it ran in alliance with the DPP.

<sup>15</sup> In 1992, the NP had not yet been formed but the KMT faction that would serve as the base for the NP in its establishment six months later did contest and win seats that year. The other debateable case is 2008 when, on paper only, a single PFP legislator was elected but, in reality, the KMT had agreed to nominate a significant group of PFP legislators.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Achen and TY Wang, "The Taiwan Voter," in *The Taiwan Voter*, ed. Christopher Achen and TY Wang (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 20.

<sup>17</sup> Wu Jieh-min, "The China Factor in Taiwan: Impact and Response," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Taiwan*, ed. Gunter Schubert (London: Routledge, 2016), 430.

The way that the China factor affects Taiwan's elections is complex and changes over time. For example, there are some years when the China factor appears to have been less salient and instead the campaign has been dominated by domestic issues, such as in 2008 or even 2016. There are also years when the issue appears to favor the KMT and to be detrimental to the DPP, such as 1996 or 2012. There are other years when the China factor seems to have enhanced the electoral prospects of the DPP, such as 2000, or as we will see in this study, 2020. The way the issue works on Taiwan's public opinion is affected by both what China says and does and the ways in which Taiwan's parties respond. As Kharis Templeman notes, "In Taiwan, Beijing's preferred candidates have tended to do best when Beijing does least—threats and overt endorsements have usually served only to strengthen PRC-sceptical voices over friendlier ones."<sup>18</sup>

The first place where we can see the effect of the China factor in the puzzles addressed in this essay concerns the DPP's presidential nomination. In late 2018, polls suggested that Lai Ching-te would be a stronger presidential candidate than Tsai.<sup>19</sup> One reason that there was strong potential for the China factor to be especially influential on the primary was that many of Tsai's loudest critics were from the older generation of the Pan Green camp who believed that she had been too cautious in promoting Taiwan's independence. In contrast, they saw Lai as a better representative of their cause.<sup>20</sup>

Both Shelley Rigger and Templeman view Xi Jinping's January 2, 2019 speech on Taiwan as the starting point of Tsai's recovery.<sup>21</sup> Xi reiterated the PRC position that peaceful unification under "One Country, Two Systems," the model used in Hong Kong for the handover from Britain to China in 1997, was the only possible future for cross-strait relations. This Chinese linkage of the "One China" principle with "One Country, Two Systems" placed the KMT in a difficult position, as it was harder for it to sell its "One China, Different Interpretations"<sup>22</sup> model for cross-strait relations to the Taiwanese electorate. Templeman notes how Tsai's forceful rejection of Xi's speech was well received in the polls and even gained cross-party support.<sup>23</sup>

As the DPP's primary campaign developed, Tsai was able to narrow the gap over Lai and take the lead. Brian Hioe argued that both Xi's January military threats against Taiwan if it rejected China's unification proposals and the anti-extradition protests in Hong Kong contributed to Tsai's victory in the primary. It is noteworthy that, despite Lai's reputation for being a strong supporter of Taiwan's independence, he did not benefit from the China factor in the same way as Tsai. Hioe noted, for instance, how Lai did not make a serious attempt to distinguish his outlook toward China or his broad policy appeal from Tsai's in the primary debate. In fact, perhaps in order to appeal to the floating voters he needed to win the primary poll, he disappointed hardliners by reiterating the moderate DPP position that there was no

<sup>18</sup> Kharis Templeman, "How Taiwan Stands Up to China," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (July 2020): 85-99.

<sup>19</sup> TVBS Poll Center, "Poll on DPP Chair Byelection and 2020 Presidency (民進黨主席補選與 2020 總統民調) (December 14, 2018), [https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll\\_center/2018/20181214\\_/6cd006ffbba1d7ec5c59091252948d16.pdf](https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll_center/2018/20181214_/6cd006ffbba1d7ec5c59091252948d16.pdf) (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>20</sup> Brian Hioe, "William Lai Declares Challenge to Tsai for the DPP's 2020 Presidential Nomination," *New Bloom Magazine* (March 19, 2019), <https://newbloommag.net/2019/03/19/william-lai-challenge/> (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Shelley Rigger, "Taiwan's 2020 Election Analysis," *China Leadership Monitor* (March 1, 2020), <https://www.prcleader.org/shelley-rigger-taiwan-election> (accessed December 12, 2020), and Kharis Templeman, "How Taiwan Stands Up to China," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (July 2020): 85-99.

<sup>22</sup> The 1992 consensus (One China different interpretations) is a contested concept that originates from negotiations between Taiwan and China in 1992. According to the KMT a tacit agreement was reached that both sides accepted the idea of One China but that they would set aside how to define One China. While the KMT has termed the 1992 consensus as "one China, each side with its own interpretation," the Chinese side's definition does not include different interpretations.

<sup>23</sup> Templeman, "How Taiwan Stands Up to China."

need for Taiwan to declare independence because Taiwan already was an independent country.<sup>24</sup>

The continuation of protests in Hong Kong and violent police actions, together with the perception of a growing PRC threat to Taiwan, undermined the campaigns of both Taipei mayor, Ko Wen-je, and the KMT's Han Kuo-yu. Ko had been ahead of Tsai in the polls for much of the first half of 2019, but as Tsai's support levels recovered, Ko's campaign began to falter. Since Ko had been willing to reach out to China with the slogan, "One family on both sides of the Taiwan Strait," he had lost the backing of many former supporters.<sup>25</sup> Instead, it appeared he was now reaching out to Pan Blue voters rather than the Sunflower generation that had been central to his rise to power in 2014. Ko's changed approach toward China also contributed to the DPP's decision to no longer support him in his 2018 re-election bid. The fact that Ko only narrowly won re-election as Taipei City Mayor suggests his support already was on the wane. While Ko's ambiguous positions concerning China allowed his election as Taipei's mayor, his perspectives regarding China could not be avoided in a national election, especially when China was so prominent on the political agenda. Although Ko did not officially announce that he would not run until September, he had been losing support gradually in the first half of 2019 and it could be argued he had switched his focus by July to his new party, the TPP.<sup>26</sup>

Although Han tried to project a very different image from that of the previous KMT president, Ma Ying-jeou, in reality his China policies were almost identical to Ma's. In other words, for Han and Ma, the China market represented the answer to Taiwan's economic problems. Indeed, Han was happy to engage with China on the basis of the 1992 consensus that there was One China, albeit with two different interpretations. The way Han would deal with China was made clear in his visit to Hong Kong as the mayor of Kaohsiung in March 2019. The official stated objective of the trip was to boost the market for Kaohsiung's agricultural products. In Hong Kong, Han met both Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam and China's top official in Hong Kong, the Director of the PRC's Hong Kong Liaison Office, Wang Zhimin. Then, in Xiamen, Han met the head of China's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO), Liu Jieyi. The DPP questioned whether Han was offering tacit support for "One Country, Two Systems." For instance, the director of the Mainland Affairs Council, Chen Ming-tung, called Han's visit a "political act that falls under the One Country, Two Systems framework."<sup>27</sup> However, Han appeared to be following a precedent established in 2005 when KMT chair Lien Chan visited China at a time in which China was refusing to deal with the elected DPP government. It seemed that Han was preparing a blueprint to return to Ma-era cross-Strait relations, the model that had been rejected by the Sunflower Movement in 2014. At least at this point, though, it did not yet appear that there was a major public backlash against Han's China initiatives.

The 2019 anti-extradition Hong Kong protests changed the Taiwanese political agenda to a much greater extent than their predecessor, the 2014 Umbrella Movement. Han's earlier Hong Kong visit placed him in a very awkward position when the protests first erupted. As

---

<sup>24</sup> Brian Hioe, "Tsai Ing-wen Wins DPP Presidential Nomination, Will Run Again as DPP Presidential Candidate," *New Bloom Magazine* (June 13, 2019), <https://newbloommag.net/2019/06/13/tsai-reelect-dpp/> (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Brian Hioe, "What Does the Formation of the Taiwan People's Party Mean for 2020 Elections?" *New Bloom Magazine* (August 6, 2019), <https://newbloommag.net/2019/08/06/tpp-party-formation/> (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> TVBS Poll Center, "Poll on the 2020 Presidential Election after the DPP's Primary" (民進黨初選後 2020 總統可能人選民調) (June 22, 2019), [https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll\\_center/2019/20190624/85dda81cdb86284e8c509b1ceb7525f1.pdf](https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll_center/2019/20190624/85dda81cdb86284e8c509b1ceb7525f1.pdf) (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Rebecca Lin, Yi-Shan Chen, and Shu-ren Koo, "Han Kuo-yu's Visit to Hong Kong Raises Suspicions," *Commonwealth Magazine* (April 11, 2019), <https://english.cw.com.tw/article/article.action?id=2354> (accessed December 12, 2020).

Templeman explained, “A revealing moment came at the very outset of the Hong Kong protests on June 9, when Han feigned ignorance, then dismissed them as a ‘parade.’ He backtracked under a deluge of criticism—later that month, he would vow that OC2S would take effect in Taiwan only ‘over my dead body’—but the damage had been done.”<sup>28</sup> If the protests had quickly faded, probably the effect on Han’s campaign could have been contained. However, they continued, and images of violent police and gangster action against the protestors made the government’s handling of the demonstrations impossible to ignore.

In addition to the Hong Kong protests, other China-related issues filled the news media in the second half of 2019. The KMT’s attempts to shift the agenda away from concerns about China or to sell its vision of cross-Strait relations became impossible. China continued to apply both economic and military pressures. For instance, Templeman notes, “On 31 March 2019 there was an apparently deliberate incursion by PRC fighter jets across the midline of the Taiwan Strait—the first such incident in two decades.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, China attempted to punish Taiwan economically by reducing the number of Chinese tour groups and banning travel by independent Chinese tourists to Taiwan. International media organizations such as Reuters and the Financial Times reported on how China was trying to control Taiwan’s media landscape and agenda both through the Want Want media group and by “secretly paying to place positive stories about the mainland in Taiwanese papers.”<sup>30</sup> The perception that the PRC was trying to influence Taiwan’s elections and support the KMT was further reinforced by the news story that broke in November 2019 of the defection of an alleged Chinese spy in Australia and his reports on how he had operated in Taiwan.

A useful framework for understanding how topics operate in elections is issue ownership theory.<sup>31</sup> Stated simply, voters view some parties as better able than others to deal with certain matters, thus they can be seen as owning these issues. To reap electoral benefits, the key for parties is to make certain that the focus of the political agenda is on their owned issues. In contrast, parties will try to steer the political agenda away from topics that are owned by their opponents.

In 2012, the KMT had appeared to own the cross-Strait issue. Consequently, in debates and advertising, it tried to challenge the DPP on relations with China, while the DPP tried to steer the political agenda toward more favorable social considerations.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, the pattern was reversed in 2020. As Templeman explained, “Han’s campaign strategy was to deflect concerns about the China threat by talking about the economy and Taiwan’s diplomatic isolation. This approach faltered as rumours of CCP interference in the race grew louder.”<sup>33</sup> The pattern of issue ownership also was seen in the way the parties addressed the Hong Kong protests. A forthcoming study by Eva Mazzeo compares the way that Han and Tsai dealt with the Hong Kong protests in their social media posts.<sup>34</sup> She found not only that Tsai had far more posts mentioning the Hong Kong protests, but also that her posts were much more extensive. In contrast, Han talked far less on Facebook posts about Hong Kong. In Mazzeo’s words, “Han’s comments on the protests in Hong Kong are few and chaotic, and the real intention of his discourse is difficult to identify.”<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Templeman, “How Taiwan Stands Up to China.”

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>31</sup> John Petrocik, “Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study,” *American Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 3 (1996): 825-850.

<sup>32</sup> Dafydd Fell and Charles I-hsin Chen, “Lessons of Defeat and Success: Taiwan’s 2012 Elections in Comparative Perspective,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 43, no. 3 (2014): 13-43.

<sup>33</sup> Templeman, “How Taiwan Stands Up to China,” 92.

<sup>34</sup> Eva Mazzeo, “The ‘Hong Kong Factor’ in Social Media Discourses during Taiwan 2020 Presidential Election Campaign: A Preliminary Research,” *SOAS Journal of Postgraduate Research* (forthcoming).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

An example of Tsai's employment in the campaign of China's crackdown in Hong Kong was her January 6, 2020 TV ad, *Speak Loudly* (大聲說話).<sup>36</sup> The ad starts with everyday scenes of young people's lives, then the narrator describes how just a few hundred kilometres away countless young people are disappearing, being imprisoned, and being abused on a daily basis. Then Xi's January 2 speech is referenced with the line, "It turns out the 1992 consensus is One Country Two Systems. It turns out that One Country Two Systems is dictatorship." Next, the visuals switch from carefree young peoples' lives in Taiwan to clips from Hong Kong and China that cast the KMT in a negative light. First is Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam, whom Han had met in March, followed by the China-based Taiwanese singer, Huang An, who created a media storm in 2016 by denouncing the teenage K-pop idol, Chou Tzu-yu, as a Taiwan independence supporter for waving an ROC flag. This is followed by clips of three KMT nominated legislators, Wu Szu-huai, Chiu Yi, and Yeh Yu-lan, who have reputations for being pro-PRC. Wu had been attacked during the campaign for a film of him standing for the PRC national anthem at an event in Beijing. Both Chiu and Yeh had formerly been nominated by the pro-unification New Party, suggesting that the KMT was also pro-unification. Moreover, Yeh was one of the few politicians in Taiwan who had publicly supported the actions of the Hong Kong police against the protesters. This is followed by a clip of Xi and finally by a slightly longer visual of violent police actions against protestors in Hong Kong.

The DPP's framing of the China threat appears to have been especially effective in winning back the support of young voters who tend to have the highest level of Taiwanese identity. Comparing the support rates of the 20–29 age group in a July 2019 survey with the final pre-election survey of December 29 reveals the effect of the campaign. In the first survey, the support rates for the group were 45 percent for Ko Wen-je, 34 percent for Tsai, and 20 percent for Han, but by December the rates were 63 percent for Tsai and only 24 percent for Han.<sup>37</sup>

Templeman has observed that the PRC's interference "efforts seem to have worked against Beijing's 'defeat Tsai' project: Within a year, she went from probable loser to 18-point winner."<sup>38</sup> It can be argued that it is also important to factor in the way both the Han and Tsai campaigns reacted to the impact of China on Taiwan. As Mazzeo concludes in her study of the way candidates dealt with the Hong Kong protests in their social media posts, "the President of Taiwan was able to be re-elected not only due to the context she had been presented with, but also for the way in which she was capable of exploiting it. In other words, if her narrative had not taken Hong Kong into account, the results of the election would have likely been different."<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, it is important to note that Tsai did not adopt an extreme anti-China stance. A number of studies observe that Taiwanese voters have tended to reject the DPP when it has adopted exclusive ethnic nationalist campaign appeals.<sup>40</sup> While in 2016 the DPP left such

---

<sup>36</sup> DPP election ad, "Speak Loudly" (大聲說話) (January 6, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqtpKLsukwk&t=4s> (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>37</sup> TVBS Poll Center, "Poll on the 2020 Presidential Election after the KMT Primary" (國民黨初選後 2020 總統大選民調) (July 18, 2019), [https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll\\_center/2019/20190718\\_/92ae63afafc8669dd8cbd2de127cd5c4.pdf](https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll_center/2019/20190718_/92ae63afafc8669dd8cbd2de127cd5c4.pdf) (accessed December 12, 2020), and TVBS Poll Center, "Poll on the 2020 Presidential Election after the Televised Debate" (電視辯論後，2020 總統大選民調) (December 30, 2019), [https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll\\_center/2019/20191230/a136da8dbd0dd9b2ff1b35ebb05637e7.pdf](https://cc.tvbs.com.tw/portal/file/poll_center/2019/20191230/a136da8dbd0dd9b2ff1b35ebb05637e7.pdf) (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>38</sup> Templeman, "How Taiwan Stands Up to China," 86.

<sup>39</sup> Mazzeo, "The 'Hong Kong Factor' in Social Media Discourses during Taiwan 2020 Presidential Election Campaign."

<sup>40</sup> Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "Specificities and Limits of Taiwanese Nationalism," *China Perspectives*, no. 62 (2005): 32-43, and Dafydd Fell, *Party Politics in Taiwan* (London: Routledge, 2005).

exclusive appeals to the Taiwan Solidarity Union, in 2020 the State Building Party played this role.

### Shortcomings in the Challengers' Campaigns

Although the China factor, especially the Hong Kong protests, played a key role in explaining the election outcome, it does not tell us the whole story. It is important to remember that the key challengers to the Taiwanese party system in 2020 had risen to power locally on platforms and appeals that were not centered on China. Hsiao, for instance, views Ko, Han, and Gou as part of what he calls a trend in "Rising Populism in Taiwan Politics."<sup>41</sup> For Hsiao, there are three core features of global populism today:

- 1) a right-wing nationalistic xenophobic and racist/anti-immigration conservative ideology, 2) a form of charismatic leadership with politicized mobilization of the masses, and 3) a style of rhetoric reflecting absolute principle that 'the people'—especially 'the common people' and not the elites—should rule all aspects of politics.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, he argues that all three types were present in the Taiwan case in 2019.

Even though there are aspects about the style of campaigning adopted by Ko and Han that fit standard definitions of "populism," the present analysis is not centered on the concept. One problem is the way the term is used in Taiwan. Generally, it is used to condemn opponents without any reference to or understanding of the academic definitions. Secondly, by trying to squeeze the challenger cases into a set definition of populism, it is easy to lose track of the objective of this essay, which is to shed light on why the 2020 campaign was ultimately a maintaining election. It is easy to frame 2020 as a case of Taiwan's rejection of populism, but this tells only part of the story.

Therefore, this section of the essay addresses the non-China related elements of the challengers' campaigns and how these contributed to the candidates' electoral performance. Of interest is why the electoral strategies that got them elected in the first place and allowed them to gain significant levels of support in the first half of 2019, seemed to cease to be effective in the second half of the year. Since young voters had been a key factor in the initial success of Han in 2018 and Ko in 2014, it is especially interesting to consider the non-China-related factors in why their youth support bases either declined or collapsed.

Both Ko and Han had managed to be elected in locations long seen as strongholds for their rival parties. This had led to downplaying partisan identity in their campaigns. In Han's 2018 newspaper ads, he never mentioned that he was a KMT candidate and there was no KMT party insignia. Despite being a KMT candidate, he even could use the slogan, "Taiwan can no longer divide between Blues and Greens."<sup>43</sup> He tried to argue that politics were the problem not the solution and indicated that he would focus all of his attention on economics if elected. His most repeated slogan during the campaign was, "Export the products, people come in. Kaohsiung make a fortune."<sup>44</sup> Therefore, a key element of his 2018 campaign was that once it was possible to export the city's products, Kaohsiung would be able to provide economic opportunities that would motivate people to move to the city. A symbol of this export appeal was his adoption of a cabbage as his 2018 campaign logo, symbolizing how Kaohsiung would

---

<sup>41</sup> Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, "Observations on Rising Populism in Taiwan Politics," *Global Taiwan Brief* 4, no. 15, <http://globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/4.15-PDF-GTB.pdf> (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>42</sup> Hsiao, "Observations on Rising Populism in Taiwan Politics."

<sup>43</sup> Han newspaper ad, *China Times*, November 23, 2018, A10.

<sup>44</sup> See Han newspaper ad, *Liberty Times*, November 1, 2018, A13.

become rich through exporting its agricultural products.<sup>45</sup> In fact, many of Han's ads focused on the idea that, because of the poor state of Kaohsiung's economy, the city's young residents were forced to seek employment in the north of Taiwan. Many of Han's front-page newspaper ads featured images of homesick youngsters in Taipei, with slogans such as "Father, Mother, I want to come home."<sup>46</sup>

One element of Han's campaign that neatly fit the populist label was his attempt to portray himself as a nonelite politician. Accordingly, one of his core slogans was that he would be a "president of the common people." He often employed the picture of a bottle of mineral water to suggest his modest and frugal nature.<sup>47</sup> He claimed that he had a severe lack of resources compared to his DPP rivals, though, in reality, in 2018 he outspent his opponent in campaign advertising. Han was willing to attack the failures of the Taiwanese government since Chiang Ching-kuo leadership, including the administrations of both KMT and DPP presidents. Nathan Batto highlighted a speech Han made in 2017 in his bid for the KMT chair in which he argued,

There are now three living ex-presidents, President Lee, President Chen and President Ma. You were president for over twenty years. What industry did you leave behind for Taiwan? The only industry Taiwan has is in the Hsinchu Science Park. We don't have a second sector. Too tragic. You were president. You feasted and feasted. If it wasn't engaging in corruption it was laziness or goofing off.<sup>48</sup>

In Han's campaign speeches and the televised presidential policy presentations, he repeatedly accused Tsai and her DPP administration of being corrupt.<sup>49</sup> Batto highlighted a Han campaign speech which gives a sense of the way he framed his corruption message:

It's full of corruption and rot. They feast and feast. The factions divide the spoils among themselves. When the factions finish dividing the spoils, their underlings divide up their share, and then their lackeys take their cut. As long as you are a DPP elite, it doesn't matter what birth status or background you have, as long as you are one of their people. It doesn't matter if you have murdered someone, committed arson, or embezzled money, it doesn't matter. They'll give you a powerful position all the same. They set these people free on us to engage in corruption, to eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Taiwanese people. Now, after three and a half years, all of Taiwan is sick.<sup>50</sup>

Both Ko and Han were able to rely on the support of mainstream parties plus a significant number of floating voters to accomplish their initial surprise electoral successes. However, both would experience an erosion in his support base that would cause Ko to decide not to stand for election and Han to eventually lose by a wide margin. In the previous section, there was a discussion of the China impact on swings in support levels, but factors unrelated to China also contributed to these changes.

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> See Han ad, *Liberty Times*, November 6, 2018, A13.

<sup>47</sup> See Han ad, *Liberty Times*, October 29, 2018, A9.

<sup>48</sup> Nathan Batto, "A Lecture on Populism," *Frozen Garlic* (January 13, 2021), <https://frozen-garlic.wordpress.com/2021/01/15/a-lecture-on-populism/> (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>49</sup> Brian Hioe, "The Third and Final Presidential Policy Presentation Takes Place," *New Bloom Magazine* (December 28, 2019), <https://newbloommag.net/2019/12/28/third-presidential-policy-presentation/> (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>50</sup> Batto, "A Lecture on Populism."

Since Ko's support had risen earlier than Han's, his decline in support was more gradual. It was already clear that Ko's popularity was falling when he struggled to win re-election in 2018. Naturally, his overtures to China had led the DPP and pro-independence groups to cease supporting him, but his rise was also closely tied to the emergence of the Sunflower Movement generation of youth activism. Even in 2016, Green Party Social Democratic Party Alliance candidates sought Ko's endorsement. However, it has become increasingly unpalatable for the progressive movement parties to ally with Ko in recent years. As Brian Hioe has noted, "Ko has also caused controversy for misogynistic and sexist comments many times in recent memories, pointing to Ko's own social conservatism."<sup>51</sup> Hioe also notes how the TPP was willing to nominate socially conservative candidates: "TPP candidate Hsieh Wen-ching (謝文卿), who is running in Taipei City Constituency 5, is actively campaigning on a platform to repeal the Tsai administration's legalization of gay marriage."<sup>52</sup> Thus, during the 2020 campaign, Ko instead became a target of attack by progressive movement parties such as the GPT.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, by making overtures to Pan Blue figures such as James Soong, Wang Jinping, and Terry Gou, it was clear that Ko was moving further away from his original 2014 base. Hioe concluded that Ko's party, the TPP, "should not be mistaken for anything but a conservative Pan Blue party."<sup>54</sup>

Like Ko, Han had relied on a diverse alliance of support bases to win in 2018. He had managed to appeal to both the KMT base, as well as to those without a clear partisan affiliation and to people dissatisfied after two decades of DPP rule in Kaohsiung. By winning back the Kaohsiung mayoral post for the KMT, Han made many believe he could perform a similar miracle at the national level. However, by seeking the KMT's nomination for the presidential campaign just months after being elected Kaohsiung's mayor resulted in a sense of betrayal among many of his original nonpartisan supporters. Even during his first months in office, it appeared that he was struggling to live up to the expectations he had raised in his mayoral campaign. According to Batto, writing toward the end of the campaign: "Han has not performed well as mayor; he has not taken good care of the *shumin*" (common people).<sup>55</sup> The campaign in Kaohsiung to recall him began in June 2019. This would eventually lead to Han's being the highest profile politician to be successfully recalled in June 2020. He paid a large price for abandoning Kaohsiung. He went from winning the mayoral election in 2018 with 53.8 percent of the vote, to the 2020 presidential election in which he managed to win only 34.6 percent of the vote in Kaohsiung, well below his national vote share of 38.6 percent.

For much of Taiwan's post democratic transition era, political corruption has been an electoral issue that has favored the DPP, as the KMT has been viewed by voters as a highly corrupt party.<sup>56</sup> However, there have been elections in which issue ownership has switched. In 2005 and 2008, KMT accusations of DPP corruption played a major role in the KMT's landslide election victories. However, there also have been many election campaigns during which the KMT has made similar accusations against the DPP but they have not resonated with voters. Sometimes this has been because the accusations have not been seen as serious or

---

<sup>51</sup> Brian Hioe, "The TPP Should Not Be Mistaken for Anything but a Conservative Pan Blue Party," *New Bloom Magazine* (December 23, 2019), <https://newbloommag.net/2019/12/23/tpp-pan-blue-conservative/> (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Dafydd Fell, *Taiwan's Green Parties: Alternative Politics in Taiwan* (London: Routledge, 2021), 262.

<sup>54</sup> Hioe, "The TPP Should Not Be Mistaken for Anything but a Conservative Pan Blue Party."

<sup>55</sup> Nathan Batto, "Populism and Han Kuo-yu," *Frozen Garlic* (December 27, 2019), <https://frozengarlic.wordpress.com/2019/12/27/populism-and-han-kuo-yu/> (accessed December 12, 2020), and Brian Hioe, "Han Accuses the DPP of Trying to Rig the Elections in Order to Distract from Personal Scandals," *New Bloom Magazine* (December 7, 2019), <https://newbloommag.net/2019/12/07/han-scandals-accusations/> (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>56</sup> Fell, *Party Politics in Taiwan*.

believable and on other occasions because voters simply have viewed the KMT as a more corrupt party than the DPP. For instance, in 2004, the KMT made corruption accusations against Chen Shui-bian's wife during the presidential election but they did not appear to have any significant impact. Despite Han's heavy emphasis on accusations of DPP corruption during the 2020 campaign, it appears that voters did not find these allegations especially convincing. There were some corruption scandals during Tsai's first term, but they were not on the kind of scale nor directly linked to the ruling party as in many earlier presidencies.

Lastly, Han's slogan of being a common person president was undermined as new scandals emerged during the campaign. Batto and Hioe maintain that Han was damaged by the scandals related to his luxury real-estate transactions in Taipei and his wife's construction of an illegal luxury mansion on agricultural-zoned land in Yunlin.<sup>57</sup> Batto notes that, as a result of such scandals, "His opponents questioned whether a property speculator who depended on political connections was really a *shumin* or whether he was actually merely an ordinary corrupt politician."<sup>58</sup> In fact, the Yunlin county magistrate, Chang Li-san, being so often at Han's side during campaign events was likely to undermine his credibility of being free of corruption. Chang is the sister of the former county magistrate, Chang Jung-wei, now serving an eight-year jail sentence for corruption and featured in Ko's ground-breaking book on organized crime and politics, *Heijin*.<sup>59</sup>

In short, as the campaign developed, non-China campaign factors contributed to the loss of much original support base for both Ko and Han. While Ko eventually opted to withdraw from the presidential campaign, Han was increasingly left with only the core Pan Blue support base.

## Institutions

One of the most studied topics in political science is the effect that institutions can have on the evolution of the party system. This analysis of the 2020 campaign suggests two key ways in which Taiwan's political institutions can help us to understand the eventual limited effect that the political challengers had on the political scene. This is examined first from the perspective of the parties' nomination systems and second by looking at the actual electoral system.

There has been much debate, both within political parties and academic circles, about the potential effects of different types of nomination systems in Taiwan. Much of this reflection has centered on the pros and cons of inclusive competitive primaries versus centralized, top-down nomination. Although some Taiwanese politicians have warned of the damaging effect of inclusive nomination, in a study using cases mainly in the 1990s, Wu and Fell argued that "the weakening of party competitiveness cannot be blamed on primaries."<sup>60</sup> In a more recent publication, Fell concluded that the KMT's adoption of more institutionalized primaries was a key factor in its electoral recovery in the post-2000 period through 2008.<sup>61</sup>

In their nominations for the 2020 presidential race, both the KMT and the DPP adopted remarkably similar procedures for their candidate selection. Both relied primarily on national telephone polling for their presidential primaries and held primary debates; however, the outcomes were markedly different. In the KMT's case, the semi-outsider and outsider

---

<sup>57</sup> Nathan Batto, "Populism and Han Kuo-yu," *Frozen Garlic* (December 27, 2019), <https://frozengarlic.wordpress.com/2019/12/27/populism-and-han-kuo-yu/> (accessed December 12, 2020).

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ko-lin Chin, *Heijin: Organized Crime, Business, and Politics in Taiwan* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 2003).

<sup>60</sup> Chung-li Wu and Dafydd Fell, "Taiwan's Party Primaries in Comparative Perspective," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (2001): 23-45.

<sup>61</sup> Dafydd Fell, "Impact of Candidate Selection Systems on Election Results: Evidence from Taiwan before and after the Change in Electoral Systems," *China Quarterly* 213 (2013): 152-171.

candidates performed best; in the DPP's case, the incumbent managed to defeat her challenger. Therefore, it was the way in which the parties dealt with the aftermath of the nomination process that can tell us more about why 2020 was a maintaining election year.

Since the introduction of multiparty elections, the KMT has tended to be much less comfortable with the competitiveness of inclusive nomination. We can see this not only in its relatively late adoption and use of primaries but also in the way the losers have handled defeat. Historically, KMT candidates have been likely to stand as rebels after failing to gain party nomination, thus splitting the KMT vote and making the party appear divided. In the case of the 2020 KMT primary, second-place Terry Gou not only contested the fairness of the primary, but also withdrew from the party and initially did not rule out standing as an independent candidate. Although Gou eventually decided not to run as a KMT rebel, the KMT's primary left the party looking divided and questions were raised about the degree to which the party establishment truly backed Han.

The way in which the DPP's primary was conducted was also controversial as not only was the polling date delayed repeatedly but also changes were made to the methodology of the polls so that cell phones were included in the primary survey.<sup>62</sup> It was clear that the DPP leadership had tried to manipulate the primary to favor Tsai.

The way the DPP handled the aftermath of the primary was in stark contrast to the KMT. Although Lai had initially questioned the legitimacy of some aspects of the primary, he accepted the eventual results and later agreed to serve as Tsai's vice presidential candidate. In other words, the DPP was able to deal better with the competitive primary and to reunite the party afterward. This was something the DPP had managed well in the past. For instance, after the bitterly fought 2008 presidential primary, the DPP was able to heal wounds by nominating the second-place candidate, Su Tseng-chang, as the vice presidential candidate. Therefore, when comparing the two parties, it was not so much their actual nomination methods that contributed to the different outcomes; instead, what mattered was the unwritten rules of inner-party political culture in handling party competition.

When it comes to national elections, we can see the institutional effect most clearly on parliamentary election results. As mentioned at the outset of this essay, there was a remarkable degree of continuity in the parliamentary share of seats in 2020 compared with four years earlier. What makes this puzzling is that, in the party list vote, the KMT and the DPP vote shares were almost tied, with the DPP share declining from 44 percent in 2016 to 33.9 percent, while the KMT's share rose from 27 percent to 33.3 percent. The other major shift in vote share was the significant increase gained by the relevant challenger parties, with the TPP's 11.2 percent particularly eye-catching.

The electoral system that Taiwan adopted in 2005 can help explain the degree of continuity between the mainstream parties and the limited inroads the challenger parties made. Under this mixed majoritarian system, the ultimate control of parliament is determined in the competition for the seventy-three single-member districts. This part of the election has tended to be largely a competition between the two mainstream parties, the KMT and the DPP, while other parties have not been competitive. As the 2020 presidential election gradually swung in favor of Tsai, her support was able to boost the fortunes of the DPP parliamentary candidates. In contrast, Han's weakening campaign negatively affected KMT district candidates. This presidential effect was reinforced by the fact that the presidential and parliamentary elections were held on the same day. Although the small parties, the TPP and the NPP, were stronger at the district level in 2020 compared to 2016, none of their candidates was competitive against the two mainstream parties.

---

<sup>62</sup> Nick Aspinall, "Taiwan's President Clears Her Primary Challenge: Will Her Party Get on Board?" *The Diplomat* (June 21, 2019), <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/taiwans-president-clears-her-primary-challenge-will-her-party-get-on-board/> (accessed April 23, 2021).

Therefore, the smaller parties' principal hope of getting candidates elected lay in the proportional party list competition, which accounts for only thirty-four seats. Despite voters' growing willingness to split their district and party list votes, only eight seats were won by small parties on the party list, while the DPP and the KMT shared the remaining twenty-six seats. The TPP's 11.2 percent party list vote share gave it only 4.4 percent of the total seats, while despite the NPP's increase of its party list vote share from 6.1 to 7.7 percent, it fell from five to three seats. If Taiwan had a proportional representation system, the scope for challenger parties to have an impact on the political system would have been much greater.

## **Conclusion**

In short, this essay has examined how Taiwan's mainstream parties coped with the challenges to their domination of the party system in the most recent national election in 2020. This includes both challengers coming from within the main parties and those from other challenger parties. The question posed at the outset of the essay was, despite the myriad of challenges facing the mainstream parties in the first half of 2019, how did the 2020 election achieve such a high degree of continuity? When an earthquake election had been the bookies' favorite outcome, why did we instead witness a maintaining election?

Although there is a wide range of ways to explain any election, this essay has focused on the China factor, shortcomings in the challengers' campaigns, and institutional factors. Although the China factor was critical in the DPP's ability to win re-election and maintain its parliamentary majority, it was not just the high salience of the issue that allowed Tsai to win back support. Equally important were the ways in which Tsai and her rivals addressed the China threat and the Hong Kong protests in their campaign communications. It can be said that, at least in 2020, Tsai and the DPP owned the China issue.

Although the China factor was probably the most influential factor explaining Tsai's recovery and eventual re-election, this essay shows that shortcomings in the challengers' campaigns should not be ignored. Many of the core appeals that had allowed them to be elected at the local level gradually became ineffective during the 2020 campaign. Lastly, the essay has considered the institutional factors contributing to continuity in 2020. Despite using similar nomination systems, the two main parties selected entirely different types of candidates. Moreover, the DPP was much more successful at healing the primary wounds and reuniting the party for the national campaign. The parliamentary election system meant that the new challenger parties could be competitive only for the proportional party list seats. Since these account for only thirty-four seats, despite the rising popularity of the smaller parties, they were able to advance only minimal change to the overall party system.