

The 2012 Taiwan Elections - What Happened and Why

Panel Discussion Summary

On January 24th the Democracy in Taiwan Project hosted Shelley Rigger of Davidson College and Eric Chen-hua Yu of Taiwan's National Chengchi University for a lively discussion on the outcomes of Taiwan's recent presidential and legislative elections, in which incumbent president Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT was re-elected and the KMT maintained its legislative majority, though with significant losses.

Professor Rigger began the dialogue by noting the drift in international discourse on Taiwan from the "Ilha Formosa" to "Free China" to the contemporary "Taiwan Problem," alongside a similar drift in the PRC's position on Taiwan from all-out civil war to "liberation" to "peaceful reunification." Through these developments, the answers to the question of "what does Taiwan want?" have progressed from a discourse of "recovering the mainland" to a push for "Taiwan independence" to a pervasive contemporary preference for preservation of the status quo. The latter means primarily self-governance, but without closing off the possibility of eventual reunification.

Rigger framed the elections as a clash over which party was best able to meet these expectations. The KMT position, represented by Ma Ying-jeou, was very similar to prior elections, with foundations in the "three 'nos'" and the 1992 consensus. The DPP, represented by Tsai Ing-wen, found it difficult to articulate its opposition, and Rigger noted that even on the controversial issue of the cross-strait ECFA, the DPP could not outright denounce the KMT's position.

Tsai had advocated for a "Taiwan consensus" before a Beijing consensus, but Rigger argued that a

Taiwan consensus already exists. It largely fits under the umbrella of the KMT position and the "three 'nos'" concept, though it is not widely accepted by Taiwan's political elites for reasons of political expediency. The DPP 2012 campaign focused on economic issues as opposed to cross-Strait policy, but the election results reaffirmed the KMT approach, albeit in a limited way.

The US position on the issue has been and continues to be one of strategic ambiguity, as explicated in a series of documents beginning with the Shanghai Communique, through the TRA, and further developed by President Clinton. Rigger maintained that it is not in the interest of either the US or the PRC for the US to back away and allow coercive unification. Referencing her recent book, she demonstrated that "Taiwan matters." It matters, as an Asian example of remarkably egalitarian economic development and successful democratization, while forming a crucial part of the larger security architecture that promotes regional and global security. This election demonstrated that the discourse of independence versus unification is out of date, she concluded, and that both parties recognize that Taiwan is at the heart of its own enterprise.

Professor Yu's extensive analysis of public opinion surveys and statistics from National Chengchi University's Election Study Center largely confirmed Rigger's analysis. There were 18 million eligible voters for this election, which was Taiwan's first instance of combined presidential and legislative elections. The primary reason for this decision was to save the social cost of repeated elections, but the decision also drew concern for its chosen date one week prior to the Chinese new year and the transportation cost that was likely to decrease turnout in southern Taiwan.

The 2012 elections looked to be potentially a comeback story for the DPP, but one which in the end was all about numbers. Yu framed his election analysis in terms of how many votes Ma could afford to lose, seeing the 2008 result as a base case with his victory of more than 2 million votes over Frank

Hsieh. After a number of losses for the KMT in legislative by-elections, the end result in the 2012 presidential election was still a win for Ma by 800,000 votes.

Throughout the campaign season Tsai and Ma looked to be entwined in a very tight race. Yu considered the impact of early events in the campaign, such as Ma's discussion of a potential cross-Strait peace accord in an October conference, opposing farm subsidy proposals, the DPP's piggy bank campaign, and performance in the presidential debates. These events created short term surges and declines but never solidified into long-term, game-changing momentum for the DPP.

Yu analyzed the potential significance of the "Soong factor" --, James Soong's consistent 7-10% level of support throughout the election season. However, Soong's support declined dramatically in the final two weeks of the campaign, neutralizing his potential impact Yu speculated that Soong's supporters might have feared unstable cross-Strait relations if Tsai were elected, and so in the end opted to vote strategically and abandon Soong. Correlated to this was the finding from public opinion surveys that the desire to abandon the '92 consensus dropped from 30% in December to 20% in January, suggesting the '92 consensus and related issues did indeed factor into voters' decision-making process. Survey findings also indicated that "defectors" from both the KMT and DPP dropped dramatically from December to January, also indicating strategic voting.

The major debate in the 2012 elections, Yu concluded, seemed to be the impact of cross-Strait exchanges, tied up with a battle of issues and images. Specifically, the KMT's campaign platform emphasized economic development premised on stable cross-Strait relations, while the DPP leaned more heavily to issues of social inequality. Yu noted an overall better quality of democracy in this election, with less vote-buying, less negative campaigning, and no "random shock" effect such as the shooting the day before the 2004 elections. The "China factor" was also a potential complication, in the

form of an invisible threat from the possible cut-off of economic benefits and incentives.

The discussion acknowledged the subtle shifts in the nature of identity politics in Taiwan, addressed by both Rigger and Yu, that appear to have contributed significantly to the eventual election result.

Professor Larry Diamond, director of the Democracy in Taiwan Project, concluded the discussion with a comment on the continuing international relevance of and interest in these issues, noting in particular that these elections further demonstrate the progress of Taiwan's maturing democracy and electorate.