

Changing Party System? Analyzing the 2020 Presidential and Legislative Elections

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Abstract

On January 11, 2020, 14.4 million Taiwan voted in a presidential election which saw the DPP winning a landslide. The KMT, however, remains competitive. Our analysis of vote share of political parties over the past two decades shows that the DPP's vote continues to grow while the KMT's has bounced back a little bit. We look at the trend of party support and suggest that the stability of the KMT's support is lower than that of the DPP's. Moreover, the difference between two major and other parties seems to become larger. The ratio of independents, KMT, DPP, and other parties is about 40:25:25:10, plus or minus 5. Further investigation of party support within five age groups reveals that people over 39 years old are essentially closer to the Pan-blue and the younger generation is mostly Pan-green. In the 2000s, every age group favored the Pan-blue parties but switched to Pan-green parties in the 2010s. Regarding political geography, our comparison for the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections shows that the DPP is relatively strong in southern Taiwan and is expanding into other areas. The KMT's vote share is stable in most cities, but it is weaker than the DPP in urban areas.

Keywords: Presidential Election, Legislative Election, Political Party, Partisanship, Absolute Vote

On January 11, 2020, 14.4 million Taiwanese voters went to the polls. Most of them cast three ballots for president, district-level and party list respectively. It is the first national election in the world of 2020, and the first one after the protest against the extradition bill in Hong Kong.

In this election, the ruling party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), was

looking for not only victory in the presidential election but also a majority in the Legislative Yuan (LY). Four years ago, Tsai Ing-wen won the presidency with 56 percent of votes and became the first female president of Taiwan. The DPP also won 68 of the 113 seats in the LY. In other words, the DPP has controlled the government and legislative body for four years. The major opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), only held 35 seats in LY. The main reason for the KMT's catastrophic defeat in 2016 was the fears of the younger generation that the KMT government had pushed forward integration with China. Due to scandals and unpopular reforms, the DPP had a devastating failure in the 2018 local elections. The KMT won 15 out of 22 mayor elections, including Kaohsiung City, where the DPP had been dominant for two decades. The newly-elected Kaohsiung mayor, Han Kuo-yu, was so popular that the KMT invited him to the presidential primary election. Eyeing the remarkable victory in the 2018 local election, the KMT aimed to regain the presidency and secure a majority in the LY under Han's charisma.

However, Tsai Ing-wen won 8.17 million votes, or 57.13 percent of the total vote, with Han Kuo-yu taking 39 percent. The third candidate, James Soong, got only four percent of the vote share. As for the district-level elections, the DPP won 45 percent of the total votes and the KMT earned 40 percent. Minor parties and independent candidates shared the rest of votes. The KMT and DPP won around 33 percent respectively in the party-list district respectively. The Taiwan People Party (TPP) and New Power Party (NPP) were the other two parties in addition to the KMT and DPP allocated seats in the party-list district.

This paper will analyze the election statistics to illustrate the changes to Taiwan's party system over the past two decades. Moreover, we will examine the longitudinal data to observe the social bases of the KMT and DPP. Because survey data is not available at this point, we are not able to discuss the effect of campaign issues, candidate characteristics, and so on. Instead, we will focus on the variations in vote share across different elections and regions. We leave the cross-sectional individual-level data analysis for future research.

I. Party Competition Since 1996

One of the key questions of this election is, how much has the political landscape

changed? Is the DPP’s vote share growing compared to 20 years ago? Based on the election results of the presidential and legislative elections, the answer to this question seems to be “yes.” Figure 1 shows that the DPP has continued to increase its vote share, except for a setback in 2008. The KMT, by contrast, reached a peak in 2008 but has kept losing vote share since then. In 2012, the KMT barely defeated the DPP by six percent. In 2016 and 2020, the KMT failed to win more than 40 percent of the vote.

Figure 2 also shows the KMT’s vote share has declined since 2008. Although Ma Ying-jeou won reelection in 2012 with 51 percent of the vote, his party received 48 percent in the LY election. The DPP’s vote share has increased since 1998, and they have stayed within between 40 and 45 percent for the last three LY elections.

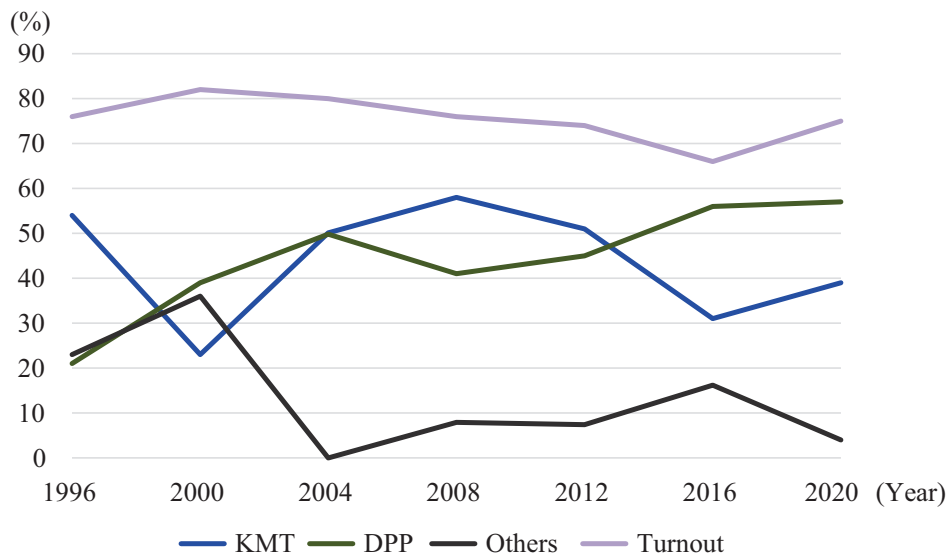


Figure 1. Vote Shares of KMT, DPP and Other Presidential Candidates, 1996-2020

Source: Central Election Commission, “CEC Database,” January 18, 2020, accessed, *Central Election Commission*, <<https://db.cec.gov.tw>>.

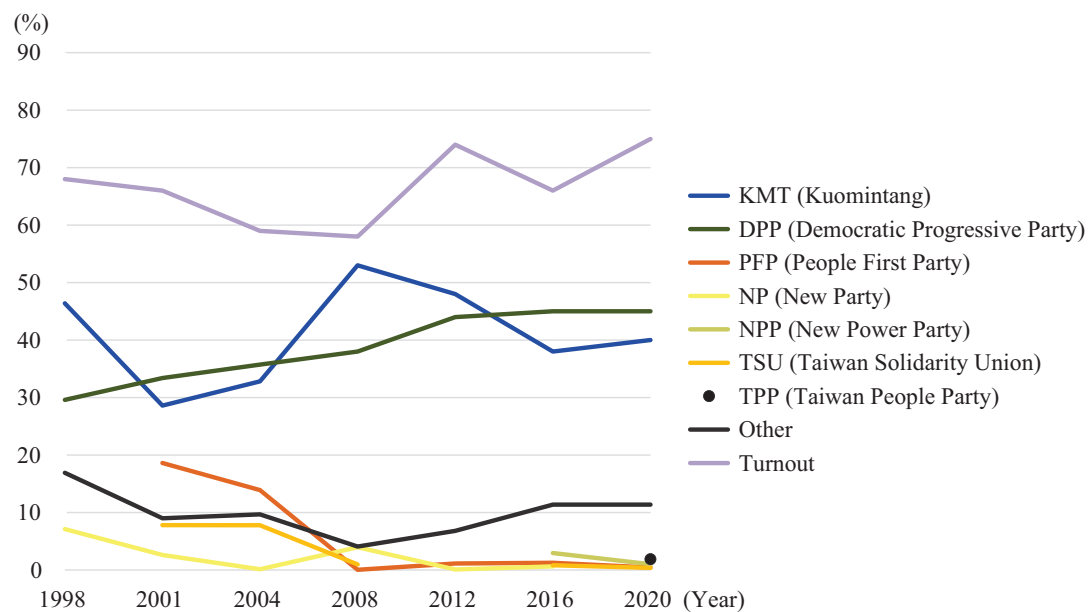


Figure 2. Vote Shares of the KMT, DPP and Other Parties in the District-level Legislative Election, 1998-2020

Source: Central Election Commission, “CEC Database.”

Due to challenges of new parties such as the Taiwan Statebuilding Party, the Taiwan People Party, and the New Power Party, neither the DPP nor the KMT can win more than 50 percent in single-member districts and party-list constituent. Figure 3 shows that the DPP and the KMT received about 33 percent of votes in the party-list district in 2020. The TPP wins 11.22 percent, which may reduce the DPP’s vote shares. Compared to 2016, the DPP dropped 11 percent but the KMT gained 6.4 percent in the party-list election. Comparing the district-level and party-list elections, the KMT garnered seven percent more in the district-level elections than the party-list election. But the difference between these two constituents for the DPP is 11 percent. One of the reasons is that there are many parties that share similar ideology with the DPP in the party-list election, so DPP supporters may split their tickets more easily than KMT supporters do. The bottom line is that the DPP’s performance in these three elections can be ranked in terms of the size of vote share as president > district-level LY > party-list LY, and the KMT as district-level LY > president > party-list LY. The KMT had a similar performance in 2016. In other words, the KMT has difficulty in not only winning the presidency but also organizing its campaign as a

whole. Unlike the DPP, the KMT seems to be relatively stronger at grass roots rather than at national agenda-setting.

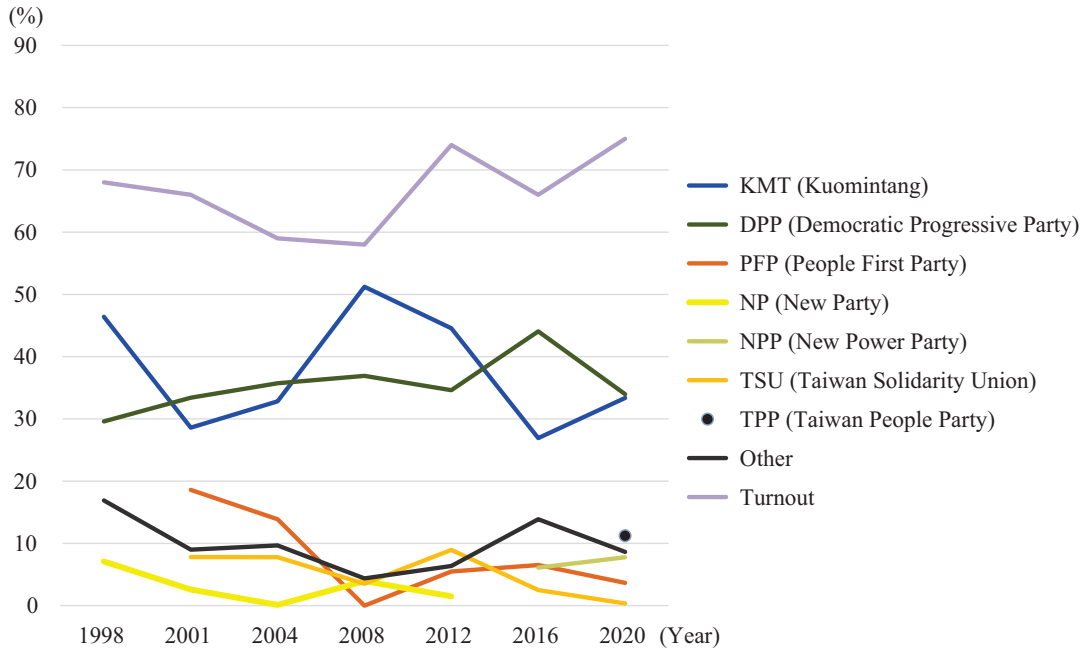


Figure 3. Vote Shares of KMT, DPP and Other Parties in the Party-list Legislative Election, 1998-2020

Source: Central Election Commission, “CEC Database.”

Note: The party-list seats are allocated according to the district-level election results. Therefore, the vote shares of KMT, DPP and PFP before 2008 are as same as Figure 2.

II. Partisanship in History and Relationship with Generation

Figures 1, 2, and 3 present the election outcomes, in which the two major parties and one or two minor parties compete for the presidency and in the LY elections. However, according to social psychological theory, people inherit political attitudes from their parents. One of political predispositions is party identification. Partisanship means long-term attachment to a political party. People who identify with a party may share the same points of view and constantly vote for the party. In other words, it is a strong predictor of voting choice.

Since 1992, the Election Study Center (ESC) at National Chengchi University have polled three questions. One is political party identification. Data is gathered

through telephone survey polls are merged every year. The political party identification variable was constructed by combining a sequence of questions. The respondent is first asked the following: “Of the following five political parties—Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT), Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), New Party (NP), People First Party (PFP), and Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU)—which party do you support the most?” If the respondent names a party, then that answer is taken to be the respondent’s party identification; if the respondent answers “it depends” or “don’t know”, then they are asked, “which do you prefer more: the KMT, the DPP, the NP, the PFP, or the TSU, or do you not prefer any of these?” If the respondent then names a party, that answer is taken to be their party identification; and if the respondent still does not name any party, the answer is counted as a non-response. In 2016, the New Power Party won five seats and became the third largest party. Therefore, we changed the first question to the following: “Of the many political parties in our society, which party do you support the most?”

We will examine the distribution of partisanship from 1994 to 2019 first, and then discuss the relationship between age and partisanship. We classify age into five groups: 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, and 60 and over. A breakdown of partisanship into age across two decades reveals the social base of political parties.

1. Partisanship in History

Figure 4 shows the change in partisanship since the 1990s. Before the first change in ruling party in 2000, around 30 percent of people identified with the KMT and less than 20 percent identified with the DPP. This was mainly because the DPP was not formally established until 1986. Figure 1 shows that Lee Teng-hui, the KMT’s presidential candidate, won the first direct presidential election with 54 percent of the vote, which is much higher than the KMT’s partisanship. The DPP’s ticket won only 21 percent, which is pretty close to the DPP’s partisanship. The New Party that split from the KMT and supported reunification with China emerged after the 1992 LY election, and had up to 9.8% of support. During this period, the proportion of people who claimed that they did not identify with any party decreased from 62 percent to 40 percent. Afterwards, the proportion of independents ranges from 30 percent to 49 percent.

After the DPP won the 2000 presidential election, about 20 to 25 percent of people identified themselves as DPP partisan. The proportion of KMT partisans dropped to 15 percent while about 10 percent of voters identified with the People's First Party (PFP), another splinter party from the KMT. After 2004, however, both the NP and the PFP have been marginalized. Instead, Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) emerged under Lee Teng-hui's leadership. The TSU won 12 LY seats in 2004. In other words, KMT support has split between KMT, PFP, NP, and TSU, creating two major parties and three minor parties.

Following DPP scandals, the KMT regained momentum in 2004, winning the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. In the meantime, DPP partisanship had remained around 20 percent and increased to 25 percent. The KMT was criticized for drawing too close to China, and finally lost presidency and LY elections to the DPP in 2016. DPP partisanship rose to 30 percent in 2015 and 2016, and the KMT fell to 22 and 20 percent. In the 2016 LY elections, the New Power Party became the third largest party. Some New Power Party members used to be affiliated with the DPP, but New Power Party emphasizes sovereignty and social issues. They also pledged to monitor the DPP government. The PFP won three seats in both the 2012 and 2016 elections, but their support fell to five percent. In 2020, the NP, PFP, and TSU did not win any seat. Instead, the Taiwan People's Party funded by Taipei mayor Ko Wen-je won five seats and the NPP won three seats. This meant there were two major and two minor parties in the 2010s.

Overall, Figure 4 reflects party competition as shown in Figures 1-3. When the support the opposition party sours, party turnover is inevitable. Moreover, the difference between the two major and other parties seems large after the decline of the PFP in the early 2000s. The ratio of independents, KMT, DPP, and other parties is about 40:25:25:10, plus or minus 5.

Due to data limitation, it is difficult to ascertain the intention of independent voters. People who refuse to declare party support or answer "it depends" tend to have similar responses to the questions on Taiwanese identity. We may have to look to individual-level survey data, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

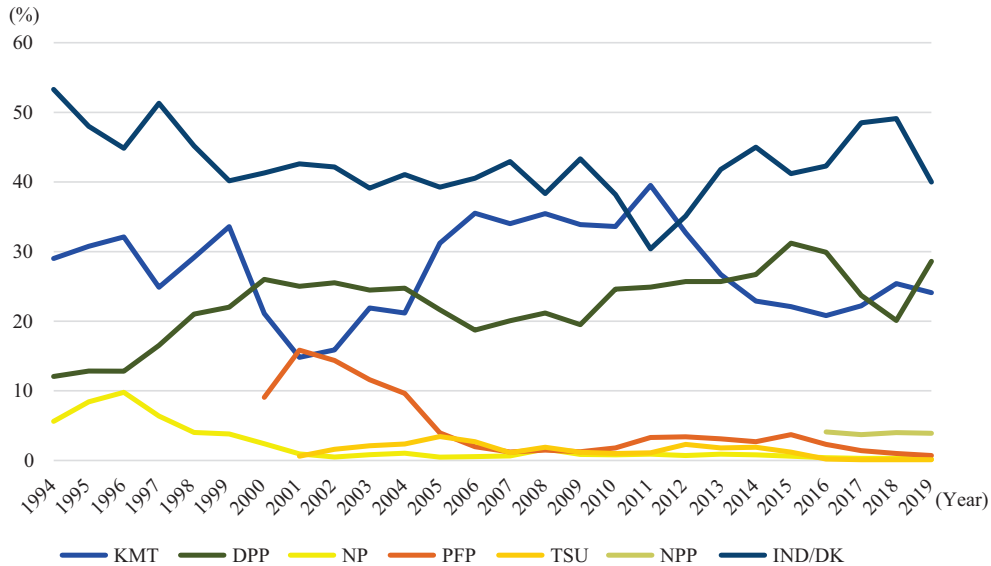


Figure 4. Partisanship of Taiwan Voters, 1994-2019

Source: Election Study Center, “Latest Trend of Taiwanese Core Political Attitude,” February 14, 2020, accessed, *Election Study Center*, <<https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/course/news.php?Sn=165>>.

2. Generation and Partisanship

Figure 5 shows that younger generations were Pan-blue supporters in 2000s but switched to Pan-green in the 2010s, especially after the DPP returned to power in 2016. About 30 percent of young people identify with the Pan-green camp. In 2018, the proportion of independents sharply increased while the proportion of Pan-green identification dropped. But the situation changed in 2019. Overall, the Pan-green camp is popular among younger generations. Because young people preferred the Pan-Blue in the 2000s, however, it remains to be seen if Pan-green can keep attracting young people.

To observe changes in partisanship in every age group, we calculated the difference between Pan-blue and Pan-green identification (see Figure 6). The five lines in Figure 6 are mostly parallel, except for 20-29 year-olds between 1997 and 2000. Younger people seemed to move away from the Pan-blue after the KMT won the first democratic presidential election. Secondly, those over 60 year-olds were relatively stronger Pan-blue identifiers before 2000. After then, 40-49 year-olds stand out when the trend goes up and down. It is obvious that 40-49 year-olds are on the opposite side of 20-29 year-olds. Overall, those who are 39 or over and those under 39 form two groups—

the older group is essentially closer to Pan-blue and the younger mostly Pan-green. As Figure 6 shows, every age group favored Pan-blue parties in the early 2000s but switched to Pan-green parties in the 2010s. Whether each age group will uniformly change partisanship support in the 2020s remains to be seen.

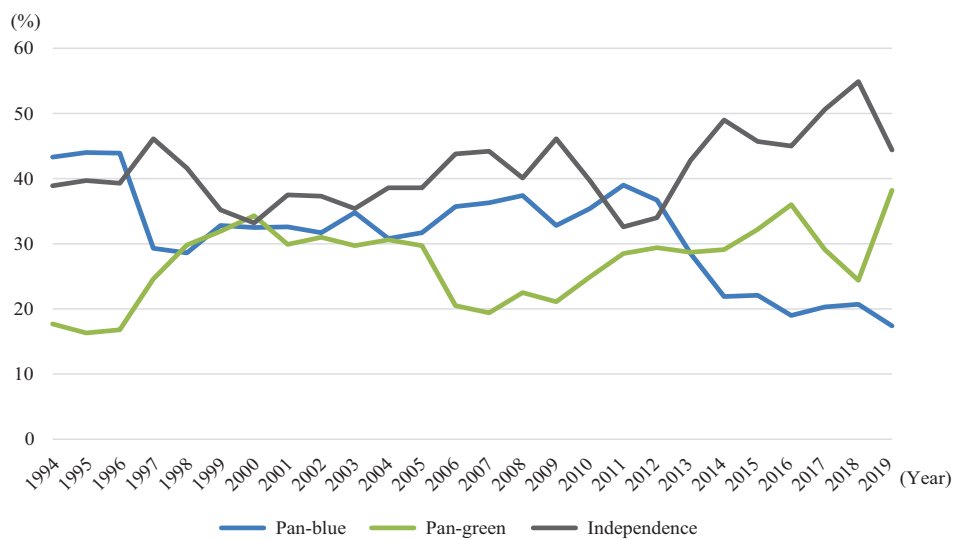


Figure 5. Partisanship of People Who Are 20-29 Years Old

Source: Election Study Center, “Latest Trend of Taiwanese Core Political Attitude.”

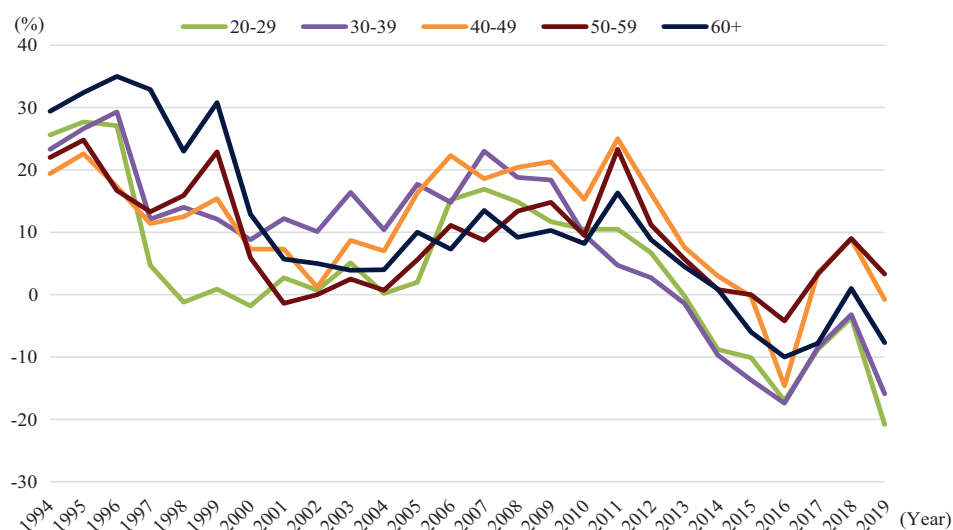


Figure 6. Difference in Partisanship of Five Age Categories

Source: Election Study Center, “Latest Trend of Taiwanese Core Political Attitude.”

Note: We subtract Pan-green identification from Pan-blue to get the difference in partisanship.

III. Election Results by Cities

To further understand how two major political parties compete with each other, it is necessary to discuss the percentage of absolute vote by cities. The absolute vote is defined as the number of votes garnered by each party divided by the total number of electors. The absolute vote takes the number of electors as the denominator so that it measures how many people each party can get to vote, rather than the number of those who voted for each party. Given that the number of eligible voters for a given district should not change too much across, say, four years, increases in the absolute vote means that the number of voters supporting a particular party has increased, rather than the decreasing number of people who turn out to vote as the denominator. Considering that turnout rate varies from one election to another, absolute vote enhances the comparison of party support across time.

Figure 7 shows that the DPP gained more votes in every city/county in 2020 compared to 2016. The DPP won about 50 percent of the absolute vote in Tainan City, meaning half of all voters there voted for the DPP. The DPP won around seven percentage points more than four years ago, which is the equivalent of 100,000 votes (the number of electors in Tainan City is 1.5 million). In Kaohsiung City, another DPP stronghold, the DPP won around five percentage points more than in the last presidential election, which is also about 100,000 votes ($0.05 \times 2.2 \text{ million} = 0.1 \text{ million}$). As for the two northern municipalities, Taipei City and New Taipei City, the DPP won about 40 percent of the absolute vote respectively. The DPP won 40 percent of absolute vote in Taoyuan and Taichung City. In some senses, the DPP was very successful in these six municipalities. Hsinchu and Miaoli County are consistently DPP's weak areas, however, but Hsinchu City is an exception in this area. In central Taiwan, the DPP won more than 40 percent of absolute vote in Changhua County, the seventh largest city. Nantou remains very challenging to DPP, so are Hualien and Taitung Counties on the east coast.

Our comparison for the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections shows that the DPP is relatively strong in southern Taiwan, including Chiayi City, Chiayi County, Tainan City, Kaohsiung City, and Pingtung County. Voters in New Taipei City also showed stronger support for the DPP than four years ago, but the DPP gained barely 40 percent of the absolute votes in Taipei City and Taoyuan City. The DPP gained more votes

from central-northern Taiwan, such as Hsinchu and Miaoli County. Forty percent of voters in Taichung City and Changhua County, the two largest cities in central Taiwan, turned out to vote for the DPP. In short, the election results in northern and central Taiwan is different from southern Taiwan, but the DPP’s vote seemed to grow nationwide.

Figure 8 shows the difference in absolute vote between 2016 and 2020. It is apparent that the DPP vote increased in every city and county, especially in central-northern and southern Taiwan.

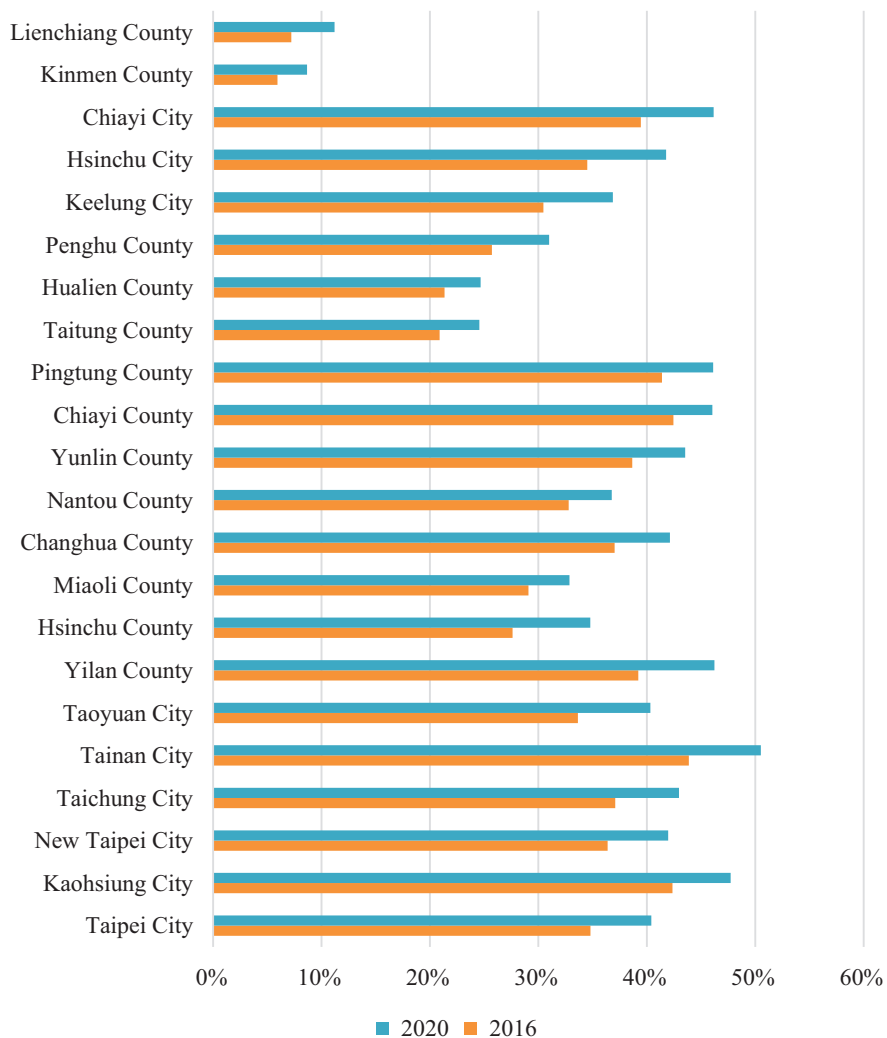


Figure 7. Absolute Vote of the DPP in 2016 and 2020 Presidential Election

Source: Central Election Commission, “CEC Database.”

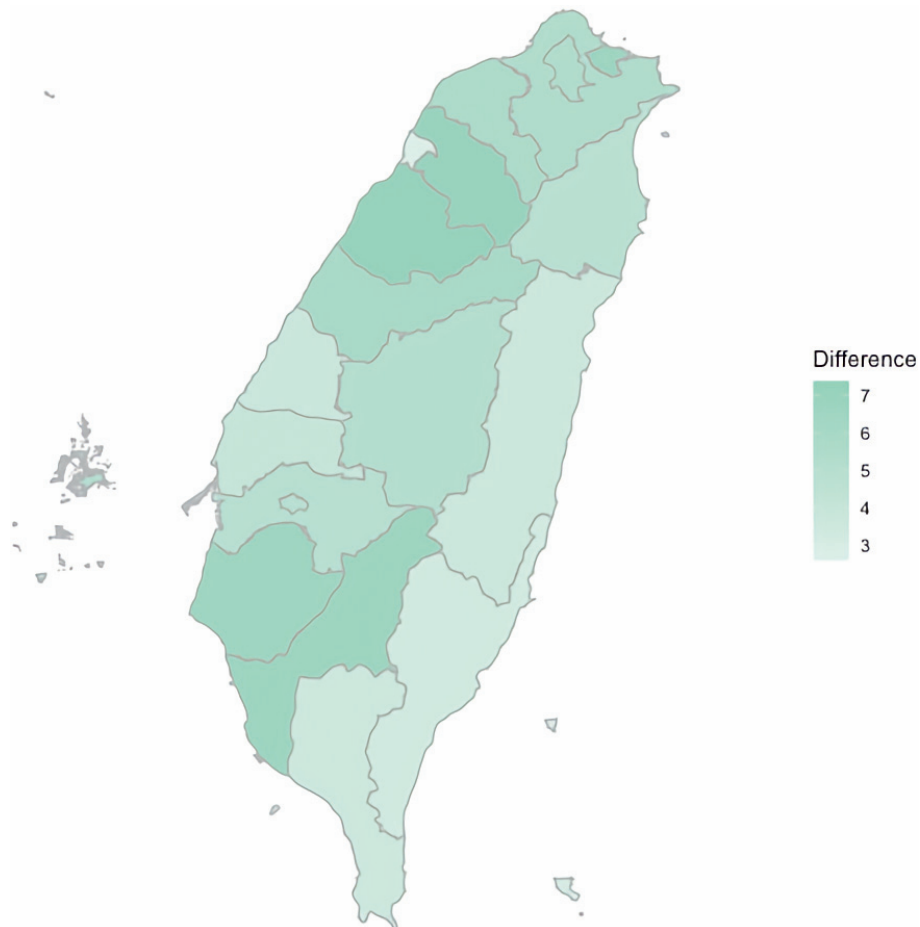


Figure 8. Change in Absolute Vote of the DPP between 2016 and 2020 Presidential Election

Source: Central Election Commission, “CEC Database.”

Note: The difference is percentage change between the DPP’s absolute vote in 2016 and 2020 presidential election.

Although the DPP had a uniform increase in share of votes in the presidential election, there were more variation in the 73 single-member districts of the LY elections. Figure 9 shows that the DPP gained more votes in Taipei City, Hsinchu County, and Lienchiang County because the DPP nominated no one or yielded to other parties in 2016. Taipei City is one of this kind. In 2016, the DPP fielded only two candidates in eight districts in 2016 but fielded seven candidates in 2020.¹ That increases the DPP’s absolute vote by 20 percentage points. In Hsinchu County, the DPP supported Cheng Yung-king, who ran as an independent in 2016. In 2019, the

DPP nominated one candidate in each of two districts.² Lienchiang County has had no DPP candidates since 2008, so the net increase is exactly the absolute vote in 2020. In most districts where the DPP had candidates in both 2016 and 2020, the DPP's vote share did not change so much. The largest change was in Taitung County, where the DPP increased its share from 23 percent to 35 percent. Liu Chao-hao has been elected since 2012.

As with the presidential election, Tainan and Kaohsiung City are DPP strongholds in the LY election. The DPP gained between 40 and 45 percent of the absolute vote in both cities in these two elections. The DPP won about 35 percent of the absolute vote in New Taipei, Keelung and Chiayi City, Changhua, Yunlin, Chiayi, Pingtung, and Taitung County. As for Taichung City, Taoyuan City, Nantou County, and Hsinchu City, the DPP won about 30 percent of absolute vote. These results imply that voters were not supportive of the DPP in the LY election as much as they were in the presidential election, especially in Taichung and Taoyuan City. It also indicates many voters cast split-tickets for the presidential and LY elections. This maybe because voters prefer check-and-balance rather than one-party dominance, or that voters prioritized a personal vote over party vote; personal favor from legislators may be more important than party identification in the LY election.

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1. The DPP supported Freddy Lim Tshiong-tso in the fifth district. Lim was nominated by the NPP and won the election in 2016, but he withdrew from the NPP and ran as an independent in 2020. Because he supports Taiwanese independence, the DPP helped him to get re-elected.
 2. Hsinchu County went from one to two districts after re-districting in 2019.

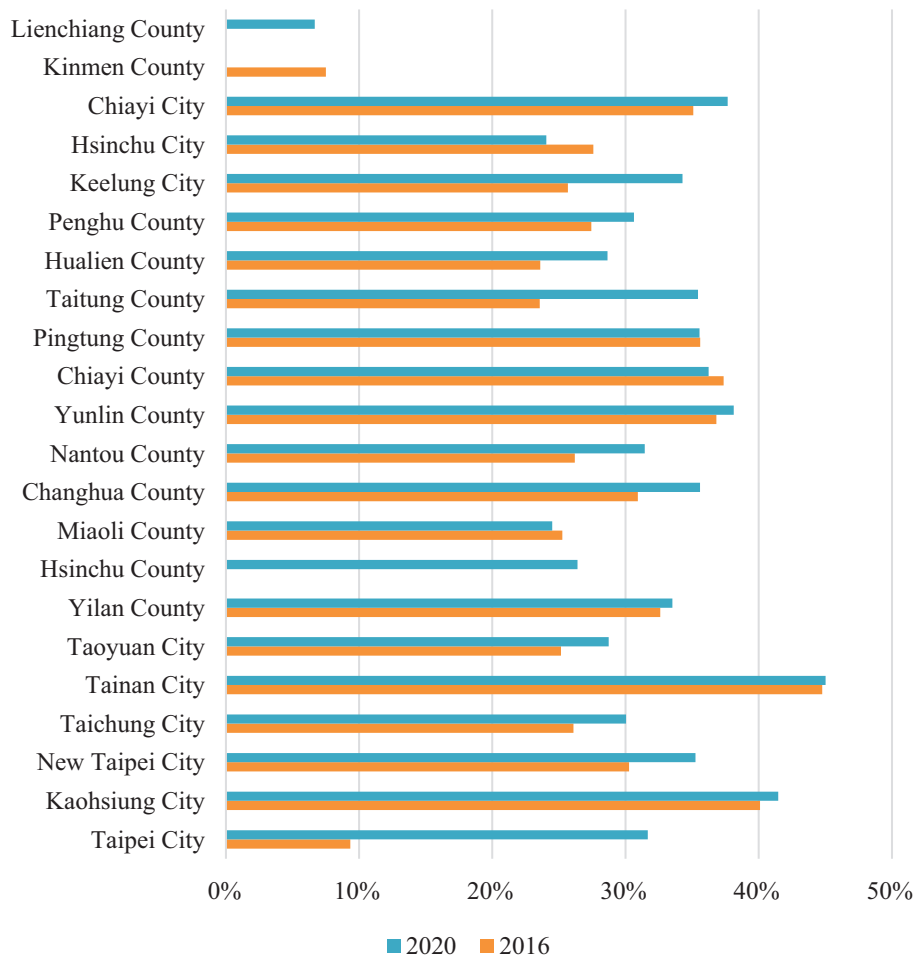


Figure 9. Absolute Vote of the DPP in 2016 and 2020 District-level Legislative Election

Source: Central Election Commission, “CEC Database.”

Note: In Pingtung County, Su Chen-ching was nominated by the DPP in 2016 for the first district. After the re-districting, Su ran for re-election as an independent. Because he will join the DPP’s caucus, we count his votes in the DPP category.

Figure 10 demonstrates that the DPP did not gain too many more votes in this LY election. Unlike in the presidential election, the DPP did not expand at all, except in Hsinchu and Taitung County. Instead, the DPP lost votes in Hsinchu City, Miaoli County, Chiayi City, Chiayi County, and Pingtung County. This result suggests that the DPP cannot maintain their grass roots even in southern Taiwan.

Comparison of the DPP’s performance in the presidential and LY elections reveals the DPP’s weakness in LY districts. The difference between the LY and presidential

elections is remarkable, while there is also minor difference between 2016 and 2020 LY election. Although the DPP candidates won in 47 districts (including Su Cheng-chin), they lost some under certain conditions. If there are better qualified presidential candidates who can carry LY candidates, or the DPP cannot coordinate their own candidates, the party landscape may change. The scale of change may not be huge, considering the DPP has consistently consolidated southern and even the central Taiwan. Once the dynamic of change starts, however, there will be more uncertainties for each political party.

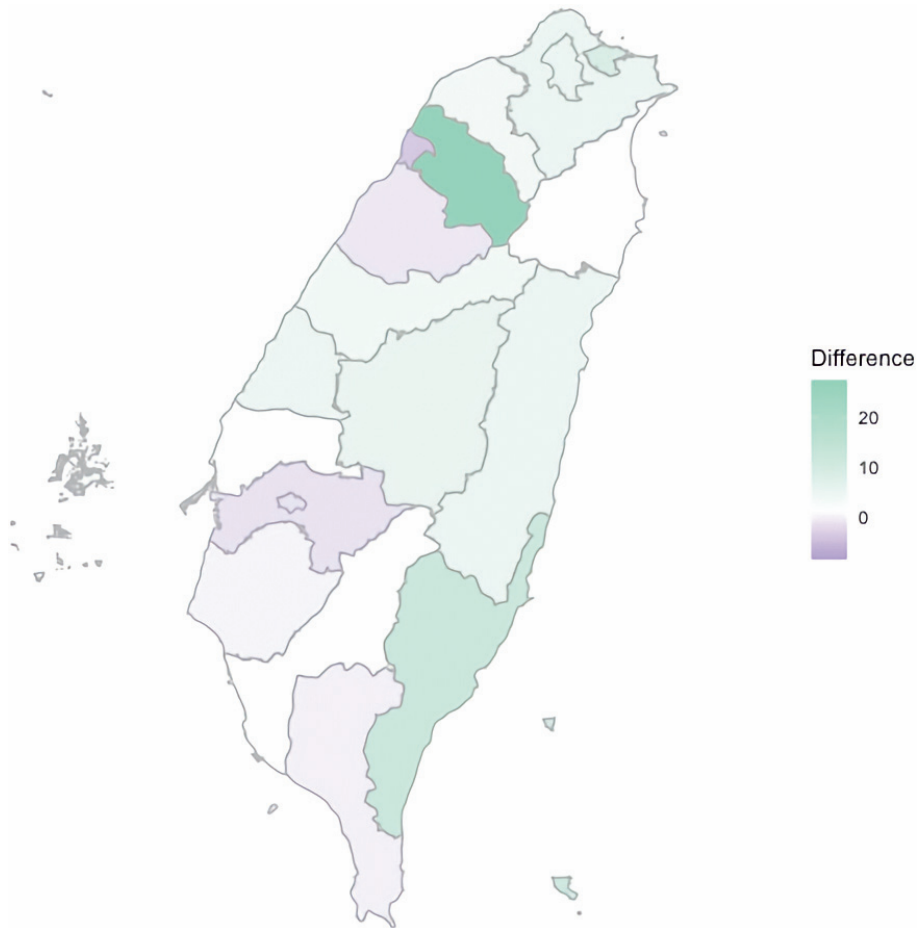


Figure 10. Change in Absolute Vote of the DPP between 2016 and 2020 District-level Legislative Election

Source: Central Election Commission, “CEC Database.”

Note: The difference is percentage change between the DPP’s absolute vote in 2016 and 2020 district-level legislative election.

Turning to the KMT, Figure 11 shows a marked contrast between the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. It is apparent that the KMT won more votes in every city/county, particularly Hsinchu, Miaoli, Taitung, Hualien, and Lienchiang County. Of the six municipalities, however, the KMT won more than 30 percent of the absolute vote in Taipei City. Figure 12 shows that the KMT gained more votes in southern Taiwan, but performed relatively poorly in central and northern Taiwan. This result implies that the KMT may have a chance to receive more support in southern Taiwan. However, the KMT should be careful of the voters in northern Taiwan, which is used to be the KMT’s stronghold.

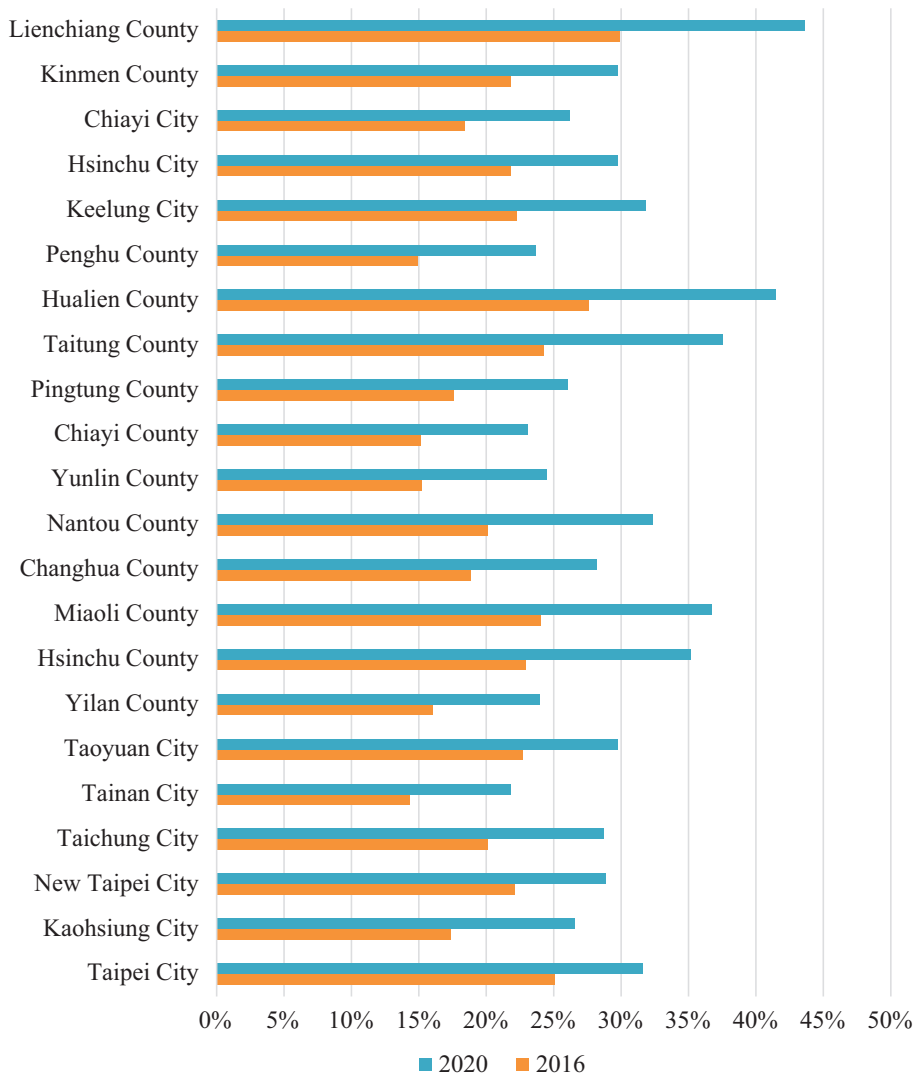


Figure 11. Absolute Vote of the KMT in 2016 and 2020 Presidential Election

Source: Central Election Commission, “CEC Database.”

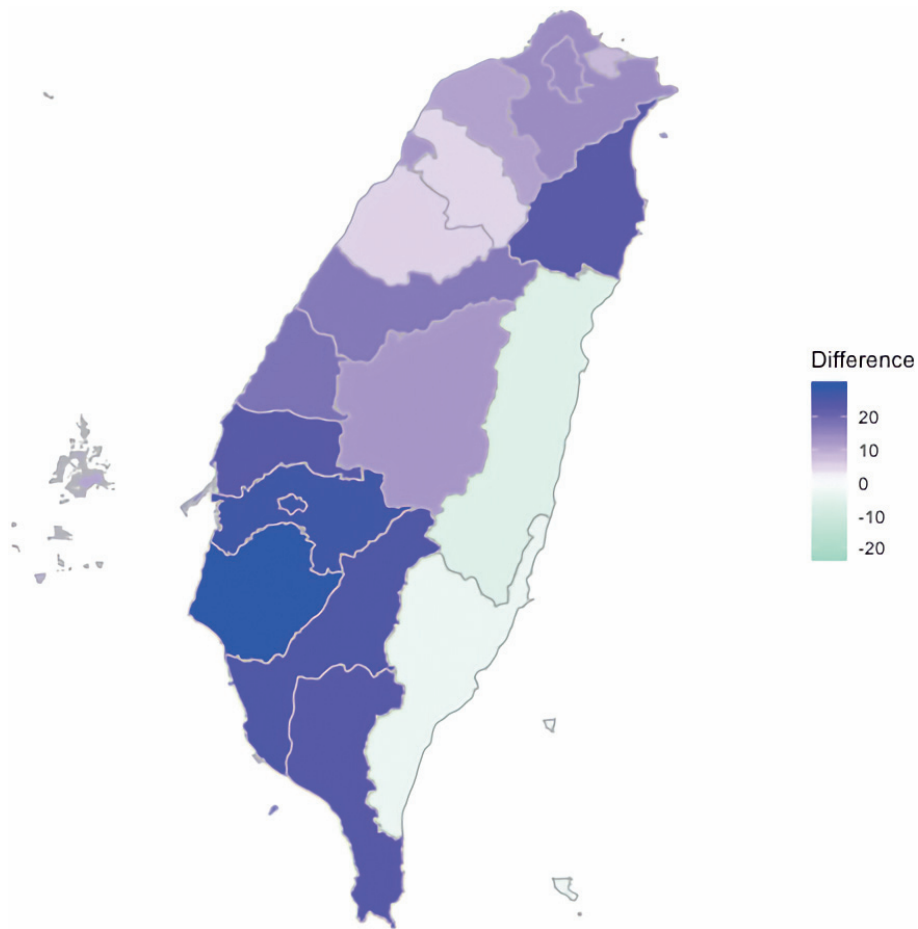


Figure 12. Change in Absolute Vote of the KMT between 2016 and 2020 Presidential Election

Source: Central Election Commission, “CEC Database.”

Note: The difference is percentage change between the KMT’s absolute vote in 2016 and 2020 presidential election.

Compared to the presidential election, the KMT gained more votes in most districts in LY election. For example, as Figures 13 and 14 show, KMT candidates won more than or nearly 30 percent of the absolute vote in Taipei, New Taipei, Taichung, and Taoyuan City. In other cities and counties, the KMT also gained more votes, except in Chiayi and Hualien County. Compared to the DPP (see Figure 7), however, the KMT won fewer votes in all of the municipalities. That suggests that the KMT has problems getting people out to vote in urban areas. Instead, the KMT seems to have better chances in less developed areas, such as Miaoli, Nantou, and Pingtung County. In the long run, the Taiwan People’s Party led by Taipei Mayor Ko

Wen-je may have more influence in urban areas. Having said that, Figure 14 shows that many more voters chose KMT candidates in 2020 despite the fact that the DPP held 49 districts. The KMT LY candidates won 40.7 percent of votes, which is close to the presidential candidate’s 38.6 percent. The KMT presidential candidates failed to carry the national tide; instead, it is the LY candidates who keep the KMT afloat.

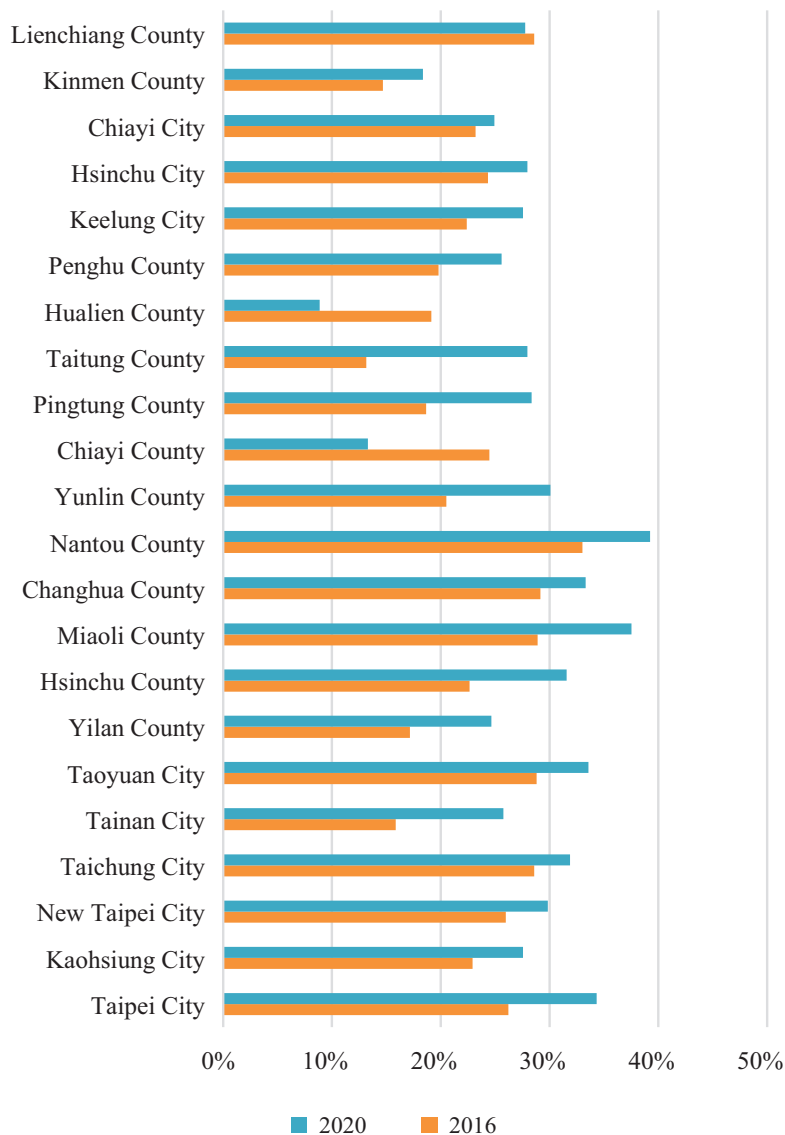


Figure 13. Absolute Vote of the KMT in 2016 and 2020 District-level Legislative Election

Source: Central Election Commission, “CEC Database.”

Note: In Hualien County, Fu Kun-chi ran as an independent because the KMT nominated Huang Chi-chia. However, Fu Kun-chi has applied to rejoin the KMT following the LY election.

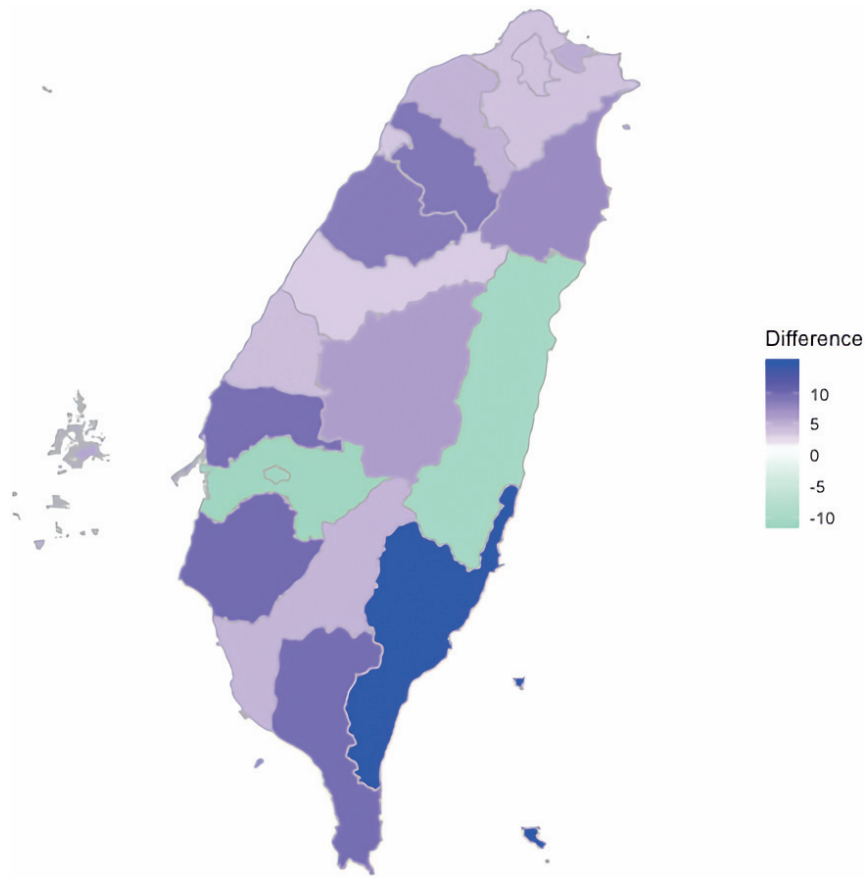


Figure 14. Change in Absolute Vote of the KMT between 2016 and 2020 District-level Legislative Election

Source: Central Election Commission, “CEC Database.”

Note: The difference is percentage change between the DPP’s absolute vote in 2016 and 2020 district-level legislative election.

IV. Conclusion

Some interpret the 2020 elections as a referendum on cross-Strait relations. Without individual-level data, this research cannot tell a causal story of voting behavior, let alone the evaluation of the cross-Strait issue. Instead, this research analyzed the election results and shows the political landscape, particularly the differences between 2016 and 2020.

We can summarize our findings as follows. First, the DPP had a commanding lead over the KMT in these two presidential elections, but the KMT remains strong

in the LY elections. It is necessary to explore why the KMT has been keeping pace with the DPP in the LY elections, while the gap between the two parties in the presidential one enlarged. One of the explanations is the KMT is strong on the issue of economic development, which remains popular in less developed areas. Another explanation is many voters leaning toward the DPP split their tickets in the presidential and LY election. The DPP's presidential vote may be inflated by the presidential system; voters tend to concentrate their votes on the two leading parties because there is only one seat.

Second, KMT supporters look more volatile than the DPP partisans. The proportion of KMT identifiers ranges from 15 percent to 39 percent, but that of DPP identifiers lies between 12 percent and 31 percent. When the proportion of KMT partisanship goes up, party turnover is inevitable. If the proportion of KMT partisanship declines, the DPP is likely to take over the presidency. Partisanship is a strong predictor of election result.

The difference between two major and other parties also deserves attention. It seems to become larger especially after the PFP gradually declined in the early 2000s. The ratio of independents, KMT, DPP, and other parties is about 40:25:25:10, plus or minus 5. The move of the independents definitely will tip the balance of political parties.

Third, generations are associated with partisanship. If we categorize people who are 39 and over and those under as two groups, the older group is essentially closer to the Pan-blue and those younger mostly on the side with the Pan-green. In the 2000s, however, every age group favored Pan-blue parties, switching to Pan-green in the 2010s. We will be watching closely whether the partisanship of each age group will change in the 2020s.

Last, we analyzed the absolute vote, namely, each party's vote share divided by the number of all electors rather than voters. Our comparison of the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections shows that the DPP is relatively strong in southern Taiwan, including Chiayi City, Chiayi County, Tainan City, Kaohsiung City, and Pingtung County. Comparison of the DPP's performance in the presidential and LY elections reveal the DPP's weakness in LY districts. By contrast, the KMT won fewer votes in the municipalities. That suggests that the KMT has problems in urban areas. It is the

LY candidates that backed up the presidential campaign. In the long run, the Taiwan People's Party led by Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je may have more influence in urban areas if the KMT cannot reach out to urban voters.

This election may be a turning point in Taiwanese politics for two reasons. First, the DPP not only continues to extend its dominance in the southern Taiwan but also raises its vote share to a higher level in central and northern Taiwan. Second, the KMT seems to have limited growth in northern Taiwan where more than one-third of registered voters reside. In the meantime, the proportion of younger generations that identify with the KMT continues to decline. It is still possible that the KMT can win over the whole country in the next election, but it may require an extraordinary effort in setting a new agenda and thwart the DPP's incumbent advantage.

