

Taiwan's Year-end Elections – A First Exploration

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On Nov. 29, Taiwan will hold important municipal elections whose outcome will have island-wide implications. Traditionally, election campaigns in Taiwan's municipal elections tend to be more candidate-centered. However, this time political party organization and party image will have quite an influence on the nine-in-one elections. The latest opinion poll conducted by Taiwan Brain Trust (TBT) in August shows that the major opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which currently rules six cities and counties, could expect to win 7 to 10 out of the 22 municipalities at stake. Various other opinion polls, including the DPP's own projections, expect the DPP to win at least nine municipalities. Nevertheless, the DPP should not be overly optimistic and fight this election even with caution, for the following reasons:

First, although the approval rates for President Ma Ying-jeou and Premier Jiang Yi-hua still hover around just 20 percent, the downturn trend is bottoming out and there has even been a slight rebound, according to the latest TBT opinion poll. Dissatisfaction with the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) and the DPP is both on the rise (KMT rise from 63.6 percent to 69.2 percent; DPP rise from 52.9 percent to 55.6 percent). For the DPP the biggest concern is that it has not been able to widen its stable lead over the KMT in terms of public support. This means that public dissatisfaction with the KMT has not translated into a marked increase in support for the DPP (the gap stands at just 3.7 percentage points). Since

taking power two months ago, DPP Chairwoman Tsai Ing-wen has not been able to change the situation.

Second, in terms of party favorability, the KMT still enjoys a slight lead over the DPP (24.5 percent versus 23.4 percent). However, the DPP is more popular among younger voters (32.8 percent of 20-29 year-olds like the DPP versus 18 percent who favor the KMT). The share of respondents, who answered questions on their satisfaction with and liking for a certain political party, increased by five to eight percentage points. Yet, dislike for the DPP continues to increase (from 11.1 percent in January to 20.2 percent in August). A possible reason is that the KMT successfully portrayed the DPP's behavior in the legislature as an irrational boycott. Moreover, the DPP was marginalized in the Sunflower Student Movement in March this year. A TBT opinion poll in June showed that voters are most dissatisfied with the DPP because of factional infighting and its failure to propose concrete policies.

It is somewhat comforting that satisfaction with the performance of Tsai has risen from 46.1 percent to 48.7 percent in the two months since she took the helm of the DPP. This means that for the time being Tsai is able to draw on her higher personal approval rate to bolster the DPP's flagging support. Nevertheless, Tsai has not been able to come up with concrete policies, actions and results since becoming chairperson. As a result, her personal disapproval rate has also increased from 21.5 percent to 30.5 percent so

that developments in the coming months deserve our attention.

With regard to political party support in the upcoming municipal elections, the DPP leads the KMT with 29.5 percent to 21.9 percent. However, the 39.4 percent of voters who have not revealed their political preferences will play a crucial role in the election outcome. While 29.4 percent of respondents believe that the DPP will win 7 to 10 seats, as many as 29.8 percent have not yet decided for which party they will cast their votes. Most likely, the majority of respondents who did not voice an opinion support the KMT. In the TBT opinion survey in June, as many as 52.8 percent of respondents did not reveal their political leaning, whereas that figure had dropped to 39.4 percent in August. It seems a growing number of voters are willing to reveal their voting preference. Yet, support for the DPP has not increased markedly, whereas support for the KMT has risen 4 percentage points. There is a correlation between these two trends.

Finally, there are three and a half months to go before the Nov. 29 municipal elections. The KMT still controls administrative resources and enjoys a media advantage. The possible effects of vote buying and election rigging are not yet evident. The DPP must make sure that it does not commit any mistakes. Other unforeseeable events could also affect the election scenario. The gas explosion in Kaohsiung, for instance, is already affecting the election prospects of DPP Mayor Chen Chu. Moreover, depending on how well the KMT unites its forces in Keelung City and other municipalities, the DPP's chances of winning could be undermined. More importantly, the more optimistic DPP supporters are about the election situation the more likely that support will

unravel. Overconfidence on the part of the DPP will create a sense of crisis among KMT and blue camp supporters who have not yet taken a stance, sparking them to unite.

The latest TBT opinion poll shows that voters care most about the following topics: economic issues (68.5 percent), government efficiency (43.90 percent), fairness and justice (30.5 percent) as well as cross-strait ties (23.8 percent). The ruling KMT and the major opposition DPP should quickly propose political platforms for their individual candidates or combined local government policy guidelines that effectively improve Taiwan's economy and people's lives, and also deliver fairness and justice, as reference for voters. After all, "all politics are local." **T**

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