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**Taiwan's 2012 presidential election**

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The results of the combined presidential and legislative elections held on January 14<sup>th</sup> 2012 suggest a routine win for incumbent President Ma Ying-jeou and his Kuomintang (KMT) party, but belie a highly competitive campaign. Sitting presidents who steward an economy relatively unscathed through a global crisis and reduce pressing security threats seldom fail to be re-elected. And so it was that Ma recorded a comfortable 6% margin of victory over his Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) challenger, Tsai Ing-wen. The candidacy of a third party spoiler on the KMT side of the ideological spectrum ultimately proved irrelevant, with James Soong polling just 2.8% of the presidential vote and his People First Party (PFP) winning 3 (of 113) legislative seats. Nevertheless, the threat of a split in the blue vote, as occurred in 2000, may have increased KMT supporter turnout and motivated the Election Day switch from Soong (who had recorded up to 10% support in pre-election polls) to Ma. The KMT retained its legislative majority, albeit reduced compared to the previous election in 2008.<sup>1</sup> A birds' eye view of the campaign elicits a sanguine interpretation: Robust competition between candidates, intense coverage in the media and 74% turnout despite the close proximity to Lunar New Year festivities. Candidates put forward their policy platforms, credentials and records, and attacked those of their opponents, in election ads, at rallies and in televised debates. The incumbent president highlighted his policy achievements, pledging to maintain stable relations with China and address social and economic inequalities. The opposition candidate mobilized dissatisfaction with Ma's performance and put forward an alternative vision for Taiwan's economic development and relationship with China. Voters were given abundant information and the freedom to choose from legitimate competing choices, which they did peacefully and without incident. Ultimately, a combination of incumbency advantages, a proven platform for engaging China and the aversion to change that characterizes many electorates, were enough for Ma to secure re-election against an impressive but unproven rival. The result sets the tone for cross-Strait relations in the near-term, although a strong losing effort from Tsai and the DPP should mean that Ma and the KMT have less latitude to implement their rapprochement policies at will.

## The Campaign

The idea that incumbent President Ma Ying-jeou could fail in his re-election bid was virtually unthinkable throughout much of his first term. He entered office with a landslide victory and a huge legislative majority (80 out of 113 seats). His DPP predecessor's eight year administration was bedevilled by inept governance,

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1 KMT candidates won 64 of 113 legislative seats available compared to 80 seats in 2008. See <http://vote2012.nat.gov.tw/en/FT/T0000000000000000.html>. Accounting for Independents and small party seats, the KMT should probably have the support of another six legislators.

excessive ideological mobilization, diplomatic gridlock across the Strait, increasing international marginalization and high level corruption scandals.<sup>2</sup> Fatigued and disillusioned, voters gave Ma a mandate to improve cross-Strait relations and reinvigorate the economy. With his parliamentary majority, an untainted personal lustre and facing an opposition in disarray, the KMT looked all set to resume the position it gave up when Chen unexpectedly won the presidency in 2000. That election was lost as a direct result of infighting within the KMT, with James Soong standing as an independent splitting the KMT vote with Lien Chan. Although Soong had no chance of winning in 2012, his ‘protest vote’ candidacy against another KMT opponent briefly concerned the party while he polled 5-10% in pre-election opinion polls. Although the conditions in which Ma took the presidency in 2008 appeared to have re-established order ‘under heaven’, a nervous campaign suggested that Ma may have allowed Tsai and her DPP party to become realistic challengers again. When their highest profile and most successful politician, Chen Shui-bian, was jailed for financial corruption enacted during his time as president, the DPP faced major difficulties. For a time it looked as if the party would not return to being a viable opposition, let alone challenge the KMT for power. However, Tsai Ing-wen gradually emerged as a figure that could re-unify a party riven by divisions and someone who could become an electorally viable presidential candidate. Being competitive nationally would require appealing to voters outside of the DPP’s electoral base of southern-based green and blue collar workers and those attracted by the party’s position on Taiwanese national identity. Although she failed in her bid to become Mayor of the major municipality of New Taipei, Tsai was competitive in her first major campaign. Indeed, DPP candidates in all of the 2010 Municipal elections (the equivalent of Taiwan’s mid-term elections) performed above, admittedly low, expectations. Tsai won the DPP’s presidential nomination in a hard-fought primary against Su Tseng-chang. Tsai was not the typical DPP candidate, having no lineage to the pre-democratization *Dangwai* activist movement and not an ideological firebrand. Yet, after the constant ideological mobilization of the Chen Shui-bian era, her calm rational approach was sensible. Indeed, she succeeded in establishing herself as a legitimate presidential candidate, to such an extent that her status as the first woman to stand for ROC president did not become a salient campaign issue.<sup>3</sup> Her deft responses to Ma’s insinuations about Chen Shui-bian during the first televised debate were characteristic of a candidate who had grown in confidence from an unsure lightweight to a candidate of genuine presidential bearing.

Belying his favourite status, Ma’s lacklustre campaign gave his opponents hope right up until Election Day. Rather than emphasizing his stewardship of the

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2 With the exception of corruption involving the First Family, the KMT and PRC government respectively also contributed to these problems.

3 The extent to which gender had an effect on vote choice is not clear at this point.

economy and steady relations with China, Ma misread public opinion by gambling on a pledge to seek a Peace Accord with China at a future juncture when his putative second term would have been long-concluded. His campaign frequently meandered off message and allowed ephemeral 'campaign issues' to become salient. These short term issues included a raft of marginalia relating to campaign tactics, use and misuse of government resources, governmental leaks, legal battles, name calling, and scandal mongering. These issues gave Tsai's campaign momentum and made the race much closer than it should ever have been. First, the KMT-led Control Yuan (one of the five branches of government) invoked laws against receiving campaign contributions from minors after young triplet girls donated their piggybanks to Tsai. The resulting outrage prompted thousands of supporters to fill and donate piggybanks to the tune of NT\$210 million. Moreover, in a campaign where the uneven benefits of Ma's economic policies came under attack, it focused attention on the tension between the DPP's grassroots appeal and the KMT's association with big business and special interests. Second, one of Ma's campaign lieutenants accused Tsai of using her ethnic background to appeal to traditionally KMT-leaning Hakka voters. Questioning Tsai's identity, for example by noting her lack of facility with the Hakka language, was unwise given the KMT's difficult legacy and more specifically that KMT policies and prejudices during the one party era were responsible for the marginalization of non-official languages and cultures. Third, the KMT filed a lawsuit against the DPP for allegations about the propriety of Ma's meeting with an odds-maker at the outset of the campaign: a meeting that Ma did not deny took place. Since illegal gambling on the outcome of elections is one example of the business/crime/politics nexus that continues to bedevil Taiwanese politics and which the KMT is more closely associated with (Chin, 2003), launching a lawsuit and keeping the issue in the news was another example of bad decision-making. These examples are a small section of the missteps, flubs and flip-flops that benighted the KMT campaign. One area where the KMT strategists did stay on message was in reminding voters of the economic and governance difficulties experienced by the former Chen administration, and contrasting this period with improvements under Ma. Numerous TV spots and newspaper ads made this juxtaposition clear.<sup>4</sup> However, starting with the first presidential debate, Ma's campaign also attempted to associate Tsai with the corrupt Chen Shui-bian administration.<sup>5</sup> Integrity and propriety are important characteristics for most election candidates, but they were particularly salient in an election where Ma prided himself on his own clean image and Tsai had to deal with the baggage of a former party chairman and president currently serving a 20 year jail term for bribery and embezzlement. Guilt by association is a common

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4 See for example, <http://tinyurl.com/7u5mkwd>

5 Video of the televised debate available at <http://tinyurl.com/bvqlkz2>

campaign tactic, and after priming voters to think of Tsai and Chen together, the KMT reinvigorated an old issue involving Tsai's potentially problematic consulting role for the Yu-chang biotech company.<sup>6</sup> Employing such tactics has been a staple of numerous campaigns since before democratization in local and supplementary elections, and in many elections since. For example, during the 2000 presidential campaign the KMT broke the Hsing-piao scandal that cost front-running James Soong victory.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted however, that many of Ma's TV and newspaper ads targeting the DPP did so in terms of the issues rather than personal attacks. Furthermore, as incumbents often are (Sullivan, 2008), Ma's campaign focused more on self-promotion and was less negative than Tsai's.

## The Issues

Though cluttered by relatively marginal 'campaign issues', the campaign was primarily fought on three fronts: a cluster of socio-economic issues, Taiwan's engagement with China and Ma's personal effectiveness. Although the President took credit for pushing through a free trade agreement with China, Tsai's campaign attacked Ma for the failure of his major economic policies to deliver generalized benefits. While big businesses have been the major benefactor, the middle classes and blue and green collar workers have not made such gains. Three months before the election Ma was forced to apologize for the failure of one of his major campaign pledges in 2008, the '6-3-3' targets of 6% annual growth, per capita GDP of US\$30,000 and an unemployment rate of less than 3%. Economic inequalities increased markedly during Ma's first term, creating a potential fusion of social justice and quality of life issues that Tsai attempted to harness. Specific issues included new policies to protect labour and the environment, policies to address income disparity, unemployment, social welfare, rising real-estate prices, and proposed reforms to the judiciary, education, national health and taxation. Appealing to the cohort that was expected to be most influenced by the campaign, Tsai emphasized the dire economic prospects facing young people, particularly graduates. Invoking the results of his policies and long held stereotypes about his character, the DPP also attacked Ma's ability to govern effectively. Ma is a good example of how the difficulties associated with governing can take the sheen off a leader's image. As a candidate for Taipei Mayor in 1998, Ma's campaign expertly packaged him as a healthy, modern and urbane character to appeal to the equally urbane electorate in the capital. Yet, during his re-election campaign in 2002, Ma

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6 In order to invigorate this case, the KMT appeared to stage manage a legislative hearing and may have even involved forged documents. For discussion of the Yuchang case, see <http://tinyurl.com/7mlnot3>

7 I thank an anonymous reviewer for correcting my understanding of the nuances of the Hsing-piao case.

came under concerted attack for his inaction and ineffectiveness in dealing with natural disasters, crime and other mundane issues effecting peoples' lives. Tsai's campaign built on popular characterizations of Ma as personally weak and ineffective, for example by targeting his mismanagement of the response to a devastating natural disaster, Typhoon Morakot, which killed hundreds of people in August 2009. The DPP further attacked the Ma administration for what it alleged to be the heavy handed and politically motivated treatment of Chen Shui-bian, and attempted to cast doubt on Ma's clean image by invoking several potentially nefarious deeds.

Ultimately, however, these issues were subordinate to the relationship with China, which encompasses increasingly numerous policy sectors in addition to the national identity issues that have frequently been fought in the ideological arena (Sullivan and Lowe 2010). In the latter stages of the campaign, differences between the two candidates crystalized around competing conceptualizations of how to conduct Taiwan's relationship with China, also known as the 'two consensuses.' Ma endorses the '1992 consensus' that there is one China but the ROC and PRC have different interpretations about which government is the legitimate representative. The historical record is clouded by post-hoc arguments, but it appears that representatives of the KMT and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) agreed on this formulation prior to the ground-breaking Koo-Wang talks held in Singapore in 1993. Over time, acceptance of the 1992 consensus has become Beijing's minimum requirement as the basis for open high level contacts. Like her predecessor Chen Shui-bian, Tsai rejects the 1992 consensus, arguing that an agreement did not exist, until the idea of one was created by the KMT at a much later date and adopted by the CCP later still.

Upon assuming office, Ma's immediate and unequivocal embrace of the 1992 Consensus and affirmation of the 'Three Nos' (No Unification, No Independence, and No War) provided the platform for generating unprecedented goodwill with China. During Ma's first term, cross-Strait relations reached a historically high level of cooperation. Taipei's Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) and Beijing's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) resumed dialogue for the first time since the mid-1990s and quickly endorsed a range of economic interactions. These culminated in the central policy achievement of Ma's first term, the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), essentially a free trade agreement with China.<sup>8</sup> Ma's conciliatory approach towards China also enabled Taiwan to increase, albeit to a limited extent, its participation in international society. Taiwanese have long expressed the desire to enjoy a role in international society commensurate with Taiwan's status as a global economy and liberal democracy. For years, China has mobilized its substantial and rapidly

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8 I thank an anonymous reviewer for the reminder that ECFA faces many practical obstacles and implementation has been slow and problematic.

increasing economic and political influence to ensure that Taiwan has not. Although it has been necessary to accept the Chinese Taipei designation to achieve it (which opponents argue involves unacceptable infringements of ROC sovereignty), given China's intractable position, compromises of this nature appear necessary to avoid the marginalization that characterized the Chen era.

Nevertheless, the speed and unchecked nature of Ma's cross-Strait détente, owing to the KMT's supermajority in the legislature, appeared to have concerned the median voter. According to three decades of reliable longitudinal opinion surveys, this hypothetical voter emphatically supports maintenance of the status quo (Rigger, 2001; Wang and Liu, 2004; Wang et al., 2011). Compounding the perception that things were moving too fast, Ma introduced his Peace Accord proposal at the outset of the campaign, only to hastily remove it from sight when rebutted by public opinion. Perceiving and hoping to capitalize on concerns about the scale of Ma's cross-Strait policies, Tsai advocated prudence and patience in dealing with China. Her alternative proposal of a 'Taiwan Consensus' established bi-partisan agreement within Taiwan as a pre-requisite to further interactions with China. Although she espoused a moderate position on cross-Strait relations, proposing deceleration rather than negation of already enacted cross-Strait policies, the Taiwan Consensus appeared impracticable in its means (bipartisan political consensus has seldom been achievable) and its end (as a platform from which to engage China given Beijing's de facto bottom line for cooperation). As Tsai struggled to articulate her intentions, Ma attempted to equate the choice of president to a choice between stability, embodied by the 1992 consensus, and the uncertainty and potential instability of Tsai's Taiwan consensus. This dichotomy is a variation on a theme that the KMT, the CCP and, on occasion, the United States, have espoused since the first presidential election in 1996. As in 1996, when the KMT's Lee Teng-hui defeated the DPP's Peng Ming-min, voters choose stability over what was presented to them as a potentially risky alternative (see Jacobs, 2012 for detailed analysis).

## Results and Implications

Voting took place without incident and the results were reported within hours of the polls closing. In the presidential contest Ma received 51.6% of the vote, with Tsai at 45.6%, a substantial difference of 800 thousand votes cast. Although Ma's vote share and margin of victory were substantially reduced from the landslide recorded in 2008, it still represents a decisive victory. Compared to 2008, Tsai Ing-wen managed to increase the DPP vote share by around 4%, and she did so almost uniformly across all electoral districts, but she was unable to make

sufficient inroads in the major municipalities, especially in the north.<sup>9</sup> This election consolidated Taiwan's electoral geography, which is typically distinguished by the 'blue north' and 'green south' (i.e. the DPP and its allies). With the exception of rural Ilan County, the whole of northern Taiwan went blue in 2012, and losing the crucial central Taiwan battleground means that in the political imagination the DPP has been pushed into a far southern enclave. Despite this, Tsai conceded defeat with grace and, as is customary for the DPP, resigned as party Chair, having delivered the DPP's second best showing in a presidential election and the best by a non-incumbent DPP presidential candidate. She struck a concordant note at her concession rally, saying "we'll be back, we won't give in, we will keep fighting for Taiwan [...] Taiwan can't not have an opposition voice." At his victory rally, a jubilant president Ma proclaimed that he would endeavour to keep Taiwan safe, and, learning from issues raised by his opponents during the campaign, would seek to address the widening disparity between the rich and the poor and other issues.

In addition to the 'normality' of the result, we should also remember that it is difficult to defeat an incumbent leader unless he or she has done an exceptionally poor job. Even then, electorates are often resistant to change. Indeed, no sitting ROC President has ever failed to secure a second term.<sup>10</sup> While Ma's policies and personal modus operandi were not universally popular during his first term, his achievements were significant, particularly in terms of relations with China, which the majority of Taiwanese acknowledge to be Taiwan's major economic opportunity and strategic threat. Although criticisms of his record on the economy are valid, many of the issues that Taiwan encountered were the result of its integration into a global economy facing similar problems. The DPP's performance in the special municipality elections held in 2010, in which they won two of five positions, suggested that the party could capitalize on dissatisfaction with Ma and the then-recently enacted ECFA policy.<sup>11</sup> However, the DPP has always performed better in local and municipal contests than it has in national executive and legislative elections, and the results now appear symptomatic of a mid-term dip for the Ma administration. Despite the momentum that Tsai generated through a well conducted campaign and the salience of campaign issues that were generally disadvantageous to the KMT, she needed help in order to win. One potential source was that ROC presidential elections are decided by simple plurality in the popular vote, which allowed Chen Shui-bian to capture the presidency with 39% of the vote in a three horse race in 2000. However, the

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9 Official electoral district returns available at [http://vote2012.nat.gov.tw/zh\\_TW/P1/n0000000000000000.html](http://vote2012.nat.gov.tw/zh_TW/P1/n0000000000000000.html)

10 In addition to Ma and Chen's successful re-election campaigns, Lee Teng-hui won the first direct election for the presidency having served eight years as a non-elected president.

11 I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that the DPP won 400,000 more votes than the KMT, and that the two seats that they won were both located in the south.



evaporation of Soong's support, with the majority appearing to vote for Ma, meant that Tsai would have to secure around 50% of the popular vote, something that no DPP presidential challenger has even come close to achieving.

Whether you interpret it as a mandate, a signal of increasing opposition, or the result of various peculiarities, voters granted Ma another four years and another legislative majority to continue implementing his policy programs. Notwithstanding his campaign's strategic mis-steps, Ma won because underlyingly the electorate has more confidence in his policies, especially on cross-Strait relations, than they did Tsai's. However, the low hanging fruit in cross-Strait economic interactions has been harvested and the implementation of ECFA and further advances will necessitate much trickier negotiations. The CCP is currently preoccupied with its own domestic problems and an unusually eventful leadership transition (Garnaut, 2012), and is likely to lead to adopt a holding position in the near term.<sup>12</sup> Thereafter, pressure may build on Ma to get serious about talking politics with Beijing. Given the strength of popular support for maintaining the status quo in Taiwan, and a rejuvenated opposition (despite the loss and Tsai's resignation from the DPP leadership), Ma will face more pressure than in his first term. Voters may have given Ma another four years to maintain calm and mutually beneficial relations with China, but not a mandate to open political talks. There is concern in some quarters in Taiwan that over-dependence on the Chinese market threatens Taiwan's economic and political autonomy. Senior DPP figures point to Beijing's leverage over Taiwanese business interests, its commercial leverage in Taiwan, and manipulation of tourist visits as important factors in the result of the presidential election.<sup>13</sup> In the aftermath of the election, the DPP has started dissecting the causes of its poor electoral performance. This has necessitated reflection on the party's policy towards China and recognition that Tsai's Taiwan Consensus failed to convince voters and more than any other single factor was responsible for her defeat. The KMT, on the other hand, has already sought to introduce the concept of 'one country, two areas' as the basis for engagement at a KMT-CCP forum in Beijing.

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12 Interviews conducted with Taiwan Affairs Office officials in Shanghai in July 2012 confirm this interpretation.

13 Separate interviews with Tsai Ing-wen and Joseph Wu respectively in Taipei in July 2012.

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