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Lessons from Taiwan's 2016 National Elections

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In the aftermath of major elections academics, journalists and politicians attempt to learn the lessons of the campaign. As nine months have passed since the January 2016 elections, we have had some time to reflect on what we have learnt from this election. I thought that this would be an interesting topic to provoke discussion and to get a sense on the diverse ways academics in Europe, Taiwan and China understand these potentially critical elections.

This theme is one that I have published a number of articles on in the past, so it is always nice to update and revisit a topic that I have enjoyed writing on. My earlier writings considered both how the KMT and DPP responded to disastrous defeats.¹ Another advantage of this topic is it has endless scope for comparative analysis.

How do parties tend to respond to election results? It would seem rational to assume that where parties win, then they will feel vindicated and then follow a similar set of appeals in the next round of elections. In contrast, we would expect the losing party to try to learn lessons of defeat and thus adjust elements of its political package that had proved unpopular in their previous campaign. Political science theory as well as empirical cases from Taiwan and beyond show that the way parties respond to election results, particularly defeat is much more complex. For instance, one of the ways that Lees-Marshment distinguishes between party types is the way they respond to electoral defeat.² What she calls *product oriented parties* will not change their political product regardless of electoral results. In contrast, a *sales oriented party* is more responsive to the market. Following electoral setbacks it is likely to try to improve the quality of its communication and may adjust its campaign issue priorities, but will not change its fundamental policy positions. Finally the most responsive to market intelligence including previous election results and polling will be the *market oriented party*. She also argues that the model adopted by parties will have important implications for their electoral performances. Marshment's model was partly inspired by the case of the British Labour Party in the 1980s and 1990s and the way it responded to a series of electoral setbacks. Often the way a party responds to electoral defeat is closely tied to which faction is able to win the post-election inner party power struggle.

¹ Fell, Dafydd (2009) ['Lessons of Defeat: A Comparison of Taiwanese Ruling Parties' Responses to Electoral Defeat.'](#) *Asian Politics and Policy*, 1 (4). pp. 660-681; Fell, Dafydd and Chen, I-hsin Charles (2014) ['Lessons of Defeat and Success: Taiwan's 2012 Elections in Comparative Perspective.'](#) *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 43 (3).

² Lees-Marshment, Jennifer, (ed.), 2009. *Political Marketing: Principles and Applications*. London & New York: Routledge.

Thus key locations to observe following elections are debates over the causes of defeat together with post-election leadership selection struggles.

If we take Taiwanese political parties we can see a series of cases that reveal how parties have coped with defeat. Even though this was not the central focus of my first book *Party Politics in Taiwan*, it did actually feature prominently in all my party and issue case studies.³ Perhaps the best example of a *product oriented party* in the Taiwanese context has been the New Party (NP). Since 1998 it has responded to setbacks by consistently using the same set of policy appeals that have grown increasingly distant from mainstream public opinion. In other words, for this kind of party, ideological purity is more important than increasing its vote share.⁴ In other cases, parties responded in a manner closer to that of the *sales oriented party*. For example, following its defeat in 2000 the KMT attempted to learn lessons from its setback. However, the picture was mixed and could be categorised as partial learning. Some of its reforms were useful such as revising its nomination system and attempts to remove its image for political corruption. But in other areas the party either failed to learn from 2000 or seemed to misread the election. For instance, it retained the unpopular Lien Chan (連戰) as its chair and presidential candidate and on the core identity issue, it moved away from the median voter.⁵ It was not until the KMT suffered a second presidential defeat in 2004 and the 2005 leadership change that the KMT's lesson learning became more successful. There are thus parallels with the gradual way the KMT dealt with defeat and the case of the British Labour Party between 1979 and 1996 but also with the DPP's case between 2008 and 2016.

The first place to examine lessons of 2016 has to be the case of the main losing party, the KMT. Having won comfortable re-elections in both the national presidential and parliamentary elections in 2012, Ma attempted to govern in a similar manner to his first term. In other words, he continued to accelerate cross-strait integration and to govern without seeking domestic consensus with either the main opposition or civil society forces. However, the new political environment made this approach more challenging. Almost as soon as Ma had won re-election his presidential satisfaction rate plummeted and never recovered. The growing strength of oppositional civil society together with a shift towards more conservative in public opinion on China relations meant that Ma's approach began to backfire. Like the DPP during Chen Shui-bian's (陳水扁) second term, the KMT suffered a major electoral setback (2014) and loss of support in polling data. Ma's KMT had lost support in his first term but had been able to recover

³ Fell, Dafydd (2005) [*Party Politics in Taiwan: Party Change and the Democratic Evolution of Taiwan, 1991-2004*](#). Routledge.

⁴ Fell, Dafydd (2006) ['The Rise and Decline of the New Party: Ideology, Resources and the Political Opportunity Structure.'](#) *East Asia: An International Quarterly*, 23 (1). pp. 47-67.

⁵ Fell, Dafydd (2009) ['Lessons of Defeat: A Comparison of Taiwanese Ruling Parties' Responses to Electoral Defeat.'](#) *Asian Politics and Policy*, 1 (4). pp. 660-681.

sufficiently to win re-election. In contrast, in the second term the KMT was unable to recover support. It made some limited attempts to react to its 2014 setbacks. For instance, the Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement (CSSTA) was reluctantly put on hold, the Fourth Nuclear Power Station was mothballed, and Ma resigned as KMT chairman after the 2014 election loss. However, these were only partial attempts to learn from the setbacks of 2014. For instance, Ma continued in his bid to expand political and economic integration, best exemplified in his meeting with the Chinese President in Singapore.

Nomination is often a critical variable in election results and a key arena for lesson learning.⁶ The nomination and campaign of Lien Sheng-wen (連勝文) in the Taipei mayoral election was a factor in the KMT's overall poor performance nationwide in 2014. A few months later, candidate selection would again prove highly damaging for 2016. The fact that the party's presidential primary saw the hardline Chinese nationalist Hung Hsiu-chu (洪秀柱) gaining nomination signified that the KMT was moving closer to the *product oriented model*. A clear sign of this development was the way some observers began talking about a NPization of the KMT.⁷ Rather than moving closer to public opinion, Hung's nomination was moving the party in the opposite direction. Of course, the KMT, realising it was on the verge of a historic defeat did eventually replace her with Chu Li-lun (朱立倫). Chu attempted to project a more moderate line, mixing inclusive appeals such as the One Taiwan slogan with Republic of China Chinese nationalist appeals. However, it was too late to turn the tide.

In the aftermath of the January elections KMT chair Chu Li-lun had to resign to take responsibility for defeat. A key test for the KMT's future and how it would react to defeat was the post-election power struggle, particularly its chairperson election. Instead of electing a new face or more moderate politician, party members overwhelmingly voted in favour of the candidate that had been replaced for being too extreme to be presidential candidate, Hung. Thus far Hung has shown herself to be as out of step with mainstream public opinion as she had been during her time as presidential candidate. The term NPfication of the KMT has actually become more frequently used in the media since the 2016 KMT defeat.⁸ Thus we can contrast the KMT's response to defeat in 2016 with the DPP's chairperson election in 2008 that saw Tsai Ing-wen elected or even the reform minded chairmanship of Lien Chan after 2000. Thus if we adopt Lees-Marshment's terminology the KMT has reverted to being a *product oriented party*.

What of the winning party, the DPP? To what extent did its learning lessons of previous setbacks contribute to its victory in 2016? The DPP has traditionally been

⁶ Fell, Dafydd (2013) ['Impact of Candidate Selection Systems on Election Results: Evidence from Taiwan before and after the Change in Electoral Systems.'](#) *The China Quarterly*, 213, pp. 152-171.

⁷ http://www.etaiwannews.com/etn/news_content.php?id=2797482

⁸ <http://www.chinatimes.com/realtimenews/20160320003476-260407>

more responsive to shifts in public opinion and election setbacks than the KMT. We can contrast the inner party selection of Tsai in 2008 with the KMT's leadership primary selection of Hung to see this. The DPP did gradually adjust its positions under Tsai. It became more pragmatic on relations with China over time and by 2011 was no longer opposing ECFA and the Ma's cross-strait agreements. This process continued after its defeat in 2012. However, there are limits to how far the DPP can adjust its positions due to party ideology and where mainstream public opinion is located. Essentially the DPP has adopted a position that could be termed the *1999 consensus*.⁹ In other words, its position is that Taiwan is independent but there is no need to declare independence as Taiwan is already independent. However, a component of this consensus is that it accepts the constitutional structure of the Republic of China. This thus locates the DPP closer to the median voter than in its more radical phases. A final area worth pointing out is the way the DPP has learnt to devote greater resources to parliamentary campaigns. In the past it had tended to place too much priority on winning the presidency. A key lesson of the Chen era had been the limits imposed on a DPP president that did not have a majority in parliament. Naturally the DPP's moderation and skilful campaigning after 2012 did contribute to its rise to power. However, the DPP also benefitted greatly from both the Sunflower effect and the series of disastrous KMT mistakes in 2014 and 2015. Without these two factors it is unlikely the DPP could have won such landslide victories in 2016. In fact, despite the scale of the DPP's victories in 2016, the degree of party change should not be exaggerated, thus it may be more appropriate to still classify the DPP as a *sales oriented party*.

One of the most exciting elements of the 2016 election from the perspective of party scholars was the attempts by smaller parties to remain or break into the party system, with record numbers contesting the party list vote.¹⁰ We can offer a number of hypotheses on these attempts.

Firstly, voters rejected the parties that adopted more extreme and exclusive policy appeals. Three parties fit into this category. The Taiwan Solidarity Union's (TSU) advertising focused quite heavily on anti-Chinese economic integration messages. Key appeals included references to the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, opposition to Chinese students in Taiwan enjoying UNHI and opposition to Chinese agricultural imports. A memorable TSU advertisement featured a university student throwing a copy of George Kerr's book *Formosa Betrayed* at President Ma. As the student is held down by security agents he shouts "Taiwan China one country on each side." Although the TSU did try to link its anti-

⁹ I am not sure whether this is a best terminology as Shih Ming-the makes this rough statement in 1995 but the advantage of 1999 is that year features both Lee's special state to state statement and the DPP's Taiwan Future Resolution.

¹⁰ Fell, Dafydd (2016) '[Small Parties in Taiwan's 2016 National Elections: A Limited Breakthrough?](#)' *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, 23 (1). pp. 41-58.

integration message to the Sunflower movement, it had failed to fully learn lessons of earlier contests. In particular it had not been able to broaden its policy appeals and remained far too reliant on the appeal of Lee Teng-hui.

The second case was the NP, which made its most recent attempt to re-enter parliament for the first time since 2008. The NP spent even more heavily than the TSU in this campaign and had the advantage of gaining the defection of the high profile former KMT legislator Chiu Yi (邱毅). The party also again adopted a clear Chinese nationalist and anti-social movement set of appeals. The party had hoped to take advantage of dissatisfaction with the KMT, in particular from those originally supporting the hardline candidacy of Hung. However, the NP failed again to reach the required five percent threshold. The most noteworthy extremist party in 2016 though was the Chinese Unification Promotion Party (CUPP) led by the gangster figure Chang An-lo (張安樂). This campaign was significant for a number of reasons. This was the first time that a serious party openly supported the PRC's model of one country two systems in its advertising, thus locating the CUPP even further to the right on the national identity spectrum than the NP. Of course there are a large number of marginal pro unification groupings in Taiwan. However, what made the CUPP noteworthy was that it gained significant media attention and was one of the highest spenders in terms of election advertising in 2016. CUPP advertisements featured on the front pages of the main daily newspapers on a daily basis for much of the campaign. The fact that the CUPP gained a meagre 0.4 percent of the party list vote reveals the limits to PRC style nationalism in the Taiwanese election market. If we adopt Lees Marshment's model all three of these parties are clearly *product oriented parties*.

The second type of small party that attempted to enter or stay in parliament was what Sikk calls purifier-light parties or projects of newness.¹¹ While the NP and TSU are classic purifiers that seek to salvage an old ideology, purifier light parties wish to change just the manners of doing politics rather than the contents. Clear examples were the PFP and MKT. The PFP had started out as a KMT splinter that marketed itself as more moderate than the NP, emphasised Soong's leadership and for a while challenged the KMT as the leading Pan Blue party. In the last two presidential elections the PFP has dropped its Pan Blue appeals and instead relied almost exclusively attacking the KMT government and on the Soong appeal. In both 2012 and 2016 Song's presidential campaigns were enough to boost the party's PR list vote to over the required five percent. Prior to the election my colleague on this delegation Jonathan Sullivan predicted 2016 would see the final demise of the traditional splinter parties. Although the PFP did manage to scrape through it seems unlikely to be a major force in the future. It is unlikely Soong will be able to run another presidential campaign and the problem has been that the

¹¹ Alan Sikk, Newness as a winning formula for new political parties, *Party Politics* 18 (4).

PPF politicians in parliament have struggled to develop any major role or impact that could have generated broader party identification. The PFP's learning lessons of defeat have only been partial. It correctly understood the importance of presidential bids and to break free from its alliance with the KMT that almost led to its total annexation. However, it has failed to develop a clear party role, party organization and identity beyond its party leader. This will limit its scope to remain relevant in the future.

The second such purifier light party attempt was the Minkuotang (MKT) that had been formed by KMT defector Hsu Hsin-ying (徐欣瑩). As with the CUPP Hsu was able to raise extensive funds for a huge number of party workers and advertising. In fact the MKT advertising had a classic pan blue splinter feel, with heavy use of the ROC flag, incorporating the national emblem in to its party badge, and nationalist symbols such as Sun Yat Sen. Perhaps the most distinguishing element of the MKT's campaign though was its large membership drive. Most small splinter parties relied heavily on defecting politicians and failed to develop party membership or organizations beyond those of individual politicians. In contrast, the MKT made a massive membership recruitment drive, claiming within months to be the third largest party and aiming to become the largest in the future!¹² However, the party clearly lost steam as the campaign developed. The fact that it had a joint presidential campaign with Soong but rival PR campaigns probably was detrimental. In the aftermath observers joked that the party's actual votes were lower than its claimed membership figures. As had been the case with the CUPP, the MKT revealed that voters cannot be won over solely by heavy advertising spending.

The third type of small party was what Lucardie terms the *prophetic parties*, those offering new issue appeals compared to the mainstream and their splinters that are national identity based.¹³ The aftermath of the Sunflower Movement saw a proliferation of such parties competing for the same set of votes. The most significant one in 2016 was the Green Party Taiwan (GPT)-Social Democratic Party (SDP) Alliance. The GPT had contested elections since 1996, but many of its leaders viewed 2016 as its historic opportunity to make a breakthrough. The alliance adopted a range of non-identity based appeals such as gay rights, environmental protection, animal rights, and labour rights. The party attempted to be more like a party, with local branches and purchasing of bus advertising and medium scale campaign rallied. Moreover part of its appeal was that the party was not allied to the DPP. In the end though the party was to be disappointed. It did increase its vote share up to 2.5 from 1.7 in 2012 but still well short of the

¹² Fang Bing-chao, "Aiming to exceed the second largest party, the MKT will nominate a presidential candidate," *Storm Media*, June 23, 2015, <http://www.storm.mg/article/54329>

¹³ Paul Lucardie, *Emergence of New Parties Prophets, Purifiers and Prolocutors: Towards a Theory on the Emergence of New Parties*. Party Politics 6.

threshold. The election revealed the severe challenges for such a genuine alternative party. In the aftermath of the election it appears that tensions between the two component parts mean it is unlikely the alliance will be revived, also limiting the space for alternative politics.

One major factor in the GPT's failure to make a breakthrough was the more crowded market for civil society style parties. A minor factor was the Tree Party formed by GPT defector Pan Han-sheng. But more important was the emergence of the New Power Party (NPP), the new party that did make its parliamentary breakthrough in 2016. There are a number of reasons why the NPP was more successful than the GPT. Firstly, it had the advantage of political stars that were closely associated with the Sunflower Movement, thus making it more effective even at the district level. Secondly, while there was much issue overlap with the GPT, the NPP made greater emphasis on its role as a protest leader. Thus for instance, its advertising stressed its figures direct involvement and leadership in the key protest movements of the Ma era, for instance, the Sunflower occupation. Thirdly, it was able to work in alliance with the DPP. This had pros and cons. It meant that the DPP was more willing to give up a number of districts for the NPP to directly compete against the KMT. However, the DPP did attempt to win back voters from the NPP in the final weeks of the campaign and this almost undermined the NPP's PR campaign. Lastly, while the GPT attempted to largely steer clear of identity issues, the NPP did take a position to the left of the DPP and quite similar to the TSU. This enabled it to win voters that might have voted TSU in the last election but while the TSU was a single issue party, the NPP had the advantage of a much broader range of appeals. It will be interesting to see how the NPP develops in the first Tsai term. It will be a difficult balancing act. If it is too closely allied to the DPP, there is the danger it could follow a similar fate to the other failed splinters. If it is too oppositional to the DPP, it may struggle to develop especially in single member district (SMD) elections. Optimists have talked of the party replacing the KMT as Taiwan's second largest party, however, it is hard to see it competing with the KMT's clientelistic local base. The NPP can be regarded as a hybrid party with both alternative and splinter party style appeals. What will be interesting to see is which of these characteristics will predominate in the coming presidential term. If it is the latter, there may still be space for a third force party or what Chou Yi-cheng 周奕成 terms the third society. Although the GPT has become increasingly market sensitive under new leadership, it was not enough to compete with the NPP's *sales oriented approach*.

Conclusions

Based on the above discussions of the lessons from 2016, what are the prospects for the party system in the short to medium term? The next electoral tests will

come in the 2018 local elections and then the January 2020 national elections. In both rounds the DPP will have a clear incumbency advantage that will pose a severe challenge to whoever leads the KMT. Hung's chairperson term ends in 2017 and it is likely she will be challenged, especially if the party continues to lag badly in party identification. At least at this stage it is unclear who in the KMT could play a similar transformative role to that of Tsai in the DPP after 2008. The KMT has had a long-term challenge in balancing its local clientelistic base with its traditional Chinese nationalist factions and this will continue to trouble the party. 2018 will offer the NPP an opportunity to develop its support base especially in the multiple member district (MMD) district elections in major cities. However, at least at the local executive level it is likely to maintain a cooperative relationship with the DPP. Looking further ahead and especially if the KMT struggles to recover, it is likely that tensions may develop between the NPP and DPP and that the relationship may become more competitive in the run up to the 2020 elections. While the traditional splinter parties are likely to continue their decline, it will be interesting to see whether a genuine alternative party can finally emerge.