

# THE 2016 GENERAL ELECTION IN TAIWAN: REALIGNMENT OR DEVIATION?

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### **The 2016 General Election in Taiwan: Realignment, Deviation, or Neither?**

Among all the Third Wave democracies, Taiwan stands out for the remarkable stability of its party system.<sup>1</sup> Since Taiwan's first fully democratic legislative election in 1992, the two leading political parties have remained the same: the Chinese Nationalist Party, (*Kuomintang*, or KMT), and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) finished 1-2 in 1992, and 2-1 in 2016. Despite a fragmentation and significant volatility in the party system in the early 2000s, no other party has ever managed to knock either one out of the top two positions.

Equally noteworthy is that for most of Taiwan's democratic history, political party competition in Taiwan has been oriented around a single question: what should be the island's relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC)? The two major parties have been clearly divided on this issue for two decades: on the right has been the KMT, which has in recent years favored a closer, more cooperative relationship with the PRC, and on the left has been the DPP, which has been wary of closer cross-Taiwan Strait relations and has consistently advocated for a declaration of de jure or at least maintenance of de facto independence for Taiwan. But it is not just the major parties, but every significant party in the legislature over the last two decades, that can be arranged on this single dimension. On the right, the KMT has been joined there by two splinter parties, the pro-unification New Party to its right, and the more centrist People First Party of James Soong slightly to its left, which together form what in Taiwanese political parlance is known as the "pan-blue" camp. On the other side, shortly after the 2000 election the DPP was joined by another KMT splinter group, the Taiwan Solidarity Union led by former president Lee Teng-hui, which set up to the DPP's left and took an even stronger nativist, anti-PRC stance. Parallel to the KMT and its more pro-PRC offshoots, the DPP and TSU together became known as the "pan-green" camp.

This two-camp grouping along the single issue dimension of cross-Strait relations has, with only minor exceptions, structured major party competition at the national level ever since the DPP's first presidential win in 2000. All subsequent elections have turned at least to some degree on shifts in the median voter's preferences on this question.<sup>2</sup> Despite the waxing and waning of the popularity of the individual parties over time, the orientation of the party system as a whole around different approaches to cross-Strait relations has remained strikingly consistent.

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<sup>1</sup> Cheng and Hsu 2015. See also the introduction to this volume, Hicken 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Yu Ching-hsin 2005; Cheng and Hsu 2015; Rigger 2016.

Reinforcing this pattern, individual attitudes on this question have become more and more determinative of vote choice in national elections, as segments of the electorate have resorted into the political camp closest to their own views toward the dominant concern in Taiwanese politics.<sup>3</sup>

### **Was 2016 Actually a Realigning Election?**

This was the backdrop to the 2016 general election, in which both the presidency and control of the legislature were up for grabs. So it was noteworthy that many observers of Taiwanese politics thought this pattern of “blue-green” competition might at last be broken, and that Taiwan’s party system was headed for a major realignment around some other issue besides cross-Strait relations.

Indications that Taiwan’s party system might be headed for a major realignment around economic and social issues came from several directions. First, KMT President Ma Ying-jeou’s personal popularity, and that of his administration, turned negative early in his second term, and by 2013 his approval rating was consistently less than 20% in opinion polls. At the same time, civil society activists led an increase in street protests directed against a wide range of government policies, including the allegedly improper use of eminent domain by local governments in Miaoli County, Taoyuan City, and Taipei City; proposals to allow imports of US beef and pork; and the negligent death of a conscript in military custody. The surge of social activism culminated in a sudden occupation of the Legislative Yuan for three weeks in spring 2014 to prevent the approval of a trade agreement with the PRC that the Ma administration had pushed hard for. Finally, the ruling KMT itself appeared increasingly divided paralyzed by infighting among its legislative caucus, local officials, and the Ma administration, and buffeted by corruption scandals and rising public opposition to further cross-Strait rapprochement.

The December 2014 local elections put an exclamation point on the swing in public opinion against the ruling party. The KMT was trounced: going into the election, it held 15 of 22 county executive and city mayor seats, but lost nine to either the DPP or independent candidates. The headline result was in Taipei City, traditionally a pan-blue stronghold, where the DPP-supported independent candidate, Ko Wen-je, handily won the election over the KMT nominee.

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Yu 2016.

Particularly noteworthy was that Ko positioned himself as a centrist on cross-Strait relations and instead spent much of his campaign emphasizing economic and governance issues instead. When he recorded a margin of victory far better than any previous DPP candidate had done in a Taipei mayor's race, some commentators saw it as proof that Taiwan's party system was finally headed for a broader realignment around economic and class issues and away from the old "blue-green" competition over cross-Strait relations.

The run-up to the 2016 election provided more evidence that a change in patterns of political support might be in the offing. In the months after the local elections, several new political parties were founded that claimed to represent a new "Third Force" in Taiwanese politics, distinguishing themselves from both the two main political camps by emphasizing distinctive positions on cross-cutting social, economic, and cultural issues.<sup>4</sup> The most prominently were three parties that had close links to the social movements that had become increasingly active during President Ma Ying-jeou's presidency: the New Power Party (時代力量), the Social Democratic Party (社會民主黨), and the Green Party of Taiwan (台灣綠黨).<sup>5</sup> Attempting to capitalize on public concern about concerns that they thought the leading parties were ignoring, all three based their campaign appeals on a call to move beyond "blue vs. green" competition to address other economic and social issues such as labor rights, environmental protection, social welfare policy, and regulation of big business.

Nor were the NPP, SDP, and GPT the only new parties attempting to run on issues orthogonal to cross-Strait relations. They were joined by at least half a dozen other significant new contestants, including the Minkuotang (民國黨), a KMT offshoot that began as a personal vehicle for a prominent KMT legislator who defected from the party, but quickly became associated with a Zen Buddhist religious master; the Faith and Hope League (信心希望聯盟), a party appealing to religious conservatives advocating traditional family values; the Military, Civil Servants, Firefighters, Academics [Teachers], and Policemen Party, or MCFAP (軍公教聯盟黨), whose chief issue was the protection of pensions for retired government employees; the

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<sup>4</sup> For some English-language examples, see Sullivan and Thim 2015, Ekhong 2014, Smith 2015, Tsai 2015, and van der Horst 2016.

<sup>5</sup> The GPT was actually founded in the 1990s but gained little traction in elections before the 2016 campaign. On the history of the Green Party Taiwan and the environmental movement, see Grano 2015.

National Health Service Alliance (健保免費連線), founded by a former minister of health, which advocated for full nationalization of the health insurance system and elimination of for-profit hospitals and clinics, along with a greater emphasis on traditional Chinese medicine; and the Trees Party (樹黨), another pro-environmental protection party founded by a splinter group from the Green Party Taiwan.

In total, 18 different parties ran their own party lists—a record number for Taiwan. And at least that many nominated candidates at the district level. Yet, in the end, the media prominence given to these “non-traditional” alternatives belied their weakness on election night. Of all the new parties that contested the legislative election, only one, the NPP, managed to win any seats at all; three of its nominees won their district seats, and the party secured 6.2% of the party list vote, enough for an additional two seats. All the others came up short of both the 5% threshold for party list seats and in the scattered district races in which they competed.

Instead, the main shift in the 2016 election was not to upstart “Third Force” parties but instead from the KMT to the DPP, which won both an easy victory in the presidential race and, for the first time in the party’s history, a comfortable majority in the Legislative Yuan. For all the talk about a fundamental change in the party system, the same two party camps soon took up their seats in the new legislature, and almost as quickly, restarted many of the same familiar partisan arguments that had driven politics for the previous decade and more.

Thus, in hindsight, it is worth asking: was really a critical election that produced a lasting political realignment, or something less dramatic, and perhaps less permanent, than expected?

### **The Argument in Brief**

In the rest of this paper, I take up this question. I begin with a consideration of what we mean by the term “realignment,”—an old concept with a storied lineage dating back at least 50 years to V.O. Key, but one that has in recent years come to mean at least two distinctly different things. In the original, stronger version, a “realigning election” was one that produced an abrupt, significant, and lasting change in the primary cleavage dividing the electorate, and one that reordered the leading political parties or reshaped the coalitions supporting them. More recently, however, political analysts writing about Taiwan have frequently used “realignment” to refer to something simpler—a lasting shift in electoral support from one party to another. Both of these, in turn, are fundamentally different from, but often confused with, “deviating” elections, which

refer to *temporary* electoral shifts in political support toward or away from a political party based on short-term considerations.

With these distinctions in mind, I then turn to the question of whether, and how, the 2016 election represented a “realignment” of Taiwan’s party system. Drawing from election returns, I argue that Taiwan’s party system has not undergone a realignment in the classic, strong sense: the fundamental dimension of party competition and differentiation remains cross-Strait relations, as it has for almost two decades. Parties that attempted to compete on other issues mostly fell flat; the one exception, the NPP, cooperated closely with the DPP on its election campaign, and, I argue, succeeded in winning seats not because of its cross-cutting appeals, but *in spite* of them.

By contrast, we cannot rule out that the 2016 election may be a realigning one in the weaker sense—that is, a lasting shift in political support from one party to another. In several ways, this election was a historic breakthrough for the DPP. Tsai Ing-wen won the highest vote share of any DPP candidate for president, and captured a majority for only the second time ever. More consequentially, the party also won a majority in the legislature for the first time, finally ending the pan-blue camp’s nominal control of that body 24 years after its first election by Taiwanese voters. The 2016 election also was the culmination of a series of improved election performances by the DPP, beginning with the 2009-10 local elections and 2012 presidential election, where the party improved on its previous showings, and continuing with a sweeping victory over the KMT in the combined local elections in 2014. And finally, opinion polls show a significant and sustained rise in partisan identification with the DPP and pan-green camp, surpassing the pan-blue camp for the first time. All this evidence suggests that 2016 may indeed mark a critical shift in Taiwanese politics toward a “natural majority” for the green camp away from the blue.

Nevertheless, we should be cautious in drawing a conclusion that even this, more limited “realignment,” will last. In fact, the 2016 election also has elements that suggest the result might be a short-term deviation rather than a lasting realignment, including poor short-term economic conditions that hurt the incumbent KMT, low popularity ratings for President Ma, and above all a late and damaging switch in presidential candidates. In addition, the pan-blue camp suffered from yet another renegade third-party campaign by James Soong, and the election itself was notable for record-low turnout. None of these are permanent liabilities, and the low turnout is at

odds with the traditional expectation that realigning elections feature unusual enthusiasm and heightened participation.

In sum, it is premature to declare the 2016 election the moment a lasting political realignment occurred in Taiwan. Instead, the key takeaway from the 2016 election is how stable and well-institutionalized Taiwan's party system remains.

### **Party System Realignments in The Abstract: Strong and Weak Versions**

What is a “critical election” that leads to a “party system realignment”?<sup>6</sup> Political observers and even political scientists often use the terms casually, without definition, and most of us have an innate sense of what we mean by it: an election that results in a fundamental, lasting shift in the patterns of party competition and voting behavior, whatever they may be. That definition, however, obscures an important distinction between at least two possible kinds of critical realignment: what I will call the *strong* and *weak* versions.

#### *Critical Realignment: The Strong Version*

The first, strong version is what V.O. Key had in mind when he first introduced the concept of a critical election in 1955: it is one in which “the decisive results of the voting reveal a sharp alteration of *the pre-existing cleavage* within the electorate” [italics mine].<sup>7</sup> The key feature here is that a *completely new dimension* of competition suddenly becomes salient enough that a significant number of erstwhile partisans permanently drop or switch their partisan attachments. The old political coalitions in one or more parties are split apart by this new cleavage, and either a new party emerges to win big chunks of the old parties' voters, or coalitions behind the parties reform, with some segments of the electorate in effect “trading places.”

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<sup>6</sup> Major contributors to the literature on party realignments in the U.S. context include Schattschneider 1960, Burnham 1970, and Sundquist 1973. Mayhew 2000 provides a thorough, although critical, review of this literature. For a more sympathetic view, see Carmines and Wagner 2006. For an example of work on realignments outside of the United States, see Evans and Norris 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Key 1955: 4.

For instance, in the 1968 presidential election in the United States, the Democratic Party fractured over the issue of civil rights, and white voters in the southern states refused to support the Democratic nominee. This accelerated a period of dealignment from the national Democratic Party, and eventual realignment of white southerners toward the Republican Party, while at the same time African American voters swung decisively into the Democratic Party coalition.

### *Critical Realignment: The Weak Version*

But there is a second way in which the term is used, the *weak version* of party realignment: rather than requiring the appearance of a new dimension of competition, the underlying preferences of the electorate can suddenly shift in a way that favors one of the major parties over others. A significant share of voters who supported party A (or C, or D, or did not vote at all) in the previous election now support party B in the current, “realigning” one. And crucially, *this shift is both abrupt and lasting*: either through the establishment of partisan attachments from formerly unattached voters, through generational replacement, or through wholesale conversion of one party’s partisans to another’s, the expected share of the electorate that will vote for party B increases.

For instance, the 1977 Israeli election delivered for the first time a plurality of the vote (33%) to the right-wing Likud, over the incumbent left-wing Labor/Mapai (26%). That vote marked a critical shift in the Israeli party system: Labor/Mapai had long been the leading party in the electorate and had formed every government since the state of Israel was founded in 1948. The Likud victory in 1977 ushered in a new period of relative parity between the left and right blocs in the Israeli electorate and the parliament, and Labor was never again able to regain the dominant position it held prior to that election.

### *A Stylized Example*

To more clearly illustrate the difference in these two patterns of party system change, consider the following stylized example. Let us assume a simple, symmetric two-party system with high party identification: both Party A and Party B can each count on the support of 40% of the electorate. The remaining 20% are swing voters who may alternate their votes between the parties depending on the identities of the candidates, the parties’ positions on the issues of the



day, the state of the economy, the performance of the party in power, and whatever else affects voting behavior.

**Table 1**

	Party A	Swing Voters	Party B
Before Realignment	40%	20%	40%
During Realignment	20%	60%	20%
After Realignment	40%	20%	40%

In the strong version of a critical realignment, a new cross-cutting cleavage emerges that divides the coalitions of both parties. Let us take the limiting case for our example: assume this cleavage splits both parties exactly in half, with 20% of the electorate on each side in each party, and that it is so salient that partisans care more about this issue than whatever previously divided the two major parties, as Table 1 shows. The party leaders then take opposing positions on this new issue of the day, and the electorate re-sorts into the parties that correspond to their preferences on this issue. After the critical election, the parties enjoy the same proportion of supporters in the electorate—but 40% of the electorate has switched parties!

To be sure, most party system realignments, even of the strong variety, are neither this neat, dramatic, or sudden. In established democracies, partisan attachments tend to be strong, and make voters resistant to wholesale party-switching of this kind. So it is more often a completely new party that appears on the scene to Hoover up the newly unaligned voters from both camps, as, for instance, the Republican Party did over the issue of slavery in the US in the 1850s, or the British Labour Party did over class and economic divisions in the 1920s. Regardless, the key feature of the strong realignment is not neat, symmetric party switching, but merely *the emergence of a new issue cleavage* that leads to a “sharp alteration” of the pre-existing patterns of voting.

Now consider the weak version of a critical realignment, again assuming a symmetric, two-party system with each party enjoying the committed partisan support of 40% of the electorate, and 20% as swing voters. In the weak version, a realignment occurs without the

emergence of a new cleavage at all, but simply a defection of some partisans from one camp. In the scenario illustrated below (Table 2), 5% of the electorate “dealigns” from Party A to become swing voters, while 5% of the previous swing voters “realign” with Party B and become committed partisans. After the critical election, the electorate has gone from a perfectly competitive, symmetrically distributed two-party system to one with a pronounced advantage for Party B, which now enjoys a 45%-35% lead among all partisan voters.

**Table 2**

	Party A	Swing Voters	Party B
Before Realignment	40%	20%	40%
During Realignment	35%	25%	40%
After Realignment	35%	20%	45%

Now, note what does *not* have to occur here: the emergence of a new cleavage. The same issue that separates the two major parties can remain the primary, salient one in the political system, and the two parties that win votes are the same two parties as before. What *does* have to occur, instead, is a shift in the collective preferences of the electorate, away from Party A’s position, and toward Party B’s. Either through generational replacement, targeted appeals by Party B (or indifference from Party A), or a true reordering of preferences on the primary dimension of conflict, Party B permanently increases its share of partisans.

*Secular Realignments*

Now let us muddy the waters a bit more. There is a related term that also can be traced back to V.O. Key: *secular realignment*.<sup>8</sup> For Key, there was a crucial distinction between a critical realignment, which happened in a very short period of time—over the span of a single election cycle—and a secular one, which happened gradually over several elections.

Although Key did not put it in quite these terms, the difference between an abrupt and gradual shift in patterns of partisan support implies a different micro-level mechanism driving party system change. In the critical realignment, the behavior of at least some *existing voters* has

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<sup>8</sup> Key 1959.

to change: they go from being partisans to swing voters, or from swing voters to partisans, in a way that is, for them, effectively permanent.

By contrast, a secular realignment need *not* be driven by changes in the behavior of current voters, but could instead occur because of the changes in the makeup of the electorate itself. For instance, the electorate is always changing through generational replacement, as young voters with different preferences than their elders become eligible to vote, and as old voters die. Or it could be driven by the movement of voters with distinct preferences in or out of a given jurisdiction, which over time could radically change the overall composition of the electorate there. (A famous example in US politics is the migration of Latino voters into Orange County, California, in the 1980s and 1990s, turning that former conservative Republican stronghold into a competitive swing region. A similar process eventually turned California as a whole into a firmly Democratic state.)

#### *Deviating versus Maintaining Elections*

Finally, a brief comment on two other terms that are sometimes thrown around in the critical elections and realignments literature: deviating and maintaining elections.<sup>9</sup> Following the stylized example above, we can think of a deviating election as one in which there is no change in the underlying partisan balance, but for some reason most of the swing voters break in one direction or the other. If the swing is large enough to look unprecedented, or at least unusual, we might even call it a “surge” election, to use Angus Campbell’s term.<sup>10</sup>

For instance, if party A’s partisans are only 35% of the electorate, while party B’s are 45%, as in Table 2 above after realignment, then the only way party A can win an election is if most of the swing voters support it. That is, the electorate as a whole has to *deviate* from the partisan tendency toward Party B.

Why might swing voters deviate in this way? Many reasons: economic downturn is the most likely possibility, but other factors such as an unpopular candidate or party leader, a corruption scandal, a foreign crisis, or general disillusionment with the incumbent are all strong enough to cause these kinds of electoral swings. We need simply observe something that causes

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<sup>9</sup> The fullest discussion and defense of this typology of elections is given by Burnham 1970.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell 1960; cf. J. Campbell 1991.

a short-term shift in support for one party to another at the ballot box to identify a deviating election.

Last but not least, if none of these changes happens—no critical election, nor a temporary deviation from the established patterns of support—then we have a maintaining election. If, in Table 2 above after realignment, the swing voters break half for A and half for B, then Party B’s advantage in the electorate is *maintained* through that election.

### **Of Realignments and Deviations: Party System Change in Taiwan**

The terms “critical election” and “party realignment” have been tossed around a lot in discussions of Taiwanese politics in recent years<sup>11</sup>, but the preceding discussion suggests it is worth stepping back and thinking a bit more carefully about what we should observe were a true critical realignment taking place in the party system in 2016. We might then consider the following questions.

*1. Change in the dominant political cleavage?* First and foremost, was there, as a result of an election, a fundamental shift in the primary cleavage structuring party competition? This is what we need to observe to make the case for the strong version of a critical realignment: new cleavage, new electoral coalitions. If no new parties have successfully broken into the system, or if the winning parties are still competing on the same dimensions of conflict, then we have no evidence of a critical realignment.

*2. Change in vote shares?* If there was not a reorientation of the party system around a new cleavage, was there at least a significant shift in the distribution of votes from one existing party to another, or to a completely new party? If we do not observe *any* significant change in voting patterns, then this is about as close to the ideal-type maintaining election as we can expect to observe. But if there is a significant shift in partisan support, then we cannot rule out the possibility of a “weak version” realignment.

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<sup>11</sup> See the references in fn. 4. For some of the more careful, scholarly considerations of this topic, see Cheng and Hsu 1996; Yu Ching-hsin 2004; Fell 2005; and Fell 2010.

3. *Change in partisan attachments?* If we do observe significant shifts toward one party and away from another, as we do in the 2016 general election, then we are faced with an additional challenge: how do we differentiate between a deviating and critical election? They are observationally equivalent without other sources of data: the surge in support for the DPP is consistent with either a short-term deviation from the previous pattern of presidential elections, or a long-term shift in the electorate in the direction of the DPP. Much rides on this question, yet it is the hardest to answer with any degree of certainty. But there are some clues to look for: the level of turnout, generational and regional differences, and the relative organization of the parties themselves can all potentially tell us something about whether the current election is likely to mark the start of a new political era, or whether it instead represents a modest, short-term deviation from the previous state of play.

Having considered what to look for, let us now turn to the 2016 election results, and see what we might be able to conclude.

#### *1. Did the Dimension of Party Competition Change in 2016?*

First, what evidence is there that Taiwan's party system underwent a "strong" critical realignment in 2016? The best place to answer this question is to look at the legislative races rather than the presidential one, for a couple of reasons. First, it is in the legislative election where new parties ran candidates and attempted to take positions orthogonal to the issue of cross-strait relations and "blue-green" party competition.

So how did these new, small parties fare in 2016? As Dafydd Fell has noted in a recent article<sup>12</sup>, they collectively enjoyed a "limited breakthrough" relative to the rather dismal experience of most previous attempts of new parties to break into the legislature. Several ran high-profile campaigns and district candidates as well as party lists, and one, the New Power Party, ran particularly well in both the districts and the party list. It surprised most observers by winning all three district races in which it ran viable candidates, and it came in fourth in the party list vote with 6.2%, winning an additional two seats and narrowly missing out on a third.

But the New Power Party's success is a bit misleading in this context, and we should be skeptical that it represents a "new kind" of politics for two reasons. The first is that the party

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<sup>12</sup> Fell 2016.

deliberately pursued a personality-based campaign strategy. It recruited three candidates with high name recognition to run in the district races: Freddy Lim, a lead singer for the band Chthonic; Hung Tzu-yung; the younger sister of a military corporal who died after harsh punishment while in a military barracks; and Huang Kuo-chang, a lawyer and one of the public faces of the Sunflower Movement that occupied the legislature in 2014. These candidates helped the party garner a great deal of free media attention, giving it a significant leg up on the other competitors among the new entrees into the party system.

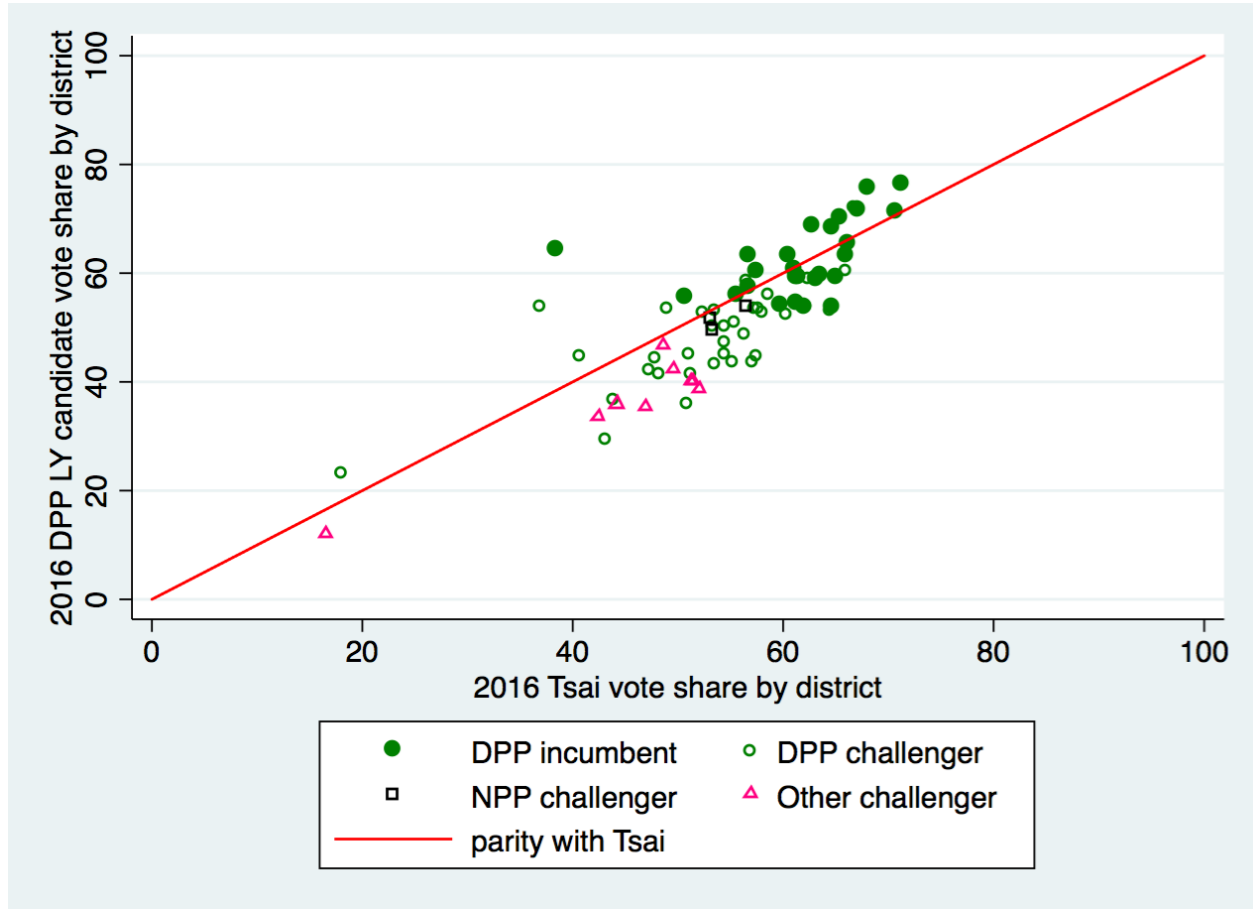
Second, as Fell notes<sup>13</sup>, the NPP coordinated very closely with the DPP itself during its campaign. The party went so far as to negotiate an agreement with the DPP not to run candidates in most districts; in exchange, the DPP yielded three winnable districts to the NPP and agreed not to run its own candidates there. The DPP even sent Tsai Ing-wen to campaign with the NPP candidates, reinforcing the impression that the NPP was running not as a competitor seeking to split the DPP's base, but as a close pan-green ally.

We can get a sense of how closely the NPP's fortunes were tied to support for the DPP by comparing the party's vote shares to Tsai Ing-wen's vote shares in the districts. In Figure 1, I have plotted the vote share won by each district's DPP nominee, as well as the vote share won by non-DPP candidates endorsed by the DPP. These included the three NPP candidates but also eight other non-DPP candidates, most of whom ran as part of an anti-KMT "capital alliance" grouping in Taipei City. As the figure shows, the three NPP candidates ran very close to Tsai's vote, providing another piece of evidence that the NPP was not really running a successful "orthogonal" campaign, but rather a very conventional, "DPP-lite" one.

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<sup>13</sup> Fell 2016: 52.

Figure 1.



Given the close coordination between the NPP and DPP, a better test of the appeal of issues off the primary dimension of competition is the performance of the other “Third Force” parties, particularly the SDP-Green Alliance, the Civil Servants party, the Faith and Hope League, and the National Health Service Alliance.

**Table 3.**

Party List Vote Shares, 2016 Legislative Yuan Election				
English Name	Chinese Name	Party List Votes	%	PR Seats won
Democratic Progressive Party	民主進步黨	5,370,953	44.04%	18
Chinese Nationalist Party - Kuomintang	中國國民黨	3,280,949	26.90%	11
People First Party	親民黨	794,838	6.52%	3
New Power Party	時代力量	744,315	6.10%	2
New Party	新黨	510,074	4.18%	0
Green Party - Social Democratic Party Alliance	綠黨社會民主黨聯盟	308,106	2.53%	0
Taiwan Solidarity Union	台灣團結聯盟	305,675	2.51%	0
Faith and Hope League	信心希望聯盟	206,629	1.69%	0
Republic Party - Minkuotang	民國黨	197,627	1.62%	0
MCFAP	軍公教聯盟黨	87,213	0.72%	0
Non-Partisan Solidarity Union	無黨團結聯盟	77,672	0.64%	0
Trees Party	樹黨	77,174	0.63%	0
Chinese Unionist Party	中華統一促進黨	56,347	0.46%	0
Health Alliance	健保免費連線	51,024	0.42%	0
Free Taiwan Party	自由台灣黨	47,988	0.39%	0
Peace Dove Alliance Party	和平鴿聯盟黨	30,617	0.25%	0
Taiwan Independence Party	台灣獨立黨	27,496	0.23%	0
Great Love Constitutional Reform Party	大愛憲改聯盟	15,442	0.13%	0
Total, parties winning seats		10,191,055	83.56%	34
Total, parties not winning seats		1,999,084	16.40%	0



So how did they do, as a whole? In the district races, they fared not as well as the NPP, as Figure 1 shows—they generally ran behind not only Tsai Ing-wen but also the NPP and DPP challengers. But what about the party list vote? Not well there, either, as Table 3 shows. The SDP-Green Alliance won only 2.53% of the party list vote, despite the distinct ideological space the party staked out during the campaign. Other parties that highlighted positions off the main blue-green spectrum also fared poorly: the Faith and Hope League won 1.69%, the Minkuotang won 1.62%, and the National Health Service Alliance won 0.42%. There is simply no evidence from the party list vote to support the assertion that a latent, under-served dimension of political conflict suddenly became salient and burst into the open in this election, despite the many attempts by the new political parties to emphasize neglected political issues.

In fact, the only change to the parties holding seats in the legislature after the election was the replacement of the Taiwan Solidary Union by the NPP. And since taking office, the NPP has positioned itself to the left of the DPP on cross-Strait relations, occupying a roughly similar ideological space to the TSU. Given these facts, it is hard indeed to make the case that Taiwan's party system has undergone a fundamental realignment in 2016, and that the NPP represents the leading edge of a new kind of politics.

## *2. How Big Was the Swing in 2016? And How Uniform?*

We know from the aggregate results of the 2016 election that there was a massive swing toward the DPP and away from the KMT, relative to previous elections. Overall, Tsai Ing-wen improved on her previous vote share by 10.49% in total, winning 56.12% of the vote, up from 45.63% in 2012.

One way to consider the “secular realignment” hypothesis is to examine how *uniform* the swing is: that is, the degree to which voters in all segments of the electorate “swing” in the same direction on aggregate, and by how much. An easy way to do this is to look at patterns across geographic jurisdictions. For instance, in the 2008 presidential election in the United States, the net swing toward the Democratic candidate was 4.6%: Barack Obama won 52.9% of the popular vote, above John Kerry's 48.3% in 2004. Yet this swing was not distributed uniformly across the counties of the United States: in some places the swing toward the Democratic nominee was over

10%, while in others it was actually negative! In other words, the electorate in some counties became more Republican even as the country as a whole was voting more Democratic.

Figure 2 below shows this pattern in stark detail: counties that voted more Republican are in red, while counties that voted more Democratic are in blue. What immediately jumps out is the spatial clustering of the Republican trending counties: the vast majority are in Appalachia and parts of the former Confederacy. Readers with even a rudimentary knowledge of American political geography can probably speculate why voters in these counties were different: they were places with (1) few black voters, and (2) very conservative racial attitudes. The nomination of a black candidate at the top of the Democratic party ticket appears to have had heterogeneous effects on the country’s voters—effects that were highly correlated with geography.

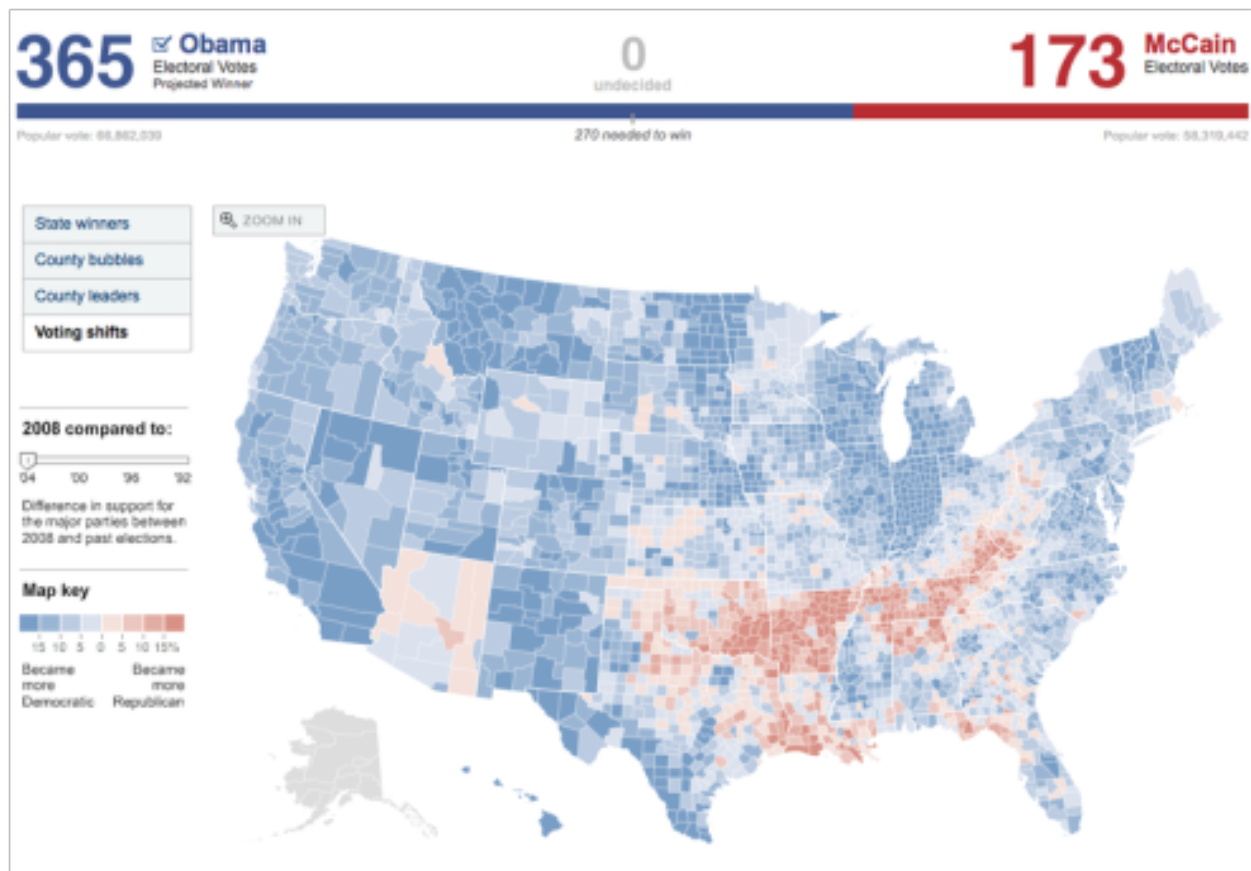


Table 4.

<b>DPP Vote Swing in Presidential Elections, 2004-2016</b>				
地區	Locality	DPP Swing 04-08	DPP Swing 08-12	DPP Swing 12-16
<b>NORTH</b>				
臺北市	Taipei City	-6.51%	2.58%	12.41%
新北市	New Taipei	-8.01%	4.52%	11.34%
基隆市	Keelung City	-8.30%	4.50%	11.45%
桃園市	Taoyuan County	-9.33%	4.50%	11.17%
宜蘭縣	Yilan County	-9.14%	3.95%	9.54%
新竹縣	Hsinchu County	-9.96%	4.95%	11.59%
新竹市	Hsinchu City	-9.58%	4.18%	11.74%
<b>CENTRAL</b>				
苗栗縣	Miaoli County	-10.24%	4.17%	12.27%
臺中市	Taichung City*	-10.04%	4.71%	10.32%
彰化縣	Changhua County	-9.85%	4.08%	9.98%
南投縣	Nantou County	-10.79%	4.40%	9.87%
雲林縣	Yunlin County	-8.79%	4.28%	7.59%
<b>SOUTH</b>				
嘉義縣	Chiayi County	-8.35%	4.13%	6.80%
嘉義市	Chiayi City	-8.45%	3.43%	8.82%
臺南市	Tainan City*	-8.64%	4.38%	9.79%
高雄市	Kaohsiung City*	-7.13%	3.67%	9.97%
屏東縣	Pingtung County	-7.86%	4.88%	8.36%
澎湖縣	Penghu County	-7.41%	3.59%	5.16%
<b>EAST AND ISLANDS</b>				
臺東縣	Taitung County	-7.81%	3.83%	7.91%
花蓮縣	Hualien County	-7.28%	3.42%	10.99%
金門縣	Kinmen County	-1.18%	3.34%	9.79%
連江縣	Lienchiang County	-0.93%	3.20%	8.50%
	Total Swing %	-8.56%	4.08%	10.49%
	Total Swing in Votes	-1027021	648629	801166

I have attempted to do something similar to evaluate the swing in the last four Taiwanese presidential elections. Table 4 shows the change in the DPP’s presidential vote share by county or city across the four presidential elections of 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016.

Given the contrast with the US example, what is most remarkable here is how uniform the swing is across counties in Taiwan: unlike in the United States, every single jurisdiction has moved in the same direction—toward or away from the DPP ticket—during the last three consecutive elections. This pattern is noteworthy for two reasons. First, some previous scholarship has claimed that geographic differences explain a great deal of Taiwan’s party system evolution over the past two decades (the so-called “blue north, green south” thesis).<sup>14</sup> The uniformity of the swing is across three different election cycles suggests that something besides geography is driving changes in voting behavior—and that whatever it is, it is not closely associated with where one lives. Indeed, the uniformity of the swing suggests geography alone is no longer a useful independent predictor of voting behavior, if it ever was.

Second, this pattern is not what we would expect if Taiwan’s party system is undergoing any kind of a realignment based on region, of course, but also, and less obviously, based on ethnicity or economics—because these vary a lot by geography as well. In other words, if Taiwan’s party system were reorienting around, say, economic issues such as trade liberalization, then we should see smaller swings toward the DPP in 2016 in the cities that are most likely to benefit from greater trade openness—Taipei, New Taipei, Taoyuan, and Kaohsiung—and larger swings in other areas that are more likely to be harmed. Yet the swing, again, is almost uniform—there is no evidence here for a realignment in 2016 around an alternative cleavage.

### *3. Was This a Realigning Election or a Deviating One? Some Preliminary Observations*

Without individual-level data, we are hard-pressed to distinguish between two possibilities: that this swing toward the DPP was a critical election that ushered in a “weak” partisan realignment likely to last for a while, or merely a “deviating” election from which the KMT will soon rebound. Nevertheless, there are at least three pieces of evidence that are inconsistent with the claim that this was a “critical election” that ushered in a lasting realignment, even in the “weak” sense of a simple shift in partisan attachments.

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<sup>14</sup> Lay et al. 2006; Lay et al. 2008; Lin 2016

First, turnout in this election hit a record low for a presidential race: at 66.3%, it was below even the 2014 local elections (67.6%), and it fell a full eight points short of the turnout of 2012 (77.4%). That means at least a million people who voted in 2012 did not in 2016. The most likely reasons for the large drop in turnout are twofold. First, the presidential election was not expected to be close, and there was very little drama by the end of the campaign, so many voters may not have felt compelled to participate. Second, the KMT's very late switch of presidential candidate from Hung Hsiu-chu to Eric Chu in October 2015, less than three months before the election, undoubtedly angered some core KMT supporters, and probably depressed turnout further on the pan-blue side. The latter, at least, is unlikely to happen again. So on this count, the 2016 election should be viewed as a deviation from the "normal" level of pan-blue support in the electorate.

Second, the KMT's position as the long-time incumbent party put it at a distinct disadvantage in this election. Although the incumbent president Ma Ying-jeou was not on the ballot, his own low popularity rating and the widespread dissatisfaction with his government were clearly factors in the KMT's own struggle to run a competitive campaign. One can easily imagine the new DPP government struggling with many of the same issues that dragged down President Ma's popularity, and facing a reinvigorated KMT unencumbered by the responsibilities of governing. That would probably be a more competitive race.

Third, incumbency worked against the KMT in 2016 for another reason: a poorly-timed economic downturn meant the party was trying to win an election in the middle of a recession—one, furthermore, that was triggered at least in part by a slowdown in the mainland Chinese economy. Because the Ma administration had made closer economic integration with the PRC a central part of its agenda while in office, the KMT was especially vulnerable to criticism that it bore responsibility for this downturn.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have attempted to address whether the 2016 general election in Taiwan was a "critical election"—that is, one that ushered in a fundamental realignment of the party system, and if so, what kind and with what consequences. Drawing from election returns, I argued that Taiwan's party system did not undergo a realignment in the classic sense in 2016: the fundamental dimension of party competition and differentiation in Taiwan remains cross-Strait

relations, as it has for almost two decades. Parties that attempted to compete on other issues mostly fell flat; the one exception, the NPP, cooperated closely with the DPP on its election campaign, and, I argued, succeeded in winning seats not because of its cross-cutting appeals, but because of its clear positioning on the cross-Strait issue.

It is true that we cannot rule out the possibility that the 2016 election is a realigning one in a weaker sense, in that the surge in the DPP's vote share represents a lasting shift in political support from the pan-blue to the pan-green camp. In several ways, this election was a historic breakthrough for the DPP. Tsai Ing-wen won the highest vote share of any DPP candidate for president, and captured a majority for only the second time ever. More consequentially, the party also won a majority in the legislature for the first time, finally ending the pan-blue camp's nominal control of that body 24 years after its first election by Taiwanese voters. The 2016 election also was the culmination of a series of improved election performances by the DPP, beginning with the 2009-10 local elections and 2012 presidential election, where the party improved on its previous showings, and continuing with a sweeping victory over the KMT in the combined local elections in 2014. And finally, opinion polls show a significant and sustained rise in partisan identification with the DPP and pan-green camp, surpassing the pan-blue camp for the first time. All this evidence suggests that 2016 may indeed mark a critical shift in Taiwanese politics toward a "natural majority" for the green camp away from the blue.

Nevertheless, we should be cautious in drawing a conclusion that even this, more limited "realignment," will last. In fact, the 2016 election also has elements that suggest the result might be a short-term deviation rather than a lasting realignment, including poor short-term economic conditions that hurt the incumbent KMT, low popularity ratings for President Ma, and above all a late and damaging switch in presidential candidates. In addition, the pan-blue camp suffered from yet another renegade third-party campaign by James Soong, and the election itself was notable for record-low turnout. None of these are permanent liabilities, and the low turnout is at odds with the traditional expectation that realigning elections feature unusual enthusiasm and heightened participation.

In sum, it is premature to declare the 2016 election the moment a lasting political realignment occurred in Taiwan. Instead, the key takeaway from the 2016 election is how stable and well-institutionalized Taiwan's party system remains.

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