

Last month, the Taiwanese Public Opinion Foundation released a poll showing that 75.2 percent of respondents considered themselves Taiwanese, rather than Chinese. However, support for Taiwan independence declined significantly to 38.3 percent from 51.2 percent in 2016, with about 2 million people changing their views.

This could be related to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government's poor performance. However, it also highlights the tough challenges that pro-independence forces are facing, especially in view of the prevailing legislative electoral system and the DPP's primary system.

The first is a result of the 2005 constitutional amendments, during which the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the DPP agreed to adopt a single-member district, two-vote system, which is unfavorable to smaller parties.

Since only one legislator is elected in each district, it is basically a showdown between the two big parties, effectively marginalizing smaller parties. As for legislators-at-large, aside from the imbalance in the number of legislative seats allocated to district constituencies, parties receiving less than 5 percent of the total electoral vote are deprived of such seats. Since votes carry different weight depending on where you live, smaller parties' chances of gaining a legislative seat is very limited.

Unfortunately, pro-independence parties are among the small parties that suffer because of this system. For example, in the 2004 elections, Taiwan Solidarity Union won 12 district and legislator-at-large seats. However, after the amendments were passed, the party won only three legislator-at-large seats in 2012, and none in 2008 and 2016. Furthermore, in 2016, the New Power Party (NPP), riding the wave of the 2014 Sunflower movement, won just two district legislator seats — and it needed the DPP's help to do so.

The second difficulty is the DPP's primary opinion poll system. As the votes of many nominal members were controlled by vested interests in the past, the party changed its primary opinion from members-only to include the general public to better evaluate potential candidates.

## Advocates of independence facing tough challenges

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Setting aside the question of whether the DPP is implementing an authoritarian system as an excuse for winning elections to make sure that members who are strongly pro-independence will not become the party chairperson or a member of the party leadership, the all-inclusive primary poll system basically ignores members' opinions and ideology, contravening basic party principles and turning the party into an interest group that only cares about political gains and winning elections.

The opinion poll primary system has been criticized for lacking credibility, but the biggest problem is that it does not prevent supporters of rival parties from distorting the results by supporting weaker candidates and then attacking them during the official election campaign. If a rival party cannot win an election, its supporters tend to support DPP candidates whose views are closer to their own.

Based on the results of the DPP's recent primary polls, it is easy to see that aspirants with a strong pro-independence profile cannot compete with those who are closer to the pan-blue camp.

Some candidates even use the pan-blue media to increase their exposure, so that these outlets and pan-blue supporters can sway and perhaps even decide the DPP's nomination, effectively blocking the party's pro-independence forces.

Ironically, if it were not for China's constant repression of Taiwan's independence forces, the number of independence supporters might have fallen even further.

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Translated by Eddy Chang

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