

## Beware trap of opinion polls aimed at policies

Written by Chen Mao-hsiung 陳毛喜  
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President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) support ratings fell through the floor in last year's local elections, but they bounced back in just a few months to put her in the lead again. This is unprecedented in Taiwan.

Most people say it was a result of the protests in Hong Kong, which the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) has used to accuse the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) of creating "a sense of the nation's impending doom."

The Hong Kong protests have helped the DPP campaign gain momentum, but they were not enough on their own to turn the situation around. Hong Kong's problems are nothing new; there had been other protest movements, and the DPP has long warned that today's Hong Kong could be tomorrow's Taiwan, without seeing any positive effects on its campaigning.

In other words, Hong Kong is not the main reason that the DPP has gained momentum — other factors have also played part.

One important factor is the "Internet army." Both major parties have such "armies," but the DPP's is stronger. The DPP's main focus is the country, while the KMT's is political ideology. Today's young people have strong national awareness, but lack political ideology, so many of them lean toward the DPP.

Another even more important factor behind the DPP's improved fortunes is that it has developed a better understanding of opinion polls. When Tsai took over the presidency, the main policies she proposed were in line with opinion poll results.

However, while US voters vote for policies they identify with — which means that if the government implements policies that most voters approve of, it will gain majority support — most Taiwanese only care about their own benefit and interests, and do not care much about public affairs.

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This means that what they think about such policy would not influence how they vote, and only policies that directly affect their immediate interests would have an effect on how they vote.

The policies the Tsai administration introduced when it came to government were supported by a majority of voters. The administration thought that would translate into majority voter support. In practice, the opposite happened, as the policies did not have a direct effect on the people who supported them.

Instead, the policies had a negative effect on a minority of voters who, for that reason, opposed Tsai. In total, this meant that a lot of people opposed Tsai and her government, which was why her support rating fell through the floor. Following the local elections last year, the government finally understood this situation and changed tack.

The policies already put in place could not be changed, so instead a host of new policies were introduced. Each of these policies were beneficial to a small group of voters, but in the aggregate, they created strong majority support for Tsai.

Although most people did not agree with each individual policy, these policies did not have an immediate effect on their lives, and therefore did not matter to them.

There are basically two kinds of opinion polls: the ones concerned with individual politicians, and the ones concerned with policies. Polls concerned with politicians are often in step with election outcomes, while polls addressing policies often are not.

Since Taiwanese only care about their own direct interests and do not pay much attention to public affairs, only policies that affect voters directly would be reflected in election results. Alert politicians would not be confused by policy-oriented opinion poll results.

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