

On Saturday, voters are to decide the positions of 11,023 public officials, from mayors and city councilors to borough wardens.

The campaign issues have largely reflected the local nature of the nine-in-one elections, albeit with a distorted focus and surprising emphasis on issues previously under the radar, such as plagiarism, as well as several conspicuous omissions, such as the environment and pollution — when COP27 should perhaps have placed the issues front and center — and cybersecurity, especially given the cyberattacks experienced in the wake of US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit.

Medigen Vaccine Biologics became caught in the crossfire of a barrage by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) and independent Taipei mayoral candidate Vivian Huang (黃晶瑩) on the government's COVID-19 pandemic response, as they wanted to damage the chances of the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) Taipei mayoral candidate, former minister of health and welfare Chen Shih-chung (陳志強). This might have backfired, as some voters perceived it as an unfair attack on a strategically important local sector.

Evaluations of the campaigns suggest that voters are concerned only with local issues, even though previous elections have had a national focus. The 2014 elections, in which the KMT was trounced, were interpreted as voters giving then-president Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) a bloody nose for his pro-China policies. In 2018, it was President Tsai Ing-wen's (蔡英文) turn, with voters showing the governing DPP what they thought of her clumsy handling of unpopular reforms.

If the TPP does well on Saturday, it would speak volumes about the chances of its chairman, Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je (柯文哲), should he throw in his hat for president, especially if it does so at the expense of the KMT. If Huang becomes mayor, this would be good for Ko, who has backed her candidacy. The Taipei mayor position is regarded as a stepping stone to the Presidential Office. If Huang and KMT candidate Chiang Wan-an (張善政) split the pro-blue vote, would they help Chen become Taipei mayor, perhaps putting him on a trajectory for president?

Observers in Taiwan and overseas will also be looking at the international implications, in terms of what the results suggest about where Taiwanese want their political leaders to take cross-strait relations, and about their resolve to protect Taiwan in the event of a Chinese

invasion.

The DPP's campaign strategy of emphasizing the need to "resist China and protect Taiwan" is hardly a local issue, and the world will be watching whether Tsai's strategy will resonate with voters. Japan and the US, and other members of the "pro-democratic alliance" such as the UK, the EU and Australia will be observing.

An initiative to have candidates sign a pledge to "defend Taiwan and never surrender" was started as a way to gauge politicians' stance on relations with China. On Tuesday, independence advocates said that 263 candidates had signed, including all 21 of the DPP's mayoral and county commissioner candidates, but none of those representing the KMT or the TPP.

This says less about the opinions or intentions of individual candidates and more about how they are toeing their respective parties' line. What message would a TPP candidate be sending by signing the pledge after Ko notoriously refused to do so?

At a local and national level, voters understand the political nature of this refusal to sign by KMT and TPP candidates; international observers less so. The gist, that the DPP emphasizes defense of Taiwan's sovereignty more than the KMT and TPP might, is arguably correct, and yet the reality is far more nuanced than the black-and-white story being presented.

Saturday's elections will decide the placements of local officials, but the results will have significant implications at national and international levels.

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