The Role of Opinion Polls in Taiwan’s Elections

Eric Chen-hua Yu
Election Study Center and Department of Political Science
National Chengchi University, Taiwan
ericyu@nccu.edu.tw

Since the lift of martial law in 1986, Taiwan has undergone a peaceful democratic transition in the 1990s and in turn passed Huntington’s “two-turnover test” for democratic consolidation in 2008. As people have been more and more freely to express their attitudes along with the democratic process, the assessment of public opinion has become indispensable as to ensure the quality of democracy.

This essay outlines the development of Taiwan’s opinion polls with a special attention on their roles and effects in recent elections. It includes the following four parts: (1) Overview of Taiwan’s public opinion research; (2) media polls in elections; (3) polls and political parties; and (4) concluding remarks.

(1) Overview of Public Opinion Research

- We may roughly divide the development of Taiwan’s public opinion research into three periods: the starting period (1960s-70s), developing period (1970s-80s), and consolidating period (1990-now).
- Starting Period: Between the mid 1960s and the mid 1970s, a handful of scholars started to conduct empirical studies regarding Taiwanese opinion formation and voting behavior. Their research scope was relatively small, and rarely used scientific methods.
- Developing Period: Between the mid 1970s and the late 1980s, the KMT authoritarian regime has faced not only international pressures forced by mainland China (ex: Taiwan’s withdraw from UN, cease of US-Taiwan diplomatic ties…and so on), but also strong challenges in elections from the opposition (i.e., Danwai—predecessor of the DPP). Meanwhile, National Taiwan University and National Chengchi University started to establish opinion research teams/centers to conduct surveys to investigate Taiwanese political participation and voting behavior. Scholars also started to apply scientific methods (including random sampling and statistical analysis) in their studies. United Daily News, one of the major newspapers in Taiwan, also established its polling center in 1983 and became Taiwan’s first media pollster.
- Consolidating Period: Since the beginning of the 1990s, Taiwan’s polling
industry has grown rapidly. In addition to numerous private pollsters, a number of universities and media outlets also established polling centers. They conducted polls with respect to various subjects for either national or local governments as well as other clients such as political parties and candidates. And in the 21st century, opinion polls have been used extensively in Taiwan, particularly in the process of policymaking and electoral campaign.

- Nowadays, most of Taiwan’s opinion surveys are conducted via telephone interviews. Academic institutions frequently conduct large-scaled, face-to-face interviews only for research purposes. Internet polling is developing but still faces various methodological hurdles such as sample selection bias.

(2) Media Polls in Elections

- Media outlets tend to conduct polls that can be utilized to follow news stories. Two of Taiwan’s four major newspapers (e.g., China Times and United Daily News) have their own polling centers. TVBS, a major cable TV station originated from Hong Kong, and Global View, a well-known magazine firstly issued in the mid 1980s, also have their own polling centers, respectively. These four institutions could be regarded as Taiwan’s main media pollsters.
- Media outlets have reported their poll results and conduct election predictions during campaign seasons. Those horse-race numbers indeed help us understand campaign dynamics in the sense of reflecting possible impacts of various electoral events on voters’ voting intentions. Yet, Taiwan’s election rule prohibits any kind of distribution of poll results 10 days prior to the election date. Thus, the effect of poll numbers on the final election results could be limited and in fact hard to gauge.
- It is arguable that media outlets have their political viewpoints when they report news. And due to their stands on the political spectrum, some argues that the polls conducted by the above media pollsters have been contaminated by serious “house effects”—specifically, their poll results almost always tend to favor policy stands/candidates of pan-blue camp (i.e., pan-KMT camp). My empirical analysis based on the 2008 election polls conducted by those major media outlets verified the arguments. Yet, the degree of bias varies in each of the media polls.

(3) Polls and Political Parties

- The two major parties, KMT (Kuomintang) and DPP (Democratic Progressive Party), have their own institutions to conduct polls. Both parties use poll results to make almost every political decision.
In the recent 2012 presidential and legislative elections, both parties used public opinion polls to select their candidates for elections. We call it “polling primary”. The DPP adopted the polling primary to nominate both presidential and legislative candidates while the KMT used it to decide its nominees for legislative elections.

The purpose of adopting polling primary is twofold: first, it is designed to find an electable candidate; second, it delegates power to the general public to resolve any intra-party conflict—let the voters decide who should be put on the ballots. And polling primary seems to be the most sufficient way as it is (i) cost-saving, (ii) avoid vote-buying, and (iii) avoid manipulation from the other party.

The two parties have adopted a very similar way to conduct polling primary. The most significant difference between the two is the use of in-house sampling. While the DPP cared more about contenders’ ability to mobilize voters, the KMT obviously cared more about representation of the survey sample and tries to avoid possible manipulation.

(4) Concluding Remarks

Opinion polls have been widely used in Taiwan. Academic institutes, mass media, and political parties conduct their polls for different purposes. In general, almost all polling institutes adopt scientific methods to conduct their surveys. Yet, the quality of polls still varies across different pollsters. The lack of regulations may create some loopholes for those who intend to manipulate poll numbers.

In the future, Taiwan’s polling industry needs to incorporate new technologies (e.g., internet polling) to facilitate their practices. And most importantly, pollsters need to build up trust among the general public.

Because Taiwan does not have exit polls, researchers have difficulties to understand major characteristics of voters. Yet, before doing so, some election regulations need to be lifted. For example, the current regulation prohibits anyone stand within 50 meters of the exit of polling station. Hopefully in the future, pollsters are allowed to conduct effective exit polls to have better understanding about who the actual voters are.