

RESEARCH REPORT

Direct Election, Bureaucratic Appointment and Local Government Responsiveness in Taiwan

Sara A. Newland 

Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, USA

Corresponding author: Sara A. Newland, email: snewland@smith.edu

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Abstract

Does local democracy induce better service to citizens? While elected officials can be punished at the ballot box if they fail to address citizens' needs, appointed bureaucrats may have policy knowledge that enables them to better serve citizens. Employing a multimethod design, this paper uses variation in local political institutions in Taiwan to assess the relative merits of direct election and bureaucratic appointment for local government responsiveness. While democratic institutions are often thought to induce responsiveness, I find that in Taiwan, with its historically strong bureaucracy and relatively new democratic institutions, the picture is somewhat more complicated. Elected and appointed officials face different incentives that motivate the latter to respond more quickly and effectively to online requests for help.

摘要

地方民主会更好地服务于民众吗？当当选官员不能够解决民众需求时，他们可能会在选举中落败，而官派官员可能具有更优的政策知识储备，从而更好地服务民众。本篇论文运用了多重方法设计，利用台湾政治机构的地方差异，评估民选和官派对地方政府反应能力的相对优势。本文发现，即便民主机制通常被认为能带来更有效的回应性，在台湾这样一个历史上拥有强大的官僚体系、且民主体系相对较新的地方，现状更加复杂。民选和官派官员们面对的不同激励机制使得后者更快速、有效地回应网上的求助信息。

Keywords: Taiwan; local governance; bureaucracy; elections; responsiveness

关键词: 台湾; 地方政府; 官僚制度; 选举; 回应性

Are democratically elected local officials more responsive to citizens? Political science research has long presumed that responsiveness is both a *reason* for the preferability of democracy over other regime types, and a *metric* by which the quality of a democracy should be judged.¹ Scholars of Chinese politics have extended this line of argument to village elections in rural China, and to township and county people's congresses. Even in an authoritarian context, elections may give citizens the power to nominate officials whom they expect to be responsive to citizens and to vote out the officials who are least responsive to citizens' needs.² However, sometimes democratic elections fail to hold officials fully accountable – and, by contrast, some non-electoral institutions may effectively motivate officials. Indeed, research on China has illustrated a variety of mechanisms, ranging from

1 Sabl 2015.

2 Brandt and Turner 2007; Li 2003; Manion 1996; 2017.

social pressure to the threat of protest, by which citizens can induce responsiveness even in the absence of fully democratic elections.³

One way to adjudicate these competing claims is to focus on “apples to apples” comparisons of elected and appointed officials who perform the same duties. Valid comparison cases can be difficult to find, and the results of studies that focus on them have been mixed. Some suggest that elected officials are more responsive to citizens because of effective monitoring by voters or re-election incentives.⁴ By contrast, other studies find that directly elected officials behave much like appointed ones.⁵ Still others find that direct election may produce *less* responsive or effective local officials.⁶

For both substantive and methodological reasons, Taiwan provides a valuable test case for assessing the relative performance of elected and appointed officials. Substantively, this is a live political issue in Taiwan. While Taiwan’s democratic transition is a point of pride, factional politics, vote buying and other forms of corruption continue to mar local elections, although these problems are not as severe as they once were.⁷ Indeed, problems with local-level democracy in Taiwan have led to proposals that would require directly elected township mayors to be replaced with bureaucratic appointees. The debate over these proposals reveals competing assumptions about the responsiveness of elected and appointed officials. DPP legislator Cheng Yun-Peng 鄭運鵬, who proposed amending the Local Government Act (*difang zhidufa* 地方制度法) to abolish township chief elections, argued that replacing elected chiefs with bureaucratically appointed ones would “increase government efficiency and reduce corruption.” Opponents of the proposed amendment, however, argued that bureaucratically appointed officials would be less responsive to citizens’ needs.⁸

Methodologically, Taiwan provides a unique opportunity to compare elected and appointed officials, as the position of township (district) chief is directly elected by voters in some localities and bureaucratically appointed in others. Taiwan is divided into 368 district-level political units (townships, districts or township-level cities). The executives of 204 of these units are directly elected while the remainder are bureaucratically appointed by the city in which they are located. Figure 1 shows the current distribution of districts with elected and appointed chiefs across Taiwan. Crucially, a given district’s method of executive selection is determined by factors that are exogenous to the district: districts within “special municipalities” (*zhixiashi* 直轄市) have appointed executives, while those within counties and smaller cities, as well as all indigenous districts, have elected ones. Whether a city is designated as a special municipality is also largely out of local politicians’ hands, as a city is automatically upgraded after its population reaches two million people. This institutional configuration allows for the direct comparison of elected and appointed officials who otherwise operate in similar positions and within the same national cultural and political context.

This paper leverages this source of institutional variation to assess whether directly elected officials are more responsive than bureaucratic appointees to citizens’ needs. Using data from an experiment in which Sara Newland and John Chung-en Liu sent requests for help from putative citizens to 358 district chiefs at two points in time, I find that they are not.⁹ This study measures responsiveness as the speed and efficacy with which officials provide help and information to citizens, in keeping with similar studies of local government responsiveness in the Chinese context.¹⁰ Elected

3 Chen, Jidong, Pan and Xu 2016; Manion 2017; O’Brien and Li 2006; Tsai 2007.

4 Besley 2013; Grossman 2014.

5 Partridge and Sass 2011.

6 Baldwin and Mvukiyeye 2015; Sances 2016; Whalley 2013. See Partridge and Sass 2011, Table 1, for a useful overview of additional studies comparing elected and appointed officials.

7 Bosco 1992; 1994; Göbel 2012; 2016; Rigger 1999; Wu 2003.

8 Tu 2016; Lü 2017.

9 For a full description, see Newland and Liu 2021.

10 Distelhorst and Hou 2014; 2017.

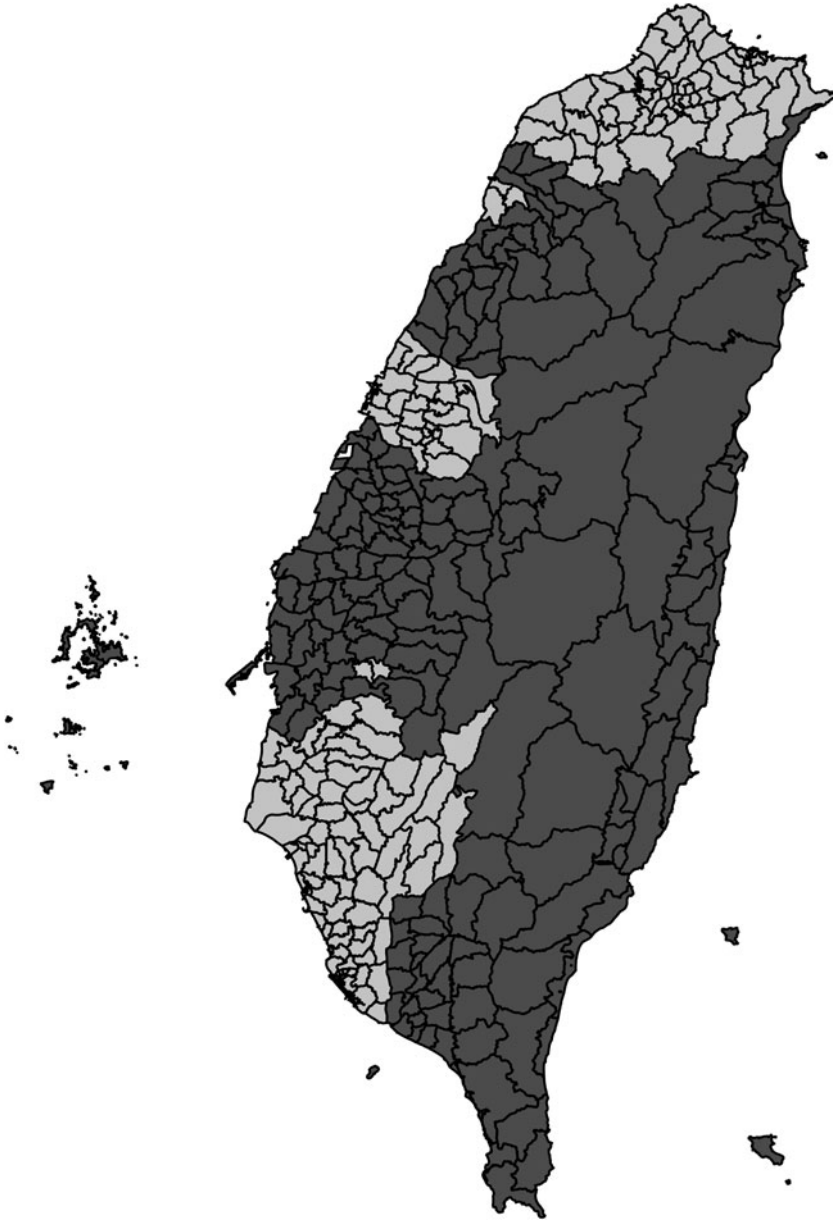


Figure 1: Districts with Elected (Dark) versus Appointed (Light) District Chiefs, 2019

officials write shorter and lower-quality responses, and are less likely to respond at all, than appointed officials. Employing a multimethod design, I use 20 in-depth interviews and data from nonparticipant observation in district service centres to elucidate the mechanisms that produce these results. The qualitative data show that local elections, which remain quite personalistic in Taiwan, do not incentivize elected chiefs to be responsive to those outside of their networks. By contrast, frequent monitoring and evaluation by higher-level bureaucrats means that appointed chiefs must be highly responsive or risk losing their positions.

Table 1: Results

	Dependent variable:							
	Length(1)	Length(2)	Response(1)	Response(2)	Quality(1)	Quality(2)	Span(1)	Span(2)
	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>logistic</i>	<i>logistic</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>	<i>OLS</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Elected	-91.33 (66.11)	-179.53** (85.63)	-0.07 (0.35)	-0.39 (0.33)	-0.44** (0.22)	-0.82*** (0.24)	751.24 (1,098.87)	1,071.92 (2,251.81)
Area	-0.001 (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)	-0.0000 (0.0000)	-0.0000 (0.0000)	-0.0000 (0.0000)	-0.0000 (0.0000)	-0.05 (0.04)	0.14 (0.08)
Population	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0000 (0.0000)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.04)
% Indigenous	-0.52 (1.79)	-0.37 (2.29)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.002 (0.01)	-0.004 (0.01)	73.83** (29.47)	136.84** (60.03)
Total income	0.0000 (0.0000)	0.0000 (0.0000)	-0.00 (0.0000)	-0.00 (0.0000)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	0.0000 (0.0001)	0.0001 (0.0001)
Constant	533.91*** (60.58)	530.09*** (76.62)	1.60*** (0.32)	1.32*** (0.32)	3.19*** (0.20)	2.92*** (0.22)	6,418.75*** (1,002.90)	5,046.66** (2,001.38)
Observations	268	217	328	290	328	276	263	214
R2	0.01	0.02			0.04	0.09	0.04	0.10
Adjusted R ²	-0.004	0.001			0.03	0.07	0.02	0.08
Log Likelihood			-150.15	-155.33				

Note: *p < 0.1; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01

Quantitative Data and Results

This paper relies on a novel source of quantitative data to compare the responsiveness of local officials: requests for help emailed by putative citizens to 358 elected and appointed district chiefs. Taiwan's local government websites are robust, providing opportunities for citizens to give feedback to local officials, ask questions and, in some cases, apply for social welfare benefits and other government-run programmes entirely online. As early as 2002, Taiwan was regarded as a global leader in "e-governance," and this reputation remains today.¹¹ Email and online platforms are thus an important site of local government responsiveness across Taiwan.

To collect data, Newland and Liu sent requests for a basic citizen service (instructions for applying for a public subsidy) to all district chiefs in Taiwan, excluding Kinmen 金門縣 and Matsu 連江縣. We then collected data on four measures of responsiveness: whether a given district chief responded to the email they received as well as the length, timeliness and quality of their responses.¹² We sent two rounds of emails, so that each chief received two different requests for assistance.¹³

The quantitative results are presented in Table 1 in which I include a short list of pre-treatment control variables. I avoid including individual-level covariates associated with particular office-holders; because a district's status – whether it is led by an elected or appointed chief – is the "treatment" in this study, (s)election of individuals into these positions occurs after treatment is assigned and controlling for individual-level factors would thus run the risk of introducing post-treatment bias.¹⁴

In all cases, the relationship between status as an elected district and our measure of responsiveness is in the expected direction, although in some cases these results are not statistically significant. Elected officials respond less frequently to constituent emails, and the responses they write are shorter, lower in quality and slower to arrive. The results are most striking for our measure of response quality. Responses by elected officials scored .44 lower than appointed ones on average in the first round, and .82 lower in the second, on a 5-point scale. These differences are statistically significant at $p < .05$ and $p < .001$, respectively.¹⁵

The results are quite consistent across both rounds of the experiment and across these various specifications. Bureaucratically appointed officials are more responsive than elected ones. In both rounds of the experiment, appointed officials were more likely to respond to putative citizens' requests for help than elected ones. In round one, 85 per cent of appointed officials responded to requests for help, compared to 78 per cent of elected officials. In round two, the gap grew to 15 percentage points (83 per cent of appointed officials responded versus 68 per cent of elected officials). By international standards, these numbers suggest that local officials in Taiwan are quite

11 West 2002.

12 We measure these variables as follows: *length* is measured as number of characters; *response* is whether a response was received (1) or not (0). Following Distelhorst and Hou (2014), *quality* is a five-point indicator constructed by assessing whether the official's response included a) the name of the government agency responsible for implementing the social welfare benefit our citizen email asked about, b) the requirements for receiving support, c) the application procedures, d) the contact information for the relevant office, and e) the levels of compensation available to beneficiaries depending on income. Finally, we measure *span* as the length of time in minutes between when the request for help was sent and the response was received. Our research was preregistered with EGAP and received IRB approval from the Harvard University Area IRB.

13 Newland and Liu 2021 included an experimental treatment: officials were randomly assigned to receive an email from a citizen with a Han name or an indigenous name in the first round, and treatment and control conditions were reversed in the second round. The experimental results are not relevant to this current study, which focuses instead on the observed differences between two groups that cannot be randomly assigned: elected and appointed officials.

14 For a discussion of the literature recommending against controlling for post-treatment variables, see Montgomery, Nyhan and Torres 2018.

15 Comparing mean values for elected and appointed districts using randomization inference and Welch's *t* test for groups with unequal variances produce results comparable to the ones described here.

responsive overall. Nonetheless, the difference in behaviour between elected and appointed officials is a striking pattern. To put these results in a comparative context, the response rates by appointed officials are higher than any reported in Mia Costa's meta-analysis of elite responsiveness studies.¹⁶ By contrast, the response rates by elected officials are still high, but much less exceptional (the 68 per cent response rate would put Taiwan in the 83rd percentile of the studies Costa analyses).

Exploring Mechanisms: Personalistic Elections and Bureaucratic Monitoring

What explains these persistent differences between elected and appointed officials? This section relies on non-participant observation in district service centres led by elected and appointed chiefs, as well as 20 in-depth interviews with citizens and local political elites, to describe the ways in which the different performance incentives of elected and appointed officials shape their behaviour. Taiwan's local elections remain quite personalistic, as voters are linked to elected township chiefs via patronage networks that encourage responsiveness to particular subsets of voters at the expense of the community as a whole. By contrast, bureaucratically appointed district chiefs are frequently monitored by their superiors in city government. While they sometimes seem distant and impersonal to voters, constant performance evaluation (and the possibility of immediate removal from office for poor performance) incentivizes them to provide effective citizen services even to citizens with whom they lack personal ties.

Several reasons for the relatively poor performance of elected district chiefs emerge from the qualitative data. First, re-election incentives encourage elected chiefs to emphasize campaigning over governance. As candidates for district chief are not always affiliated with a political party, they need high name recognition to succeed on election day and so put substantial effort and expense into campaign posters and events that bring them into contact with voters. Some see this as a useful mechanism for ensuring accountability to citizens, as "citizens may not recognize [appointed] district chiefs, and district chiefs may not care about citizens."¹⁷ Others, however, find that the work of campaigning gets in the way of service. As one employee of a district service centre with an elected head put it, "Bureaucrats who get their position by passing the civil service exam develop deep knowledge of a particular area. Elected officials are always just pursuing votes. They have to always pay attention to winning votes over everything else."¹⁸

Second, local elections remain personalistic in much of Taiwan, encouraging local elected officials to be responsive to citizens within their network of influence but creating limited incentives for broader responsiveness. One appointed district chief (*quzhang* 区长) from Taoyuan 桃園市, who replaced an elected chief when Taoyuan was upgraded to a special municipality, offered this example:

One newly elected village representative sent me at least ten messages thanking me when I agreed to put 5,000 NTD [about \$150] towards a new water system. That is not a lot of money, but he kept thanking me over and over! He said that he had asked for four years for this from the former mayor and was ignored because he wasn't part of the old mayor's patronage network. I try to provide services fairly to everyone.¹⁹

16 Costa 2017.

17 "Jiang zhixiashi xia ge xingzhengqu de quzhang gaiwei minxuan" (Turn appointed district chiefs from all administrative districts in special municipalities into elected ones), Leonard Lo, citizen petition to the National Development Council (Taiwan), 30 October 2017, <https://join.gov.tw/idea/detail/c9eb8d10-eac3-4921-af7d-6fe95ccaf567>. Accessed 3 January 2023.

18 Interview X1a, district service centre employee, October 2016.

19 Interview TY1b, district chief, Taoyuan, October 2016.

As another appointed district chief described, “My [elected] predecessor only served those who voted for him. He didn’t meet with others.”²⁰ Personalistic ties between candidates and citizens, often facilitated via vote brokers and party factions, played an important role in local elections during the authoritarian period.²¹ Although voters now have substantial autonomy and Taiwan’s local elections are widely regarded as free and fair, both existing research and my interviews suggest that these institutions continue to shape relationships between local elected officials and citizens today.²²

Pervasive corruption in electoral politics also increases politicians’ incentives for personal responsiveness to small groups of voters and financial supporters.²³ Vote buying has long been part of Taiwan’s political culture. A central component of local elections during the authoritarian period, local corruption became a wedge issue that the DPP used to attract voters during Taiwan’s first competitive elections, and a crackdown on widespread election-related corruption followed the January 1994 local elections.²⁴ Despite regular investigation and prosecution of election-related corruption in the democratic period, vote buying and other forms of corruption remain endemic in Taiwan’s district-level electoral politics. Collusion with local property developers and embezzlement of public funds are common problems – in one extreme case, the last three township chiefs were removed from office for corruption.²⁵ Although corruption is not limited to elected district chiefs, high campaign costs may lead these problems to be especially severe among elected officials. Local campaigns in Taiwan have always been expensive.²⁶ Today, Taiwan’s enormous roof- and wall-mounted campaign ads can be prohibitively costly and sometimes can only be secured via agreements between candidates and property developers.²⁷

Bureaucratically appointed district chiefs face a different set of incentives. They are typically experienced public servants with long careers in a highly professionalized bureaucracy, elite educational backgrounds and deep knowledge of local governance. These bureaucrats feel a strong sense of professional purpose and public obligation. This often manifests as a sense of obligation to higher-level officials rather than to citizens, and citizens sometimes perceive these officials as distant and unresponsive. Nonetheless, their training, their professional ethos and the strong city-level oversight to which they are subjected all lead appointed bureaucrats to be relatively responsive to a broad range of citizens.

That Taiwan’s bureaucratically appointed district chiefs are generally competent and responsive should not come as a surprise given the training, history and ethos of the civil service. Civil service posts are not especially well compensated; nonetheless, the positions are prestigious and highly competitive. In 2018, the pass rate for normal administrative posts (*yiban xingzheng* 一般行政) in the “common exam” (for applicants with at least a high school diploma) was 3.5 per cent, and the pass rate for the elementary exam (open to all adults regardless of educational background) has hovered around 1–2 per cent in recent years.²⁸ In addition, bureaucratic appointees often have elite educational backgrounds; elected district chiefs tend to be less educated and enjoy strong family ties to incumbents in local government.²⁹

20 Interview TY5b, district chief, Taoyuan, January 2019.

21 Chao and Myers 2000; Rigger 1999; Wang and Kurzman 2007.

22 Batto and Huang 2016; Braig 2010.

23 Lo 2008.

24 Rigger 1999.

25 Chen, Zhixian 2018; Xu 2018. Traditionally, vote buying has been enabled by local factions in Taiwan (Göbel 2012), although their influence has declined over time (Braig 2016; Göbel 2012). Although several of my interviewees expressed concern about vote buying and corruption, they focused primarily on the effects of such behaviour on local elected officials rather than whether factions played a role in facilitating corruption.

26 Rigger 1999.

27 Interview T3b, former city council candidate in New Taipei, January 2019.

28 “Quanguo zuida gongzhi zixun wang” (The country’s largest public information network). *Public.com.tw*. Accessed 16 March 2019.

29 Interview X1b, New Taipei Local Administration Office employee, January 2019.

District chiefs typically reach their posts after relatively long careers, and successive promotions, within this elite system. In Taoyuan, for example, most appointed district chiefs reach their positions through one of two routes. Some have already served in vice-leader (*fushouzhang* 副首长) positions in the city government and request to serve in district chief positions late in their careers.³⁰ A second route involves promotion to district chief after at least 10–15 years in lower district-level or city-level posts. Bureaucratic appointment incorporates district chiefs into social and professional networks that run between the city and its various districts, and good performance as a district chief is likely to lead to promotion to a higher position within the city government.³¹

This close relationship with the city government means that bureaucratically appointed chiefs are subject to frequent and consequential evaluation by higher-level officials. As one district chief put it, “evaluation is every day.”³² Taoyuan’s research and development council partnered with a local college to evaluate the telephone service to citizens; a team from the college called each branch office of the district government every month to ask for help, and the staff were evaluated on how helpful and polite they were.³³ In addition, city governments designate several high-priority policies each year and evaluate each district’s implementation.³⁴ In New Taipei, districts are ranked according to their scores, and these ranks and the justifications for them are made public to encourage lower-performing districts to emulate the top performers. In Taoyuan, all district chiefs attend a weekly meeting with the mayor. There is also a monthly district governance meeting (*quzheng huiyi* 区政会议) led by the secretary-general (*mishuzhang* 秘书长) of the Taoyuan city government, to which every office within the city government must send a representative.³⁵ In general, this allows for smooth coordination between districts and the city.³⁶ Finally, the Taoyuan civil affairs bureau conducts an evaluation of the district chiefs and sends the results to the mayor, who ultimately assesses each district chief’s performance.³⁷ These forms of monitoring can have immediate consequences for underperforming district chiefs: “Before, if the township chief did a bad job, it took four years before they could be voted out of office. Now, they can be removed from office the next day by the mayor.”³⁸

This combination of elite professional identities with strong and consequential higher-level monitoring has produced an effective, responsive corps of appointed district chiefs. For these appointed chiefs, responsiveness is not primarily *to citizens*. Instead, appointed district chiefs feel a strong sense of obligation to their superiors in the city government. Asked about his typical work routine, one appointed district chief replied: “I was appointed by the mayor of Taoyuan almost two years ago. My every day daily life is to serve our local village and city councilmen and execute what the city government asks me to do ... If I have a good relationship with city councilmen, I will have a good time.”³⁹ This interviewee came across as a model public servant. He saw his post as a “24-hour job” and had received a national award for exemplary local governance. However, his sense of obligation to citizens was indirect; satisfying his directly elected superiors was his primary task.

Citizens and officials perceive local state–society linkages to be weaker under appointed district chiefs than under elected ones. Both widely agree that citizens often do not even know the name of

30 Interview TY3b, employee of the Taoyuan secretary-general’s office, January 2019; interview TY4b, appointed district chief, Taoyuan, January 2019.

31 Interview TY3b.

32 Interview TY1b.

33 Ibid.

34 Interview TY1b; interview X1b.

35 Interview TY3b.

36 Ibid; interview TY5b.

37 Interview TY5b.

38 Interview TY3b.

39 Interview TY1b.

their appointed district chief.⁴⁰ Neither officials nor citizens saw this kind of distance as necessarily problematic, however. As one city government employee put it:

The old system had its advantages – [elected] chiefs were willing to work hard for citizens, even if what they did wasn't always legal (*hefa* 合法). Now, they work hard but their work is just on solving problems, not getting name recognition. Instead, they collect opinions from many citizens, and on the basis of that make policy decisions.⁴¹

Citizens also perceive appointed chiefs as relatively removed from citizens, but at the same time see them as more effective than they were under the old, election-based system:

The workers at the district service centre do a really good job. If you go to them for help they help you very quickly and efficiently. Twenty years ago, it was not like this ... Before Taoyuan was elevated to a special municipality, we all knew who the [elected] district chief was. Now, the district chief has no power ... After the elevation, everything is controlled by the city.⁴²

The interviews described in this section thus confirm the central finding of the quantitative results – that elected officials are less responsive to citizens than appointed ones. They also highlight key reasons for this responsiveness gap: whereas frequent monitoring and close ties to city government incentivize appointed bureaucrats to respond quickly and effectively to citizens' needs, the personalism and expense of local elections induces elected officials to be responsive to voters and economic elites with whom they share close ties – potentially at a cost to citizens excluded from these networks.

Conclusion

On the whole, district-level officials in Taiwan are a model of local government responsiveness. In large cities, district service centres often provide a “one-stop shop” where citizens can apply for social welfare benefits, check out library books, seek medical attention, charge electronic devices, drink tea provided by a volunteer and even get a massage. While government offices in smaller towns do not offer the same range of amenities, they nonetheless provide polite and efficient service from specialized public servants who staff walk-up desks, phone lines and online communication portals where citizens can request assistance.⁴³ The overall response rate of district governments to online requests for constituent service is about 80 per cent, one of the highest rates reported in cross-national research on local government responsiveness.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, there is substantial variation across localities in the level of responsiveness that local officials display towards citizens. This paper has argued that one important source of this variation is the method by which local township or district chiefs are (s)elected. I find that chiefs who are directly elected are less responsive to citizens than chiefs who are civil servants appointed by the city government. In districts with elected chiefs, the personalistic nature of local elections means that chiefs are often highly responsive to small groups of voters at the expense of broader attention to the needs of other voters or the district as a whole. By contrast, appointed chiefs' elite backgrounds and frequent monitoring by – and strong sense of obligation to – the city government combine to make them serve local residents more effectively.

40 Interview TY2b, Taoyuan (Pingzhen district) resident, January 2019; interview D1b, social service district office employee, Yunlin county, January 2019; interview X1b.

41 Interview X1b.

42 Interview TY2b.

43 Nonparticipant observation in district service centres throughout Taiwan, October 2016 and January 2019.

44 Newland and Liu 2021.

These findings should not be taken as an indictment of Taiwan's democratic development. Indeed, that Taiwan's bureaucratically appointed district chiefs are highly responsive is partly a function of relatively effective city-level democracy. Regular monitoring by two bodies – the elected city council and the elected city mayor and their staff – is central to appointed chiefs' sense of their mission. Put differently, Taiwan's elite bureaucracy remains so in part because elected "principals" exert meaningful control over bureaucratically appointed "agents." What would enable voters to play a similar role in local politics – in other words, to more effectively manage the principal-agent relationship with elected township chiefs – remains an open question.

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Sara A. Newland is assistant professor of government at Smith College. She researches local governance in China and Taiwan and subnational diplomacy between the US, China and Taiwan.