

**The “populist imbecile” vs. the “heartless shrew”:  
Polarizing election coverage and voters’ evaluation in Taiwan**

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**Abstract**

This study content analyzes the news coverage of two major presidential candidates – one populist challenger, the other female incumbent – in the 2020 Taiwan election. A nation-wide survey of voters and their newspaper uses was also utilized to verify the association between partisan news reliance and candidate evaluations. Based on the concept of partisan press, the study confirms that the coverage is highly polarizing and that it includes more horse-race analysis than discussion of serious issues. Sexist and misogynistic terms were used more often by party-opponent (Blue-camp) newspapers to describe the female incumbent. The male populist candidate was portrayed more often in a personal fashion than the female candidate. The voters’ primary newspaper uses were found to be positively associated with their candidate evaluations and preferences. The study sheds new light on populist vis-à-vis gendered election coverage in the context of an Asian democracy.

*Keyword:* populist candidate, partisan press, women candidate, election coverage, voting decision, candidate evaluation, Taiwan

The last decade of democratic exercises around the world has witnessed an uprising trend of populist politicians taking central stage. Many highly prominent figures have gained much attention of the press, galvanized the electorate, and succeeded in elections (Hameleers, 2019; Schulz et al., 2020). Boris Johnson of the U.K., Donald Trump of the U.S., and Viktor Orban of Hungary represented the new breeds who were able to keenly sense and capitalize on their respective national psyche for political advancement. It is unclear whether the populist movement that swirled across the West may also have taken place in the Asia-Pacific region, where democracies are less established and more fragile. The 2020 presidential election of Taiwan in which a populist candidate, Han Kuo-Yu, armed with catchy slogans and amiable personality, presented a suitable case study to examine this very question. Han was the mayor of the second largest city, Kaohsiung, and thanks to his outlandish remarks and social media presence, became extremely visible. He challenged the incumbent with a pro-China platform and caused a media feeding frenzy during the campaign.

Also in this race was a woman incumbent, Tsai In-wen, who was known for her expertise in international trades and extensive experience on various positions in the government in the past two decades. She had been unpopular in the second half of her first-term presidency for putting some controversial, lackluster policies in place. Unlike Han, Tsai is highly educated (with a Ph.D. from London School of Economics), cares about solving critical problems facing Taiwan, and holds a pro-independence stance that pleases those voters who are against China's aggression to take over Taiwan. In all democracies across the globe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women leaders are still in the minority, more so in Asia. The existing literature on Asian women leadership in the political sphere is not only scarce, but also lacks commonality and coherence

(Peus et al., 2015), making this investigation of press coverage of a female presidential candidate vis-à-vis a populist candidate conceptually promising.

The press has traditionally been considered as one of the most important mediums to inform voters and to reflect the values in society (Stone, 1987). Even with myriads of other communication channels available to or preferred by users nowadays, the press can still act as agenda-setter in general as well as during political campaigns, leading other media players to follow their leads (Guo & Vargo, 2015; Harder et al., 2017). Research shows that newspaper readers tend to be more knowledgeable about elections than consumers of other media (Chaffee & Kanihan, 1997). While the circulation of mainstream newspapers has been decreasing all over the world overall, the circulation of the Taiwanese press remains more steady than the American counterparts (The Audit Bureau of Certification, 2017; Watson, 2021), suggesting that newspapers in Taiwan appear to have retained its critical clout during political campaigns. However, it resembles many counterparts in Europe and the U.S. in that its partisan and market-driven orientations dominate reporting trend.

Taiwan's media system has been considered one of the freest in Asia, according to Freedom Forum's 2019 rating (Repucci, 2019), with little interference directly exerted from the government in any fashion. However, more pressure can be felt from the business operation and media's corporate interests (Wu & Lambert, 2016). Readership and audience share seem to be at the center of Taiwanese media's operation. With unproportionally more media outlets per person (compared with other countries), fierce competition, and China's influence on operation (Cook, 2019), compromise in journalism ethics appears common.

Given the similar media and political contexts as many Western counterparts, it could be fruitful to explore how this Asian democracy generated differed coverage for its electorate to

form critical voting decisions when China and the U.S. are engaged in geopolitics via Taiwan ("The most dangerous place on Earth," 2021). With the pre-election survey of the representative population, we also were able to examine the link between partisan coverage and readership. This study can fill the void many scholars lamented that the political communication literature – on gender, populism, and partisanship – lacks cross-cultural and global validity (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). This paper aims to investigate the pattern and tendency of news coverage of two distinct candidates in a recent presidential election of Taiwan. The findings of the study may shed light on partisan press' treatments of populist and women candidates and also contribute to the existing scholarship that has predominantly stemmed from Europe and the U.S.

### **Literature Review**

#### *Partisan orientation*

Traditional tenets of journalism call for fair and balanced coverage, especially for competing political candidates. In the partisan news era, however, they have been jettisoned and replaced by polarized or even conjured coverage that purports to attract and please target readers (Rini, 2017). The reemergence of partisan news in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the U.S. and elsewhere has triggered a profound impact on how voters are (mis)informed and insulated, and how elections are exercised in actuality (Abramowitz & Webster, 2016). This ascendance of politically biased reporting is partly fueled by increasing – and competitive – channels that strive to catch people's attention and partly attributed to highly personalized media consumption that stems from multitude of choices available to users (Stroud, 2010).

The very fundamental nature of partisan media is to provide politically congruent coverage for their like-minded readers and to keep them tuned in. McDevitt and Ferrucci (2018) argued that journalists who work in partisan fashion often base their judgments on their imagined

audiences. Partisan journalism has also been reported to be prevalent in the Taiwan media system (Wu & Lambert, 2016), where news outlets are unambiguously aligned with either political camps – Blue vs. Green. The Blue camp includes the Kuomintang (KMT) and other smaller parties, while the Green camp encompasses the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and other smaller political parties. The formation of these two political camps took place gradually and organically since oppositional parties were allowed to exist when the martial law was lifted in 1991 by the KMT regime. The newspapers in the Blue camp were launched prior to 1991 and have had an ideological alliance with the KMT. The newspapers in the Green camp started after the lift of the martial law and are ideologically linked with the DPP. While partisan media would undoubtedly present biased coverage that corresponds to readers' liking and lends support for congruent camp, there is little empirical evidence as to what types of content is produced in partisan press to distinguish opposing candidates. That is to say, it is not empirically supported whether partisan media may generate significantly differed quantities of coverage or valenced coverage of supportive vs. opposing candidates. Logically speaking, however, it is reasonable to expect ideologically aligned papers to devote more space to their supporting candidate and less to their opposing candidate. Likewise, partisan press may cover their supporting candidate with more favorable stories while cover their opposing candidate with less favorable stories.

A couple of empirical studies (Dzwo & Lee, 2010; Luo et al., 2007) did show Taiwanese news coverage presents clear partisan biases. Election news tends to be more positive toward party-congenial candidates while more negative toward opposing candidates. These studies also show that the Taiwanese newspapers publish more stories about the incumbents than the challengers during presidential elections. Given Tsai's incumbent status, this could present an

interesting factor in examining the amount of news between the two candidates. Based on the existing literature, we form the following two hypotheses:

H1: Green-camp newspapers publish more stories about Tsai, while Blue-camp newspapers publish more stories about Han.

H2: Green-camp newspapers are a) more positive, and b) less negative about Tsai than Han, while Blue-camp newspapers are c) more positive, and d) less negative about Han than Tsai.

### *Gendered election coverage*

There has been a substantial body of empirical studies conducted in the past few decades on the volume and valence of female candidates in the news media (e.g., Falk, 2010). Even though most of the investigations were executed in Europe and the U.S., they may lend support for the direction the current study takes. Jalalzai (2006) found that based on the evidence gathered between 1992 and 2000, women candidates have received more balanced coverage from newspapers; in some cases, women candidates even fared better than men. On the other hand, Lühiste and Banducci (2016), based on European data, found that not only did women candidates receive less coverage, when they got covered their stories tend to be evaluative in nature. Given a populist candidate in the race and the partisan inclination of news coverage, a sensational – yet conventional – fashion of covering the presidential candidates is expected (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2015). This means that the overall campaign coverage can emanate a masculine tone and thus the female candidate, Tsai, can be evaluated with male-dominant attributes in the news stories (Meeks, 2012) and depicted in a sexist fashion (Conroy et al., 2015), especially by the Blue camp media.

The sheer amount of press coverage Tsai and Han received respectively should be the first step of inspection. Recent studies (Hayes & Lawless, 2015; Lünenborg & Maier, 2015) have

shown no difference of coverage bestowed on candidates of different genders; moreover, Vander Pas and Aaldering's (2020) meta-analysis actually concludes gender bias ceases to exist in majoritarian electoral systems such as Taiwan's. However, the rarity of women leaders in Taiwan, Tsai's low-key campaign style, and the traditional paternalism that dominates Taiwan's political culture all suggest that newspapers were likely to devote less space to covering Tsai than Han. Despite Tsai's incumbency status that traditionally receives more coverage during electoral campaigns (Dzwo & Lee, 2010; Luo et al., 2007), Han, as a populist challenger tacitly supported by China (Horton, 2019), with novelty campaign style and constant outlandish media presence across all mediums and platforms, could have received more news coverage than a down-to-earth incumbent. Without a clear guide from the literature and campaign situation, we do not lean one way or the other, but simply want to form a hypothesis that guides our verification.

H3: Taiwanese newspapers overall publish more stories about Han than about Tsai.

Aside from the potential inclination for the mainstream press to downplay the importance and/or distort the presentation of women candidates, Taiwan's partisan press system could be at play as well. Even though Hayes and Lawless (2015) found that local newspaper coverage of U.S. congressional election is affected more by candidates' partisanship, ideology, and incumbency than their sex, more recent evidence shows that the press's partisan operation can result in more uncivil, populist, and sometimes flat-out sexist reporting toward female newsmakers, including presidential candidate (Harp, 2018).

Sexist and misogynistic news about female candidates has appeared frequently in traditional media (Rakow, 1986) and also markedly in populist media outlets (Conroy, 2018). The sexist description delivered in portraying women candidates can be seen as a part of framing

process by the press (Entman, 1993) and an outcome of journalists coping with unfamiliar news subjects (Shah & Thornton, 1994) or political candidates (Heldman et al., 2005). Despite the possibility of purposeful campaign strategy to highlight the gender factor that results in coverage of this nature (Devere & Graham, 2006), partisan journalism in Taiwan – together with market-driven sensationalist trend (Lambert & Wu, 2018) – seems to have spiraled the gender bias further to a new level. It is likely that partisan media tend to demonstrate heightened contrast, and thus, a higher amount of sexist coverage can be rendered when it comes to women candidates. Given the Blue camp papers being both populist and partisan due to their niche readership, their reporting inclination would lead them to demonstrate bias against the Green-camp female candidate. And their biased treatment of Ms. Tsai could be embodied by sexist coverage. Based on the rationale, we form the next hypothesis:

H4: Blue-camp newspapers are more likely to use sexist or misogynist expressions than Green-camp newspapers when covering Tsai.

#### *Election coverage and candidate evaluation*

News coverage about political candidates is pivotal for the electorate to form their informed decisions. However, journalists and editors during hectic campaign seasons can be overwhelmed with a multitude of choices to make – some may focus on the most important issues the country faces, some may devote to highlighting the candidates and their families, and yet others can pursue the horserace and treat the election like a game among the vying candidates (Gonçalves et al., 2020). In most democracies, horse race has gradually been focused more in election stories since the late 1970s (Broh, 1977; Sinclair, 1982), even though the prestigious press was still found to cover important issues facing the nation or communities. In the era of partisan press that reemerged in the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century, Franklin and Richardson (2002), based on evidence



from the U.K., concluded that the press is outright partisan and ‘lighter’ on the substance when it comes to election coverage. It is unclear whether the partisan press system has reinforced the trend. One aspect about political communication is certain though – most voters do not heed to the different stances candidates hold on issues as much as to the images they are presented in the media (Coleman & Wu, 2015). Therefore, readers’ interest on candidates per se may become an indispensable factor affecting the direction of election coverage.

Both partisan inclination and market-driven forces by which the press is influenced would not yield more issue-oriented election coverage. The dominant reporting trend found in the West indicates an emphasis on candidates’ personal aspects and campaign analysis. Similarly, the Taiwanese newspapers were found to focus more on horse race and campaign analysis in the past presidential elections (Dzwo & Lee, 2010; Lin, 2020). The only exception is major socio-political issues – such as referendum – that may drive more news coverage on the substance than do other topics during elections (Dzwo & Lee, 2010). Based on the existing literature, we hypothesize the following:

H5: Taiwanese news stories about the 2020 presidential candidates are more horse race- and candidate-oriented than issue-oriented.

Another unique element in this particular presidential election is the highly publicized populist candidate. Han’s unconventional campaign emphasized that he represents the “shumin,” or the common people, against the ruling elites (Batto, 2020; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). In addition, he proposed a slew of unrealistic ideas that wowed his avid supporters but also raised eye-brows and rolled some people’s eyes (Batto, 2020). His populist campaign themes had previously propelled him to win the mayorship of Kaohsiung in 2018 and within a year he

plunged into the race for the presidential office. Han was the first presidential candidate to run on populist platforms in Taiwan.

Populism appears to have swirled around the world's democracies in the past decade. Despite the sizeable volume of studies done on populism in the West (e.g., Hameleers & Vliegthart 2020), there is a void in research of populism that has been manifested elsewhere. For one thing, the themes and topics (e.g., anti-immigrants) used in European populist politics are not relevant in the Taiwan context. It is unclear whether the Taiwanese populist candidate invoked similar issues or embrace identical strategies in attracting media coverage and galvanizing electoral votes as their European counterparts do. The geopolitical contexts in which Asian and European democracies are situated, for example, differ greatly and could be capitalized differently by populist politicians. The refugee situation faced in Europe (Sirin et al., 2021), for example, was not particularly relevant for Asian democracies. It would be conceptually fruitful to inspect potential differences in news coverage traditional and populist candidates may engender. Moreover, the finding of the analysis may provide a much needed, cross-cultural comparison on populist candidates' coverage. Based on this rationale, we ask:  
RQ1: What are the topics and attributes of the two candidates covered in the newspapers?

News coverage of candidates has been linked to voters' perception and evaluation. Conventional media effects theories such as agenda-setting (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021) and priming (Iyengar & Simon, 1993) demonstrate the direct association between people's media exposure and their candidate evaluation and voting preference. In the era of partisan media and selective exposure, the nature of media effects on the voter is perhaps less straightforward (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2013); both echo-chamber or cross-cutting exposure of news content may take place although the former scenario was found to occur more frequently on Facebook

(Bakshy et al., 2015). The reader's existing political inclination and media preference and usage can play a critical role in determining the extent of exposure to partisan election coverage (Peterson et al., 2021). In other words, any assessment of news effects would need more control on the reader antecedents to tease out the news's net influence. However, if a given pattern of election coverage emerged, it would be meaningful to verify that partisan news – and its being selectively used by voters – is positively associated with candidate evaluations, and subsequently, voting preference. In other words, this finding would support the priming effect of partisan news in the political context. With this rationale, we formed the last hypothesis:

H6<sub>a</sub>: Voters' newspaper reliance and their *party-congenial* candidate evaluations are *positively* related.

H6<sub>b</sub>: Voters' newspaper reliance and their *party-opponent* candidate evaluations are *negatively* related.

### **Method**

This study used traditional content analysis method to code news content and yielded findings to verify the research hypotheses about the partisan influence on the candidates' coverage and to answer the research question about the topics and attributes associated with either candidate. To ensure the whole political spectrum be included, four largest circulated newspapers with different political leanings were selected. The *China Times* and the *United Daily News* tend to support the Chinese Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT) that has a pro-China, conservative platform; while the *Liberty Times* and the *Apple Daily* tend to support the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) that embraces de-facto independence of Taiwan (Sullivan et al., 2018). Hard copy of the four newspapers were purchased and gathered from July 16, 2019, when both parties have nominated their candidates, to January 11, 2020, the election day,

including roughly six months of news coverage about the presidential candidates. Research assistants were tasked with scanning each page of the newspapers to identify suitable stories. If the headline and lead paragraph of any story mentions the election or either candidate, that story was included in the study sample. The study sample likely comprises the majority of the coverage about the presidential candidates. Among the four examined newspapers, the *China Times* published the largest number of stories ( $n = 1,784$ ) while the *Liberty Times* produced the least amount ( $n = 1,145$ ) of stories. Totally, there are 5,615 stories included in the study.

The coding sheet of this study includes story ID (that includes newspaper and date), topics of the story, 12 distinct attributes of the candidate, sexist or misogynist expression/terms used in the story, and candidate images in the photos (if included in the story). The news topics and candidate attributes included in the coding sheet were derived from a pilot coding of a subset of election news and aimed to be as exhaustive and mutually exclusive as possible. These 9 news topics include international relations, relationship with China, election issues, issues within Blue camp, issues within Green camp, economics, national defense, social policies, and the media. The 12 candidate characteristics in the coding sheet are moral, honest, intelligent, caring, eloquent, self-confident, competent, experienced, consistent, charismatic, qualified, and relatable. Coders decided whether each of these 12 characteristics appeared (positively or negatively) in the story when either candidate was mentioned. The sexist or misogynist terms used when Tsai was covered were also collectively decided by the research team, compiled from the pilot coding, and updated throughout the coding process. Candidate photos – if present in the news – were coded on their facial expressions and body languages with positive, negative, or neutral categories. Given that not all facial expressions and body languages can be globally valid (Caradec, 2018); in effect some can be culturally determined, the research team coded a subset of

photos together and documented the rules of photo coding, which were discussed and updated throughout the coding process. Two college students in Taiwan were trained thoroughly, coded 10% of the news stories, and demonstrated satisfactory intercoder reliability level (i.e., each of the coding items exceeds .80 of Krippendorff's alpha) before they independently coded the rest of the stories. Each of the news stories was treated as a unit of analysis and rendered one single coding sheet. Conventional statistical analyses including crosstabulation, chi-square test, and *t*-test were conducted to verify the differences between political camps and between candidates.

This study also utilized a secondary data generated from a survey result publicly provided by Taiwan Election and Democratization Study (TEDS, 2021). TEDS is a large-scale, representative, in-person survey project independently executed, and supported and funded by the Department of Humanities and Social Science of Taiwan's Ministry of Science and Technology. The survey was conducted before the election day in 2020 and the questionnaire includes candidate evaluations and voting intention as well as an assortment of media use questions including the newspapers the respondents primarily rely on for news. These items in the questionnaire provide us with the means to examine the relationship between newspaper use and candidate evaluation and preference of the voters.

## **Results**

The first hypothesis examines the possibility of higher quantity of coverage devoted to covering candidate in the same political camp. Regarding Han's (Blue camp candidate) news coverage, even though the *China Times* has produced the largest raw amount ( $n = 1,072$ ) of news on him, in terms of percentage per individual newspapers, the percent ranges from the *United Daily News*'s 58%, *China Times*'s 60%, *Liberty Times*'s 66%, to *Apple Daily*'s 68%. Green

camp newspapers (the latter two) devoted slightly higher percentages of election-related stories on him than did the Blue camp papers ( $X^2 = 36.80$   $df = 3$   $p = .001$ ).

Regarding Tsai's coverage, both *China Times* ( $n = 901$ ) and *United Daily News* ( $n = 815$ ) devoted more stories on her than did the Green camp papers. In terms of percentage within each paper's total output, she also received more coverage from Blue camp papers than from Green camp papers (Blue: 59% and 51% vs. Green: 48% and 47%) and the statistical test result ( $X^2 = 43.65$   $df = 3$   $p = .001$ ) also is significant. Based on the chi-square values between the two candidates (i.e., 43.65 vs. 36.80), Tsai's pattern of partisan coverage appears more pronounced than Han's counterpart. Based on the findings of both candidates, it is apparent that newspapers in Taiwan tended to cover more of the candidate in the opposing camp. Therefore, H1 is rejected.

Of the 12 characteristics coded for the two candidates portrayed in the news stories, several characteristics vary significantly between them. Based on the stories, Han was portrayed as less intelligent and less competent; but he was described as more caring and compassionate, and also more relatable to average citizens than Tsai. Tsai's portrayal in the coverage, however, is not very distinctive in all categories from Han, except for her *less* political experience. Unlike Han, Tsai does not enjoy *any* positive portrayal in the papers examined altogether. Other than negative experience, she also suffers somewhat from two other characteristic categories (honesty and consistency).

H2 aims to examine whether the candidate characteristics portrayed between the Blue and Green camps of newspapers differ significantly. As Table 1 shows, Han was portrayed more negatively by the Green camp papers; likewise, Tsai was portrayed more negatively by the Blue camp papers. Specifically, stories from the Green camp papers questioned Han's competency, integrity, and governing experience. The Blue camp papers painted Tsai's honesty, consistency,

and governing experience negatively. On the other hand, Han was depicted by the Blue camp papers as more caring and relatable than Tsai. Interestingly, Tsai was not found to be depicted by the Green camp papers more positively in any of the 12 characteristics. Her coverage from the Green camp papers is simply neutral or less negative than that from the Blue camp papers. Based on these findings, H2a is rejected, whereas H2b, H2c and H2d are all supported.

Table 1 here.

H3 examines whether the Taiwanese newspapers in aggregate covered more on the populist, male candidate than the traditional female counterpart. Han was mentioned in 62.6% and Tsai was mentioned in merely 51.2% of all election stories – so the populist male candidate did exceed the traditional female counterpart in coverage by 11.4%. Based on the *t*-test, the result also shows that Han was covered more frequently in the news stories than Tsai was ( $t = 10.33$ ,  $df = 5614$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Therefore, H3 is supported.

H4 examines whether there is a tendency of the Taiwanese partisan press to pursue more sexist or misogynist coverage on the female candidate in the opposite camp. The Blue camp newspapers (*China Times* and *United Daily News*) were found to be more likely than the Green camp newspapers (*Apple Daily* and *Liberty Times*) to use sexist or misogynist expressions in their stories that mention Tsai in the race ( $X^2 = 15.88$   $df = 3$   $p = .001$ ). Thus, H4 is supported.

Table 2 here.

H5 aims to verify if horse race- and candidate-oriented news stories outnumber issue-oriented counterparts. Of the 17 news topics coded, 5 of them are about either of the candidates per se, their respective campaign team, and analysis of their campaign performances. These 5 topics account for 66% of the entire news stories; while the issues the country faces such as

national defense, the economy, and various domestic issues account for only 34%. Given the stark difference between the two categories, H5 is supported.

The research question explores how the two candidates are mentioned when substantive issues are covered in the election stories. Table 3 shows the breakdown of all topics in the news associated with either candidate. It shows that newspapers devoted more stories on election campaign per se than on the hot-button issues that concern the nation, which is salient across the two candidates. Yet, when the stories of 10 substantive issues are focused, it appears that Tsai is more likely to be mentioned than Han ( $X^2 = 108.777$   $df = 9$   $p < .001$ ). With  $t$ -test, we compared the percentages of candidate-related stories on each of the substantive issues, Han ( $M = 2.21$ ) also trails Tsai ( $M = 3.52$ ) significantly ( $t = -3.103$   $df = 11$   $p = .01$ ). In other words, Tsai, the traditional female candidate, is more likely to be associated with the critical issues facing the nation than the populist candidate, Han – indirectly indicating that populist campaigns tend to sway voters by non-substantive topics.

Table 3 here.

The characteristics bestowed on the populist and traditional candidates in the news stories are explored next. The populist candidate in this race was, in general, textually portrayed as less moral ( $t = -3.126$ ,  $df = 5614$   $p = .002$ ), less intelligent ( $t = -5.916$ ,  $df = 5614$   $p < .001$ ), and less competent ( $t = -3.399$ ,  $df = 5614$   $p < .001$ ) than the traditional incumbent. However, the populist candidate was depicted more favorably in terms of the following attributes: caring/empathetic ( $t = 5.994$ ,  $df = 5614$   $p < .001$ ), eloquent in speaking ( $t = 4.608$ ,  $df = 5614$   $p < .001$ ), experienced ( $t = 2.221$ ,  $df = 5614$   $p = .026$ ), charismatic ( $t = 4.03$ ,  $df = 5614$   $p < .001$ ), and relatable to voters ( $t = 4.399$ ,  $df = 5614$   $p < .001$ ). The study also coded all photos and visuals in the papers in which whichever candidate appears. The populist candidate was presented visually poorer than the



traditional candidate in terms of facial expression ( $t = -5.333$ ,  $df = 153$   $p < .001$ ), but the bodily language part of candidate images does not result in significant difference between them.

The 6<sup>th</sup> hypothesis examines the association between voters' primary source of newspapers and their candidate evaluations and voting preferences. Based on Table 4, voters' evaluations (in terms of their liking, candidate's capability and understanding of the nation's major issues) of Han are significantly higher if they rely on Blue-camp newspapers (*Wilks' Lambda* = 39.67  $df = 553$   $p < .001$ ); likewise, their three evaluations of Tsai are significantly higher if they rely on Green-camp newspapers (*Wilks' Lambda* = 36.68  $df = 564$   $p < .001$ ). The other direction of the relation between cross-cutting news consumption and party-congenial candidate evaluations or between echo-chamber news consumption and party-opponent candidate evaluations is also significant. Similarly, the association between voters' selective newspaper use and voting preferences is positive and statistically significant (Chi-square = 132.82  $df = 3$   $p < .001$ ). Those who primarily read the Blue-camp newspapers (*China Times* 56.7% and *United Daily News* 74.2%) are more likely to vote for Han; and those who predominantly read the Green-camp newspapers (*Liberty Times* 88.4% and *Apply Daily* 74.8%) are more likely to vote for Tsai. Therefore, both H6a and H6b are supported.

Tables 4 and 5 here.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

There are two critical aspects of partisan press's coverage of political candidates that were examined in this study: volume and valence of the stories. While it is natural to say positive things about the candidate the press supports and to cast a negative light on the candidate of the opposite camp (which is confirmed), the amount of news coverage devoted to covering the supportive candidate turned out to be *smaller* than the counterpart. The operation of partisan

press in Taiwan, therefore, appeared to generate more biased coverage against the opposing camp rather than to promote the candidate in the same camp. The result essentially showed that the Taiwanese press advocated *against* the candidate it opposed more than *for* the candidate it supported.

Another major finding this study provides is the unfair coverage about the female candidate, compared to the male candidate. Not only did Tsai receive significantly less coverage than Han, sexist and misogynist terms occasionally were used in the stories to describe her in various situations. This finding is at odds with past observations that the incumbent candidate tended to receive more coverage. Some reporters nicknamed her “heartless shrewd” or addressed her by her informal, patronizing nickname, “shiao-yin,” while others vehemently questioned her Ph.D. degree from London School of Economics and governing competence despite her completed first-term that tackled several reforms. It is not surprising to learn that the Blue camp newspapers used sexist terms much more frequently to refer her in their stories. Yet, it is counterintuitive to find sexist terms existing in the coverage of Green camp papers as well. As Kantola and Lombardo (2019) explained, maybe populism itself can pose a threat to feminism. Some journalists may intentionally or unintentionally use patronizing expression to comment, spin, self-aggrandize, lampoon, or critique her campaign and strategies, this practice vividly indicates the sensationalized practice of partisan press, nonetheless.

Another strikingly interesting news pattern uncovered in the study is the male candidate in the race was portrayed in a more personal fashion than was the female counterpart. When Han was mentioned in the stories, 19.1 % of the news stories are associated with his personal affairs, such as his property, his wife, and various family members. When Tsai was mentioned, only 5.6% of the stories are personal in nature. This can stem from the campaign strategy of Han’s

team for being extremely populist and Tsai as a conventional candidate that runs on issue platforms. However, this finding contradicts the widely held assumption that news media tend to focus more on personal and family traits of female politicians instead of their embraced issues (Aday & Devitt, 2001; Hayes & Lawless, 2015). Therefore, this Taiwanese populist candidate has indeed challenged the traditional campaign tactics and reversed the existing news pattern regarding gender.

The fact that the Taiwanese papers committed more space to covering the candidates themselves and campaign analysis than the critical issues the electorate faced parallels to the findings stemmed from the media coverage of other democratic nations (Iyengar et al., 2004; Sinclair, 1982). The most important substance for the voters to ponder and evaluate – including the candidate’s platforms for the highest public office – has given way to variety show about candidates and their families and horse race analysis, which of course catch more eyeballs, and therefore, help the revenue. The Taiwanese press appears to embrace their coffer more than their social responsibility. This is one dysfunctional aspect of free press system in democracies around the world and deserves proactive intervention from concerned publics and entities.

The emergence of populist politicians in the last decade or so across many democracies is an intriguing phenomenon that merits cross-cultural investigation. This study finds a similar pattern of populist candidates who tend to be anti-establishment, extremely personality-driven (Nai et al., 2019), and appear more authentic and relatable to average voters (Bakker et al., 2021; Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). Han’s populist “shumin” image and slogan catapulted him to land on the mayorship of Kaohsiung in 2018. However, it failed to do wonders for Han during the 2020 presidential election. One contextual, unfavorable factor is that he has been portrayed as a mayor who is more interested in running for president than keeping his promise to solve many of the

city's problems. The Taiwanese voters seemed to have lost trust in Han right before the presidential election (Everington, 2019). The results of news coding indicate his name has been less likely to be associated with agendas covered in the news; on the other hand, he has been portrayed as more compassionate, experienced, and relatable. Despite the apparent lack of needed qualification for the job, Han was able to get away from the expectation to elaborate on how he proposes to govern and solve any of the critical issues facing the nation and managed to appear more amiable in the press coverage than his opponent. This is a commonality with other populist candidates in other parts of the world – no matter what type of critical stance they embrace to appeal to their critical bases.

This study also confirms the significant association between voters' partisan press use and their candidate evaluations and preferences. Most Taiwanese voters rely on like-minded newspapers, provide positive evaluations for party-congenial candidates, and vote along the party line. As such, it is unfathomable how election coverage – and political campaign in general – may actually sway voters' minds. However, the Blue-camp newspapers seem less congruent than the Green-camp newspapers in terms of mustering readers' support for the party-congenial candidate. It is worth noting that the circulation of Blue-camp newspapers is smaller in the Taiwan market, they included more sexist language, and the owner of *China Times* was well known to have businesses in China, which might have influenced the lesser extent of the association than the Green-camp papers demonstrated. On the other hand, the two distinct candidates could have yielded profound impressions on the Taiwanese electorate, trumping the newspapers' potential influence on their voting decisions. Also, owing to the deteriorating situation in Hong Kong that started right before the election, Tsai's firm stance on China could have paid off in the end despite her lackluster news coverage (Batto, 2020).

In conclusion, this study used both content analysis of newspaper coverage and survey of voters to show the polarizing coverage that emphasized horseshoe rather than serious issues facing Taiwan and the news sources most voters relied on to make candidate evaluations. With a woman candidate in the race, sexist and misogynistic terms were often used by the opponent press to depict the incumbent; on the other hand, the male populist challenger was portrayed more often in a personal fashion than the female candidate, which differs from what the existing literature suggests. The voters' primary newspaper uses were found to be positively associated with their candidate evaluations and voting decisions, which unveils the danger of further polarization and deep schism between the two political camps. The study sheds new light on two important components – populist and gendered coverage – that coexisted in the context of an Asian democracy. The findings may serve well for political reporters as well as political candidates under similar circumstances in the future.

There are weaknesses and shortcomings in this study. Even though all major newspapers were included in examination, their web versions that could vary somewhat from the print versions are not accounted for. In addition, the island is notable for its large number of cable channels that deliver 24/7 news (Sullivan et al., 2018; Wu & Lin, 2013). A great number of audiences could have relied on this medium for election information. Equally important are the social media-based messages and visuals that can also circulate widely among key segments of the population. These sources of election information hopefully could be mitigated somewhat by correspondence of cross-media agendas and the intermedia agenda-setting power of the four widely circulated newspapers.

This study set out to investigate the news coverage of two distinct political candidates in an Asian democracy: one populist contender and the other female incumbent vying for the

president's office. The election is of great importance not only because it mattered to the Taiwanese voters and their future, but also the result of the election could tip regional power structure as well as the balance between the superpowers – China and the U.S. The campaigns embodied a highly unusual contest that involved a unique combination of populism, gender, and extremely partisan press against a slew of other internal and external factors. The findings reported here may shed new light on the unique circumstance and provide insight for future elections that share similar elements.

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Table 1  
 Candidate characteristics portrayed by newspaper camp

<i>Candidate characteristic</i>	<i>Newspaper Camp</i>	<i>Han</i>		<i>Tsai</i>	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Moral	Blue*	.00	.035	Blue	.00 .043
	Green*	-.01	.101	Green	.00 .029
Honest	Blue*	.00	.081	Blue*	-.01 .109
	Green*	-.01	.121	Green*	.00 .045
Intelligent	Blue	-.01	.079	Blue	.00 .031
	Green	-.01	.099	Green	.00 .020
Caring	Blue*	.01	.117	Blue*	-.01 .115
	Green*	.00	.088	Green*	.00 .083
Eloquent	Blue	.00	.053	Blue	.00 .018
	Green	.01	.078	Green	.00 .000
Strong	Blue	.00	.056	Blue*	.00 .083
	Green	.00	.054	Green*	.00 .076
Competent	Blue*	.00	.056	Blue	.00 .069
	Green*	-.01	.116	Green	.00 .050
Experienced	Blue*	.00	.071	Blue*	-.02 .165
	Green*	-.01	.109	Green*	.00 .153
Consistent	Blue*	.00	.059	Blue*	-.02 .122
	Green*	-.02	.136	Green*	.00 .040
Charismatic	Blue	.00	.066	Blue	.00 .025
	Green	.00	.035	Green	.00 .020
Qualified	Blue	.00	.035	Blue*	.00 .056
	Green	.00	.067	Green*	.00 .000
Relatable	Blue*	.01	.127	Blue*	.00 .053
	Green*	.00	.125	Green*	.00 .040

\*Difference of portrayed candidate characteristic between two camps is statistically significant at .01

Table 2  
*Whether stories mention sexist terms by newspapers*

Sexist term usage	Blue camp		Green camp		Total
	<i>China Times</i>	<i>United Daily</i>	<i>Liberty Times</i>	<i>Apple Daily</i>	
Yes	68 3.8%	63 4.5%	24 2.1%	32 2.5%	187 3.3%
No	1716 96.2%	1328 95.5%	1121 97.9%	1263 97.5%	5428 96.7%

Chi-square = 15.88 *df* = 3 *p* = .001

Table 3  
*Candidate mentioned together with issues*

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Han mentioned</i>		<i>Tsai mentioned</i>	
Relation with China	40	1.1%	65	2.3%
Hong Kong	28	0.8%	68	2.4%
China	57	1.6%	121	4.2%
International relations (except China and HK)	37	1.1%	99	3.4%
Taiwan national identity	91	2.6%	217	7.5%
Taiwan government	207	5.9%	204	7.1%
National defense	33	0.9%	52	1.8%
Economy	41	1.2%	66	2.3%
Media	58	1.7%	33	1.1%
Fake news	9	0.3%	15	0.5%
Domestic policies (Other than national defense and economy )	265	7.5%	217	7.5%
Other issues	63	1.8%	61	2.1%
<b>Candidate and campaign analysis</b>				
Tsai herself	38	1.1%	161	5.6%
Tsai campaign team	256	7.3%	771	26.8%
Han himself	672	19.1%	94	3.3%
Han campaign team	1164	33.1%	231	8.0%
Analysis of campaigns	454	12.9%	402	14.0%
Column total	3513	100.0%	2877	100.0%

Table 4  
*Readers' evaluation by their reliance of newspaper camp*

<i>Readers' evaluation of candidate</i> <sup>#</sup>	Reliance of newspaper camp <sup>^</sup>	<i>Han</i> <sup>1</sup>		<i>Tsai</i> <sup>2</sup>	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
Liking*	Blue	5.40	0.23	4.54	0.20
	Green	2.44	0.15	7.09	0.13
Capability*	Blue	5.33	0.22	5.18	0.19
	Green	2.66	0.14	7.14	0.12
Understanding*	Blue	5.70	0.23	5.01	0.19
	Green	3.25	0.14	6.92	0.12

<sup>1</sup> *Wilks' Lambda* = 39.67 *df* = 553 *p* < .001

<sup>2</sup> *Wilks' Lambda* = 36.68 *df* = 564 *p* < .001

\*Comparisons of individual dependent variable between the Blue and Green camps are significant at .001

<sup>^</sup> The wording in the questionnaire: 'Which newspaper have you used most often?' The specific newspaper chosen is then categorized as either Blue or Green.

<sup>#</sup> The wording in the questionnaire: 'On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 meaning least/lowest and 10 meaning most/highest, what is the score you would give to each of the candidates?' 'How much do you like the candidate?' 'What is the candidate's overall capability?' and 'How much does the candidate understand the needs of average citizens?'



Table 5  
*Voting for either candidate by the newspaper read most often*

Voting for		Newspaper read most often			
		<i>China Times</i>	<i>United News</i>	<i>Liberty Times</i>	<i>Apply Daily</i>
Han	within voting for either candidate	12.2%	49.6%	18.7%	19.4%
	within the paper read most often	56.7%	74.2%	11.6%	25.2%
Tsai	within voting for either candidate	4.1%	7.6%	63.0%	25.3%
	within the paper read most often	43.3%	25.8%	88.4%	74.8%

Chi-square = 132.82  $df = 3$   $p < .001$