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What is the Role of New Residents in Taiwan's Next Elections?

Written by [Lara Momesso](#).

As Taiwan's presidential and legislative elections approach, major and minor parties are busy defining their agendas, electoral campaign strategies, and potential interest groups.

New immigrants have emerged as an increasingly important constituency in Taiwanese political debate. In January 2016, new immigrants with Taiwanese citizenship comprised 1.33% of the total electorate. Although this does not yet constitute a major constituency, the portion is predicted to increase next year. The expected expansion of this constituency is not only related to the number of migrants who will acquire Taiwanese citizenship, but also their children, who will be of legal voting age in the coming years.

Both the DPP and KMT [have included new residents in their electoral campaign narratives since 2000](#) as part of multicultural discourse. In October 2015, then KMT Chairman [Eric Chu stated](#), "New residents are Taiwan's most important resource. There is currently a total of 600,000 such individuals from China and Southeast Asia. Each new resident who joined our great family is part of us, and these new Taiwanese children are children of Taiwan. This population will make Taiwan even more multicultural." In December 2016, [Hong Hsiu-Chu, then Chairman of the party, thanked new residents for participating in Taiwanese society](#) and making it more inclusive and diverse. Similarly, on the DPP side, [Changhua County Magistrate Wei Ming-ku thanked new residents for their contribution to Taiwanese society](#) and for choosing Changhua as their new home during an event for new residents in 2015.

In the last four years both the KMT and DPP have created opportunities for conventional inclusion and representation of new residents within the parties. In 2015 the [KMT established a New Resident Working Committee](#) 新住民工作委員會 to show its commitment towards the rights and interests of new residents and to implement policies of inclusion by [working directly in relation to the Legislative Yuan](#). Furthermore, in 2016 Lin Li-chan, an immigrant spouse of Cambodian origin, entered the elections as a candidate in the proportional representation ballot and became the first immigrant to win a seat in the Legislative Yuan. These achievements allowed the KMT to boast itself as [the first party that nominated a new resident in its electoral lists](#) and established a body to serve them.

The DPP has taken similar action. According to a DPP officer involved in projects for migrants, new residents cannot be overlooked in the party narrative: regardless of their party identification and whether they vote, as a special interest group, new residents may influence other areas of society. It is therefore crucial for the party to cultivate positive relations with new residents. In February 2017 [the DPP established the New Resident Affairs Committee](#) 新住民事務委員會 which, unlike the KMT New Resident Working Committee, boasted significant immigrant presence. The Committee comprised immigrants from Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia and even Mainland China, as well as a second generation representative born from a cross-border marriage.

Migrants were aware of their statistical significance in terms of votes. As an Indonesian woman stressed: "By now we are almost 600,000 new residents in Taiwan and the government is paying attention to us! If it lets us take part in politics, it is because the Taiwanese government hopes to hear our voice! And you know, a few years ago we were only a few with voting rights, but now we are more and more and the government listens to us." Yet, if migrants typically maintained a positive attitude towards political parties' outreach initiatives, they also understood these initiatives

as party strategies to gain votes. As a migrant from mainland China explained to me with a hint of disillusion: “Obviously the Taiwanese government is working hard to give us a space and let us access politics. They want us to take part in politics. But...I think that if not for politics and votes, the government wouldn't care about us.” Some of my informants saw this issue as part of the democratic process of voicing interests through votes. As a woman from mainland China who had lived in Taiwan for more than two decades, she explained: “So it works like this: democracy looks at votes, and votes look at who can vote. So, if we can vote, the government will listen to us! So, we need to vote.”

New residents expressed differing opinions regarding the DPP and the KMT committees on new residents. Most of my informants provided positive feedback and argued that through these bodies, migrants had a chance to speak and be heard. A main point of departure, however, was related to the issue of political candidacy: in contrast to the KMT choice to propose a new resident as a candidate for the 2016 elections, the [DPP was still debating how the presence of “ignorant small women” nominees would impact the whole electoral campaign](#). A Vietnamese woman was positive about the DPP’s cautious approach, arguing, “We are not ready yet, so I accept this. And the DPP is gradually pushing to be ready to take a bigger step in the future. For instance, Lin Lichan is not mature yet. She is not able to have all the things she wants done.” A male respondent was more critical, saying new residents were used as puppets by the DPP, which allowed only a basic degree of participation. This approach disappointed some of the consultants in the New Resident Affairs Committee and eventually [resulted in some members departing to other parties](#).

The inclusion and participation of new residents in Taiwan’s party politics is a relatively recent phenomenon. Yet it has developed quickly and in different directions. As this article showed, as political parties demonstrated willingness to strategically capture migrants as voters, migrants took advantage of these new opportunities and experimented with new options and directions. Migrant actions then forced political parties to readjust in reaction to migrant requirements. With general elections coming in just a few months and new residents remaining an important matter in party narratives, we will see a greater representation of new residents in Taiwan’s legislature. These interactions will eventually reshape Taiwan’s democratic image as at the forefront of migrant political inclusion in Asia.

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