Cost of Politics

The cost of politics in Taiwan

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WFD

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Introduction

In the 2024 legislative election, the two major political parties - the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and Kuomintang (KMT) - divided up 79 seats for district and indigenous legislators. Meanwhile, the 34 at-large and overseas citizen seats were divided among three political forces—DPP (38.24%), KMT (38.24%), and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) (23.52%). Notably, this election did not produce a majority party, meaning no single party holds more than half of the seats in the current Legislative Yuan. Encouragingly, female legislators have continued to achieve remarkable representation. While young legislators remain a minority in the Legislative Yuan, a significant number of younger candidates successfully secured seats in this election. One intriguing phenomenon observed in the political donation income and expenditure reports is that 81% of legislative candidates reported a deficit in their political finances, with the highest loss amounting to approximately TWD 10 million (USD 310 thousand). Conversely, 29% of candidates had a surplus, with the highest positive balance reaching TWD 53.7 million (USD 1.7 million)[12]. However, funding is only one aspect of political costs and represents just a fraction of the overall political landscape.

This study examines the 2024 legislative election as a case study to explore the political costs incurred by candidates running for central-level public office. It investigates the various costs—both tangible (such as financial expenses) and intangible (such as time commitment)—at different stages of the election cycle, from party primaries and campaigning to serving as a legislator. The research aims to answer the following questions: What political costs are necessary in the context of Taiwan's electoral culture? Do political costs serve as barriers to female or young candidates? What are the implications of political costs for Taiwan's democratic processes?

Methodology

This study primarily employs qualitative research methods, integrating two complementary approaches. The first involves data collection, which includes gathering relevant materials on the 2024 legislative election, such as Taiwan's legislative electoral system, gender quota mechanisms, election procedures, and candidate nomination lists. Additionally, data from the Central Election Commission (CEC) is used to compile demographic statistics on past legislative elections, including candidate's gender, age, and incumbency status. Political donation records are sourced from the Control Yuan's Political Donations Public Access Platform, allowing for a collection of political fundraising and expenditure patterns across candidates in different administrative regions, thereby providing insight into how financial resources are distributed in electoral campaigns.

The second approach consists of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. A total of ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted, including eight candidates from the 2024 legislative election—representing both major and minor parties, as well as both successful and unsuccessful candidates. Additionally, one senior legislative assistant and one journalist specializing in political donation issues were interviewed. The focus group discussions were designed to examine

the political costs incurred at different stages of the legislative election cycle—including party primaries, campaign periods, and post-election service—and to assess the implications of these costs for Taiwan's democratic processes. Two focus group discussions were held, each consisting of legislative assistants involved in electoral campaigns organised by party affiliation. Beyond firsthand electoral experiences, this study also incorporates perspectives from experts and scholars specializing in electoral studies, parliamentary operations, and political finance. Their suggestions regarding and insights into the role of political costs in the context of Taiwan's electoral system and political culture were analysed and included in this report.

Table 1: Breakdown of research participants

Activity	Participant Category	Number of Participants
Focus Group Discussion I	Legislative assistants	4 (F=1; M=3)
Focus Group Discussion II	Legislative assistants	4 (M=4)
Focus Group Discussion III	Scholars	5 (F=2; M=3)
Key Informant Interviews I	Elected members of the Legislative Yuan	5 (F=4; M=1)
Key Informant Interviews II	Candidates who lost	3 (F=1; M=2)
Key Informant Interviews III	Legislative assistant	1 (M=1)
Key Informant Interviews IV	Journalist	1 (F=1)
Total Research Participants		**23 (F=9; M= 14)**

F= female; M= male.

Electoral Politics in Taiwan

Taiwan's Electoral System

Taiwan's current legislative electoral system is based on the amendment to Article 4 of the Additional Articles of the Constitution, which was passed on August 23, 2004, ratified by the National Assembly on June 7, 2005, and promulgated by the President on June 10 of the same year. The National Assembly transferred its powers to the Legislative Yuan and was abolished in 2005. Beginning with the 7th legislative election in 2008, the total number of legislators was set at 113, with a four-year term and eligibility for re-election. The previous multi-member district Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system was replaced with a Mixed-Member Majoritarian (MMM) system[3]. In fact, since 1945, elections for all levels of public representatives in Taiwan had adopted the SNTV system[4]. However, as Taiwan underwent democratization, electoral reforms for central representative bodies—namely, the National Assembly and the Legislative Yuan—gradually took place[5].

The Legislative Yuan has 113 seats, comprising 73 district legislators elected from electoral

districts, 3 legislators from Highland indigenous districts, 3 legislators from Lowland indigenous districts, and 34 at-large and overseas citizen legislators. The electoral system for district legislators is a single-member district, first-past-the-post system. Candidates running for district legislator seats may not simultaneously be listed on a political party's proportional representation list[6]. Each electoral district elects one representative, with constituencies defined by administrative boundaries such as municipalities and counties. In accordance with Article 67 of the Public Officials Election and Recall Act, the candidate receiving the highest number of votes is declared the winner. For example, in the 2024 legislative election, Tu Chuan-chi won in Taoyuan City's Second District with 103.7 thousand votes (48.19%), narrowly defeating Huang Shih-chieh, who garnered 102 thousand votes (47.61%)—a margin of just 1,229 votes. By contrast, in Tainan City's Fifth District, Lin Chun-hsien secured a landslide victory with 126 thousand votes (76.54%) over opponent Hsiao Lin-hung's 38 thousand votes (23.46%), winning by a margin of 87.6 thousand votes[7].

All voters in Taiwan receive two ballots: one for a district legislator and another for a political party. The electoral system for indigenous legislators—both Highland and Lowland indigenous representatives—follows a multi-member district with a single non-transferable vote (SNTV). Indigenous voters are classified according to their legal status as either "Lowland" or "Highland" indigenous peoples and cast their votes accordingly[8]. In other words, indigenous voters also receive two ballots, but instead of voting for a district candidate, they cast one vote for either a Highland and Lowland indigenous legislator, depending on their legal classification, and one vote for a political party. Because voting in indigenous constituencies is based on voter identity rather than geographic district, candidates for indigenous seats must compete for the support of Highland and Lowland indigenous voters across the country. Wherever indigenous voters reside, their location becomes part of the electoral base for indigenous candidates.

Legislators elected through the nationwide at-large and overseas citizen system are chosen via a closed-list proportional representation system. Under this system, the candidate lists submitted by political parties are fixed, meaning voters cast their ballots for a party rather than for individual candidates, and cannot influence the order of names on the party list. The entire nation constitutes a single electoral district for this category. Only parties that receive at least 5% of the total valid party votes are eligible for seat allocation. According to Article 67 of the Public Officials Election and Recall Act, the allocation of seats is determined using the Hare/Niemeyer largest remainder method. Of the seats won by each party, at least half must be allocated to female candidates. If there are any remaining seats, they shall be allocated in order according to the size of each party's remaining vote total after the initial distribution of seats. If two or more parties have the same remainder, the allocation shall be determined by drawing lots.

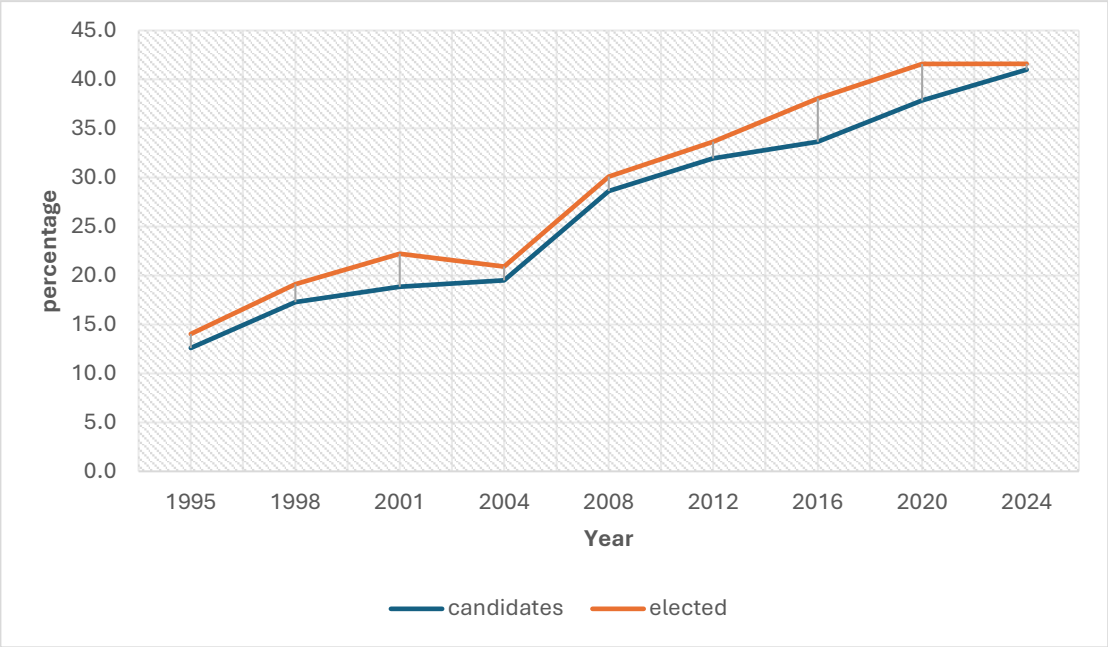
Women's Representation Quota

Article 134 of the Constitution of the Republic of China (Taiwan) not only formally recognises women's right to political participation but also serves as a fundamental legal basis for the protection of women's political rights. In the context of legislative elections, the constitutional amendment in 1991 first codified the provision for a women's representation quota. According to Articles 1, 2, and

3 of the Additional Articles of the Constitution, for the National Assembly, the Legislative Yuan, and the Control Yuan elections, at least one representative must be a woman for constituencies electing between five and ten representatives; for every additional ten representatives beyond the first ten, one more woman must be elected[9]. A subsequent amendment in 1997 reformed the electoral system for the National Assembly by adding 20 seats for overseas citizens and 80 nationwide at-large seats, in addition to district representatives and indigenous representatives. These two new categories of seats—overseas citizens and at-large—were elected through a party-list proportional representation system. Under this revised system, for every four representatives elected from a party list, at least one must be a woman[10]. This constitutional reform not only expanded central-level representative elections to include nationwide at-large and overseas citizen seats, but also strengthened gender representation by increasing the women's quota from one-tenth to one-fourth of the seats.

Following the 2005 constitutional amendment, Taiwan's legislative electoral system was changed to a mixed-member system with two votes per voter. Nationwide at-large and overseas citizen representatives are elected based on political party lists, and no less than half of the candidates on each party list must be women. If a political party is allocated 10 seats, it must include 5 male and 5 female candidates. However, if the party list includes only 4 female candidates, the remaining seat cannot be filled by a male candidate, resulting in one vacant legislative seat for that party[11]. The mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) system combining single-member districts and proportional representation was implemented for the first time in 2008. Under this system, it is stipulated that no less than half of the seats won by each political party in the nationwide at-large and overseas citizen elections must be filled by women. As shown in the accompanying chart, data on female participation in legislative elections from 1995 to the present indicate a significant increase in both the candidacy and election rates of women starting in 2008. In the 2024 legislative election, women accounted for 41% of all candidates—the highest proportion of female participation since 1995. This marks a 3.1 percentage point increase compared to the 2020 election, in which the proportion of female candidates was 37.9%. The success rate for female candidates in 2024 was 41.6%, the same as in the previous election.

Figure 1. Female Participation in Legislative Elections Over the Years



Source: Central Election Commission.

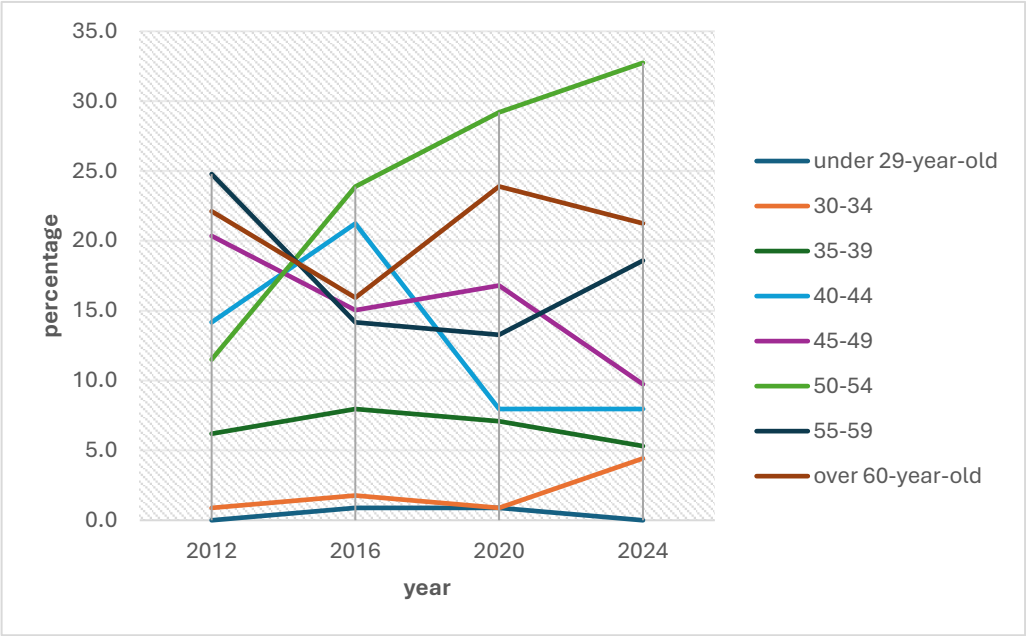
Who's Who in 2024 Taiwanese Legislative Election

According to the Additional Articles of the Constitution, members of the Legislative Yuan serve four-year terms and may seek re-election. Legislative elections are held within three months prior to the expiration of each term. For the 2024 legislative election, the CEC announced on November 7, 2023, the details of the 11th Legislative election, including the types and number of seats, electoral district divisions, the voting date, and the maximum campaign expenditure limits[12]. Candidate registration for the legislative election was open from November 20 to 24, 2023. Candidates—whether running in district, indigenous, or nationwide at-large elections—were required to register in person at the CEC or local election commissions (special municipalities, counties, or cities) and submit a deposit of TWD 0.2 million (approximately USD 6.2 thousand)[13]. On December 13, 2023—one month prior to election day—the CEC officially announced January 13, 2024, as the date for the presidential and legislative elections. The list of legislative candidates was published ten days before the election[14151617].

A total of 505 candidates contested the 2024 Legislative election, including those running in district races, nationwide at-large and overseas citizens constituencies, as well as the Highland and Lowland indigenous constituencies. The 113 elected legislators took office on February 1, 2024, as members of the 11th Legislative Yuan. In terms of age distribution, the proportion of legislators aged 29 and under has historically remained close to zero. However, in this election, the number of legislators aged 30 to 34 increased significantly, marking the highest proportion in that age group across all past sessions. These younger legislators are not only affiliated with major political parties

but also tend to possess substantial political resources—such as prior experience as local elected officials, family ties to political figures, local community roots, or factional backing. When viewed alongside the proportion of legislators aged 60 and above, the results of this election suggest a potential generational shift; however, the majority of legislators remain in the 50-and-above age group.

Figure 2. Age Distribution of Legislators in Past Elections



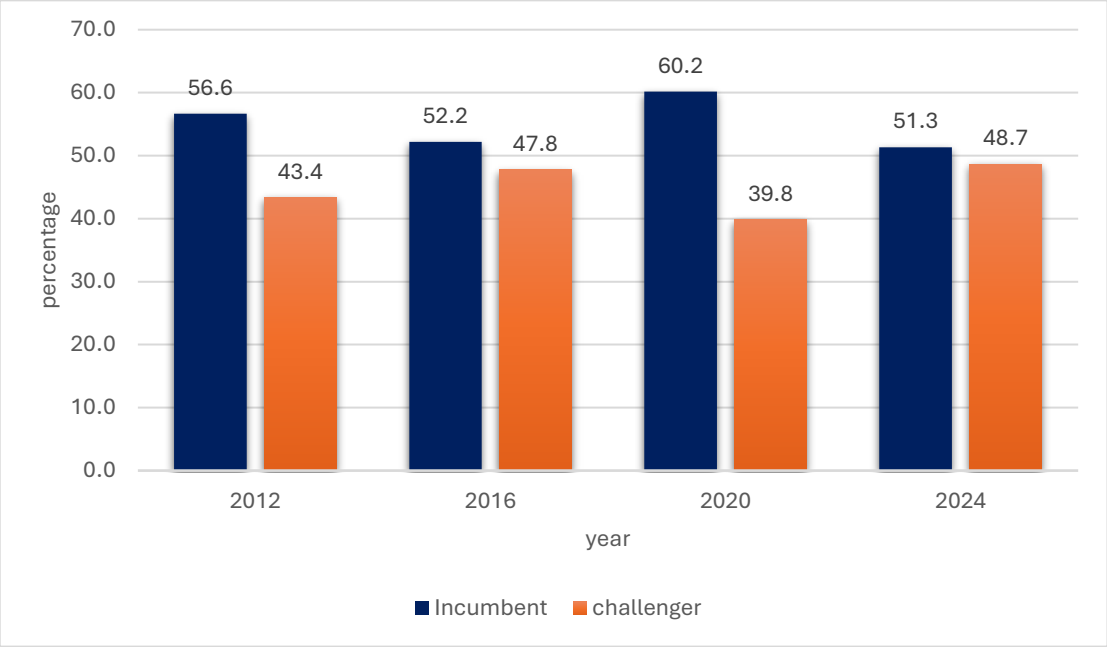
Source: Central Election Commission.

One notable feature of the 11th Legislative Yuan is that 48.7% of its members are first-time legislators—the highest proportion of successful challengers in Taiwan's legislative history. Among all legislators, 59.3% have prior experience as local elected representatives, 33.6% come from political families, 22.1% have local family roots, and 24.8% are classified as "political outsiders"—those without experience in elected office or ties to political or local family networks. Focusing specifically on district and indigenous legislators, 70.9% have held local office, 39.2% have political family backgrounds, 25.3% come from established local families, and 8.9% are “political outsiders”. Most of the latter were elected with the backing of local political factions. This outcome is not surprising. For political parties, name recognition is a key factor in candidate selection. Local elected representatives are often chosen to run for national office precisely because of their strong grassroots support base. The second factor is access to resources—particularly in single-member districts—where candidates connected to political families, local clans, or factions tend to hold structural advantages.

> *“If you have resources—whether personal wealth or the ability to mobilize financial or organisational support—it signals that you are well-connected. After all, politics is ultimately about securing two things: votes and money. Your political skill lies in how effectively you obtain one or both. The more capable individuals, once elected, know how to leverage power and institutional channels—often through rent-seeking*

mechanisms—to build political capital for their next campaign. This is a realm far removed from the reach of ordinary people"[18]

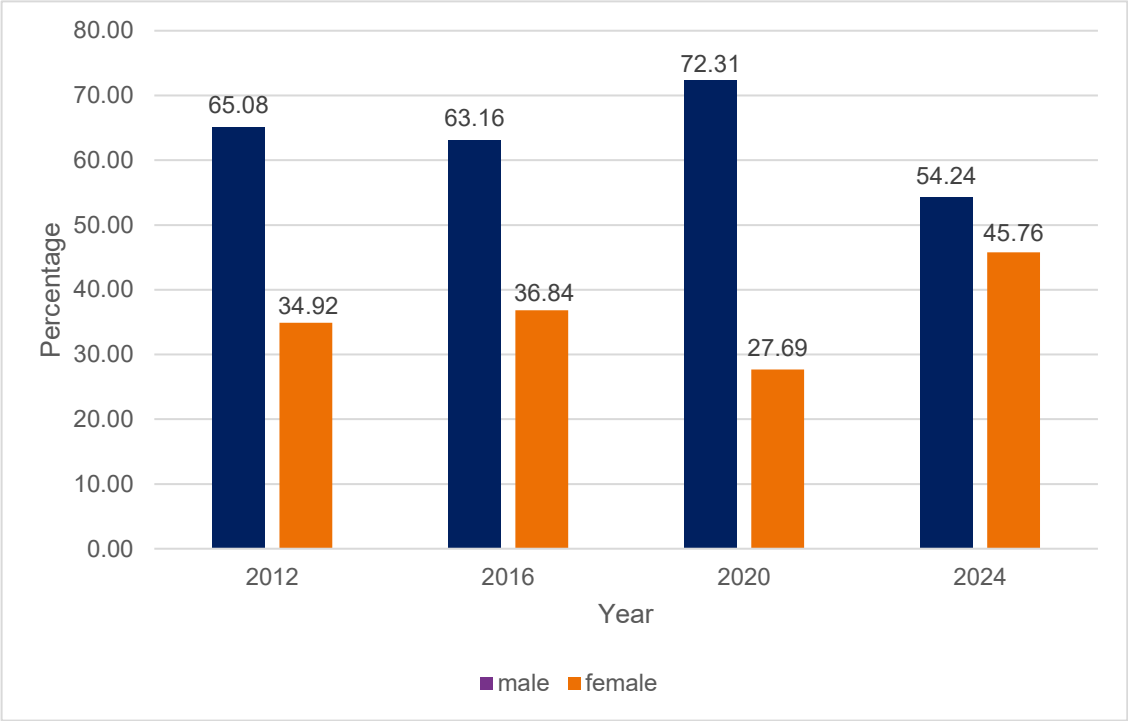
Figure 3. Proportion of Incumbent and Non-Incumbent Candidates in Legislative Elections Over the Years



Source: Central Election Commission.

Among the 113 members of the Legislative Yuan elected in 2024, 41.6% are women—maintaining the same level of female representation as in the 2020 election. Notably, when examining re-election outcomes by gender, 45.76% of women legislators successfully retained their seats in 2024. This marks a significant achievement and reflects a gradual yet meaningful shift toward greater gender equality in Taiwan's political landscape. While Taiwan's nationwide at-large and overseas citizen electoral system includes a gender quota to ensure a minimum level of female representation, the increase in women elected through district seats is especially noteworthy.

Figure 4. Gender Ratio of Past Re-electors



Source: Central Election Commission.

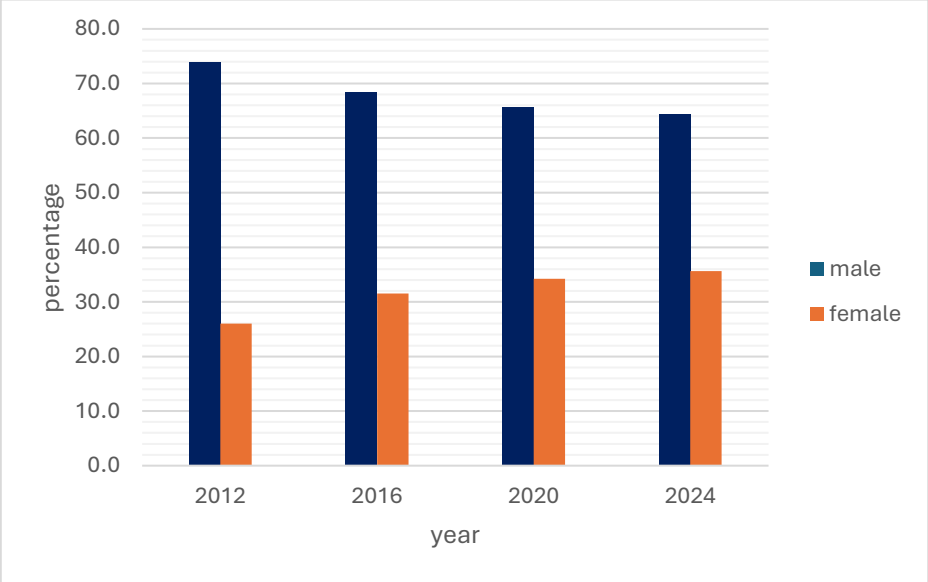
The proportion of female district legislators rose from 26% in 2016 to 35.6% in 2024. This upward trend not only highlights the efforts and performance of female candidates but also signals broader societal changes. In earlier periods, Taiwanese society tended to hold conservative views on gender roles, often expressing scepticism, ridicule, or even hostility toward women in politics. Legal protections against gender-based issues—such as sexual harassment—were also limited or underdeveloped. Today, the landscape has changed considerably. Female leaders now hold prominent positions across all levels of government, from the presidency and local executives to legislators and grassroots representatives such as city councillors and village heads. This growing visibility reflects an increasing level of trust among voters toward female political leaders. In the current electoral environment, when candidates are of similar age or background, being a woman can sometimes be perceived as an advantage. This does not suggest that the political cost is lower for female candidates, but rather that public perceptions often favour women as more principled or trustworthy. For example, voters may associate female politicians with a lower likelihood of being involved in scandals such as extramarital affairs or collusion with business interests. As a result, gender may positively shape a candidate's image, even though it does not guarantee electoral success.

> *"There is a growing recognition of women as independent and autonomous individuals, instead of merely extensions of a family or subordinate to a man. In the long term, I believe this represents a progressive shift in Taiwanese society and has*

a positive impact. We're seeing more and more women in politics—not only does this highlight women's capabilities, but female politicians have been committed to issues related to women, social welfare, children, the elderly, and other vulnerable groups. Their involvement has indeed contributed to significant progress in related policies and budget allocations in Taiwan. I believe that because women are willing to prioritize these issues, their male colleagues are also encouraged to pay more attention to them. In the Legislative Yuan, we can clearly see a positive and supportive attitude toward these matters, with many willing to follow their lead"[19]

While voters may view female candidates as having a positive public image, this perception is often shaped by gendered expectations. In practice, female politicians are held to higher standards than male politicians in general. For instance, female candidates are frequently asked whether they have the support of their family, and married women in particular are often questioned about how they intend to balance political responsibilities with family life. These implicit pressures contribute to a political environment in which female candidates must work harder to gain recognition. They are often more self-motivated, expected to devote more time to constituency services, and to demonstrate higher standards of performance in governance. Such expectations, while sometimes interpreted as voter confidence, effectively increase the burden placed on women in politics. Although there is a common perception that gender can serve as an electoral advantage, in reality, gender alone does not determine the outcome of legislative elections. In the 2024 Legislative election, for example, it is evident that in constituencies where the two major parties nominated candidates of different genders, female candidates did not always prevail. Electoral outcomes were more closely tied to district-level dynamics and the overall strength of the party's brand in that constituency.

Figure 5. Proportion of Male and Female District Candidates in Legislative Elections Over the Years



Source: Central Election Commission.

In addition, the 2024 indigenous legislator election also merits close attention—particularly in

terms of campaign strategies and party nominations. Taiwan's two major political parties held a clear advantage in these races, with KMT winning three seats and the DPP winning two. Legislator Kao Chin Su-mei, an independent, was supported by KMT through strategic concession. In fact, these results are closely tied to party strategies and resource allocation. In both Highland and Lowland indigenous constituencies, major parties fielded spoiler candidates to split the vote against strong contenders. For example, in response to a strong candidate from Party A who was born in Renai Township, Nantou County, Party B also nominated a candidate from the same township, in an attempt to divide the opponent's vote base. In addition to nomination strategies, party affiliation also plays a significant role in indigenous elections. In this election, a young indigenous candidate emerged with a powerful campaign message: “I belong to no party or faction—only to the indigenous peoples, and I will always speak up for our people!”[20]. This independent candidate garnered strong support from many indigenous youth. Unfortunately, compared to candidates nominated by the two major parties, he faced considerable disadvantages due to a combination of personal factors—being an independent, a first-time candidate, and a young politician—which severely limited his access to campaign resources.

Drivers of the Cost of Politics

In the 2024 legislative election, the total political donation expenditures reported by district and indigenous legislative candidates amounted to TWD 2 billion (approximately USD 63.4 million). To contextualize this figure, the average monthly salary in Taiwan in 2023—excluding foreign nationals and part-time workers—was approximately TWD 48 thousand (USD 1.5 thousand). Including a 1.5-month year-end bonus, the average annual salary amounted to TWD 650 thousand (USD 20 thousand). In comparison, under the Behavioural Law of Members of the Legislative Yuan, legislators receive a monthly salary of TWD 190 thousand (USD 6 thousand), resulting in an annual income of approximately TWD 2.6 million (USD 80 thousand) with bonuses. The average amount of political donations spent per candidate in this election was TWD 8.9 million (USD 276 thousand)[21]—equivalent to 13.7 years of an average citizen’s salary and 3.5 years of a legislator’s salary. This underscores the considerable financial barriers to entry in legislative elections, making it difficult for ordinary citizens to compete on equal footing.

Moreover, according to Article 12, Paragraph 1 of the Political Donations Act, district and indigenous candidates may receive political donations during a specific fundraising period, which begins ten months prior to the expiration of the current legislative term and ends the day before the next election. To accept donations, candidates must first open a designated campaign account at a financial institution and obtain approval from the Control Yuan. From the date of approval, they are permitted to collect political donations, which must be deposited into the designated account within 15 days of receipt and documented with official donation receipts. After the election, candidates are required to submit a detailed accounting report to the Control Yuan within three months[22]. These reports are self-declared by candidates and subject to review by the Control Yuan, which has the authority to audit and investigate cases of suspected violations. However, the accuracy of these

reports has been questioned in the past. Several cases of underreporting or misreporting—particularly regarding unregistered in-kind donations, excessive cash contributions, or blurred boundaries between personal and campaign-related expenses—have been documented and investigated. Despite the regulatory framework, enforcement remains selective, and there is ongoing public debate about the adequacy of oversight.

It is important to note that political donation reports focus on individual candidates rather than political parties, although parties are subject to separate reporting requirements under different provisions. These candidate-level reports only cover the 10-month formal fundraising period, leaving out many of the informal or early-stage expenditures that occur throughout the broader electoral cycle. For this reason, this study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the full range of election-related costs incurred by legislative candidates—not only during the official campaign period, but also throughout earlier phases such as the party nomination process, as well as post-election expenses. In particular, campaign costs are analysed in terms of both tangible (e.g., staff salaries, promotional materials, event logistics) and intangible (e.g., volunteer labour, social capital, emotional labour) dimensions, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the financial and non-financial burdens candidates face.

Candidate Recognition

During the party nomination stage, there is a clear distinction between the practices of smaller parties and those of major parties. In smaller parties, consensus is often reached during the party's electoral strategy committee stage through internal coordination. Major parties typically have more members interested in running for district legislative seats. Before a candidate is officially confirmed, they may withdraw following internal coordination or voluntarily step aside due to personal considerations, intervention by party leadership, or pressure from political factions. If prospective candidates fail to reach a consensus, the party may resort to public opinion polling, with the nomination granted to the candidate with higher levels of support. In other words, not every potential candidate necessarily goes through a formal primary process. Both major parties—the KMT and the DPP—have clearly defined internal regulations governing public opinion polls for nominating candidates for public office. In general, the central party leadership adopts an open approach to the nomination process. However, for prospective candidates, entering the primary polling stage effectively means entering campaign mode early.

The primary polling period typically lasts about a month. Since nominations are based on the level of support in public opinion polls, name recognition becomes the key factor in winning the primary. Expenses for promotional materials such as billboards, campaign videos, Facebook posts, and media coverage are essential. Candidates also hold press conferences, canvassing traditional markets, and organise campaign rallies—all aimed at increasing their visibility within a limited time frame. Campaign spending on publicity varies depending on the candidate’s promotional strategy. For example, compared to having an incumbent legislator’s assistant write frequent Facebook posts and personally reach out to familiar journalists to help distribute press releases, hiring a professional marketing or advertising firm is undoubtedly a more costly approach. Another practice is for

candidates to commission private opinion polls to gauge the gap in public support between themselves and other contenders from the same party. Based on the results, a candidate may choose to withdraw from the primary race or adjust their campaign strategy accordingly. Therefore, opinion polling represents a necessary expense during the primary stage. Polls can be quite costly—if conducted solely for the primaries, a single survey typically ranges from TWD 200 thousand to 600 thousand (approximately USD 6.2 thousand to 18.6 thousand). Unless the polls are conducted on a continuous basis, there is usually limited room for price negotiation with polling firms.

> *"One reason primary polls tend to be more expensive is that they include fewer questions. The more questions you include in a poll, the more likely polling companies are to offer discounted rates. I recall that during the later stages of general elections, some legislators would discreetly add extra questions into commissioned polls. For example, if they needed data on specific individuals or public reactions to certain events, they would slip those questions into the survey. Primary polls tend to be more expensive because they typically consist of just one question. From the polling company's perspective, the operational effort required to launch the poll remains the same, which drives up the cost per survey"*[23]

The primary stage is essentially an internal party contest, but candidates still campaign vigorously to secure the party's nomination for the district seat. Beyond the single-member district system as a contributing factor, if a given district is considered a party stronghold, winning the primary can effectively determine the outcome of the general election[24]. As a result, once a candidate enters the primary, they tend to approach it with the mindset of running in a full-scale legislative election. Those who make it through the primary and secure the party's official nomination often find the general election phase relatively less intense by comparison. Although the nomination stage is relatively short, the election costs that candidates incur are by no means lower than those of the general campaign period. In some cases, they may even be higher, as candidates must rapidly build name recognition within a limited timeframe while simultaneously exerting pressure on their internal rivals.

> *"During the primary, the legislator had already begun investing campaign resources. Even if it was just for show, it still had to look real—only then could he make his opponent feel that continuing the race might not be worth the cost. That's why his campaign banners were already going up early on. He was somewhat upset because he had to activate his resources earlier than expected. Had he not been pulled into the primary polling process, he likely wouldn't have needed to spend those three weeks' worth of resources. But because he faced a challenger in the primary stage, he had no choice but to act—even if it was just a strategic feint, he still had to make a move"*[25]

As mentioned earlier, name recognition is a crucial factor when political parties decide whom to nominate for legislative races. In most cases, those seeking to run for a legislative seat are either

incumbent legislators or sitting city councillors. City or county councillors typically enjoy a certain level of name recognition, an established voter base, and prior political experience. Another scenario involves candidates without prior experience as councillors who went ahead and successfully ran for a legislative seat. These candidates are often members of political families or come from prominent local clans. Such outcomes do not necessarily suggest that Taiwanese voters favour second-generation politicians or local families. Rather, they reflect the fact that political dynasties and local families have long invested substantial—often immeasurable—resources in their constituencies over time. If political parties are viewed as rational actors, then nominating a candidate with a political family or local clan background who inherently possesses strong electoral capital is a favourable and advantageous trade-off for the party. In addition, there are cases where candidates without councillor experience or a political family background are nominated. These individuals often have unique profiles. However, they are rarely nominated in stronghold districts. As a result, this gives rise to situations where political parties "recruit" candidates to run in certain constituencies.

Moreover, compared to smaller parties, political factions play a much more active role within major parties, particularly during the nomination phase. In other words, factions often intervene directly in the primaries, shaping the final list of party-nominated candidates. Their influence is not limited to legislative primaries; it is also clearly evident in the selection of candidates for city and county councils, as well as in presidential primaries.

> *"During the primary campaign, it was a full-scale election effort—extremely serious and competitive. Although the gap in support seemed significant, the opponent came from a political family, so in reality, the legislator's primary rival was quite strong—not a weak challenger. He was backed by a faction and was certainly not a political newcomer. In the end, the outcome was settled through internal factional negotiations, as they had larger strategic goals in mind"*[26]

The Campaign Period

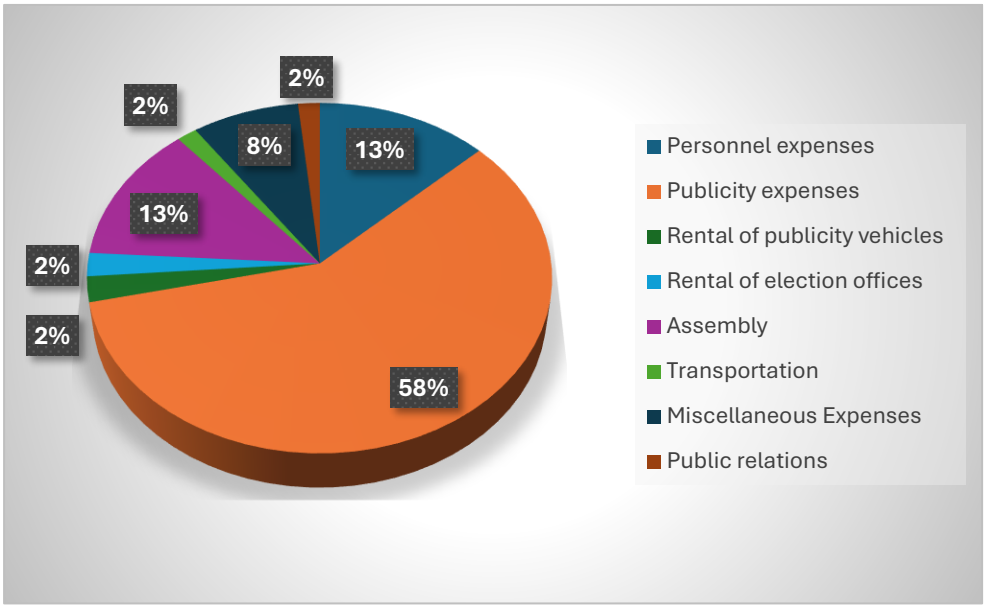
Regardless of party size, all political parties in Taiwan have clear and transparent nomination procedures, such as the Regulations on the Nomination of Candidates for Public Office and its Enforcement Rules. For each election cycle, parties establish strategic election committees to kick-start pre-election preparations, among which candidate nomination is a key component. In the case of the 2024 legislative election, the DPP passed a resolution during its Central Executive Committee meeting on March 8, 2023, to form a nomination strategy task force for the 2024 elections, balancing the interests of various factions. Similarly, the KMT launched its nomination process for both legislative and presidential races in late March, establishing a Central Nomination Committee specifically for the 2024 legislative election. Members of the KMT's committee included the party chairperson, three vice chairpersons, the secretary-general, the Legislative Yuan caucus leader, and mayors or county magistrates from KMT-led local governments[27][28]. The timing of a party's decision to form its internal strategic election committee is itself a cautious consideration. Announcing it too late may affect individual candidates' campaign strategies. In effect, the formation of such committee often marks the formal start of the election campaign.

In reality, not all candidates enter the election phase at the same time. From the perspective of political talent development, it makes sense for local-level elected representatives to challenge national-level offices. As such, following the conclusion of local elections, potential contenders for legislative office begin preparing their campaigns. For instance, after the local elections held on November 26, 2022, some local city and county councillors immediately began laying the groundwork for the legislative election scheduled for January 13, 2024—giving them a preparation window of approximately 13.6 months. In some cases, to avoid criticism for "running for higher office while still in position," certain local councillors choose to strategically forgo local representative election[29]. It is reasonable to assume that this type of challenger often has a preparation period even longer than 13.6 months, as they must make a decision—whether or not to run for the local councillor seat. In contrast, candidates who are "recruited" by their parties typically have much shorter preparation periods—sometimes only eight months, three months, or as little as 70 days. As a result, the campaign expenditures of legislative candidates can vary significantly. Conservative estimates place total campaign costs between TWD 10 million and 30 million (approximately USD 310 thousand to 930 thousand). Many candidates, depending on their campaign strategies and district-specific structures, also incurred costs that exceeded this range. These electoral costs can be further categorized into two types: tangible costs and intangible costs.

Tangible Costs

When discussing tangible costs, monetary expenditures are often the first to come to mind. In the 2024 legislative election, district and indigenous legislative candidates collectively reported a total of TWD 2 billion (approximately USD 63.4 million) in political donations. The majority of these funds—58%—were spent on campaign advertising, followed by personnel costs (13%) and event-related expenses (13%). Miscellaneous expenses accounted for 8%, while expenditures on campaign vehicles, office rentals, transportation, and public relations made up only a small portion of total spending[30].

Figure 6. Political Donation Expenditures of 2024 Legislative Election Candidates – District and Indigenous Candidates



Source: Political Donations Public Disclosure Platform, Control Yuan.

> *"To the public, campaign billboards are seen as essential. Voters expect to see candidates' billboards prominently displayed; otherwise, they may perceive the candidate as not serious or merely putting on a show—and may even withdraw their support entirely. A lack of visible signage can be interpreted as a lack of commitment to the race, making billboards an indispensable part of any campaign"*[31]

Campaign publicity typically falls into two categories: traditional media and new media. People immediately associate traditional media with campaign billboards, printed flyers, and promotional giveaways. Billboards, in particular, serve two important functions. First, they help introduce the candidate to voters. In many cases, the geographic coverage of constituencies varies significantly. Even if a candidate actively participates in local events, size big or small, they may still struggle to make themselves known to voters. Given the time and transportation constraints, billboards become a preferred way to boost visibility—especially in urban constituencies, where candidates have fewer opportunities for direct interaction with voters through chatting, handshakes, or joint activities. In such settings, billboards play a crucial role in leaving an impression. Second, billboards can be used to apply pressure on opponents or to attack them directly. For example, in the later stages of a campaign, if a candidate realizes that the polling gap is too wide to overcome, they may still choose to put up billboards—not with their own image, but with aggressive messaging or graphics that aim to discredit or mock their opponent.

The cost of campaign billboards depends on factors such as their location, quantity, the characteristics of the electoral district, and the candidate's overall campaign strategy. In the same district, the monthly rental cost for a single billboard can range from approximately TWD 3 thousand to 100 thousand (USD 100 to 3.1 thousand), with higher costs associated with areas closer to city

centres or with higher foot traffic. Some candidates adopt a "billboard saturation" strategy to strengthen name recognition and exert pressure on their opponents. Others determine the budget and placement of billboards based on campaign strategies and allocation of resources. Deciding whether to feature a solo photo of the legislative candidate or a joint photo with the presidential candidate on campaign billboards is very much an art in itself. If the presidential candidate enjoys strong support in the legislative candidate's district, using a joint photo can be advantageous. Conversely, if the presidential candidate's support is relatively weak in that area, it is generally wiser to feature only the legislative candidate's photo. It is worth noting that while campaign billboards are an indispensable part of Taiwan's election culture, certain constituencies—due to natural environment or climate conditions—are less suited for billboard campaigning. As a result, aside from a few key locations, these districts tend to see fewer billboards overall, and the vibrant scenes of a "billboard sea" are relatively rare.

Secondly, printed campaign materials generally fall into two categories. The first involves distributing flyers directly to households within the constituency, either through a newspaper delivery system or by campaign volunteers. This method often incurs additional personnel costs such as hiring temporary workers or organising volunteers. While the printing cost of these materials is relatively low compared to other campaign expenses, the associated labour costs can add up. In some cases, campaign teams must even hire additional staff to monitor the distribution process—ensuring that flyers are actually delivered to the intended mailboxes in certain communities and not discarded on the street or in trash bins, and verifying that the correct number of materials has been distributed. The second method is to insert campaign flyers as inserts in newspapers. Compared to other areas, traditional constituencies tend to rely more heavily on this type of campaign tactic. The cost difference lies in whether the material is placed as a formal advertisement within the local section of the newspaper or simply included as an unbound insert.

> *"A half-page newspaper ad, scheduled to appear in the local section, typically costs around TWD 200 thousand (approximately USD 6.2 thousand) per placement — particularly when it involves one of the three major newspapers. Due to media's political leanings, there's only one viable newspaper option, Therefore, this makes ad space in its local section extremely valuable for a candidate's event or statement can appear there. When I first heard the going rate, I thought it was outrageous—but apparently, that really is the market price for candidates"*[32]

In addition to staples like tissue packs and campaign flags, candidates also need to develop creative promotional giveaways to catch voters' attention or items that combine practicality with strong promotional value, such as mouse pads, cleaning cloths, toothpaste, or mini soap bars. Television and radio also fall under traditional campaign model, which is why it's common to see candidates appear on political talk shows or radio programmes during the election period. Another low-cost yet effective way to gain publicity is by creating conflict or controversy with rival candidates to attract media attention and increase one's own visibility. Take traditional market canvassing as an example—a staple in any candidate's campaign schedule. Generally, there is a tacit understanding among candidates to avoid appearing at the same market at the same time. However, some

candidates deliberately go against this unspoken rule by showing up at the market during their opponent's scheduled canvassing, choosing a "direct confrontation" approach to build momentum for his base and boost their own visibility.

New media campaign tactics primarily focus on digital platforms and social media, such as Facebook and Line. These tactics include selecting which platforms to target, determining optimal ad timing, crafting the style and tone of promotional content, and planning next steps. Given the maturity of the internet and the speed at which information circulates, candidates also recognise the importance of new media campaigning. This is especially true in urban constituencies. Some candidates choose to fully outsource their digital media campaigns to professional public relations firms. A one off package typically costs around TWD 4.5 million (approximately USD 139.5 thousand), covering services such as online advertising and big data-driven sentiment analysis. For individual services—such as designing campaign graphics—the cost is roughly TWD 300 thousand (about USD 9.3 thousand). Alternatively, a more cost-saving approach involves leveraging the support of current legislative assistants to manage new media promotional efforts. This can include writing social media posts, editing videos, and coordinating with vendors.

During the campaign period, personnel costs are an essential expenditure. However, according to political donation income and expenditure reports, total personnel costs amounted to TWD 260 million (approximately USD 8 million), accounting for around 13% of total campaign spending[33]. Take district legislative candidates for example, the average spending on personnel was TWD 1.1 million (about USD 35 thousand) per candidate. However, this is considered a relatively conservative figure for two main reasons. First is the advantage of incumbency. If a legislative candidate is already serving as a legislator or city councillor, their existing staff naturally transitions into campaign roles, becoming part of the candidate's electoral resources. Second, aside from the core campaign team, many of the supporting staff are either temporary workers or volunteers, whose involvement is often compensated with boxed meals or refreshments. Take campaign vehicle drivers as an example: some candidates hire short-term drivers and pay them a fixed salary, which is then counted under personnel costs. Others rely on legislative assistants or temporary workers, using office vehicles for campaign outreach. In cases where private vehicles are used, fuel reimbursements are often provided as a form of compensation.

> *"For incumbent legislators, campaigns are often built around their existing office operations. Under Taiwan's public funding system, legislators receive TWD 420 thousand (approximately USD 13 thousand) per month for staffing expenses. Now imagine that amount multiplied over six months. Basically, during the election period, these staff members typically shift their focus almost entirely to campaign-related work. This is how it works. This, too, counts as a form of personnel cost. On the bright side, however, a portion of this cost is subsidized by public funding"*[34]

In earlier stages of Taiwan's electoral history, campaign vehicles were a common and prominent means of promotion. In recent years, however, growing public awareness of environmental issues has led to increased voter resistance to this method—especially in urban constituencies.

Nonetheless, candidates continue to use campaign vehicles, both to reinforce name recognition and to promote upcoming rallies or events. Spending on rallies also depends on a candidate's campaign strategy. Standard mobilization activities include campaign headquarters openings, joint rallies with other candidates, and the high-energy "Election Eve Rallies." The latter two are particularly significant, as they are often attended by the party's presidential candidate, effective in boosting exposure for the legislative candidates. In addition, some candidates organise family-friendly activities or public talks in their constituencies in an effort to engage with as many voters as possible. For example, a family-oriented event with an estimated attendance of 1,000 to 2,000 people—including stage setup, sound equipment, etc.—typically costs around TWD 500 thousand (approximately USD 15.5 thousand). For larger-scale campaign rallies with crowds ranging from 10 to 20 thousand attendees, the cost can range from TWD 2 million to 3 million (roughly USD 62 thousand to 93 thousand).

It is worth noting that since the consolidation of Taiwan's presidential and legislative elections in 2012, this practice has become customary and has gradually given rise to a campaign culture commonly referred to as the "mother hen leading the chicks" strategy, aimed at generating a coattail effect. When presidential or vice-presidential candidates have strong personal image and charisma, their presence on the campaign trail can significantly boost the prospects of legislative candidates. In fact, legislative candidates will sometimes proactively inquire about the campaign schedules where the presidential or vice-presidential candidates will be stumping for others. In order to increase their own visibility. Legislative candidates make every effort to attend any event featuring the presidential or vice-presidential candidate. Conversely, in districts where the party enjoys strong support, the dynamic can reverse—resulting in a “chicks leading the mother hen” effect, where popular local legislative candidates help boost the momentum and visibility of the presidential or vice-presidential campaign[35].

> *“There were two very different levels of mobilization at our campaign rallies—those with the presidential candidate and those without. For instance, when the vice-presidential candidate came to our district, it didn't generate much buzz. In contrast, even though the presidential candidate only visited a few times, each visit came with full presidential-level staging and fanfare. That kind of presence created a powerful atmosphere and publicity buzz—something we just couldn't replicate when it was only us, the legislative candidate, or even with the vice-presidential candidate or other legislators showing up to lend their support”*[36]

Intangible Costs

Intangible costs can be broadly categorized into five key areas: time investment, campaign team, party affiliation, social networks, and mental health. Time cost refers to the hours devoted by the candidate, their campaign team, and related personnel throughout the election period. To ensure the candidate's campaign schedule proceeds as planned, advance coordination and planning by campaign staff is essential. For example, during joint campaign events, staff must carefully plan seating arrangements and event flow for local officials, legislative candidates, and city or county councillors. In addition, campaign teams and personal aides must constantly navigate logistical

challenges—figuring out how to help the legislative candidate overcome transportation issues, maximize personal visibility, and simultaneously apply pressure on opponents. All of these put their crisis management skills to the test. Time cost also includes the personal time candidates spend with their families. In some cases, family members themselves must devote time to supporting the campaign—whether by participating in street canvassing, appearing in promotional videos, or attending campaign rallies.

A candidate's daily campaign schedule can vary significantly depending on the demarcation of the electoral district. In relatively compact constituencies, a legislative candidate may have over a dozen stops and attend 20 or more events in a single day. In contrast, in larger districts, a candidate may only be able to manage around five events per day. At times, voters want to see the candidate in person—this is especially true in more traditional constituencies, where direct interaction and face-to-face engagement between the candidate and voters are highly valued. In traditional constituencies, personally visiting voters, attending neighbourhood events, and maintaining regular interactions with constituents are all considered essential parts of campaigning. In addition, if the candidate is an incumbent legislator whose constituency is located outside of Taipei City—where the Legislative Yuan is based—they must also factor in the time cost of commuting. Taiwan's parliamentary elections are held before the end of the legislative term, meaning that incumbent candidates often juggle both legislative duties and campaign activities simultaneously. In such cases, some candidates may need to travel back and forth between their constituencies and the Legislative Yuan multiple times in one single day.

The second type of intangible cost involves the candidate's campaign team, particularly the staff of incumbent legislators. As previously mentioned, once the campaign period starts, the assistants of incumbent candidates often wear two hats—serving both as parliamentary assistants and as members of the campaign team. Today's legislative assistants are expected to be a jack of all trades, mastering a wide range of skills—from drafting bills and interpellation scripts, reviewing budget proposals, editing videos, to organising events, writing campaign proposals, and demonstrating coordination and communication abilities. In preparation for the legislative election, assistants not only face a heavier workload and higher expectations for efficiency, but are also required to actively support rallies in the constituency, including accompanying the candidate to high-traffic intersections to greet voters, organising family friendly events or public forums, and leading volunteers in distributing campaign materials on the streets.

> *"As the election draws closer, the boss—the legislative candidate—often becomes extremely anxious, constantly asking us, the legislative assistants, "When will that draft be ready? "For example, after an event, we might be given just 30 minutes to produce a press release. I spent maybe five minutes drafting it for him, and then spent the next 25 minutes making nonstop revisions. By the end, the candidate was so anxious that he obsessed over every single word—even down to individual commas. He also cared deeply about the timing of video release. These were all things he paid extremely close attention to. The biggest challenge was the time spent coordinating with volunteers or contractors. Sometimes, what the volunteers, staff, or vendors produced—or even what you asked for—didn't align with what the boss*

had envisioned. When that happened, he would insist that you go back and communicate with them to make adjustments... The constant back-and-forth communication significantly increased the workload"[37]

By contrast, for candidates who are neither incumbent legislators nor sitting city councillors, it is typically a less experienced team that must take on tasks such as forming a campaign team, setting overall strategy, and coordinating events and personnel. The team often requires significantly more time and energy to adapt. In fact, if the candidate has very limited resources, their assistant may need to take on multiple roles—writing press releases or interpellation scripts, while also serving as a personal aide, accompanying the candidate to events or driving them to campaign activities.

"Back then, I'd write (press releases or scripts) in the morning, then head out to attend a luncheon. Sometimes I barely got any writing done before having to go to a memorial service. Then it was the luncheon, back to writing in the afternoon, and another banquet in the evening. But when you're on the road campaigning, it requires no mental effort—you just hand out pocket tissues and enjoy the moment"[38]

In addition, party affiliation represents a significant intangible cost. A party's established policy positions, core values, and long-standing voter loyalty can be both a blessing and a burden for candidates. If a candidate is running in a party's stronghold, receiving the party's nomination places them at a clear advantage from the outset. Such candidates often have more room to focus on communicating their vision for local development. In other words, when a candidate already enjoys a certain level of name recognition, and that is further reinforced by a party label—be it through the party's policy stance, core values, or campaign slogans—it gives the candidate an even greater boost. Conversely, if a candidate from Party A is running in a district where Party B holds stronger voter support, the candidate may need to downplay their party affiliation and instead emphasize their personal political beliefs and issue-based positions. Party branding also has varying degrees of influence depending on the electoral system. In local council elections, which use multi-member district voting, party affiliation certainly matters, but a candidate's image and policy views often play an even greater role. Therefore, in local representative elections, participation is not limited to the two major parties. Smaller parties and independent candidates generally have a comparatively greater chance of being elected. By contrast, in legislative elections, political parties play a more critical role. It's no exaggeration to say that without party backing, it is extremely difficult for a candidate to win.

The fourth type of intangible cost is social networks, which are closely tied to political parties, local family clans, and intra-party factions. Party support for a candidate goes beyond just political donations or sharing the cost of joint campaign events—it often includes connecting the candidate to businesses that may be willing to support their campaign. Most importantly, parties provide access to their broader organisational network. The organisational network refers to the interpersonal systems that a political party has cultivated over time within a local constituency. These networks are often deeply intertwined with other structures—such as temple associations, which collectively form stronghold districts. Take family-based politics as an example: local mayors, district legislators, and

city or county councillors operate in a tightly coordinated fashion—supporting the legislative candidate during legislative elections and backing the councillor during local elections. Compared to candidates who are not part of a political family, those with family-based political backgrounds save a significant amount of time when it comes to building connections and securing campaign resources. The impact of this interpersonal network system becomes especially evident during election season. For smaller parties, their organisational networks are generally not as well-established as those of the major parties. As a result, even if polling numbers appear promising, there is often a significant gap between their polling performance and actual election outcomes. In other words, while smaller parties may generate significant buzz and visibility through new media channels, that online presence doesn't always translate into actual votes when the ballots are counted.

In addition, political factions also operate their own interpersonal networks. Candidates who receive support from a faction can save considerable time securing campaign resources. Factional support for candidates often depends on how the faction operates. Some factions offer support by connecting candidates with useful contacts or resources, while others help share campaign costs—such as sponsoring opinion polls or providing access to livestream studios for their endorsed candidates. In fact, when it comes to interpersonal network systems, political parties and factions operate differently. While the interpersonal networks provided by political parties are rooted in formal political structures—such as those involving public officeholders like the president, legislators, local mayors, city and county councillors, village chiefs, local party chapters, and constituency service offices, factional networks, by contrast, are built around local figures who hold social prestige and community authority. For district or indigenous legislative candidates, the most critical elements of campaign rallies are crowd turnout and momentum. When figures from the party network—such as the presidential candidate, local mayors or magistrates, and fellow party legislative candidates—lend their support, it significantly boosts the candidate's visibility. Meanwhile, when factions mobilize voters to attend campaign events, it helps amplify the candidate's campaign momentum.

> *"I believe that support from factions or influential local figures plays a crucial role. Elections are often about generating momentum—and how does that momentum take shape? Sometimes, it requires a group of influential individuals to come together and signal to voters: these are the local leaders, the respected figures in the community, and they are all backing this particular candidate. This kind of social capital can significantly shape public opinion, and influence key opinion leaders within certain groups. In my view, this is a critical campaign cost"*[39]

The final form of intangible cost in election campaigns—often overlooked but deeply consequential—is the impact on a candidate's mental health. Regardless of whether the candidate is a newcomer or an experienced legislator, the campaign period demands long working hours, constant public exposure, and participation in exhausting array of activities, including campaign rallies, community events, weddings, funerals, and fundraising functions. The cumulative effects of sleep deprivation, physical fatigue, and social obligations can take a significant toll on both mental and physical well-being. In addition to the intense schedule, candidates must manage various emotional stressors, such as negative campaigning, unfavourable polling results, and personal

attacks. Media outlets and internet users may also scrutinize candidates' private lives, bringing unexpected attention to their families and personal affairs. These pressures are especially severe for first-time candidates who lack established networks, political experience, or sufficient resources. For them, the journey toward electoral success is not only a financial and logistical struggle, but also an emotionally taxing experience marked by uncertainty, public judgment, and psychological strain.

Budgeting for the Aftermath

After being elected, both district and indigenous legislators typically establish constituency offices to support ongoing engagement and service delivery within their districts. Each legislator is also provided with a parliamentary office in the Legislative Yuan. According to Article 32, Paragraph 2 of the Organic Law of the Legislative Yuan, legislators are entitled to a range of monthly subsidies to support their official duties. These include TWD 12 thousand (USD 372) for mobile and automated telephone services, TWD 15 thousand (USD 465) for stationery and postage, TWD 20 thousand (USD 620) as a rental subsidy, and TWD 14.7 thousand (USD 454.83) for other office-related expenses. To ensure comprehensive voter access, multiple offices may be set up across the constituency. However, in the case of indigenous legislators—whose constituencies span vast geographical areas—they usually maintain just two main offices: one in the Legislative Yuan and one in the constituency. The primary expenses associated with maintaining a presence in the district include setting up an office—covering rent, equipment, utilities such as water and electricity, and staffing costs. In some cases, constituents may offer space at reduced rent or even free of charge. Legislators may also partner with local councillors to establish joint service centres or use second-hand furniture and appliances to reduce costs.

As for personnel, according to Article 32, Paragraph 1 of the Organic Law of the Legislative Yuan, each legislator—whether district, indigenous, or at-large—may hire between 8 and 14 publicly funded assistants. Given the need for district and indigenous legislators to maintain close ties with their constituencies, it is typical for 4 to 6 staff members to remain based in the Legislative Yuan, with the remaining assistants assigned to the constituency office, working alongside volunteers to serve local constituents. In addition to staffing, legislators incur other routine expenses related to publicity and travel. Although the intensity of publicity efforts typically decreases after the election period, it does not cease entirely. Some legislators continue to purchase online advertisements—particularly on platforms such as Facebook—to maintain public visibility, while others limit such activities to campaign seasons. Furthermore, participation in community events, such as weddings and funerals, also constitutes a vital aspect of constituency service. In Taiwan, it is customary to offer cash gifts as a gesture of congratulations at weddings and as condolences at funerals—acts that are both culturally meaningful and politically symbolic. For indigenous legislators, community engagement extends further to include attendance at and contributions to traditional celebrations such as the Harvest Festival, which serves as another essential form of voter outreach and service.

Another major cost that newly elected legislators must face is the fundraising quota. Each political party has its own expectations, but for most legislators, the annual fundraising target ranges from TWD 250 thousand to 300 thousand (approximately USD 7.75 thousand to 9.3 thousand). In

some parties, these quotas apply only to at-large legislators, whose annual fundraising responsibilities can range from TWD 720 thousand to 1.2 million (approximately USD 22.32 thousand to 37.2 thousand). In fact, at-large legislators are sometimes assigned to "adopt a constituency." This so-called adoption system refers to the party headquarters designating or encouraging at-large legislators to establish constituency service offices in districts where the party faces electoral disadvantages. Therefore, to some extent, at-large legislators also have the need to establish constituency service offices in local districts—not only to serve voters who support their party, but also to expand and build new connections.

Recent political developments in Taiwan further illustrate how rising public dissatisfaction can intensify electoral mobilization. The recall movement, sparked by controversy over certain legislative bills and coinciding with the 2025 general budget deliberations, has significantly increased the political cost for some legislators. A surge of recall initiatives was launched in early 2025. According to the Public Officials Recall Act These legislators must now devote additional time and resources to defending their positions, adding further financial and administrative burdens. Notably, at-large legislators remain exempt from recall procedures under current legislation. This has raised questions about the fairness and logic of excluding non-district representatives from both recall and by-election mechanisms—a point increasingly debated in Taiwan's evolving democratic landscape.

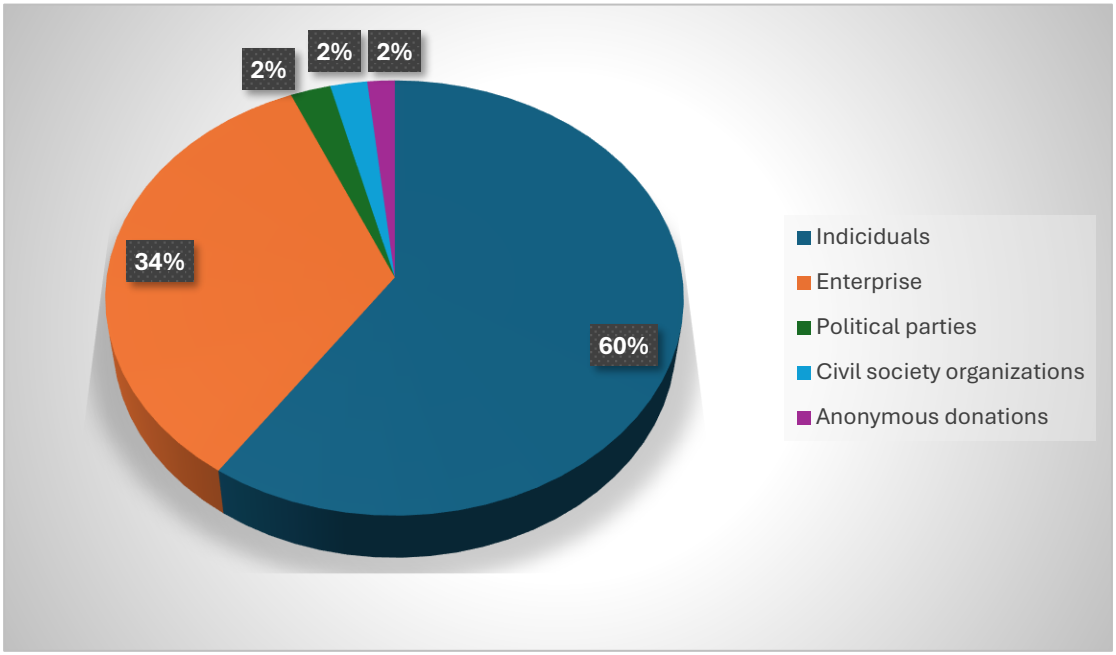
Sources of Funds

Although party subsidies accounted for only a small portion of total political donations—approximately 2% in the 2024 legislative election—the influence of party affiliation extends far beyond direct financial contributions. Candidates affiliated with major parties, political families, or influential factions benefit from a range of tangible and intangible advantages, particularly in single-member district races where local presence and visibility are crucial. Those from political families often inherit well-established campaign infrastructures, including experienced teams, strong relationships with township mayors and local leaders, and deep-rooted ties with constituents. Their institutional knowledge and name recognition enable them to operate more efficiently. For example, they are more likely to secure high-visibility billboard placements at reduced costs or free of charge—an advantage that enhances their competitiveness in vote-dense districts. In contrast, candidates from smaller parties or without entrenched networks face considerable disadvantages. They often lack support from local political figures, have limited access to reliable fundraising channels, and must navigate complex campaign finance systems with fewer institutional resources.

In contrast to the strong influence of social capital, demographic characteristics such as gender and age appear to have a limited impact on political fundraising outcomes. Data from the 2024 legislative election indicate no significant difference in the amount of donations received by male and female candidates, nor any consistent pattern linking fundraising outcomes to a candidate's age. These findings suggest that structural and institutional dynamics, rather than individual attributes, play a more decisive role in shaping access to campaign resources. According to data from the Political Donation Platform administered by the Control Yuan, individual donors made up the largest

share of contributions (60%), followed by corporate or for-profit entities (34%), while political parties, civic organisations, and anonymous sources contributed only a small portion. In this context, a candidate's ability to mobilize personal networks and navigate institutional channels remains a key determinant of campaign viability—one that continues to reinforce existing political hierarchies and presents significant challenges for newcomers and independents.

Figure 7. Political Donation Income of 2024 Legislative Election Candidates – District and Indigenous Constituencies



Source: Political Donations Public Disclosure Platform, Control Yuan.

Although political donations from parties accounted for only 2% of the total funding, in practice, party support for district and indigenous legislative candidates takes both tangible and intangible forms. In terms of financial support, there are generally two approaches. One is the "equal share for all" model, in which the party headquarters allocates a set budget to each candidate running in district or indigenous constituencies under the party's banner. If a candidate also holds a party position, the amount of political contributions received from party subsidies may differ accordingly. The other approach is the "priority-based support for weaker districts" model, in which the party allocates political contributions primarily as seed funding for candidates in difficult constituencies, followed by highly competitive districts where pre-election polling shows a neck-and-neck race[40]. In addition, parties often provide non-monetary support. This includes organising large-scale regional rallies, inviting all party-affiliated candidates from the area to participate, and covering event costs such as venue rental, stage setup, sound equipment, emcees, guest coordination, and promotional materials. Local party chapters may also assist candidates by coordinating with constituency service offices, covering the cost of opinion polls, or connecting them to key supporters—such as senior party figures or business leaders—who can contribute to their campaigns.

Therefore, while 34% of political donations from corporations or for-profit entities may stem from the interpersonal networks of parties, factions, or candidates, they also reflect the business owners' own considerations—such as political insurance. Although corporate donations do not surpass individual contributions in percentage, they are often made as long-term investments, much like paying an insurance premium. These for-profit enterprises are often large conglomerates, family-run businesses, regulated industries, or domestically based enterprises in Taiwan—many with strong political ties or significant investments in China. Through internal networks such as business

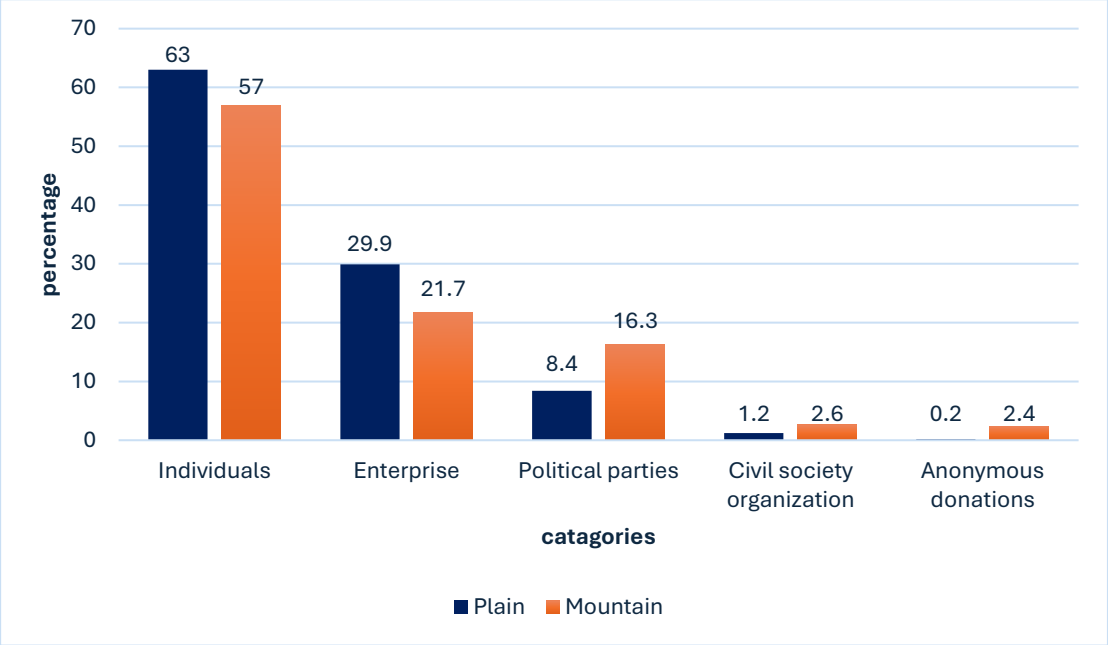
associations, federations, and chambers of commerce, they tend to be more politically engaged and influential in shaping policy. A unique feature of Taiwan's political landscape is the merging of family and corporate networks. As such, what may appear to be an individual company's political donation is often part of a collective action within a network. Moreover, corporate or for-profit entities' political contributions today take many forms. Donations are not always made directly under the parent company or corporate group name—they may come through multiple subsidiaries or even be funnelled through individuals.

On the other hand, there is a clear difference between Highland and Lowland indigenous legislative candidates in terms of the political donations they receive. Lowland indigenous candidates received a total of TWD 19,123,704 (approximately USD 592,834.82), with 63% coming from individual donations, 29.9% from corporations or for-profit entities, 8.4% from political parties, 1.2% from civic organisations, and 0.2% from anonymous donors. Highland indigenous candidates received a total of TWD 17,804,914 (approximately USD 551,952.33), with 57% from individuals, 21.7% from corporations or for-profit entities, 16.3% from political parties, 2.6% from civic groups, and 2.4% from anonymous sources[41]. In general, compared to district legislative candidates, indigenous candidates—unless they possess exceptionally strong personal networks—tend to have relatively weaker fundraising capacity from corporate or for-profit sectors.

> *"Our interpellation topics have always focused on indigenous issues. Of course, I've tried to seek out fundraising opportunities and political donations—but I can feel it clearly: because we are indigenous, they often assume that you won't be able to serve their interests. These companies and corporations, they won't invest in us—even if I were to win, they don't think I'd be able to serve their interests anyway"*[42]

Therefore, political parties play a crucial supporting role for indigenous legislative candidates. Party donations accounted for 8.4% of total contributions for Lowland indigenous candidates and 16.3% for Highland indigenous candidates—both figures significantly higher than those for district legislative candidates. Intangible assets such as party affiliation and organisational networks are equally important for indigenous candidates. As previously mentioned, indigenous legislators have long received support from the two major parties, particularly through well-established party networks in indigenous constituencies. Although these constituencies cover vast geographic areas, party networks have remained closely intertwined with indigenous communities over time. Even though formal "constituent service offices" may no longer exist, these networks continue to operate through other forms.

Figure 8. Political Donation Income of Indigenous Legislative Election Candidates



Source: Political Donations Public Disclosure Platform, Control Yuan

Implications for Democracy

Institutional and Cultural Factors Shaping Electoral Costs

The cost of legislative elections in Taiwan is shaped by a combination of institutional and cultural factors. Taiwan adopts a mixed-member majoritarian electoral system, under which district legislators (representing municipalities or counties) are elected through a plurality with single-member-district system (SMD). As a result, these candidates rely heavily on their personal connection with local voters. Added to this is another feature of Taiwan's political culture: the public's overreliance on elected representatives. This has made "constituency service" an expected duty for every representative, from the national level down to local offices. For example, in Taipei City's sixth electoral district—covering Daan and Wenshan Districts—there are around 430 thousand eligible voters. The district elects 13 city councillors, meaning each councillor serves approximately 33 thousand constituents. The average campaign cost for a city council seat in this district ranges from TWD 3.6 million to 5 million (approximately USD 111.6 thousand to 155 thousand)[43]. This highlights the fact that, compared to local council elections, legislative

candidates must actively engage with over 230 thousand constituents, resulting in significantly higher campaign costs. Whether such electoral costs should be understood as a form of communication cost in a democratic system, or rather as an investment in democracy itself, remains an open question without a definitive answer.

Institutional design also significantly shapes party competition. Research consistently shows that SMD-plurality systems tend to favour large parties—a pattern reflected in Taiwan's legislative elections. Major parties such as KMT and DPP have benefited disproportionately, enabling them to consolidate resources and attract strong candidates. Their perceived electability, combined with established party networks, makes them appealing to those considering a political career. Candidates are more likely to run under major party banners or accept party recruitment, knowing it boosts their chances of success.

Barriers to Entry: Financial Elites and Party Size

Candidacy decisions in Taiwan are shaped not only by party dynamics but also by access to financial and social capital. In many regions, political families or influential local clans dominate elections. These candidates often benefit from inherited name recognition, established networks, and deep community ties—advantages that newcomers or independents rarely possess. Campaigning is also expensive, often exceeding a legislator's salary, making financial resources a decisive factor. Candidates must carefully balance their funding needs with the risk of becoming dependent on corporate or individual donors—raising concerns about clientelism and undue influence on public policy.

At the same time, institutional structures create additional barriers for smaller parties and young candidates. The single-member district component of Taiwan's electoral system places them at a disadvantage, pushing their focus toward the proportional representation (PR) tier. Even this path, however, is not easily accessible. According to the Public Officials Election and Recall Act, a party must nominate at least ten candidates in district or indigenous constituencies to be eligible to submit a party list for the PR seats. This requirement, combined with the TWD 200 thousand (USD 6,200) deposit per candidate—totalling TWD 2 million (USD 62 thousand) for a minimum slate—creates a significant financial burden. While the deposit system is designed to prevent frivolous candidacies, it can act as a gatekeeping mechanism that disproportionately affects under-resourced parties and reinforces existing power structures. These overlapping challenges—reliance on political families and the institutional disadvantage faced by smaller parties—limit the diversity of candidates and hinder broader democratic participation.

Democratic Supply and Demand Imbalance

Election costs are closely tied to supply and demand across different levels of elected office. While Taiwan's local representative elections are held in multi-member districts, legislative elections operate on a single-member-district basis. When a city or county councillor seeks to move up and run for a legislative seat, it often creates a situation of "too many contenders, too few positions." If one councillor succeeds in making the leap, the others typically remain in their current roles though they may consider challenging that legislator in the next election. Meanwhile, the newly elected legislator faces a new dilemma: whether to stay in the legislature or move on to pursue a county or city mayoral position. If a legislator's career goal is simply to serve long-term as an effective lawmaker, this can have a ripple effect on the political trajectories of local-level representatives—sometimes even contributing to a lack of generational turnover in politics. The main reason is that incumbents typically enjoy a solid base of voter support, established mobilization networks, and a clearer understanding of how to allocate campaign resources. Unless a challenger possesses a similar background—along with additional advantages and emotionally charged and high-intensity manner, voters may be less inclined to spend time reading official election bulletins or learning about legislative candidates' policy positions and philosophy. Compounding this, the media often sensationalizes campaigns, meaning that conflicts, scandals, or negative stories between candidates tend to attract more public attention. Over time, although voter turnout remains relatively high, public trust in politics has steadily declined.

Constraints on At-Large Legislators

Furthermore, under the Political Donations Act, only district and indigenous legislative candidates are required to file political donation reports. At-large and overseas Taiwanese legislative candidates are not obligated to do so—and, in fact, are prohibited from accepting political donations altogether. However, this gives rise to an issue: the role and capacity of at-large legislators are constrained. The introduction of proportional representation into the electoral system was intended to create a more diverse and representative legislature—one that could better accommodate smaller parties. Yet in practice, once elected, at-large legislators often take on the role of political foot soldiers or serving primarily as messengers for the party's platform. Throughout the entire election cycle, at-large candidates often function more as the poster child of their party to boost the party's vote share by assisting in presidential or regional campaigns and promotion. Whether they are truly able to leverage their professional expertise to advocate for specific policy areas remains an open question. From the perspective of political supply and demand, the supply side appears well-functioning in Taiwan’s democracy. Elections

are fair, open, regular, and competitive. On the demand side, voters may be looking for representatives who are younger, focused on specific issues, and not from political dynasties or local family networks. However, under conditions of relatively high electoral costs and prolonged campaign periods, voters are left with limited choices, and those who are ultimately elected tend to lack diversity.

Recommendations

A constitutional system represents a certain logic of power operation; however, when the concept of political cost permeates the system, that original logic can become distorted. Moreover, Taiwan's overall political structure leans toward an elite model of democracy, which—often unconsciously—excludes ordinary citizens from the policy-making process. In order to promote equality and ensure that citizens can actively participate in politics, the following recommendations are proposed.

Lower the Threshold for Election Deposits

This can be addressed in two ways. The first is to reduce the actual amount of the deposit. Currently, the CEC lacks a consistent and transparent standard for determining deposit amounts, and the relevant regulations have not been updated in line with changing times[44]. The second approach concerns the threshold for refunding election deposits. Before discussing the refund criteria, it is important to revisit the original legislative intent behind election deposits—namely, to prevent frivolous candidacies and to conserve public resources and government expenditures. However, the current refund threshold also lacks a clear calculation standard, and it carries an implicit punitive element—candidates who perform poorly (e.g., those who fail to win or receive less than 10% of the total votes cast in their constituency) are unable to reclaim their election deposit. The right of citizens to participate in politics is not only protected by the Constitution, but should also evolve with the times and reflect respect for individual civil and political rights.

Primary Election Political Donation Disclosure

Under the single-member district system, party primaries are particularly critical. Candidates participating in primaries should be required to submit separate disclosures for political donations received during the primary phase. Although political donation reports cannot fully reflect the overall political cost, the establishment and enforcement of laws such as the Political Donations Act and the Act on Property Declaration by Public Servants provide the public with greater access to information for informed judgment. These financial reports offer an initial

understanding of election costs, candidates' resource allocation, and the role played by corporations or interest groups in the electoral process. Compared to earlier periods in Taiwan's political and social history—when there was little awareness of transparency or public access to information—the practice of vote-buying has significantly declined. With the implementation of supporting legal frameworks, modes such as vote-buying and the use of local patronage networks have gradually diminished. While these practices have not disappeared entirely, their influence—along with that of political factions—has gradually waned.

Welfare Protection for Personnel During the Election Period

The first group whose welfare deserves protection are legislative assistants. Issues such as salary, benefits, and working hours for legislative assistants have long required improvement. When an election period comes around, assistants often suffer in silence. Behind every legislator is a dedicated team of skilled assistants. From a human rights perspective, the working conditions and remuneration of legislative assistants should be further institutionalized and made more humane. The second protection should cover the political and employment rights of candidates. Independent candidates who resign from their jobs to run for office often do so as a way to express their political ideals through concrete action. In addition to the financial costs of campaigning, they also face a social climate in Taiwan that tends not to encourage such behaviour. If these candidates are not elected, they may encounter challenges in their professional careers and struggle with economic insecurity. The Constitution clearly guarantees every citizen the right to participate in politics. While running for office is not the only way to express democratic values, the right to employment should not become an additional cost of democratic participation.

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[5] In general, most elections during this period were conducted using the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system, with the exception of several indirect elections—such as the 1946 first elections for county and provincial councilors, and the 1951 first election of members to the Provisional Taiwan Provincial Assembly. (Wang, Yeh-Lih. (2016) *Comparison of Electoral System.* Taipei: Wu-Nan Book Inc.)
[6] Countries such as Germany and Japan adopt a dual candidacy (or double candidacy) system, under which parliamentary candidates may simultaneously run in a single-member district and be listed on the party's proportional representation list. If a candidate wins in the single-member district, they are removed from the party list, and the rankings on the list are adjusted upward accordingly. In contrast, Taiwan's legislative electoral system does not allow for dual candidacy. (Wang, Yeh-Lih. (2016) *Comparison of Electoral System.* Taipei: Wu-Nan Book Inc.)
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[8] Apart from Indigenous legislative elections, Taiwan's local councilor elections also adopt the multi-member district single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system.
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the Security Deposit Amount to Be Paid. Available at: https://web.cec.gov.tw/central/article/40103 (Accessed: 24 Feb, 2025).
[14] If the Legislative Yuan passes a no-confidence vote against the Premier, the President may, within ten days and after consulting with the President of the Legislative Yuan, dissolve the Legislative Yuan. A new legislative election must be held within sixty days of the dissolution, and the newly elected legislators shall convene within ten days after the election results are confirmed. Their term of office shall begin anew from the date of the first session.
[15] Central Election Commission. (2023) *Please Be Informed That January 13, 2024 (Saturday) Has Been Designated as The Polling Day for the Election of the 16th President, Vice President, and the 11th Legislative Yuan. In Accordance with Legal Provisions, This Day Is Recognised as A Public Holiday to Facilitate Voters, Including Employees of Government Agencies, Schools, Organizations, and Institutions within the Electoral District, in Exercising Their Right to Vote.* Available at: https://web.cec.gov.tw/central/article/40676 (Accessed: 24 Mar, 2025).
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