

# Consensus Politics in the Urban Political Arena: Implications for Urban Development in the Greater Taipei Metropolitan Region

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## Abstract

This study investigates the urban development views and priorities of city councillors in New Taipei City and Taipei City by analysing election statements of candidates participating in the local elections of 2018, and conducting in-depth interviews with elected city councillors. The urban development discourse presents as a business-as-usual approach based in a consensus on good urban development, rather than transformative action. The cause for this consensus is partly explained by the functioning of the urban political arena, where silencing and exclusion of divergent ideas are present, and partly by the presence of national divides and issues in the local arena. Taiwan, as a young democracy, faces extra challenges in ensuring that transformative discourses enter the political debate. The implications of a consensus on urban development rooted in neoliberalism are presented and compared along theory by Swyngedouw (2007) on post-political cities in Western countries. Lastly, politicisation of the urban political arena is suggested as beneficial for development towards a more just and sustainable city, as well as benefiting democratisation on the local scale.

**Keywords:** democratisation, pluralism, neoliberalism, urban governance, right to the city

## Introduction

In recent years, Taiwan has been called the rising star of democracy in East Asia. In 2020, Taiwan climbed up to the 11th place in the Democracy Index of the Economist, reaching a full democracy status with a maximum of ten points for the category ‘electoral process and pluralism’ (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). Measuring democracy is difficult as many factors determine the political process. Therefore, global comparison studies, such as the Democracy Index by the Economist, measure basic characteristics of democracy, such as political freedom and the right to form civil organisations, which represents a minimum of democracy (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). One of the downfalls of these indices addressed in

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this study is the sole focus on the national level in determining the state of democracy in a country. Does the urban political arena reflect pluralist views that are, according to *The Economist*, present at the national level or is there instead an absence of divergent voices in the local arena? This study investigates the urban development views and priorities of city councillors in New Taipei City and Taipei City by examining election statements of candidates running for the position of city councillor and in-depth interviews with elected city councillors. What kind of discourses are present on urban development and do these support a debate on the future of the city, where alternative futures are represented? Or is the opposite true, that consensus politics ensures the proliferation of neoliberal urban policy?

This relation between consensus politics and urban development in neoliberal societies is studied primarily by scholars in the critical tradition. Already in 1989 David Harvey stated that urban governance had changed from discussion and political decision-making into a state of entrepreneurialism, where city governments behave as businesses aiming at strengthening comparative advantages for economic growth. More recently literature on the post-political city builds on theory that is critical of liberal democracy and neoliberal influences on urban development. Swyngedouw (2007) identifies discourses connected to tourism, sustainability, resilience, business environment and smart city, that define urban development in the neoliberal era. The consensus on ‘good’ urban development creates an environment where alternatives for urban development, that do not fit either of the pre-defined focus points, are not discussed in the political arena. According to Swyngedouw (2007) these cities can be regarded as depoliticised, whereby the role of governing the city is conceived as a managerial task, detached from its political function. As a result of prioritisation of economic contribution of urban projects, not only urban governance, but also the urban structure is reshaped in a way that can harm the rights and priorities of urban citizens (Harvey, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2007). By examining the urban development ideologies of city councillors, not only the implications for future development can be outlined, but the presence or absence of pluralist views provides insight in the state of democratisation on the local level. This study concludes with a call for politicisation and localising of the urban political arena, in order to allow for alternative policy development that addresses issues of justice in the urban sphere.

## **Theory and local context**

Pluralism, defined as the presence of ‘difference’ in a political arena, addresses interests of diverse groups in society and provides input for the political debate among equals: “Enduring cleavages that must be taken into account in order to characterize conflicts among a given collection of persons” (Dahl, 1978). Deliberative democracy sees consensus among pluralist visions as the summon of democracy, where collective decision-making processes ensure that every participant’s interests are addressed equally in the result (Bouwel, 2009). However, critical political theorists argue that in liberal democracies the presence of pluralism alone is not sufficient, as they observe that the power balance between interest groups leans in the

direction of the established elites in society (Dahl, 1978; Mouffe, 2007). Taiwan as a young democracy has the additional problem of power imbalances inherited from the authoritarian era (Clark and Rigger, 2000; Mattlin, 2011). This imbalance results in consensus politics that seemingly addresses the weighted average of all views present in society, while actually policy derived from this consensus aids the interests of elites (Dahl, 1978; Mouffe, 2007). Mouffe (2007) suggests that in order to ensure that the voices of the underprivileged are heard, 'conflict' in the political arena is essential. Conflict is expressed by acknowledgement of all parties that their ideologies are irreconcilable, but represent 'true political voices'. By recognition of each other's credibility, the actors shape a political environment where, that what is considered political, is broad, while practices of silencing and exclusion are absent. The ideal outcome of political debate is not a consensus, as consensus steers the debate away from politicisation, which is a threat to democracy (Mouffe, 2007). The amount of consensus that may exist can be examined by determining the assemblage of the political arena by questioning the background of the people that make up the arena and the topics discussed, and the presence of exclusion and silencing practises (Mouffe, 2007). Social life in itself is conflictual, with individuals having different worldviews and ideologies, therefore only a political arena that celebrates this plurality, with political opponents respecting each other's difference, can truly address all voices present in society. When citizens cannot identify with political parties anymore, the road is paved for populism to emerge (Mouffe, 2007; Zizek, 2011).

In established Western democracies with a multi-party system, political parties on the left side of the political spectrum traditionally stand up for the rights of the working class, liberal values and egalitarian policies. However, some scholars argue that a crisis is present on the left side of the political spectrum since the 1980s, initiated by the changing global distribution of labour, which narrows the scope of ideologies present in the political spectrum (Crouch, 2004; Zizek, 2011). Industrial labour was increasingly relocated to low-income countries and a service economy was built where labour safety and rights, once the spearpoints of the left political parties, were no longer priorities of the working class. This left the political left guessing: who they represent now? In a reaction to a decline in member numbers, left parties lost their activist feathers and became mainstream in order to attract the now white collar workers (Crouch, 2004; Mouffe, 2007). Or according to Harvey (1989) the left learned how to play the capitalist game. As a result, politics has taken a neoliberal turn, where economic development is prioritised and unchallenged. As Western democracies are regarded to as the summon of democratisation (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021), the neoliberal stance of politics is perceived as democratic, even though scholars continuously outline the negative effects of neoliberalism on urban life (Fuller, 2013; Harvey, 2007; MacLeod, 2011; McCann and Ward, 2013; Yiftachel, 2020) and the undemocratic nature of this ideology (Croissant, 2002; Crouch, 2004; Mouffe, 2007; Zizek, 2011).

In the urban context neoliberalism prioritises the city as economic motor over a place of living. For example, under neoliberal ideology, the concept of housing changes from a home to live in into a place to store surplus capital and make profit for elites (Chen, 2020). Under increased globalisation regions compete

for beneficial positions in the international division of labour and attempt to become global cities, where multinationals, high-tech industries and banks want to locate their headquarters (McCann and Ward, 2012, 2013; Peck, 2011). This desire is driven by a fear to be outcompeted and presents in sustainability, resilience, tourism and smart city discourses in combination with large-scale urban development projects aiming at increasing the attractiveness and competitive benefits for businesses (MacLeod, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2007; Swyngedouw *et al.*, 2002). Urban governance follows the practices of a business, where marketing and branding strategies are applied to sell the product 'this city' and the rights of the investors, bringing in capital, are prioritised over the needs of citizens (Swyngedouw, 2007).

In Taipei urban development has been an integral part of economic development since the early 1990s when the focus of becoming East Asia's financial capital was embraced by the local government (Jou *et al.*, 2012). Harvey (2013) argues that neoliberal urban development is accompanied by displacement and dispossession of the lower class, which results in them being displaced from their place in the city in favour of more powerful and wealthy individuals. One of the examples where this happened in Taipei was the regeneration of the area that now makes up Daan Forest Park. The 'Manhattan-like' urban park is lined with new luxury real estate and the housing prices of properties in the wide environs rose sharply (Jou *et al.*, 2016). Nothing reminds of the low-income families that previously resided in this place and were forced to find other housing within or outside of the city.

The prioritisation of projects that benefit the Greater Taipei region in economic terms is demonstrated by Jou *et al* (2012), who argue that private property rights are determining who has the right to the city and that through land grabbing and accumulation through dispossession the city is shaped to play its role in economic growth. Large-scale urban development projects in Taipei, such as Xinyi Planning District, Nangang Economic and Trade Park, Neihu Technology Park and Taipei Main Station Special District are prioritised, but local citizens and Non-Governmental Organization involvement is nihil even though democratisation spiked citizen participation in civil society organisations (Jou *et al.*, 2012). Jou *et al* (2012) also outline the influence of democratisation on urban development and urban politics. As Taiwan was a developmental state led by an authoritarian regime that provided social security through economic growth, pro-market strategies were adopted after democratisation. Jou *et al* (2012) argue that the direct mayor election, that was introduced in 1994, provides the mayor with almost unlimited power in policy-making, while limited funding and subsidies from the central government contributed to the entrepreneurial stance of urban governance in the city, whereby private capital is directed to urban development and as a consequence elites get influence on urban policy development.

In order to see how democratisation and neoliberalism are interrelated in the Greater Taipei Metropolitan area, this study looks at the urban development ideology present in the local political arenas of Taipei and New Taipei City by examining the urban development ideas of candidates for the position of city councillor and elected city councillors. In order for Taiwan's local political arenas to complete a transition from authoritarian to democracy a representation of different worldviews in the urban debate is essential taking

into account the presence of pluralism as one of the defining indicators in measuring democracy (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). McAllister (2016) argues that for a party system to work, parties must present clear lines of policy based in major cleavages in society to voters, so that party programs present real choices. This presents a challenge as Taiwan's political spectrum crystallised around the reunification – independence cleavage in relation to China present in society, instead of a left-right political spectrum based in ideology. The former authoritarian Chinese Nationalist Party, Kuomintang (KMT) is pro-unification and pushes policy for further cooperation with China, while the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) takes a pro-independence stance. Mattlin (2011) argues that both parties were established to overthrow a regime: The KMT to fight the communist party in China and the DPP to end the KMT's authoritarian rule. As a result, both parties are not founded on an ideological basis to serve pluralist ideas in society, but build on one social cleavage, which is the China-policy and related national identity (Mattlin, 2011). Hsiao *et al* (2017) found in their research on attribution of characteristics to political parties by the general public, that the DPP is slightly associated with environmental protection, reform and social welfare programs, over the KMT, but that cross-strait relations and national identity still is the major division. In elections voters prioritise performance on issues shared broadly in society, such as economic stability and national and personal safety, over ideological representation (Ho *et al.*, 2013; Hsiao *et al.*, 2017). This relates to Taiwan's geopolitical situation and the constant threat of economic or social disruption from external forces. The China position is leading in party distinction and voter behaviour on the national level, but how does this play out on the urban level?

This study examines whether pluralist views on urban development are present in Taipei and New Taipei City's local elections and elected city councillors' views, so that real choices are presented to voters and citizens can, by voting, influence the future of city development. The results are examined in terms of neoliberal development ideology, to see if democratisation in Taiwan has crystallised just as established Western democracies, where neoliberalism is unchallenged as political and economic ideology, and thus threatens the rights and needs of citizens.

## **Research methods**

This study examines the urban development ideas of city councillors in the Greater Taipei Metropolitan area. In Taiwan, city councillors have three roles, namely: (1) evaluate and approve urban policy and plans provided by the local government and mayor, (2) propose urban development plans and (3) be a local representative for their district, which means they are the first person of contact for local business-owners and residents in addressing district-level issues. City councillors constitute the highest local political level under the mayor and therefore play a vital part in the politicisation of the urban political arena and the development and approval of urban development policy. In order to determine the urban development ideology present in the thinking of city councillors, the election statements of candidates for city councillor in the 2018 local elections in Taipei City (n=112 candidates) and New Taipei City (n=121 candidates) were investigated. These

election statements were derived from the website of the Central Election Commission (Central Election Commission, 2018). A manifest approach of content analysis was applied, because the research question aims at understanding trends of 'what' is communicated in the election statements, following four steps of analysis as identified by Bengtsson (2016): decontextualization, recontextualization, categorisation and compilation. An inductive category development approach allows for reflexive interaction with the data (Mayring, 2004). In this study the inductive category development led to grouping of the data in seven dominant themes that are mutually exclusive and by adding the code 'other' as the eighth category for less mentioned themes, exhaustive. The identified themes, taking into account the criterium that a topic is mentioned by more than 30 percent of the candidates, are: parks and green space, parking and transportation, urban development, tourism and heritage, social services, smart/resilient city and social housing. Themes mentioned by less than 30 percent of the candidates were grouped together in the category 'other'. Each election statement was per 'group of words that address the same theme' delineated and categorised. This method of data organisation allows for preservation of the original text for analysis (Mayring, 2004). Content analysis is the best suitable method for this study, because the actual words and sentences of the short statements are analysed for discovering trends, whereas other text-based analytical methods, such as discourse analysis, focus on discovering 'hidden meaning' or motivations behind language-use and require detailed, long, context-dense texts (Mayring, 2004). Weber (1990) argues that content analysis is a useful technique to discover group or institutional attention for specific topics, which is the objective of analysing the election statements in this study. Quantification of the results helped to determine which types of urban development ideology are more prevalent in the dataset. In order to distinguish between dominant and divergent concepts concerning urban development in the election statements qualitative analysis of the data was applied. A dominant concept is identified when > 70 percent of the candidates mentioning a topic expresses a specific discourse, while the latter is defined as <10 percent of the candidates mentioning the topic displaying a specific discourse. The distinction between business-as-usual policy and alternative policy is based upon compliance with neoliberal urban development strategies, such as policy aiming at creating competitive advantages over other regions or cities, reactionary policy created according to perceived urgent threats and policy ensuring the position and benefiting the lives of the higher middle class and elites (McCann and Ward, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2007). The former represents these approaches and the latter is distinct from this kind of policy and instead focusses on social justice, environmental action and democratising the political system.

In addition to the content analysis, eight elected city councillors with different political affiliations (2 KMT, 4 DPP, 1 Social Democratic Party (SDP), 1 Independent) were interviewed for deepened understanding of their urban development ideology. The interviewees were approached through two rounds of emails to all city councillors of Taipei and New Taipei City that requested participation in the study on a voluntary basis. Quota sampling was employed to ensure that a minimum of participants of differing backgrounds are represented in the study (Robinson, 2014). In this case the quota consists of 2 KMT and 2 DPP city councillors, as these make up the biggest group in the city council (see table 1, and 1 independent and 1 city

councillor representing a smaller political party. Sampling was stopped when the quota was met and no further volunteers presented to be interviewed. The employment of a sampling process based on voluntary participation might result in nonresponse bias (Goldstein, 2003). Therefore, it is important to question how the views of those unwilling to be interviewed differ from the interviewed population. Goldstein (2003) argues that unlike studies involving the general public, broad generalisation among party members is possible, as party ideology is influencing strategy and decision-making of individual party members.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the eight interviewees, these interviews varied in length from one to two hours. Open-ended questions related to the seven themes identified in the content analysis were asked and, in addition, questions regarding the functioning of the urban political arena and the position of their political party on urban development topics in comparison with other political parties, were incorporated. In order to analyse the data, discourse analysis was applied, as this methodology allows for determination of dominant and divergent discourses on themes found in the source material, while also addressing the power relations that make that the dominant discourse is sustained and/or reinforced, such as presenting knowledge as truth. A reflexive approach was taken in engaging with the data to identify reoccurring themes, whereafter the results were contrasted with the results of the election statements and discussed against the literature.

Table 1. Taipei and New Taipei City local elections for city councillor 2018: candidates

Party affiliation	Number of candidates (Taipei City)	Number of elected city councillors (Taipei City)	Number of candidates (New Taipei City)	Number of elected city councillors (New Taipei City)
KMT (中國國民黨)	30	28	32	33*
DPP (民主進步黨)	27	18	34	25
Independent Candidate (無黨籍)	27	10	30	8
New Party (新黨)	7	3	3	-
New Power Party (時代力量)	5	-	6	-
Trees Party (樹黨)	4	-	1	-
Taiwan Statebuilding Party (臺灣基進)	2	-	1	-
Non-Partisan Solidarity Union (無黨團結聯盟)	-	-	2	-
Green Party (綠黨)	-	-	1	-
(正黨)	-	-	1	-
(中華民國國政監督聯盟)	-	-	1	-
Social Democratic Party (社會民主黨)	6	1	-	-
People First Party (親民黨)	3	1	-	-
For Public Good Party (中華民族致公黨)	2	-	-	-
Minkuotang (民國黨)	1	-	-	-
Taiwan Solidarity Union (臺灣團結聯盟)	1	-	-	-
(愛心黨)	1	-	-	-
Left Party (左翼聯盟)	1	-	-	-
Chinese Democratic Progressive Party (中國民主進步黨)	1	-	-	-
Civil Party (公民黨)	1	-	-	-
The New Deal Century Party (新政世紀黨)	1	-	-	-
People's Democratic Party (人民民主黨)	1	-	-	-
Total	121	61	112	66
* Due to city councillor changing party membership				

## Results

### 1. Business-as-usual development

In the election statements of candidates participating in the election for city councillor in 2018, seven themes are addressed by at least 30 percent of the candidates (exception New Taipei City theme smart/resilient city) as can be seen in table 2. The theme ‘social services’ ranks highest in both Taipei and New Taipei City followed by ‘urban development’ and ‘transportation and parking’. This section identifies the discourses present on these themes according to the analysis of the election statements and interviews with elected city councillors and determines whether these represent a business-as-usual or alternative rhetoric.

The outcomes of the content analysis of the election statements are displayed in table 3. Business-as-usual discourse is prevalent, as none of the dominant discourses includes measures aiming at transforming society in the direction of social justice or sustainable urban development. For example, when ‘parks and green spaces’ are discussed, these are regarded to as recreational areas, whereas referrals to climate change, biodiversity and ecosystem conservation and the provision of clean air are absent. This demonstrates that in the political discourse nature is not regarded to as valuable in itself, but instead it has to serve an economic or social function in order to have a place in Taipei and New Taipei City. In relation to environmental impact, the topics transportation and parking express a similar rhetoric. Sustainability is a major focal point of both Taipei and New Taipei City (New Taipei City Government, 2020; Taipei City Government, 2020), but the extension of the Greater Taipei’s mass rapid transit (MRT) and bus network is presented as providing convenience in commuting, instead of energy conservation and pollution reduction. Conflicting ideas are present on green transportation, where candidate 13 in district 6 (KMT) and candidate 12 in district 3 (Independent) mention sustainable transportation in combination with creating more parking spaces for non-electric cars. Also, the bike-sharing system in Taipei and New Taipei City, Youbike, is mentioned by 17 candidates as an alternative mode of transportation, but the development of bike friendly infrastructure in the city centre is only mentioned by one candidate from the Trees party. Most candidates mention the extension of bicycle paths in the riverside parks, which instead relates to recreation. Therefore, cycling is not regarded to as an environmental friendly alternative in relation to other transportation modes, but seen as leisure activity.

Table 2. Incidence of themes in election statements of candidates for city councillor in the 2018 local elections (light grey colours indicate >15% differences from the average for that city)

	Parks and green space	Transportation and parking	Urban development	Tourism and heritage	Social services	Smart/resilient city	Social housing	Other
<b>Taipei City</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>60%</b>
KMT	56%	77%	87%	37%	80%	43%	37%	43%
DPP	48%	67%	78%	52%	78%	37%	63%	59%
Independent	37%	44%	74%	48%	67%	26%	41%	63%
Smaller parties	35%	43%	59%	41%	62%	35%	41%	70%
<b>New Taipei City</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>61%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>50%</b>
KMT	66%	78%	69%	38%	72%	19%	22%	50%
DPP	65%	76%	65%	44%	74%	26%	50%	35%
Independent	37%	47%	47%	40%	77%	13%	30%	47%
Smaller parties	31%	56%	63%	44%	63%	25%	44%	88%

Within all themes sub-themes can be identified, such as different modes of transportation in the ‘transportation and parking’ theme, which present one or more dominant discourses and sometimes divergent discourse. The ‘urban development’ theme is an exception; two discourses are present that make up a 50/50 divide: (1) a. Economic stimulation through the development of science and technology parks and b. the revival of traditional business districts and (2) a. urban renewal through public-private initiatives and b. solely through public funding. These discourses are presented by an equal amount of candidates, with diverse political affiliations. The ‘social rent housing’ theme is mentioned by 55 candidates in Taipei City and 39 in New Taipei City. While the social rent housing policy is a new strategy proposed by the national government and pushed by the DPP, the local government is concerned with the execution of the policy. This topic is especially suitable to address urban inequality and help to disadvantaged citizens in society. However, the dominant discourse is constructed as a temporary living solution for young people in society that are unable to buy property, so that they can save money while living in the social rent housing. Apart from social housing, the social services theme provides an opportunity to express policy ideas that are not aiming at achieving competitive benefit or maximising revenue, but increase social justice. Some referrals to transformative ideas, such as the protection of the rights of immigrant workers and labour protection, are present, but these reside in the divergent discourse section, which represents an opinion by less than 10 percent of the candidates that mention this theme.

Table 3. Dominant and divergent discourses per theme in the election statements of candidates for city councillor (Taipei and New Taipei City combined) (2018)

Theme	Dominant concepts	Divergent concepts
<b>Parks and green space</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parks and green space are leisure and activity spaces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parks and green spaces help in combating climate change/ air pollution</li> <li>- Environmental protection for other reasons than disaster prevention or recreational reasons</li> <li>- Restrict construction in ecological protected zones</li> </ul>
<b>Parking and transportation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Road and public transportation extension</li> <li>- Bike sharing system extension and bicycle lanes in riverside parks</li> <li>- Increase parking spaces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Environmental friendly alternatives for road transportation</li> <li>- Replace road segments with bicycle lanes</li> </ul>
<b>Urban development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Urban renewal through private market approaches and urban renewal through public approaches</li> <li>- Science and technology parks and revival of traditional business districts</li> </ul>	
<b>Tourism and heritage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Economy and tourism development hand in hand</li> </ul>	
<b>Social services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Open more elderly care and child care facilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Job opportunities for young people, labour protection and health protection</li> <li>- Protect the rights of immigrant workers</li> </ul>
<b>Smart/resilient city</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Smart technologies for increase efficiency and easy living</li> <li>- Measures for disaster prevention and mitigation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Green energy and sustainable city (undefined)</li> </ul>
<b>Social housing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social housing as a temporary solution for young people that cannot afford to buy property</li> <li>- Direct construction by the government</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social housing as social policy for disadvantaged in society</li> <li>- Social housing for everyone that meets the income requirements</li> <li>- Volume rewards for private parties that construct social housing</li> </ul>
<b>Other</b>	In this category a variety of topics appears, these are discussed in the text in more detail	

Again, the dominant discourse does not reflect a critical perspective, but instead policy aiming at releasing pressure on middle income families through the creation of more care facilities and activity centres for the elderly and nurseries and kindergartens for young children. Traditionally, in Taiwan generations share a household, helping each other both financially and in household tasks (Wong, 2019). As Taiwan's modernisation progresses, and housing and education costs rise, this traditional living arrangement is under pressure, as women have to work fulltime to contribute to the family income. Reducing the burden on families' care work, in the form of elderly-and child care facilities, addresses the needs of the majority of citizens. However, in the election statements the needs of the people that struggle most living in Taipei and New Taipei City, such as the homeless, mentally handicapped, low-income households et cetera, are not addressed.

The results of the interviews with elected city councillors reflect the discourse present in the election statements. When asked about their ideal city three city councillors (DPP, KMT and Independent) focus their arguments on ‘hardware’ development of the city, with the stimulation of high-tech industries and extension of the transportation network for easy commuting, without mentioning greener alternatives for transportation, which reflects the main discourse found in the election programs: road and public transportation extension. Two city councillors (KMT and DPP) ask for a mix of hardware changes to make life more convenient, but also suggest to balance this with ‘software’ development aiming at increasing social facilities for elderly and children, while one city councillor (DPP) considers the hardware structures of Taipei City sufficient and solely focusses on social services for elderly and children and park facilities, which again is similar to the dominant discourse found in the election programs. Only one city councillor (SDP) that does not refer to the outlook of the city or specific policies, but aims at the overall goal of creating equality of opportunity for the citizens of Taipei City, mentioning disadvantaged groups and gender issues, and thus providing the only alternative discourse on ideal urban development. All, but the SDP city councillor’s, descriptions of ‘ideal cities’ relate to plans aimed at the creation of a manageable, efficient city, where commuting is convenient, child care is readily available, so that parents can leave for work with peace of mind and upon return from work can recreate in the outdoors. This is in line with what Swyngedouw (2007) refers to as consensus on ‘good’ urban development in the urban political arena, where every plan contributes to increasing the competitive advantages of the city and its citizens.

As the election statements and interviews with elected city councillors indicate a consensus on urban development, where >70 percent of the candidates present business-as-usual ideas for urban development, the needs of disadvantaged citizens are not addressed and urban development for other-than economic benefit is sporadically mentioned, primarily focussing on the increasing the convenience and living environment of middle class citizens. How does this consensus present within and between parties? Can the divergent discourses be attributed to specific parties? In the next section the election statements are analysed in terms of within- and between-party consistency.

## **2. Within- and Between-Party Consistency**

As can be observed in table 2, candidates representing different political parties adhere various priorities in their election statements. With KMT and DPP candidates addressing transportation and parking >15 percent more than the average in Taipei City. While smaller parties focus on other topics than the traditional development themes that are addressed by more than 30 percent of the candidates, with in Taipei 70 percent and in New Taipei 88 percent, which is above the total average of respectively, 60 and 50 percent. Although priorities slightly differ, when the content of the election statements is examined the between-party consistency is high for the DPP and KMT. Also, the great amount of differences of opinion within parties contributes to a low within-party consistency. In conclusion, both parties’ election statements are very similar. This section provides examples of this similarity in urban development ideology. Table 4 summarises the findings of the internal differences and between party differences. Most remarkable is the commonality of the

election statements of DPP and KMT candidates, up until a point where presented with a statement one cannot distinguish which party affiliation the candidate has. For example, two candidates participating in district 1 in Taipei City, Neihu/Nangang District, express similar views on transportation and parking:

Candidate 2 (DPP): Fully promote transportation construction, supervise the planning progress and construction schedule of the Minsheng Xizhi Line and the East Ring Section of the MRT, and improve the surrounding traffic and parking problems.

Candidate 4 (KMT): Speed up the construction of the East Ring Section of the MRT, widen the roads and bridges connecting Nangang and Neihu, and use a big data transportation system to end the traffic jams of Nangang and Neihu.

And two candidates of these majority parties in the same district on smart city applications:

Candidate 1 (KMT): Strive for central subsidies to fully integrate electronic medical records of public, private hospitals and clinics in Taipei City, and establish a comprehensive cloud medical demonstration zone.

Candidate 13 (DPP): The municipal government should accelerate the promotion of “smart medical care” and give priority to setting up smart beds in the 12 districts of the Taipei City Hospital.

Table 4. Within- and between-party analysis

Topic	Taipei City		New Taipei City	
	Within-party consistency	Between-party consistency	Within-party consistency	Between-party consistency
<b>Parks and green space</b>	High, Trees Party all candidates pro protection. DPP and KMT candidates display the dominant discourse	Climate change related topics mentioned more often by smaller parties. DPP and KMT display dominant discourse. Trees party most progressive	High, DPP and KMT candidates display dominant discourse	The Green party mentions the benefit of green spaces for heat reduction and sponge city. KMT and DPP display dominant discourse
<b>Social housing</b>	DPP candidates define social housing as 'for rent'. Within KMT there is variability in definition. Half the candidates mention youth housing, a quarter public housing for sale and a quarter social housing for rent and rent subsidies. The New Party candidates all mention combined construction of social housing and public facilities	High, no differences observed	DPP candidates show variety on who should live in social housing: youth, only disadvantaged groups, everyone up until median income. KMT candidates mention social housing for youth, without income requirements and rent subsidies	The New Power Party and Green Party candidates express similar views on how to achieve housing justice by tax reforms, battling speculation and social housing construction. DPP candidates mention social housing more often than KMT candidates, but in ideas they overlap
<b>Transportation and parking</b>	Low, many different ideas between party members	MRT related topics are mentioned more by DPP and KMT than by smaller parties, who mention green alternatives more often	Low, many different ideas between party members	KMT candidates mention both road extension and public transportation, while DPP candidates focus on public transportation
<b>Urban development and renewal</b>	Low, many different ideas between party members	Pro-market strategies and public-private initiatives only mentioned by DPP and KMT	Low, many different ideas between party members	Low within-party consistency is reflected in high between-party consistency due to the lack of focus on one specific idea
<b>Tourism and heritage</b>	High, no differences observed	KMT candidates do not focus on local places of interest and upgrading traditional markets into tourist places, as other parties suggest	High, no differences observed	High, no differences observed
<b>Social measures</b>	High, no differences observed	High, no differences observed	High, no differences observed	High, no differences observed
<b>Smart/resilient city</b>	Low, many different ideas between party members. Only New Power Party candidates all mention smart technologies	KMT and DPP candidates mention disaster prevention, while this topic is not mentioned by other parties	High, but due to the limited number of candidates mentioning the topic	High, no differences observed
<b>Other</b>	Low, many different ideas between party members	Government transparency, citizen participation and corruption mentioned by smaller parties and independents	Low, many different ideas between party members	Government transparency, citizen participation and corruption mentioned by smaller parties and independents

Candidates of smaller parties and independent city councillors do not necessarily display transformative or divergent voices, but often address one specific topic where a divergent discourse is expressed, while on

the other themes dominant discourses are mentioned. For example, the Trees party in New Taipei City addresses environmental issues related to ‘parks and green space’ and ‘transportation and parking’, but on the themes ‘social services’ and ‘urban development’ expresses the same dominant discourses as the majority parties. Independent candidates tend to adhere to district-specific causes, which do reflect dominant discourse, but aim at smaller scale implementation. While discourses on topics, such as elderly and child care, park facilities and making transportation more convenient, are shared among most political parties and independent candidates, small differences between the majority parties DPP and KMT and smaller parties/independents are observed. MRT-related topics, pro-market strategies in urban development, the establishment of more parks and leisure activities and disaster prevention, are all mentioned more by KMT and DPP candidates than smaller party candidates in Taipei City, although in New Taipei City these differences are smaller.

The category other, which reflects issues brought up by less than 30 percent of the candidates, includes a variety of referrals to animal-friendly spaces, healthy school lunches, gender equality and drugs prevention, but the subject that divides most is the democratic system. KMT and DPP candidates do refer to cross-strait relationships, while topics such as, governmental transparency, citizen participation and the will to step away from Blue-Green politics are expressed by several independent and smaller party candidates. The China position is mentioned by all parties and reflects the influence of national politics played out on the local level, being a divider for people to base their votes on, instead of the urban policy agenda. The between-party analysis shows that KMT and DPP candidates present an consensus on urban development in their election programs, where only the social rent housing theme causes discussion, while smaller parties present a mix of dominant and divergent discourse. In the next section the causes for the presence of consensus on urban development among city councillors are discussed. How are the background of candidates, Taiwan’s demographics, the functioning of the urban political arena and culture, influential in the preservation of a depoliticised environment?

### **3. Overrepresentation**

The analysis of the election statements of candidates participating in the elections for city councillor in Taipei and New Taipei City shows that the two dominant parties, DPP and KMT, provide most candidates in these elections, but that independent candidates together make up an evenly big candidate group of around 30 persons in both Taipei City and New Taipei City (Table 1). However, in the election results there is an overrepresentation of city councillors representing DPP and KMT.

The overrepresentation can be linked to voter behaviour which is influenced by several processes, namely voter stability, media representation, demographics and cultural influences (Chu *et al.*, 2008; Croissant, 2002). According to the interviewed city councillors voters over 40 years old are not likely to switch between parties or candidates, which is reflected in the high number of ‘career politicians’ that serve more than 3 terms in the city council. These city councillors often became involved in politics from a young age, entering politics through relatives, or in case of DPP city councillors involvement during the

democratisation protest movement in the 1980s and 1990s. The Social Democratic Party city councillor is involved in politics since the Sunflower Movement in 2014, which among other topics, addressed housing unaffordability and youth dissatisfaction with politics. The independent city councillor for Zhonghe, New Taipei City expresses how he became a candidate for the local elections:

It is all about the family business. My cousin, he was about to retire. So that is why he tried to find a suitable candidate. My dad recommended me and my family, they all thought I would be suitable for this job. That is why I am here.

He stresses the difficulty of being an independent candidate as media coverage is less than party-members, but that his family's long reputation provides a loyal voter base. As stability on economic progress and national and personal safety, as well as performance on good governance, are favoured over ideological representation in Taiwan, as mentioned by Hsiao (2017), this explains why voters stick to the two majority parties that have proven to be capable of providing these stable factors, while new parties lack this proven record. The Independent city councillor in New Taipei City explains his experience with the older generation: "Did you shake their hand once? Have you been to their house? They remember you and you get their vote. They stick with you". Taiwan's aging population contributes to the DPP-KMT domination, as the younger generation which is more supportive of transformative standpoints provided by smaller parties, is outnumbered in votes. The city councillor representing the SDP mentions how she first ran for legislator, but that she deems being elected as legislator impossible for members of smaller parties, as only one legislator per district is elected. The significant higher change to be elected at local elections is the reason for her participation. She hopes to get the attention of the citizens of Taipei, so that her party has more chance to be elected in the next national elections.

Overrepresentation of DPP and KMT candidates in the urban political arena creates an environment for consensus politics as the discourse expressed by city councillors of both these parties present a neoliberal urban development strategy that is similar and absent of transformative discourse as displayed in the previous sections. The next section demonstrates how this overrepresentation influences the functioning of the urban political arena.

#### **4. Functioning of the urban political arena**

In Taipei and New Taipei City's urban political arenas the debate is initiated by the elected mayor. The local government carries out the mayor's vision and policies, which makes the mayor's position very powerful in determining the future of the city. The city councillors have a three-fold role in the urban political process of which (1) controlling the budget and the execution of policies implemented by the mayor/local government and (2) presenting policies or cases for improvement of their district/city-wide, are contributing to the politicisation of urban politics. Although city councillors' duty is to challenge policies and create initiatives, their perception of power is not universal. With a DPP city councillor representing Zhongzheng and Wanhua District, mentioning she perceives her power as limited, similar to the Lizhang (neighbourhood

representative, 里長), but with responsibility for a greater area. Her influence limited to making small improvements, such as adding street lights in her district. On the contrary, her party colleague in Banqiao sees her influence in policy construction as powerful. She points out that it takes time to understand the political process and her four terms experience earns respect from government representatives and colleagues alike: “I am a professional, this is my career. So, I can be considered influential in parliament”. She states that her lengthy career in local politics makes that she is trusted by the local government and invited to join discussions on urban development, while the newly elected SDP city councillor for Daan District, Taipei City, relates to the other end of the spectrum, feeling not being taken seriously by the city government and her colleagues from the established parties, as she only represents one vote in the city council:

The first problem is that if you're from a smaller party in Taipei city, you will have only little chance to be the chairman of some meeting. The city government does not take you seriously, you are just one vote. If they have support from DPP or KMT you are nothing.

This quote supports the argument that silencing and exclusion, although not always actively, takes place in the urban political arena, due to insufficient divergent voices and incompatibility of ideologies, as the city council works towards consensus. The SDP city councillor on the urban political process:

We rarely vote. This really surprised me. We only discuss until we have consensus. Voting is only used when the majority party wants to pass something very political. Then they don't care about us [independents and small party members].

When asked how she tries to have impact she refers to voter mobilisation:

I reach out to my voters...I cannot influence the government through my votes or in a political way. But the city government really cares about public opinion therefore raising public awareness on public policy is the best influence method.

This debating until consensus minimises the influence of smaller parties or independent candidates as they are ignored in the debate, as the majority agrees upon the proposed projects. As DPP and KMT are the majority parties in both Taipei and New Taipei City's councils, expressing similar political ideologies, policy construction is often agreed on. For smaller parties and independents to be heard, they have to group together. In both New Taipei City and Taipei City such informal collaborations exist. The Independent councillor in Zhonghe and SDP councillor of Daan mention that these informal meetings go beyond party beliefs and standpoints, but instead aim for mutual support and for better visibility. Six of the eight city councillors interviewed served multiple terms and are involved in politics through family or friend connections (DPP, KMT and Independent city councillors) or since the democratisation movement in case of DPP politicians. When city councillors discuss their opponents the distinction between long-time career politicians and newly-elected city councillors becomes clear, with a KMT city councillor addressing the difference:

The elections in Taiwan are very strange now. Some of the elected councillors in Taiwan do not understand local construction, some are internet or media celebrities. They get more votes, but we really do more work.

Regarding the policies promoted by newly-elected candidates her party colleague representing Xizhi/ Wanli/ Jinshan says:

Because we have been in the place for a long time, we will not put forward unfeasible policies casually. Actually, we will still give the people hope, but we will suggest something more practical and feasible.

These two quotes describe how the dynamic between established city councillors already serving for multiple terms in relation to new city councillors of especially smaller parties or independents, is characterised by a feeling of superiority. Trust from the city council and local government has first to be gained through hard work and working in line with the current policy trends. This proves a challenge for newcomers to the political arena, especially for those without party support. At the same time the second excerpt shows how this city councillor refrains from bringing up ideas of citizens that she deems unfeasible. This indicates that new and divergent ideas, which are not in line with already existing policy directions are not brought up in the urban political arena, supporting the existence of consensus politics.

As indicated earlier in the literature review and results section, the social cleavage most persistent in society is the Taiwan-China question. This question surfaces in the local political arena, influencing mutual relations. The city councillor for the SDP expresses the will to step away from Blue-Green (KMT and DPP) politics, but at the same time brings up how the issue, which is a big part of her party's image, can be addressed at the local level:

As national diplomacy is suppressed by China, Taipei can do city diplomacy easier, but we are not Chinese Taipei, we are Taiwan. So even from a local level we can address Taiwan's sovereignty [...] We [as SDP] want to be an alternative to those that are not satisfied by DPP or KMT.

The DPP city councillor for Banqiao observes the consensus on urban development among her party and the KMT: "So just looking at political views, our political views are probably only different, because we will mention the positioning of the country. After all, Taiwan is not a normal country", but continues that the implications in the urban arena are vast as conflict builds on the issue: "Sometimes I face a politician, I speak Taiwanese. She speaks Mandarin, and she speaks Beijing dialect, so the two of us do not match up". Thus, as this cleavage is less important in local policy construction, discussion and voting is affected by the cleavage, bringing national issues into the local arena.

In conclusion, the functioning of the urban political arena of Taipei and New Taipei City and the relative power differences between city councillors shape an environment where consensus on urban development is maintained, as exclusion and silencing of divergent views and ideas is practiced, both by city councillors

upfront in selecting ideas to put forth in meetings and in the urban debate, where smaller party and independent city councillors are not selected as committee head or their opinions and ideas not deemed necessary in policy construction. Silencing and exclusion of divergent discourse, so that these cannot enter the political arena are key factors in the creation and preservation of consensus.

## Discussion

Mouffe's (2007) theory on the functioning of the political arena is based in two questions: Who is at the table and what is on the agenda? The results sections 1 and 2 show that there is a consensus present on the discourse on urban development in the Greater Taipei Metropolitan area. The election programs of the candidates for city councillor in the 2018 local elections show a neoliberal stance of urban development, where transformative ideas are absent. This result is endorsed by the analysis of the interviews with the elected city councillors. McAllister's (2016) argument that in order for a party system to work, clear lines of policy based in major cleavages in society must be present, so that party programs present real choices to voters, is not upheld in the local elections for the position of city councillor. The between-party analysis shows that consistency is high, this is partly due to low within-party consistency and partly due to consensus on urban development topics. The smaller parties and independent candidates challenge the dominant discourses present on urban development topics to a small degree, primarily on environmental issues. The dominant discourses on urban development presented by the majority parties in the urban arenas of Taipei and New Taipei City, DPP and KMT, display ideas aiming at business-as-usual development in a neoliberal tradition and include, among others, the provision of convenient transportation and the inclusion smart technology in urban development, which are indicated by Swyngedouw (2007) as spearpoints in 'good' urban development in the post-political, neoliberal city. Although divergent discourses show some transformative ideas towards social justice and sustainable development, these are only expressed by less than 10 percent of all candidates and primarily by smaller party candidates. However, these candidates are less likely to be elected, due to Taiwan's aging population, where older voters do not change party or candidates in elections, and are thus not eager to vote for a 'new' party. This can be explained by the observation of Hsiao *et al* (2017) that Taiwanese prioritise stability and security issues over ideology in national elections, which might also be true on the local level. According to elected city councillors however, this voter stability can be explained by disinterest in these local elections, and the perception that it does not matter who to vote for, which surprisingly enough seems to be the case indicated by this study. According to the elected city councillors this lack of interest results in citizens deciding at the last moment who to vote for, often in favour of DPP and KMT long-time 'career politicians', who run alongside a mayoral candidate and receive more media attention. This lack of interest in local politics is what McAllister (2016), Mouffe (2007) and Zizek (2011) all mention as an indicator for lack of representation of worldviews in the political arena, which widens the gap between citizens and the government and provides a political environment for populism to

occur. Other scholars explain the absence of pluralism as ‘consent’ for the current development strategy, linked to the influence of Confucian values or Asian Democracy (Chan *et al.*, 2016; Chu *et al.*, 2008; Thompson, 2015).

The individuals that make up the urban political arena influence what will be worth discussing, what is considered political, as well as how this discussion is shaped. The results sections 3 and 4 provide input for this second question proposed by Mouffe (2007) to investigate the functioning of the political arena. Currently, the urban political arena is made up of many career politicians that served multiple terms. Their involvement in politics is often through family or relatives and in case of the DPP since the democratisation in the early 1990s. There is a sense of superiority present in the attitude of these established politicians towards newcomers, as they perceive the ‘art’ of urban politics and policy-making as something that has to be learned. This not only undermines the credibility of newcomers, but also shows that disruptions of the current course of events is unwished for. Those with different ideas are considered troublemakers, as there is a predisposed idea of ‘good’ urban development among most members of the city council. Silencing and exclusion are present in the urban political arena’s of Taipei and New Taipei City, which threatens the political and blocks the discussion of transformative ideas (Mouffe, 2007). Furthermore, national issues are brought into the local arena as the political divide between the two majority parties, whose urban development plans are similar and are often solved in discussion until consensus.

The state of politicization in the urban political arenas of Taipei and New Taipei City reflects the situation of post-political cities in Western countries, where societal interest in politics is falling, a true left voice in the political spectrum is absent, neoliberal policy is leading and populism is rising (Zizek, 2011). This raises the question whether urban politics in the Greater Taipei Metropolitan area should be conceived as fully democratised or a not yet fully transformed political system where remnants of the developmentalist strategy practised under authoritarian rule still persist? This case demonstrates that an absence of transformative ideas in the urban political arena in the form of a consensus among the members of the city council, but also presented by almost all candidates competing for this position, leads to a continuation of neoliberal urban development strategies. However, the opposite is also true, the focus on neoliberal urban development and the consensus on ‘good’ urban development prevents the urban political arena from democratisation, as alternative voices are either absent, silenced or excluded. Thus, the urban political arenas of Taipei and New Taipei City display a depoliticised environment focussed on neoliberal urban development similar to the post-political city as outlined by Swyngedouw (2007). However, unlike their Western counterparts these Taiwanese urban arenas were not ‘political’ before, but got stuck in the process of democratisation by the unanimous acceptance of neoliberal ideology as the best development method.

The absence of transformative ideology in the thinking of city councillors means that a continuation of urban development in the neoliberal tradition is eminent. As Swyngedouw (2007) and Swyngedouw *et al.* (2002) outlined, this includes a continuation of focus on: large-scale urban development projects, aiming at creating competitive beneficence for the city in global comparison with other cities, often at the expense of

local residents, and branding of the city as modern, sustainable, smart and attractive, contributes to attracting tourists that spend money at festivals and malls. Furthermore, those that can spend surplus capital in the city are welcomed to invest in property development, which increases the importance of exchange value of urban space over the use value and enlarges their power in policy-making (Harvey, 2007, 2013; MacLeod, 2011; Purcell, 2014). The absence of an 'other-than-neoliberal' ideology in the election statements of city councillors makes that through voting the citizens of Taipei and New Taipei City cannot contribute to the development of urban life, claiming their right to determine the city (Purcell, 2014). Some city councillors on their turn describe their perception of power as limited and their influence on urban development restricted to small adjustments, such as adding traffic lights, reorganising parks and organising small events, within their own district. As Jou *et al* (2012) indicated the introduction of the direct mayor election provided the mayor with almost unlimited power of designing the future of the city. A re-evaluation of the tasks and role of city councillors in the urban development process would awaken the public interest in these elections. Furthermore, a refocus on local urban issues instead of national issues, such as the China position, would contribute to discussions on how Taipei and New Taipei City's citizens want their city to develop. Realigning the focus to the urban realm could be done by the establishment of a true local party that refrains from participation on the national level. Extensive citizen participation and engagement with activist groups can restore the prioritisation of use value of urban space over the exchange value, according to Purcell (2013, 2014).

This study serves to initiate a debate on the functioning of the urban political arenas of Taipei and New Taipei City, as well as the implications for the future of urban development in the region and democratisation on the local level. This study includes an analysis of 233 election statements of candidates participating in the 2018 local elections for city councillor. As such this study can be referred to as extensive. However, election statements are short excerpts and by no means constitute the complete election program of the candidates. Interviews with eight elected city councillors were conducted to validate the results found in the election statements. However, further research on the ideas of city councillors for urban development and their perception of the functioning of the urban political arena, including a bigger sample size would strengthen understanding of the relation between urban political arena functioning, neoliberalism and democratisation in the Greater Taipei Metropolitan area.

## Conclusion

This article started with a reference to the Economist's Global Democracy Index mentioning Taiwan as the rising star in Asia. This study shows that on the local urban level, pluralist views are absent, and as such stresses the importance of scale in determining democratic status. If the definition of democracy is perceived according to the state of urban politics in many Western countries, where neoliberalism is the only ideology present in the political spectrum, the Greater Taipei Metropolitan can be regarded a successful example.

However, as Taiwan wishes to continue the process of democratisation the influence of neoliberalism on the urban political process has to be addressed.

This study shows that the urban development ideas present in the election programs of candidates for the position of city councillor in the 2018 local elections, present as business-as-usual instead of transformative discourse. Interviews with elected city councillors endorse this conclusion.

Overrepresentation of the majority parties, DPP and KMT, in the urban political arena, the practice of bringing national issues into the local political arena, silencing and exclusion of newcomers and a low perception of power, are identified as key issues contributing to preservation of consensus politics.

Politicisation of Taipei and New Taipei City's urban political arena's is necessary in order to ensure other than neoliberal policy can be developed and the needs of the disadvantaged in society can be addressed. The politicisation should occur in regard to the local elections, as citizens regard to these elections as unimportant, and the functioning of the urban political arena, where national issues overshadow a true debate on local issues. The establishment of a third-party or local parties that specifically aim at local development goals, can steer the debate away from the national identity, cross-strait relations and urban development for economic growth and attain politicisation of the urban political arena.

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