

COVID-19 and the Anatomy of the Rally Effect in Taiwan

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that major international events can produce a “rally ‘round the flag” effect that boosts citizens’ support for an American president. This study examines such an effect in Taiwan, when the country was confronted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We find that citizens who previously disapproved of the president did become more likely to gather around their leader. The public’s support was contingent on the president’s ability to handle the crisis. This is one of the few studies on this effect conducted outside the US, and its findings represent a significant step toward broadening the scope of analysis.

KEYWORDS: rally effect, external crisis, presidential approval, COVID-19, Taiwan

STUDENTS OF THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY have long recognized the “rally ‘round the flag” effect, which significantly boosts a president’s popularity during dramatic external events. Since the publication of Muller’s (1970) seminal work on presidential approval, which characterized the effect, a substantial body of research on the subject has been generated (Baker and Oneal 2001; Baum 2002; Brody 1991; Brody and Shapiro 1989; Callaghan and Virtanen 1993; Chapman and Reiter 2004; Chatagnier 2012; Edwards and Swenson 1997; James and Rioux 1998; Kam and Ramos 2008; Ladd 2007; Lee 1977; Lian and Oneal 1993; Mueller 1970, 1973; Newman and Siegle 2010;

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Oneal, Lian, and Joyner 1996; Ostrom and Simon 1985; Parker 1995; Sigelman and Conover 1981). However, all but a few of these studies were conducted in the United States (exceptions include Kuperman 2003; Lai and Reiter 2005; Lee and Hwang 2015; Morgan and Anderson 1999). This prompts the question of whether these findings are equally applicable to other democratic polities.

When the novel coronavirus disease, known as COVID-19, wreaked havoc on the global community in 2020, the dramatic surge of presidential popularity in Taiwan presented an opportunity to study this question. The virus posed a direct and imminent threat from abroad to the safety and health of the country's 24 million people, who reside about 100 miles (across the Taiwan Strait) from the Chinese mainland, where the pandemic originated. In the five months after Beijing first reported the virus to the World Health Organization (WHO), President Tsai Ing-wen's public approval rating increased dramatically, from 59% to 80% (Cheng 2019, 2020). Just before this, in January 2020, Tsai, the first female president of the country, had won re-election and led her Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to a major victory in the legislative election. She had already enjoyed a high approval rating, and her continuing surge in popularity was probably the most notable event in the island country's democratic history, since such survey data have been systematically recorded.¹ Although the rally characteristics that Muller identified were inspired by Cold War events, they have substantial resonance with the COVID-19 pandemic. The surge of approval for Tsai in this setting does look like a rally-'round-the-flag phenomenon. How can such a major shift in Taiwanese citizens' attitudes be explained? And who was it that rallied? Answers to these questions are important for scholarly understanding of the rally phenomenon outside the US context.

This study employs two waves of panel survey data collected on the island during the pandemic. The research aims to demonstrate that in times of international crises citizens will provide greater support for the president based on their dispositions and their assessment of the administration's

1. Survey data on public approval of Taiwan's president have been systematically collected since September 2012. The surveys are conducted quarterly via telephone interviews under the auspices of the Planning and Executive Committee of Taiwan's Election and Democratization Study (TEDS) Project. The coordinator of the multiyear TEDS project is Professor Chi Huang, and the data are managed and distributed by the Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, Taiwan. More information is available on the TEDS website, at <<http://www.tedsnet.org>>.

response to the event. Specifically, the rally effect comes primarily from constituents who disapproved of the president before the crisis, and their positive appraisal is performance-based, contingent on the administration's ability to handle the crisis. To analyze the nature of the rally effect, the next section will present a theoretical framework, which will be followed by a discussion of the COVID-19 rally event in Taiwan. The ensuing sections present statistical analyses of the recently collected survey data, with a conclusion in the final section.

UNDERSTANDING THE RALLY EFFECT

The essence of the rally-'round-the-flag hypothesis is that, when a country is confronted by major international events, citizens will circle the wagons, set aside their differences, coalesce around their national leaders with unity, and offer greater support. Because the president is the symbol of the country, particularly in a time of crisis, presidential popularity is likely to surge as a result. As Nelson Polsby (1971: 44) observed over half a century ago, "Invariably, the short-run popular response to a President during an international crisis is favorable, regardless of the wisdom of the policies he pursues." Similarly, Kenneth Waltz (1967: 272) indicated that "in the face of such an event, the people rally behind their chief executive." Mueller (1970, 1973) empirically operationalized the concept in statistical analyses of presidential popularity and is credited as the one who introduced the phrase to the political science lexicon. Following Mueller's lead, rally events are generally conceptualized as being international in nature and are "specific, dramatic and sharply focused" incidents that involve the United States (21). Unlike riots, strikes, and scandals, which tend to aggravate domestic division, rally events confront the nation as a whole and attract substantial public attention.² The rally effect is now a well-recognized empirical phenomenon. The theoretical puzzle is why there are frequently such spikes in presidential approval following dramatic external events.

Some scholars attribute the effect to citizens' sense of patriotism (Brody 1991, Ch. 3; Parker 1995). Others cite the absence of elite criticism and of media coverage of critical views as contributing factors (Brody 1991; Brody

2. While Muller's original conceptualization suggests that the rally event must involve the United States, it can be broadly interpreted as any country that is confronted by a dramatic international event.

and Shapiro 1989). Still others identify trust in government, support of the UN Security Council, and information cues as determinants of the rally effect (Chapman and Reiter 2004; Chatagnier 2012; Lee and Hwang 2015). Despite these rich findings, most studies treat citizens as a monolithic entity, either rallying or not rallying. By aggregating public opinion into a series of data points across time, this analytical approach does not fully assess the individual-level dynamics of the rally phenomenon (Kam and Ramos 2008). Research has shown that people with different characteristics respond differently to presidential actions and policies (Edwards and Swenson 1997). To properly explain who rallies and who does not, it is necessary to disaggregate citizens according to their dispositions.³

Support for a president could come from three groups: members of the president's party, people who identify with opposition parties, and independents (Callaghan and Virtanen 1993; Edwards and Swenson 1997; Sigelman and Conover 1981). Before the rally event, people in the first group are more likely to strongly back the president in large numbers, given their party affiliation. Independents and people who identify with the opposition are less likely to approve of the president's actions, and even if they do, their support will be weaker by comparison. This means that few of the president's fellow partisans would be able to provide *more* support in response to special circumstances, whereas independents and the opposition could (Baum 2002).

In addition to party attachments, a widely held explanation is that a surge of public support for the president is the result of citizens' patriotic response. It is argued that government policies and public officials are generally cast in a far more positive light during such dramatic moments. Rally events are likely to stimulate citizens' national pride and arouse their sense of loyalty and devotion to the country (Baker and Oneal 2001; Brody 1991, Chapter 3; Lee 1977; Parker 1995). Such a response is essentially reflexive. Complementing the patriotism explanation is an identity-based argument: external crises reinforce the distinction between "us" and "them." To confront the common threat, individuals tend to think of themselves as belonging to one unit and are willing to re-evaluate their differences. A dramatic external event is likely

3. For studies that employ individual-level data to examine the rally effect, see Chatagnier (2012), Edwards and Swenson (1997), Kam and Ramos (2008), Ladd (2007), Parker (1995), and Sigelman and Conover (1981).

to increase in-group solidarity, strengthen group identity, and reinforce allegiance to such group symbols as the flag and national leaders (Kam and Ramos 2008). This bolstered national identity and patriotic feeling will manifest in a sudden surge in a president's approval ratings, and thus a "rally."

Finally, liberal democracy requires that governments be responsive to citizen preferences, at least in theory (Dahl 1971). As the head of the country, the president is held accountable for her/his policies and actions. This principal-agent relationship is better understood in the realm of the economy. Empirical studies have demonstrated that public attitudes about the state of the national economy (the sociotropic concern) and about personal economic well-being (the pocketbook concern) are consequential for a president's popularity. Presidential approval rises when citizens' economic concerns are addressed, and falls when economic prospects appear gloomy (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2007). This "reward/punishment" argument is equally applicable when a country is confronted by a dramatic event such as a war (Callaghan and Virtanen 1993; Lai and Reiter 2005) or a public health crisis (Jennings 2020). The public is mindful of whether the incumbent has the ability to handle the crisis. The surge or decline of presidential popularity reflects this concern.

In the light of this discussion,⁴ the following hypotheses are to be examined in this research. The surge of presidential approval ratings in a rally event is largely determined by individuals' party affiliation, national identity, sense of patriotism, and assessment of the economy, as well as the presidential response to the dramatic event. And all else being equal, the rallying support generally comes from citizens who had disapproved (or expressed weaker approval) of the president's policies and actions before the event but appreciate her/his leadership during the crisis.

4. The opinion-leadership model is another popular explanation of the rally effect (Baker and Oneal 2001; Brody 1991; Brody and Shapiro 1989). It maintains that rallies occur when opinion leaders refrain from making critical comments. Media coverage of the event will thus be "full of bipartisan support for the president's actions" (Brody 1991: 66). Testing this hypothesis at the individual level requires information on individual citizens' responses to media coverage of elite discourse. Unfortunately, no such data are available from the surveys. However, as Hetherington and Nelson (2003) point out, the opinion-leadership model is more appropriate for explaining how long the rally can last. Since the rally's duration is not the focus of the current study, the lack of opinion-leader-related variables should not diminish its overall validity.

COMBATING COVID-19

The foregoing discussion is relevant to the understanding of the rally effect in Taiwan and provides the theoretical underpinning of the analysis. Since the onset of rapid democratization in the early 1990s, Taiwan has been deeply divided by fierce contestation between Chinese identity and Taiwanese identity, involving the interpretation of the relationship between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland. Those who espouse Chinese identity consider the island's eventual unification with the mainland a worthy goal, while Taiwanese identifiers reject the idea that Taiwan is a part of China and prefer the island's independence. Over the subsequent two decades, this contestation increasingly crystalized as the key political cleavage on the island. Because the two main parties on the island take opposite sides on this fundamental issue, partisanship embodies the same division and forms two major political camps: the pan-Blue coalition, led by the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT); and the pan-Green coalition, led by the DPP. Roughly, pan-Blue supporters espouse "Chinese" as a part of their identity, and pan-Green followers see themselves as "Taiwanese." Meanwhile, Beijing's forceful claim to the island also plays an important role in Taiwan's domestic politics. To force Taipei into unification talks, Beijing has isolated Taiwan internationally, backing up its territorial claim with the threat of military force. As a result, Taiwan has been excluded from almost all international organizations and currently has diplomatic ties with only 15 other countries. The resulting humiliation and resentment prevent many island citizens from identifying with hostile China and reinforce their identity with an independent Taiwan (Wang 2017a).

Taipei's efforts to combat infectious diseases are complicated by this diplomatic isolation. Taiwan has been excluded from the WHO for decades and has not been able to attend its emergency meetings or important global expert briefings. As a result, when health crises have occurred Taipei did not receive pertinent information in a timely manner, or any information at all. In the 2003 SARS outbreak, for instance, it was not till seven weeks after Taiwan identified its first SARS case that the WHO dispatched two experts to the country, and only with Beijing's consent (Chinoy 2020). The lack of information on the novel virus was partly responsible for the SARS outbreak on the island, which led to the shutdown of several hospitals, 671 confirmed cases, and 84 deaths (World Health Organization 2020a). Although Taipei

was invited to attend the World Health Assembly (the decision-making body that governs the WHO) from 2009 to 2016, when the China-friendly Ma Ying-jeou of the KMT was president, the invitation was rescinded after Tsai was elected in 2016, due to her pro-independence stance.

Learning from the bitter lessons of the 2003 SARS outbreak, the self-reliant Taipei government has been constantly monitoring the spread of infectious disease. This time, when China first reported cases of a mysterious SARS-like pneumonia (World Health Organization 2020b), Taipei immediately adopted measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus (on December 31, 2019). The government first stepped up screening at border points and checked air passengers coming from Wuhan, China, before they could leave the plane (Lee and Chung 2020). After Beijing surprisingly granted Taipei's request, two Taiwanese health experts visited the Chinese city in mid-January 2020 to collect firsthand information on the outbreak (Taiwan CDC 2020a). As more confirmed cases were reported in China, a cabinet-level Central Epidemic Command Center was activated for coordinated response (Taiwan Ministry of Health and Welfare 2020). Important measures were adopted as a result, including the integration of Taiwan's national health and immigration database systems for effective contact tracing and isolation (Taiwan CDC 2020b). As scared citizens hoarded face masks, creating a shortage for the public as well as medical providers, the government directly contracted private companies to produce surgical masks, with 60 new lines producing an estimated 10 million masks per day by April 2020. The Tsai administration also created a digital platform so that citizens could conveniently purchase face masks at local pharmacies, convenience stores, or online. These measures effectively calmed the panicked public and stabilized the situation. Taipei's mask policy was so successful that, by early April, millions of masks were being donated to Europe and the United States as a part of the Taiwan Can Help campaign (Blanchard 2020). Many world leaders openly expressed gratitude for Taiwan's contributions, including Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission (*Taiwan News* 2020), Shinzo Abe, then prime minister of Japan (*Yomiuri Shimbun* 2020), and Mike Pompeo, US secretary of state (Hsu and Mazzetta 2020).

As coronavirus cases have skyrocketed across the globe, Taiwan has been able to keep the number of infections relatively low. By early August, the island country had fewer than 500 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and only

seven related deaths,⁵ despite its proximity to and active economic exchange with the Chinese mainland. Schools in Taiwan have not been closed, though winter breaks were extended by one or two weeks. Businesses have remained open, and government offices have continued in operation. The daily lives of the public have not been seriously disrupted. Taipei's ability to contain the pandemic has been widely noted and praised around the world (Barron 2020; Mosley 2021; *National Public Radio* 2020).

EXPLAINING THE RALLY EFFECT

To test our hypotheses, we use two waves of panel survey data collected in Taiwan using both landlines and cell phones (Cheng 2019, 2020). These are national probability sample surveys of island citizens aged 20 or above. The first survey was completed on January 8, 2020, roughly one week after Beijing made its public announcement about cases related to the novel coronavirus. At the time, few people in Taiwan had heard of the deadly virus or recognized the significance of the report, so the first wave of data effectively provides baseline information from before the rally event. The second survey was conducted between May 29 and June 7, when the pandemic was wreaking havoc on Europe and the United States. Of the 1,065 respondents in the first survey, 604 are included in the second wave, a retention rate of 57%. Because many previous studies used aggregated survey data, they do not differentiate individuals with different characteristics. The current analysis will remedy this deficiency by dissecting the rally effect at the individual level and assessing opinion change over time. If the data were limited to two independent cross-sectional surveys, it would not be possible to analyze the individuals who altered their appraisals of the president.

Preliminary Analysis

Respondents in both surveys were asked, "How satisfied are you with Tsai Ing-wen's overall performance as president?" Because the theoretical premise of the rally effect is that citizens will provide *additional* support for a president when the country is confronted by dramatic external events, those who already approve of her/his performance before the event cannot rally; only disapprovers can. In the second survey, 82% of the respondents did not

5. Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, <<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>>.

TABLE 1. Citizens' Dispositions and Rallying (Percentages; Weighted $N = 442$)

	<i>Rally</i>	<i>Not Rally</i>	
Overall	18.2	81.8	
<i>Party affiliation</i>			
Pan-Green	4.0	96.0	
Opposition parties	30.0	70.1	
Independents	27.6	72.5	$\chi^2 = 45.2; p = .000$
<i>National identification</i>			
Taiwanese	13.6	86.3	
Dual	32.5	67.5	
Chinese	9.1	90.9	$\chi^2 = 20.2; p = .000$
<i>Patriotism</i>			
Proud of Taiwan	18.1	81.9	
Not proud of Taiwan	18.5	81.6	$\chi^2 = 0.003; p = .96$
<i>Pandemic response</i>			
Strongly satisfied	13.1	86.9	
Satisfied	27.9	72.0	
Dissatisfied	22.9	77.1	
Strongly dissatisfied	6.5	93.5	$\chi^2 = 16.4; p = .01$
<i>National economy</i>			
Better	4.0	95.8	
About the same	13.7	86.3	
Worse	35.5	64.5	$\chi^2 = 45.0; p = .000$
<i>Personal economic well-being</i>			
Better	6.8	93.2	
About the same	17.4	82.5	
Worse	31.9	68.1	$\chi^2 = 18.2; p = .000$

change their prior positive evaluation of Tsai, but 18% switched from disapproval to approval (Table 1).⁶

6. Four respondents (less than 0.05%) changed from approval to disapproval. These few cases add a lot of noise to the analysis and cause unstable estimation for this group of respondents when a multinomial logit model is used. To simplify the estimation, they were dropped from the analysis. The elimination of these four cases has not biased the overall conclusion, because the substantive findings of binary logit analysis are consistent with the results of a multinomial logit model.

Who are these citizens that rallied? Empirical research has shown that citizens' attitudinal characteristics may influence their support for the president (Gronke and Newman 2003), and it is expected that the dispositions they have before the event would affect their propensity of rallying. To address this, data on respondents' party affiliation, national identity, sense of patriotism, and assessment of the economy were collected in the first survey, and their views on Tsai's pandemic response were gathered in the second survey, as measured by satisfaction with Taipei's mask policy. As noted, the distribution of facial masks is considered the most visible and significant policy of the DPP government (Blanchard 2020; Hsu and Mazzetta 2020; *Taipei Times* 2020; *Yomiuri Shimbun* 2020). The citizens' view of the mask policy is thus used to gauge their assessment of Tsai's pandemic response. The English version of the survey questions is given in the appendix.

In Table 1, all the associations between rallying and respondents' attitudinal characteristics are statistically significant except one. Party affiliation is an important predictor of rallying propensity. Indeed, 96% of pan-Green supporters display unwavering support for the president,⁷ as those who approved of Tsai's presidential performance in the first survey maintained their positive appraisal in the second survey. The rally comes from members of opposition parties and from nonpartisan independents: 30% and 28% of them, respectively, changed their presidential evaluation from disapproval to approval.⁸ National identity also appears to be a predictor of propensity of rallying. In particular, 33% of dual-identity holders gathered around the president during the pandemic, more than twice the proportion of Taiwanese or Chinese identifiers. This is not surprising, as those who support Tsai generally have a strong Taiwanese identity, giving them little room to rally, while holders of Chinese identity tend to oppose her pro-independence stance and are more immune to providing additional support. Dual-identity holders, without a firm commitment to either identity, have more leeway to change their appraisal. Contrary to our expectation, patriotism shows no statistically significant association with respondents' propensity of rallying, but respondents who are satisfied or even moderately dissatisfied

7. Pan-Green supporters are those who identify with the DPP, the New Power Party, and the Taiwan Solidarity Union.

8. Opposition parties include the KMT, the People First Party, the New Party, and the Taiwan People's Party.

with the administration's pandemic response rally behind the president. Finally, those who had a negative view of the economy before the event are also more likely to switch from disapproval to approval of Tsai.

In summary, the preliminary analysis shows that, as hypothesized, citizens who expressed prior disapproval or a weak approval of Tsai's presidential performance have a higher propensity of rallying. They include members of opposition parties and independents, dual-identity holders, and those who expressed prior dissatisfaction with the economy, as well as those who later appreciated the president's response to the pandemic.

Multivariate Analysis

To ensure that the preliminary findings are not spurious, a multivariate analysis was conducted with the variables listed in Table 1. The dependent variable, *rallying*, was measured as the change of an individual's presidential approval between the two surveys, coded dichotomously, with 1 indicating a change from disapproval to approval and 0 otherwise. This is a measurement that is consistent with the conceptualization of rally and adopted by previous studies using either aggregated or individual-level data (Baker and Oneal 2001; Chatagnier 2012).

Two party dummy variables, *member of opposition parties* and *independent*, were created, with pan-Green supporters as the baseline group for comparison. We hypothesize that members of opposition parties are less approving before the event and thus have more room to change their attitude toward the president. Independents, without clear party affiliations, are likely to fall between. Both coefficients of the party variables are expected to have positive signs. To assess the effect of national identity, *dual identity* and *Chinese identity* were created, coded dichotomously, with Taiwanese identity as the base category. *Patriotism* is coded the same way, with 1 being proud of Taiwan and 0 otherwise. *Pandemic response* is created to gauge citizens' appraisal of Taipei's mask policy; it has four categories (from 1, "strongly dissatisfied," to 4, "strongly satisfied"), with the first category as the baseline. All of these coefficients are expected to have positive signs. To assess citizens' views of the economy, *sociotropic concern* and *pocketbook concern* are coded with three categories, from 1 to 3, indicating that the state of national economy or personal well-being is "worse," "about the same," or "better," respectively, with "better" as the base category. Since it is hypothesized that prior

disapprovers have more room to turn into approvers, the associated coefficients are expected to be positive.

Several control variables were also included in the analysis. First, in view of Beijing's forceful claim over Taiwan, a large proportion of the public consistently perceived China as a hostile regime and harbored anti-China sentiments (Wang 2017b). The recent pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong and Beijing's subsequent repressive responses have further raised the alarm among Taiwanese citizens. Given Tsai's pro-independence stance, both developments may raise Tsai's presidential approval.⁹ To partial out the associated effects, respondents' *concern about Hong Kong* is included, along with *anti-China sentiment*, which is based on responses on whether the novel virus should carry the loaded label of "Wuhan virus" or a more scientific label such as "novel coronavirus." Both variables are coded dichotomously. Because those who register a strong sentiment or concern are consistent with Tsai's political position, they are more likely to support the president before the pandemic and thus have little room to rally. These coefficients are expected to have negative signs. Similarly, prior electoral supporters for the incumbent president are also less likely to rally. A dummy variable, *vote for Tsai*, is created, with 1 for respondents who supported Tsai in the 2020 presidential election and 0 otherwise, and a negative coefficient is expected. *College education* and *female* are coded with 1 for respondents who are in the relevant category and 0 otherwise. *Age* is a continuous variable, the number of years since birth.

Finally, while panel data were employed in the current study, they were used to obtain information on respondents' change of opinion between the two time periods. Since the data are not pooled across time, the unit of analysis is the individual rather than the individual-time. The data structure can thus be treated as cross-sectional. With a dichotomous dependent variable, a binary logit analysis was employed, and the results are presented in Table 2.¹⁰

First, all the regression coefficients associated with party affiliation are statistically significant and have positive signs. The odds of rallying for

9. We thank anonymous reviewers for this point.

10. Only one variance inflation factor has a value slightly above 5, which is the recommended threshold of multicollinearity (Fox 1991). After testing different models with various combinations of independent variables, the overall conclusion remains the same. This shows that multicollinearity does not pose a threat to the statistical analysis.

TABLE 2. Citizen Dispositions and Propensity of Rallying (Weighted $N = 442$)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficient (standard error)</i>	<i>Odds ratio (percentage change in odds)</i>
<i>Party affiliation</i>		
Members of opposition parties	1.44** (0.52)	4.20 (320)
Independents	1.58** (0.48)	4.84 (384)
<i>National identity</i>		
Dual	0.64 (0.39)	1.89 (89)
Chinese	-1.31 (0.94)	0.27 (-73)
Patriotism	0.54 (0.65)	1.72 (72)
<i>Pandemic response</i>		
Dissatisfied	1.91* (0.80)	6.78 (578)
Satisfied	2.83*** (0.74)	16.91 (1591)
Strongly satisfied	2.56** (0.78)	12.93 (1193)
<i>Sociotropic concern</i>		
Worse	1.82** (0.69)	6.18 (518)
About the same	0.57 (0.61)	1.77 (77)
<i>Pocketbook concern</i>		
Worse	0.21 (0.62)	1.24 (24)
About the same	0.59 (0.53)	1.80 (80)
Concerns about Hong Kong	0.01 (0.35)	1.01 (1)

(continued)

TABLE 2. (continued)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Coefficient (standard error)</i>	<i>Odds ratio (percentage change in odds)</i>
Anti-China Sentiment	0.51 (0.40)	1.66 (66)
Vote for Tsai	-0.91* (0.36)	0.40 (-60)
College education	-0.06 (0.34)	0.94 (-6)
Female	0.04 (0.31)	1.04 (4)
Age	-0.00 (0.01)	1.0 (0.0)

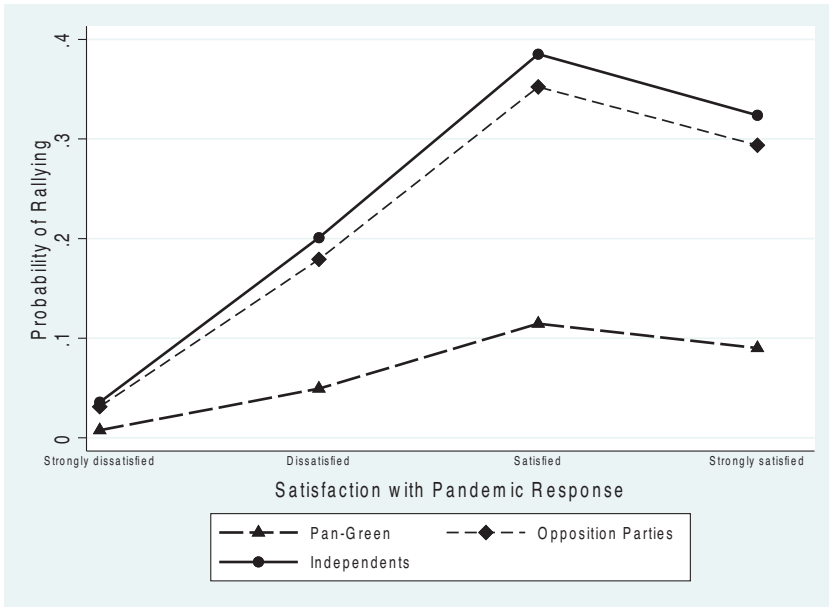
* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$, two-tailed test.

members of opposition parties and independents are 4.2 and 4.8 times larger, respectively, than for pan-Green identifiers. The findings confirm the hypothesis that Taiwan citizens' propensity of rallying should be minimal for the president's fellow partisans, since their positive appraisals *start* from a level that is the highest of the three groups. Independents are more likely to rally than opposition disapprovers, but the difference is not substantial.

Second, the Tsai administration's ability to combat the deadly virus proves to be the most important factor for the president to receive additional support. All three coefficients are statistically significant and have positive signs. The odds of rallying are about 13 to 17 times larger for citizens who express satisfaction with Tsai's pandemic response. Even those who show moderate dissatisfaction with Taipei's mask policy are prone to providing additional support for the president.

Third, the public's sociotropic concern before the pandemic is also a significant predictor: those who express dissatisfaction before the rallying point are more likely to gather around the president in response to changing circumstances. The fact that supporting Tsai in the 2020 presidential election has a statistically significant but negative effect on rallying further supports the hypothesis that prior disapprovers have more latitude to turn into approvers.

FIGURE 1. Predicted Probability of Rallying and Satisfaction with Pandemic Response, by Party Affiliation



The coefficients associated with citizens' pocketbook concerns, national identity, sense of patriotism, and demographic characteristics are statistically insignificant, which indicates that the related associations previously identified in Table 1 are spurious. Despite the temporal overlap with events in Hong Kong and the prevalent anti-China sentiment in Taiwan, the associated coefficients are statistically insignificant. Taiwan citizens' propensity of rallying is therefore mainly contingent on their appreciation of the president's pandemic response, which effectively eliminates the alternative explanation that the rally effect may be caused by events in Hong Kong or anti-China sentiment.

To further advance our understanding of these findings, Figure 1 shows the predicted probabilities of the three party groups with respect to different levels of satisfaction with Tsai's pandemic response. Among those who did not vote for Tsai in the 2020 presidential election, the probability of rallying increases as they become more satisfied with the government's handling of the health crisis. The tendency is particularly strong for members of

opposition parties and independents: the probabilities of both groups are roughly 3 to 4 times larger than those of pan-Green identifiers. Thus, partisan disapprovers may turn into approvers if they appreciate the president's actions and policies during a rally event.

CONCLUSIONS

Political scientists have long been aware of the existence of a rally-'round-the-flag effect. But despite voluminous studies being produced during the past half-century, little attention has been paid to this phenomenon outside the US. The current research addresses this gap by assessing the rally effect in Taiwan during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike many previous studies, which implicitly treat citizens as a monolithic entity, this study uses panel data from two surveys to analyze the relationship between respondents' attitudinal characteristics and their rallying propensity.

We find that individuals' prior disposition toward the president is an important predictor of rallying. Not surprisingly, party affiliation is a significant factor, given that the political division along party lines structures much of how Taiwan citizens orient themselves to almost every aspect of their lives. Because pan-Green identifiers' overwhelming support for Tsai before the pandemic left little room for them to rally, only members of opposition parties and independents did. The result confirms the earlier finding that not all party groups are equally susceptible to the rally effect (Brody 1991; Mueller 1973; Sigelman and Conover 1981). That the island's citizens are able to transcend partisan differences is encouraging news for a country that has been marked by a deep political divide (Achen and Wang 2017).

But the public in Taiwan did not rally behind the president merely for their own sake, since Tsai's effective response to the health crisis plays a crucial role in mediating citizens' support. This finding is consistent with observations made by scholars and journalists about recent rally phenomena in other countries as the deadly virus has swept the world. Many national leaders received positive appraisal for their response to the pandemic, but not all of them did—take for example American President Donald Trump and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. In reaction to their lack of leadership in combating the deadly virus, the bump in their approval ratings was modest and brief (Boadle 2020; Greenberg and Rosner 2020). Other political leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Canadian Prime Minister

Justin Trudeau, saw a bigger boost, and for a longer period (Jennings 2020). Collectively, these cases have broader implications for democratic governance, which presumes that an elected government must be held accountable for its actions and policies. In return, the citizens provide consent and support, irrespective of their ideological orientations. This is an important reminder to political leaders that their performance plays a central role in the minds of citizens as evaluators.

The current finding has contributed another countervailing case that further diminishes the validity of the patriotism interpretation in a cross-national setting. Citizens' sense of patriotism has been considered one of the most important determinants of the rally effect. But several studies have challenged this interpretation, because, if it is true, there should be evidence of rallying whenever there is a dramatic external event. And as Baker and Oneal (2001: 681) have concluded, "This clearly is not the case" (also see Brody 1991, ch. 3). That Taiwan citizens' gathering around the president involves more than national identity or a reflexive patriotic response adds another piece of evidence for this conclusion.

While the present study assessed individual citizens' dispositions of rallying, we did not examine the duration of rallies, because of data limitations. However, empirical research has shown that such a surge of presidential popularity is generally short-lived (Muller 1970, 1973), and it should not be surprising to see it decline quickly after a dramatic event. Tsai has a list of daunting domestic tasks for her second term. The economy is at the top of the list. While Taiwanese citizens appear to be sympathetic to the challenge the country confronts during the pandemic, it is an open question how long this sympathy can last. Because the island's economy is heavily reliant on exports, the pandemic-driven economic downturn around the world makes recovery particularly challenging and is likely to take a toll on Tsai's popularity.

A sluggish economy will also limit the political room for other badly needed reforms, including the long-term care system, the unbalanced tax structure, immigration, and national defense, not to mention the continuous political and military pressure from a hostile China. As she maneuvers through competing political interests for these reforms, Tsai may gradually alienate supporting constituents. Following the "coalition of minorities" thesis (Muller, 1970: 20), her popularity may suffer as a result. After all, members of opposition parties are hard to win over and can easily defect.

Finally, the identification of causal relationships is always a challenging matter in social sciences research. The current study is no exception. The prevalent anti-China sentiment in Taiwan and the temporal overlap of events in Hong Kong complicate the investigation of the rally effect during the pandemic. Fortunately, the robust statistical findings have increased our confidence in the overall conclusions. That said, this study examines only one rally event, and its findings may be atypical. Since this is one of the few studies conducted outside the US, one can argue that it takes a significant step toward broadening the scope of analysis of that important political phenomenon known as the rally-'round-the-flag' effect.

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APPENDIX: SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. How satisfied are you with Tsai Ing-wen's overall performance as president?
2. Which political party do you support?
3. In our society, some consider themselves "Taiwanese," while some view themselves as "Chinese." Others see themselves as both "Taiwanese and Chinese." How do you identify?
4. Are you proud of Taiwan's pandemic response?
5. Are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the government's mask policy?
6. Compared to six months ago, is the nation's economy now better, about the same, or worse?
7. Compared to six months ago, is your family's economic situation now better, about the same, or worse?

8. Some people believe the novel virus should be called the “Wuhan virus,” but others feel that “novel coronavirus” is more appropriate. What do you think?
9. The Chinese government recently passed a new national security law in Hong Kong. Does it cause you to have concerns about Taiwan’s future?