

RESEARCH NOTE

A System Not of Our Making: Electoral and Institutional Constraints on Indigenous Self-determination in Taiwan

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Taiwan Politics

This research note examines the Indigenous legislative electoral system in Taiwan, discussing how the separation into “Mountains” and “Plains” reflects a legacy of colonial classification and continues to marginalize Indigenous voices in contemporary politics. It then argues that low voter turnout and limited legislative impact are not merely behavioral issues but outcomes of deeper structural constraints. This note situates electoral underrepresentation within broader conversations about Indigenous sovereignty, survival, and self-determination, and questions whether reforms within a state-centric framework are sufficient to address systemic exclusion. In doing so, this note contributes to ongoing debates about democratic participation, settler colonialism, and the future of Indigenous politics in Taiwan.

1. Introduction

The electoral system in Taiwan is often lauded for its democratic advancements (Bush 2021), but for its Indigenous peoples or the Austronesian peoples in Taiwan, the elections come with distinctive nuances (Palalavi 2010). In the Legislative Yuan elections, a democratic process in which voters elect representatives to formulate laws and oversee government operations, the votes of Indigenous peoples are separate from those of other Taiwanese citizens. Taiwan has designated electoral districts and legislative seats specifically for its Indigenous population; according to the Public Officials Election and Recall Act (hereafter “the Election Act”; 公職人員選舉罷免法), Indigenous individuals who meet the qualifications for suffrage are eligible to vote for Indigenous public officials. The Election Act also specifies how legislative districts are divided, particularly creating separate districts for Indigenous peoples from the “Plains” (平地原住民; *pingdi yuanzhumin*) and those from the “Mountains” (山地原住民; *shandi yuanzhumin*) Indigenous areas (Ke and Yen 2023).

This system, while aimed at ensuring representation, reflects deeper historical roots and presents ongoing challenges. Dr. Jolan Hsieh, an esteemed Indigenous scholar and activist from the *Siraya* Indigenous community in Taiwan, recently argued in an interview that the terms “Plains Indigenous” and “Mountains Indigenous” create a “false dichotomy” that merely serves to divide and separate Indigenous communities (Shyn 2024). The “Plains/

Mountains” classification represents a colonial framework for categorizing the Austronesian peoples in Taiwan, which persists in its legal system and policies.

The separation of Indigenous populations into “Mountains” and “Plains” categories was originally instituted under Japanese colonial rule and then preserved by the Republic of China’s government after 1949. Rather than dismantling these classifications, the state bureaucratized them, embedding the distinction into household registration systems and legal frameworks. This post-war continuity reflects a deeper logic of governance: By administratively recognizing certain Indigenous identities while marginalizing others, such as the Pingpu Indigenous peoples,¹ the state reasserted its authority to define who counts as Indigenous. These inherited classifications have shaped social policy and electoral design, obscuring the complex diversity of Indigenous nations and reinforcing state-centered representations.

This research note asks: How does the current Indigenous electoral system in Taiwan, twenty years after its major reforms, continue to shape the possibilities and limits of Indigenous political participation? Rather than offering a comprehensive review of the literature, this note highlights persistent institutional barriers and their broader implications for Indigenous sovereignty. In doing so, I attempt to illuminate how Indigenous politics in Taiwan are entangled in unresolved tensions between representation and self-determination.

2. Literature Review

The Election Act separates Indigenous voters into distinct districts, meaning they can only vote for candidates running in Indigenous districts. These are further subdivided into Plains and Mountains Indigenous districts. This distinction, rooted in Taiwan’s colonial past, continues to shape the political engagement of Indigenous communities. The issue stems from the fact that this division perpetuates the classification system used by the Japanese colonial regime (1895–1945); it was later reinstated by the *Kuomintang* government after WWII (Kao 2015). The relevance of this electoral division in Taiwan today, where Indigenous people are increasingly urbanized and dispersed, is debatable. Migration for job opportunities and the presence of second or later generations born in cities have altered the population distribution, raising questions about whether this colonial legacy should still guide Indigenous representation in the Legislative Yuan (Kuan, Lin, and Cheng 2015).

¹ As of 2025, Taiwan officially recognized sixteen Indigenous nations: Pangcah/Amis, Atayal, Paiwan, Bunun, Pinuyumayan, Rukai, Cou, Saisiyat, Tao/Yami, Thao, Kavalan, Truku, Sakizaya, Sediq, Hla’alua, and Kanakanavu. In addition to these groups, there are the Pingpu Indigenous peoples: Siraya, Makatau, Kavalan, Ketagalan, Taokas, Pazeh, Papora, Babuza, and Hoanya, many of whom have not yet gained official recognition but have long called for the restoration of their status and rights (the Kavalan are, however, among those officially recognized). The current electoral design does not distinguish among these diverse nations, treating all Indigenous peoples as a single voting bloc divided only by the “Mountains” and “Plains” binary.

In the past, there has been considerable research on the elections of Taiwan Indigenous peoples, with one of the most important works being that of Dr. Haisul Palalavi, from the *Bunun* Indigenous community in Taiwan, namely his doctoral dissertation (Palalavi 2007), which in 2010 was further published as a book titled *Research on Indigenous Peoples' Participation in Legislative Yuan Elections: 1972-2004* (Palalavi 2010). In it, he compiled all the research on Indigenous elections in Taiwan up to that time, from the first Indigenous Legislative Yuan election held in 1972 to the election of 2004.

Twenty years later, in the 2024 election, many issues previously identified regarding Indigenous elections still persisted. The system of Indigenous legislators has not been adequately adjusted or amended over the past twenty years, and the remaining key issues primarily include the following four:

(1) The election of Indigenous legislators faces the problem of “overly large electoral districts”:

Whether competing for seats for Plains or Mountains Indigenous legislators, candidates must appeal to “all voters in Taiwan’s Plains or Mountains” (the “Single Non-Transferable Vote;” SNTV), unlike general Han regional candidates who campaign in specific cities or counties, typically reflecting the geographical correlation between Han voters and candidates (the “Single Member District Delimitation;” SMD). This SNTV election system requires Indigenous candidates to have substantial financial backing, making it difficult to win without support from powerful political parties (Huang 2024).

(2) Additionally, there is the issue of “larger population groups having an advantage,” leading to the underrepresentation of smaller groups:

Under the current system, stipulated by Article 4 of the Additional Articles of the Constitution of the Republic of China, there are only six seats for Indigenous legislators, with three for Plains Indigenous and three for Mountains Indigenous representatives. Currently, Taiwan recognizes sixteen Indigenous groups and their Indigenous legal status, but this excludes many of the Pingpu Indigenous peoples (平埔族群; *pingpu zuqun*), who are on the way to achieving recognition by the national government of their legal status (Pan Adawai, Mali, and Ahuan 2024). Larger populations, such as those of the *Pangcah/Amis*, *Paiwan*, *Atayal*, and *Bunun* (who combined constitute about 80% of the Indigenous population), are more likely to secure national Indigenous legislative seats due to their higher numbers (Ke and Yen 2023). In contrast, smaller groups, such as the *Tao/Yami* of Lanyu (Orchid Island), renowned for their unique maritime culture and the famous cultural expression of *Tatala*, have

never held any positions among the Legislators over the past 52 years, since the time Taiwan has had legislative elections for Indigenous peoples.

(3) Also, there is a lack of representation for urban Indigenous peoples: Many Indigenous individuals in Taiwan have moved away from their ancestral lands due to colonization, work, and other reasons, so their residence does not align with the current divisions of Plains and Mountains Indigenous electoral districts (Kuan, Lin, and Cheng 2015). This has resulted in lower voter turnout, making it difficult to achieve the democratic aim of elections. The recent data (Council of Indigenous Peoples (原住民族委員會) 2024) released in August 2024 shows that the total population of Taiwanese Indigenous peoples is 606,066, and the Indigenous population living in urban areas is 307,795 (50.79 percent); there were only 165,816 Indigenous people in the mountains area (27.36 percent of the total), and 132,455 (21.85 percent) in the plains area.

Although Indigenous voters residing in urban areas can cast their ballots at local voting stations, they must vote for candidates in the separate Indigenous electoral districts, which do not correspond to their place of residence. As a result, many urban Indigenous voters lack familiarity with the candidates, who often campaign in tribal regions, and feel disconnected from the platforms being presented. This mismatch contributes to low turnout rates and a perceived lack of meaningful representation.

(4) Finally, and most importantly, we need to recognize that representatives of Indigenous peoples did not establish this electoral system: How can we resist this situation in the context of transitional justice and the contemporary awakening and practice of Indigenous self-determination?

Scholars addressed the current two-system election status a decade ago in the *Journal of Electoral Studies*, where proposed solutions were discussed. In their paper, “A Preliminary Study of Single Member District Delimitation for Indigenous Legislators in Taiwan,” Da-wei Kuan, Shih-yuan Lin, and Su-feng Cheng suggested transitioning Taiwan’s Indigenous legislator election system from the current SNTV (Single Non-Transferable Vote) model to “Single Member District Delimitation (SMD).” Their primary argument was to temporarily set aside the complex issue of identity protection (i.e., the classification of Plains/Mountains Indigenous) and instead focus on shifting from SNTV to the SMD model. They proposed a comprehensive

assessment to redraw the electoral boundaries, including four specific plans for single-member district delimitations for Plains Indigenous and Mountains Indigenous legislators, as well as a proposal for "six districts for Indigenous legislative elections without the Plains/Mountains Indigenous division (Kuan, Lin, and Cheng 2015). The study thoroughly evaluated the potential impacts on and consequences for Indigenous legislative elections of the shift to single-member districts, offering a complete set of legal and policy adjustment recommendations through academic research (Kuan, Lin, and Cheng 2015). Moreover, this research note would like to highlight that their article also meaningfully included the following quote (107–108):

... this paper suggests that since population from the four main tribes of Amis, Paiwan, Atayal and Bunun make up eighty percent of the indigenous population, the electoral result after redistricting will not be dramatically different from those of multiple member district, all the seats might remain to be shared by the four main tribes. It is argued that, since indigenous legislators enjoy a solid electoral base at home, redistricting the electoral boundary would not affect her/his prospects for electoral victory. Moreover, the redistricting would significantly reduce the size of district and thus enable a more thorough constituency service.

The subdivided electoral system mandated by the Public Officials Election and Recall Act is designed to provide Indigenous peoples with a platform to address their unique issues and needs; however, has it truly achieved this goal? The evidence suggests otherwise, as the restrictions on who Indigenous voters can elect seem to limit their ability to fully participate in the broader political conversation.

3. A Rare Occurrence: The Marginalization in the Media and the Lack of Public Discourse

Going by previous research on Taiwan's Indigenous legislative elections, much of the focus has been on the four key issues outlined above, primarily analyzing the accessibility of Indigenous political participation through the lens of institutional design. However, this research note aims to add a new layer—a **fifth issue: the accessibility of information and the challenges posed by the absence of active platforms for information exchange in Indigenous elections.**

The 2024 elections marked a milestone in Taiwan's democratic journey, with the eighth direct presidential election and the eleventh election for the Legislative Yuan held in January of that year (Hsiao 2024); over 72 percent of registered voters participated, highlighting a solid commitment to democracy. However, despite the high turnout, Indigenous voices remained marginalized, encountering difficulty finding platforms to express their views on critical

issues such as national identity (Chang et al. 2024). Based on data released from the Central Election Commission, Taiwan, ROC, the percentage of registered voters who participated in the election of the Plains Indigenous legislators was 58.25 percent (Central Election Commission (CEC) (中華民國中央選舉委員會) 2024b), with 64.32 percent (Central Election Commission (CEC) (中華民國中央選舉委員會) 2024a) participating in the election of the Mountains Indigenous legislators.

Media plays a pivotal role in shaping public discourse, particularly during election seasons. Let us now examine whether the topic of Indigenous elections has generated significant attention or discourse within the media. Taiwan Indigenous Television (TITV) launched in 2005 and has served as a channel in Taiwan devoted to Indigenous issues and culture. In 2007, TITV became part of the Taiwan Broadcasting System (TBS) and transitioned into a non-commercial public media platform; by 2014, TITV began operating under the Indigenous Peoples Cultural Foundation (IPCF). Around a decade later, in 2017, Indigenous Radio, Alian 96.3, was established as a platform for Indigenous peoples to voice their concerns. However, TITV and FM 96.3 Alian Radio, both aimed at Indigenous audiences, tend to focus more on promoting Indigenous languages and cultures rather than on political matters. This stands in stark contrast to the political talk shows targeted at Han voters, which dominate the media landscape during election campaigns. Indigenous elections receive only minimal media coverage, further silencing the political voices of Indigenous communities.

Academic research focused on Indigenous elections also remains relatively scarce (Kuan, Lin, and Cheng 2015). Indigenous-focused media, such as TITV or Alian 96.3, dedicate little programming to politics or elections. In the realm of new media, during the 2024 election period, Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) and influencers also rarely discussed political or electoral matters. “Indigenous elections” remain an internal game played by a specific group of people and their successors, forming a circle that newcomers are unable to easily enter or participate in. In contrast, elections in mainstream Taiwanese society, dominated by Han people, are highly active across traditional media like television, newspapers, online platforms, and social media. The lack of engagement in Indigenous elections is then concerning.

While institutional critiques of Taiwan’s Indigenous electoral system have received some scholarly attention, it is equally critical to center Indigenous voices from within the communities themselves. In response to recent legislative developments (which I discuss in the following section of this research note), a powerful statement was circulated across Indigenous networks on Facebook and Threads under the title “Calling for International Indigenous Support Against Aggressive Legislation Jeopardizing the

Sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples in Taiwan.”² This declaration sheds light on how state actions are perceived not merely as administrative reforms but as a continuation of colonial suppression:

Despite language barriers and Taiwan’s exclusion from international institutions, we closely follow and support Indigenous movements worldwide... Today, our sovereignty faces a new threat... The amendment passed on December 13, 2024, spearheaded by Indigenous legislators aligned with the KMT, weakens the Council of Indigenous Peoples... and enforces divisive colonial categorizations.

The statement highlights that, far from being passive participants in electoral politics, Indigenous communities in Taiwan are actively engaged in resisting legal and political developments that compromise their self-determination. It warns that such legislative changes—such as the introduction of a ministerial system rotating between so-called “Mountains” and “Plains” groups—further marginalize smaller and unrecognized communities, while entrenching outdated colonial classifications.

More importantly, the declaration underscores a key concern: the growing alignment of domestic actors and the implications this has for Indigenous autonomy. In a context where Taiwan remains diplomatically isolated, these grassroots voices urgently call for international Indigenous solidarity to resist what they see as a “systematic attack” on their rights, identity, and future. This perspective not only enriches the legal and institutional critique laid out in this research note but also reminds us that Taiwan’s Indigenous politics is not just about representation—it is about sovereignty, survival, and self-determination.

These concepts are not merely rhetorical. For many Indigenous communities in Taiwan, sovereignty involves efforts to reclaim ancestral lands and assert authority over traditional governance systems. Survival includes the revitalization of Indigenous languages, the defense of sacred sites, and the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations. Self-determination is expressed in community-driven initiatives, such as tribal schools, intergenerational education projects, and campaigns to resist state-led development projects that threaten Indigenous ways of life. For example, the Cou Saviki Tribal Classroom in Taiwan is a solid practice (Lin, n.d.).

Furthermore, avoiding risks solely within state frameworks can reproduce settler authority by reaffirming the legitimacy of colonial political institutions, which is another critical concept. In recent years, some Indigenous

2 The post is available on Facebook with this link: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10164642765392926&set=a.458532012925>

communities in Taiwan have called for alternative models of participation that emphasize cultural governance and direct engagement with international Indigenous networks (D'Arcy and Kuan 2023).

These practices reflect a broader desire for self-determination beyond the confines of state-sanctioned mechanisms. These practices reflect a broader vision of Indigenous futures that extends beyond electoral participation and resists the constraints of settler-defined political structures.

4. Institutional Constraints Beyond the Ballot: Budget Cuts and Political Suppression

I am a member of the Taiwan Indigenous peoples, an urban Indigenous individual, and an individual currently studying in the United States. Through this admittedly preliminary research, I hope to spark deeper conversations, invite constructive criticism, and collaborate with others who care about these issues to collectively envision the Taiwan Indigenous communities' future.

While the design of the Indigenous electoral system imposes structural limitations, Indigenous voters and candidates actively negotiate these constraints. For instance, some candidates intentionally emphasize pan-Indigenous solidarity rather than tribal affiliation, while others invoke ancestral place names or speak in their Indigenous languages during campaigns to assert cultural identity.³ Voters, too, often weigh their support not only on the basis of political platforms but also based on kinship ties, linguistic affinity, and shared histories. These practices reflect how Indigenous individuals assert political agency despite institutional marginalization.

In addition to structural limitations within Taiwan's Indigenous electoral system, recent legislative actions underscore how state institutions can further marginalize Indigenous peoples beyond the ballot box. In December 2024 and early 2025, the Legislative Yuan in Taiwan passed unprecedented cuts to the Council of Indigenous Peoples (CIP)'s 2025 annual budget. According to CIP official statements and media reports, several key Indigenous development programs faced budget freezes or elimination.

The CIP issued a statement responding to the opposition party's proposal to freeze up to 70 percent of its operational budget. Over NT\$500 million in administrative funds were frozen, as well as an additional NT\$110 million designated for promoting Indigenous language use in churches. The CIP emphasized that these funds are closely tied to the everyday lives of Indigenous peoples, supporting initiatives such as healthcare improvement,

³ See generally, "Special Topic – 2024 Indigenous Legislative Yuan Report Zone (專題 - 2024原民立委報導專區)." TITV News, 2023. <https://news.ipcf.org.tw/topic/2024原民立委報導專區>

care for vulnerable families, broadband access in remote areas, language revitalization, industrial marketing, tribal road construction, and environmental upgrades. Any cuts or freezes, the CIP warned, would directly disrupt critical programs and significantly hinder tribal development.

The CIP also noted that NT\$19.76 million allocated to support the Austronesian Forum—a regional alliance involving participants from fifteen countries and territories—was completely eliminated following opposition proposals. This organization, built over five years of effort, plays a key role in countering China’s diplomatic isolation of Taiwan and promoting international Indigenous engagement. The forced suspension of the forum would not only undermine Taiwan’s credibility in the global Indigenous community but also damage its diplomatic position. Furthermore, it would eliminate crucial opportunities for tribal youth, community groups, artists, and scholars to engage with international partners, resulting in irreparable loss.

In addition, NT\$36.96 million in public outreach funds—intended to raise awareness among Indigenous communities about their rights and promote government policy among the broader public—was entirely cut. According to the CIP, this would severely limit the council’s ability to disseminate essential policy information through media channels, leading to a loss of access to vital resources for Indigenous peoples and weakening broader public understanding of Indigenous history and culture in Taiwan.

While the budget cuts affected Indigenous programs, not all Indigenous legislators publicly opposed the measure, for example, Kao Chin Su-mei. The episode illustrates how Indigenous issues are often subordinated within a broader political agenda and the dynamic between Indigenous legislators, their political parties, ideologies, and more.

Though part of broader sweeping reductions across multiple ministries under the new opposition-controlled legislature, the precision with which Indigenous-related programs were targeted suggests a deliberate pattern of marginalization. When viewed together with the electoral limitations and the colonial-era classification system, these budget cuts reveal a deeper, systemic issue—namely, the nation’s capacity to retract resources and autonomy from Indigenous communities via legislative power. This illustrates how sovereignty is not only challenged by electoral structures but also by administrative decisions that affect everyday governance, participation, and development.

5. Conclusion

I would like to emphasize once again that the separation of Indigenous electoral districts is not only a reflection of colonial history but also a potential barrier to full democratic participation for Taiwan’s Indigenous

peoples. While the system was originally designed to ensure representation, it may now be doing the opposite by confining Indigenous voters to a limited electoral sphere.

This research note, therefore, calls for a critical reassessment of the electoral system for Indigenous peoples, alongside an honest reckoning with its colonial legacy. A more integrated and inclusive model of Indigenous representation is urgently needed—one that reflects the realities of urbanization, respects the diversity within Indigenous communities, and centers Indigenous voices in the process of institutional reform. As Taiwan continues to evolve as a democracy, it must decide whether it will truly uphold the principles of pluralism and self-determination, or continue to marginalize Indigenous political participation through outdated structures.

At the same time, institutional design cannot be viewed in isolation. As discussed in this research note, the persistent lack of information access, underrepresentation in media, and the recent legislative budget cuts targeting Indigenous programs reveal a broader pattern of structural marginalization. Electoral systems, media infrastructures, and fiscal governance all intersect to either enable or inhibit Indigenous futures.

Therefore, meaningful reform must go beyond merely redrawing electoral boundaries. It requires engaging Indigenous communities in genuine dialogue, restoring resources to support Indigenous self-governance, and addressing the digital and media inequalities that limit their full participation in the public sphere. Only through such comprehensive efforts can Taiwan begin to fulfill its promise of transitional justice and democratic inclusion.

This research note is a preliminary step in that direction. Future research should continue to interrogate how sovereignty, representation, and information access converge in the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples. In doing so, we may begin to reimagine a future where Indigenous political participation is no longer conditional, but fully integral to Taiwan's democratic landscape.

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