



## Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

# Strengthening Democracy through Open Governance: Shared Values in US-Taiwan Relations

In 2014, young protesters took to Taiwan's streets to oppose a trade agreement with China and temporarily seized control of the national legislature. This protest, now known as the [Sunflower Student Movement](#), prompted a shift in Taiwanese politics that continues to influence its democracy today. Indeed, Taiwan is gaining a reputation as one of the world's leading states promoting democracy activism through the innovative use of digital technology. Recently, the [Sigur Center](#) hosted Audrey Tang, the first Digital Minister of Taiwan, to discuss Taiwan's now experienced civil society and the country's technological approach to open governance. Additional commentary came from GW professors [Scott White](#), Director of the Cybersecurity Program and Cyber Academy at GW, and [Susan Aaronson](#), Research Professor of International Affairs.

### **"Fork the Government"**

In addition to serving as Taiwan's Digital Minister, Tang is an activist and contributor to Taiwan's [g0v](#) ("gov-zero"), which is a community focused on equipping civil society with tools to shape a better democracy. Minister Tang cited g0v and its work to "fork the government" as the first major component of Taiwan's open democracy. The term "fork" refers to the act of changing the direction of something

without necessarily destroying it. For g0v, this means taking government services g0v thinks could be improved and producing a “shadow government” version with which it can transparently tinker parallel to the official version. One example is [Moedict](#), an improved version of the Ministry of Education’s [online dictionary](#). The goal of this process is not to replace government services. Instead, g0v purposefully does not copyright its websites so that the Taiwanese government can elect to incorporate the “forked” versions into the official government domain. Thus, Minister Tang described this “forking” process as a way to fulfill public needs while “gently pushing” the government to pursue changes.

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Beyond improved online services, however, Minister Tang’s ultimate goals for Taiwanese democracy include transparency, accountability, participation, and inclusion. While many of the technologies and methods being used in Taiwan are new, she argued that Taiwan is already one of the most open democracies in the world and that these achievements are especially notable when placed in contrast with the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

### **Stark Contrast to PRC in Transparency**

Whereas the PRC tracks its population for its [social credit system](#), Taiwan uses the same technology to track and publicize the actions of its government. For example, g0v created [budget.g0v.tw](#) to track the government budget and visualize trends. Similarly, the group’s [Vote.ly.g0v.tw](#) was created to make the voting records of individual legislators easily accessible and to provide broader insights by sorting and ranking legislators according to the collected data. This kind of transparency is applied to specific legislation as well. One of the most recent g0v projects is the [LSL Calculator](#), which visually clarifies different proposals to amend labor regulations in order to help workers better understand and review the impacts

of each proposal.

Taiwanese policy radically differs from the PRC in other ways as well. While the PRC requires companies to establish a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) branch, Taiwan flips this principle and requires each government agency to include a [Participation Officer](#) (PO) whose main job is to listen to public opinion and cooperate with citizens to make policy plans. This more horizontal mode of government relations also applies to Taiwanese companies, which are granted a year to violate state regulations with the condition that the company must share its data and recommendations with the public at the end of the trial period. This [sandbox system](#) of regulatory co-creation allows for innovation within the government, as the public can choose to incorporate the recommendations of companies into official regulations. Minister Tang made clear that Taiwan's policies are not merely different from the PRC's, but normatively better as well. "Chinese

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action is bravado that is not a projection of power, but rather a projection of insecurity," she said.

In contrast to the PRC's logic to leverage state opacity, Minister Tang argues that an open government such as Taiwan does not necessarily sacrifice the security of the government. In fact, she claims that Taiwan is uniquely equipped to handle adverse events such as foreign attacks on elections through campaign donations or targeted misinformation in social media. To combat the former, Taiwan releases all donation records to its public so that any interference can be identified. However, the government only releases the records in paper format, which is why gov conducts [crowdsourced projects](#) to run optical character readers (OCRs) on all 2637 pages of data. This data is then digitized, organized, and published in a searchable format within 24 hours of the release of the original document.

In the fight against disinformation on social media, Minister Tang notes that there are limitations on what a state can and should do without leaning into problematic

ensorship or government propaganda. G0v's solution is collaborative [fact-checking](#) through the use of bots. When individuals feel unsure about a piece of information, they can forward it to a bot that sends the post to a group of fact-checkers. After the fact is checked, the information is sent to everyone who forwarded the original post regardless whether they sent they initially flagged the post or not.

## **Additional Expert Commentary on the Broader Context**

In his comments, White pointed out that a state's security goes beyond election security. White's main concern with Taiwan's pursuit of open governance is that there is some government activity, especially as regards security, that he believes warrants top secrecy. Minister Tang's response was that the openness she advocates does not apply to every detail of governance. Minister Tang herself avoids looking at any sensitive information and passes that work to others on her team. Aaronson, meanwhile stressed that while transparency, accountability, participation, and inclusion are valiant and important goals to pursue, democracy is fundamentally built on trust. Although the strategies being implemented in Taiwan help preserve trust, it is not clear how governments can work to rebuild trust that has been lost. Given this, she argues that the threat of misinformation and disinformation, which contribute to the erosion of trust, should be given more weight in Taiwan.

Another concern for Aaronson is that Taiwan's crowdsourced projects, while intended to improve participation and inclusion, could be dominated by special interest groups, such as corporations or a small subset of especially motivated citizens. In this sense, all of the tools being employed by g0v and the Taiwanese government may not do enough to reflect the views of the average citizen. A related example is Taiwan's use of [Polis](#), an AI moderated conversation tool that only allows people to indicate whether they agree or disagree with statements to chart areas of consensus. According to Minister Tang, Polis is often used by the Taiwanese government to get a sense of public opinion. However, Polis seems to some challenges currently to screen out non-citizens from participating. Taiwan's democratic technologies may need to be refined to achieve its desired goals.

## Conclusion

Taiwan's unique approach to democracy may still be too new for definitive conclusions; what is clear, though, is that both academics and the global community should be paying closer attention to Taiwan's pursuit of open governance. Even mature democracies are experiencing serious concerns of balancing openness with state security interests, effectively building trust, and ensuring equitable use of technologies. Taiwan's bold approach to democracy may come with some new challenges, but moving forward, the Taiwanese experiment with emerging technologies for open governance under the new Digital Minister is bound to hold important lessons for the United States and other states with shared values.

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*The views expressed are the speakers' own.*

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***About the Rising Powers Initiative and Sigur Center for Asian Studies***

The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asian scholarly interaction and serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts and policymakers. The Sigur Center houses the Rising Powers Initiative, a multi-year, multi-project research effort that studies the role of domestic identities and foreign policy debates of aspiring powers.

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