

# Inter-Party Competition in Taiwan: Two Decades of Change and Continuity

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Despite talk of a decline in the importance of political parties in modern democracies, parties remain essential players in the political process of liberal democracies. E.E. Schattschneider's comment that, "modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of political parties," still rings true over sixty years after the publication of his work *Party Government*.<sup>1</sup> Parties continue to play a critical role in recruiting political leaders, nominating electoral candidates, structuring public debate and organizing government. There is also a consensus among political scientists that institutionalized political parties are a prerequisite for democratic consolidation.<sup>2</sup> However, many of the newer democracies associated with the Third Wave of Democratization, in Samuel Huntington's terminology, have failed to develop such strong political parties.<sup>3</sup> Instead parties are often the personal tool of charismatic politicians, do not offer distinctive policy appeals and lack mass membership structures. With weak party identification among both politicians and voters party splits and mergers are unsurprisingly common. The prevalence of inchoate party systems in many new democracies has made their path towards democratic consolidation highly problematic.

As Taiwan began its democratic transition in the late 1980s, it also falls into the category of a Third Wave Democracy. Over the past few decades, the transition of developing countries from totalitarian and authoritarian regimes towards democracy became a trend sweeping over the world from Eastern Europe to Latin America to East Asia. One common characteristic of such a movement was the breakdown of the incumbent political parties and the formation of opposition ones caused by democratic reforms initiated by the governing regimes. Following the arrival of the Kuomintang (KMT) regime on Taiwan in 1945, it ran the island as a one-party state for over four decades, cracking down harshly on any attempts to form a genuine opposition party. It was not until 1986 that Taiwan had its first taste of multi-party politics, when a group of democracy activists risked imprisonment by defying martial law regulations in forming the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). In 1993, a group of KMT party elite split from the KMT and formed the New Party (NP), which became a growing competitor to the two major parties in the 1990s. After

2000, two more relevant parties emerged to challenge the established parties: the People First Party (PFP) headed by James Soong and the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) assembled by former president Lee Teng-hui. With up to five significant political parties, Taiwan has some attributes of a multi-party system. However, there has also been a trend towards the formation of two political blocs; the Pan Green camp includes the DPP and its allies, primarily the TSU, while the Pan Blue camp includes the KMT, PFP, and NP.

Taiwan is an important case for party scholars to examine. Not only is it the only Chinese multi-party democracy, it is also the only Chinese liberal democracy. Taiwan's parties have taken a development path in sharp contrast to those seen in other new democracies. It has arguably the most institutionalized political parties and party system in Asia. While the Japanese and Korean political landscapes have featured incessant party splits and mergers, the Taiwanese party system has been relatively stable. The same two political parties that contested the first multi-party election in 1989 remain dominant. In 1989 the DPP and KMT won 92 percent of seats and in 2004 they still won 75 percent of seats. Unlike the issueless elections in many new democracies, Taiwanese parties offer quite distinct policy packages, so that issues do matter in election campaigns.<sup>4</sup> The parties also showed themselves to be highly responsive to perceived signals from public opinion. Dafydd Fell has shown how the KMT and DPP moved from initially highly polarized positions towards more centrist positions on core political issues.<sup>5</sup> Another sign of the stability of the main political parties is that both the KMT and DPP have been able to survive the departure of charismatic leaders that left to form new parties or stand as independent presidential candidates.

This special issue of *East Asia* examines how Taiwan's parties and party system have developed in the island's first two decades of multi-party competition. Although the authors have employed a wide range of methodologies and examined party change from different angles, they share a number of features in common. Firstly, each of the papers updates our understanding of party politics since the change in ruling parties in 2000. Secondly, they reveal how there has been considerable continuity not only from the 1990s, but also from the authoritarian martial law era. Thirdly, all four examine aspects of party politics that have received little attention from analysts of Taiwanese politics. Fourthly, the authors have used new, innovative and often previously unpublished datasets. Fifthly, these papers challenge existing theories of party and party system change in Taiwan, offering alternative theories and frameworks of analysis. Taken together, these four papers offer a valuable addition to our understanding of these crucial actors in the island's political process, its political parties.

Hsu Yung-ming analyzes the seemingly contradictory trends in the island's party system in his essay "Splitting and Making Parties: Analysis of Party Reconfiguration in Taiwan." Both before and after 2000, Taiwan has swung between two party and multi-party competition. Hsu reveals the inadequacies of existing explanations of party system change in Taiwan that solely rely on election systems, elite mobilization theory or ethnic politics theory. In their place, Hsu has created an innovative synthetic framework that incorporates structural pre-conditions, institutional incentives and the process of government formation to explain party reconfiguration. As Hsu explains, "the political map in post-hegemonic Taiwan has to be redrawn to incorporate mutual

competition along these three political boundaries.”<sup>6</sup> Thus the incongruence of ethnic and party lines, the single non-transferable vote in multi-member district election system and post 2000 divided government have created space for third parties to form and to survive. However, the single member district presidential elections act in the reverse direction, encouraging elites “to cooperate with the president’s party or the other camp as the presidential election approaches.”<sup>7</sup>

Lin Chiung-chu’s paper, “The Evolution of Party Images and the Party System in Taiwan,” reveals how the electorate’s perceptions of political parties have changed since the early 1990s. Very little has been published on party image in Taiwan since the late 1990s, thus Lin’s contribution is the most comprehensive longitudinal study on this subject to date. In addition to mass survey data spanning 1992-2004, Lin also introduces recent focus group work on voters’ party images. Lin reveals that the core voter impressions reflect the most salient issues on the political agenda, in particular ethnicity, cross-Strait relations and political corruption. There has been much continuity in party images, as many impressions created in the period of democratic transition period have stuck in voters’ minds. For instance, in the mid-1990s the KMT gained a reputation for political corruption and the DPP for being radical and seeking Taiwan independence. A decade later, these impressions still top the most common images of the two main parties. However, party images have not been immutable. For while the KMT has increasingly suffered from negative impressions, the DPP party image has become progressively more positive. Lin then goes on to use survey data to show that party images are significant factors in vote choice. Lin thus argues that the evolution of party images in Taiwan can help explain the rise of the DPP and corresponding decline of the KMT.

The rise and fall of Taiwan’s first significant third party, the NP, is the focus of Dafydd Fell’s contribution to this edition. In contrast to the rich literature on Taiwan’s established parties, very little work has been published on its smaller challenger parties. Fell outlines the NP’s split from the KMT, its meteoric rise in the mid-1990s, gradual decline after 1996, and return to being a faction within the KMT. Fell challenges the assertion that the NP is a failed party. Instead, he argues it is a victim of its own success, as by 2005 almost all its original objectives had been achieved, thus losing its *raison d’être*. Ideologically the KMT has shifted so close to the NP since 2000 that the two parties have been on the verge of merging. Fell also challenges the most common explanation for the rise and fall of the NP, i.e., that the party rose when united and fell as a result of the bitter power struggles. Instead a framework that incorporates party platforms, resources and the political opportunity structure is employed to explain the rise and decline of the NP. In other words, when the NP faced a favorable political environment in the mid-1990s, its moderate political message and rich human resources enabled the party to grow rapidly. However, after 2000 the political environment became progressively more hostile, as the NP faced a rejuvenated and orthodox KMT and a strong new competitor in the PFP. As the NP’s resources were eroded and wasted and the party switched to narrow and extremist election appeals, it began its long-term electoral decline.

In the last paper of this special issue, Mikael Mattlin looks at another under-researched topic, the party at the local level. Developments in grassroots elections stand in stark contrast to those at the national and even county executive level. While the DPP has become the largest party in the national parliament and even

won the presidency twice in a row, it and the other parties challenging the KMT have had no more than a marginal impact on grassroots elections. Mattlin employs a combination of election data and in-depth interviews with grassroots politicians to analyze changes in inter-party competition in local elections before and after the change in ruling parties. Mattlin found that in contrast to frequent instances of party switching at the national level, “In grassroots elections, many politicians flow in and out of their party affiliation depending on the political circumstances, but they rarely change party.”<sup>8</sup> The new political parties have either failed or not seriously attempted to form the local party organizations to challenge the KMT’s dominance of local elections. Nevertheless, the KMT’s strong showing in grassroots elections should not be equated to strong mass support or ideological commitment among KMT local politicians to the party program. Instead the KMT’s continued strength at the local level is down to the long-term legacy of one party rule and patronage during the martial law era and the widespread perception that DPP rule at the national level is just a temporary phenomenon.

The intensity of inter-party hostility in the post 2000 period has contributed to a growing cynicism among the Taiwanese electorate regarding political parties. Nevertheless, the studies in this special edition have shown that the island’s parties and party system continue to institutionalize to a greater degree than in many other new democracies. Rather than parties fading from the political scene, it can safely be predicted that Taiwanese democracy will continue to be unthinkable save in terms its political parties.

## Notes

1. E.E. Schattschneider, *Party Government* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1942), 1.
2. Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Towards Consolidation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1999).
3. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
4. Dafydd Fell, *Party Politics in Taiwan* (London: Routledge, 2005).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Hsu Yung-ming, “Splitting and Merging Parties: Analysis of Party Reconfiguration in Taiwan,” in this issue.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Mikael Mattlin, “Party Opportunism among Local Politicians after Taiwan’s Power Transition,” in this edition.

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