

# Was 2005 a Critical Election in Taiwan?

## *Locating the Start of a New Political Era*

### ABSTRACT

This study applies the concept of critical elections to Taiwan's recent political history. Instead of 2008, it is argued that 2005 deserves the title of a critical election. Political developments in 2005 laid the foundations for the Kuomintang's return to political dominance.

**KEYWORDS:** critical elections, Taiwan, political parties, Kuomintang, Democratic Progressive Party

### THE START OF A NEW POLITICAL ERA: 2008?

Taiwan's second democratic change of ruling parties, in 2008, appears to mark the start of a new era in its political history. After eight long years in opposition, the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party, KMT) returned to power on the back of landslide victories in both parliamentary (Legislative Yuan) and presidential elections. These elections gave the party both vote and seat share advantages last seen in the late 1980s, when Taiwan was just emerging from four decades of authoritarian rule. Under the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), supporters of the KMT had become increasingly disillusioned with Taiwan's political institutions. Slogans such as "Democracy is Dead" or "The Judiciary is Dead" were commonly seen at KMT demonstrations.<sup>1</sup>

The KMT's recent victories have served to revive its supporters' damaged trust in Taiwanese democracy and have also improved the image of Taiwan's

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1. Staff reporter, "Chen Replies to Pan Blue Rally Request," *Taipei Times*, March 28, 2004, p. 1.

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democracy in the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the degree of KMT political dominance in the aftermath of these elections and the way it has handled demonstrations have led some critics to warn of the dangers of a return to a new authoritarian era.<sup>3</sup> The frequent argument that 2008 marks the start of a new era is also reinforced by the warming of cross-Taiwan Strait relations after an effective political stalemate since 1995.

A key task for political analysts is to make complex political processes comprehensible to their readers. One way that we achieve this objective is to classify political eras and examine patterns of change and continuity across time. Therefore, in this study I attempt to locate the starting point of Taiwan's new political era. At first blush, it appears that 2008 should be regarded as a turning point, or what political scientists refer to as a "critical election." Critical elections are defined by Evans and Norris as, "Those exceptional contests which produce abrupt, significant and durable realignments in the electorate with major consequences for the long-term party order."<sup>4</sup> Election and survey data are examined to analyze the changing party order in Taiwan. However, here it must be pointed out that the study's results can only be considered preliminary: at least two more electoral cycles are required to determine whether we have witnessed a durable realignment. This study can only show whether the 2005 contest has the *potential* to be a critical election.

I argue that although 2008 does have some of the hallmarks of a watershed year, the data suggest that 2005 has a much better claim to be potentially the critical election. The critical shifts in public opinion that laid the foundations for the KMT victories occurred in 2005. Here, the key political developments of 2005 are examined to show the role they played in ending the DPP era. Although political pundits tend to regard KMT officials' visits to the PRC in the spring of 2005 as the most momentous political events of that year, I argue that other developments were more significant. The KMT's effective ownership of the anti-corruption issue and the new party leadership both contributed to decisive shifts in party support levels in late 2005.

2. References in the Chinese media to Taiwan's democracy have become far less critical since 2008.

3. For instance, DPP Chairwoman Tsai Ing-wen has made this argument. See "Tsai Calls for Police Calm during Protest," *Taipei Times*, May 17, 2009, p. 1.

4. Geoffrey Evans and Pippa Norris, eds., *Critical Elections: British Parties and Voters in Long-term Perspective* (London: Sage, 1998), p. xxxi.

In addition, institutional developments that year also make it a turning point. The constitutional reforms of the electoral system—so influential in giving the KMT overwhelming majorities in 2008—were passed in 2005. In addition, that year KMT primaries began to contribute to a coalescing of Pan Blue parties, as splinter party politicians returned to join the KMT nomination process.<sup>5</sup> This meant that by 2008 there was effectively only a single Pan Blue party, for the first time since the early 1990s.

### CRITICAL ELECTIONS

Critical elections are actually extremely rare in mature democracies, where continuity, or what political scientists call “maintaining elections,” tend to predominate.<sup>6</sup> This is where elections essentially reflect a continuation of the status quo in party competition. An intermediate type of election is referred to as a “deviating election.” This is where there is a temporary shift in the normal share of votes for the main parties, perhaps through the impact of political scandals, short-term issues, or significant events. However, after this short-term deviation, there is a return to the old pattern of party politics in the subsequent election. As Evans and Norris put it, the deviating election is one that leaves “no permanent imprint on the party system.”<sup>7</sup>

The other major categories of realignment in the party literature attempt to capture the phenomenon of long-term change. Secular dealignment refers to a long-term gradual loosening of voter-party ties.<sup>8</sup> This is closely associated with the “party in crisis” argument that the weakening of the class cleavage in West European democracies has not been replaced by new cleavages that tie social groups to parties. The other long-term change category is known as secular realignment. This describes how party allegiances shift because of generational change or new issue cleavages.<sup>9</sup>

5. The Pan Blue camp refers to the KMT and its splinter parties, such as the People First Party (PFP) and New Party (NP), while the Pan Green parties are the DPP and Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU). These colors are used because blue and green are the main colors of the KMT and DPP flags, respectively.

6. Evans and Norris, *Critical Elections*, p. xxxii.

7. *Ibid.*, p. xxxiii.

8. Pippa Norris, *The Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Electoral Marketplace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 230.

9. Vladimir Orlando Key, Jr., “Secular Realignment and the Party System,” *Journal of Politics* 21:2 (May 1959), pp. 198–210.

Although a maintaining election is straightforward to recognize, considerable time is required before we can be certain whether an election is permanently or just temporarily transforming the political system. The concept of critical elections becomes clearer if we think in terms of actual cases in modern democracies. In the case of the U.K., the most frequently cited example of a critical election is New Labour's coming to power in 1997.<sup>10</sup> Labour had been in opposition for almost 20 years, losing four consecutive general elections. But under the leadership of Tony Blair, the party recovered and dominated the political scene for well over a decade by winning a series of elections. In fact, until recently it appeared that Labour was likely to be the governing party for the foreseeable future.

#### CRITICAL ELECTIONS IN TAIWAN

After two decades of multi-party politics in Taiwan, can we talk of any critical elections there? Each of Taiwan's major elections has had its own unique feature. The 1986 contest was the first multi-party election;<sup>11</sup> 1991 and 1992 were the first full parliamentary elections.<sup>12</sup> In 1995 the NP's strong showing implied the start of a multi-party system; 1996 was the first direct presidential election; and in 1997 the DPP's vote and seat share exceeded the KMT's for the first time. Nevertheless, John Hsieh is correct in his assertion that rather than change, there was far more continuity in the first era of multi-party elections in Taiwan.<sup>13</sup> Unlike most other formerly authoritarian parties after a democratic transition, the KMT was able to remain in power by continuing to win national elections.

Now I turn to election and survey data in my search for Taiwan's critical elections. Table 1 shows the party vote shares from Taiwan's first four presidential elections. With only four direct presidential elections held so far, these results cannot be considered conclusive. The KMT's defeat in 2000 looks like a deviating election, with the party returning to its original vote share of

10. A similar case is the long-term Conservative Party's domination of British politics after its 1979 election victory.

11. Although the DPP was still technically an illegal organization, the KMT regime did not crack down on this challenger party that year.

12. The first full National Assembly elections were in 1991, while 1992 featured the first full Legislative Yuan elections.

13. See John Hsieh, "Continuity and Change in Taiwan's Electoral Politics," in *How Asia Votes*, eds. John Hsieh and David Newman (New York: Chatham House, 2002), pp. 32–49.

TABLE 1. Party Vote Shares in Presidential Elections (%)

	1996	2000	2004	2008
KMT	54	23.1	49.9	58.45
DPP	21.1	39.3	50.1	41.55
NP	14.9	0.1		
PPF		36.8		

SOURCE: Online database of the Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, at <<http://vote.nccu.edu.tw/engceec/vote4.asp?pass1=A>>, accessed December 10, 2009.

TABLE 2. Vote Shares in Parliamentary (Legislative Yuan) Elections (%)

	1992	1995	1998	2001	2004	2008
KMT	53	46.1	46.4	28.6	32.8	51.2
DPP	31	33.2	29.6	33.4	35.7	36.9
NP		13.0	7.1	2.9	0.1	4
PPF				18.6	13.9	
TSU				8.5	7.8	3.5

SOURCE: Ibid. to Table 1, at <<http://vote.nccu.edu.tw/engceec/vote4.asp?pass1=B>>, accessed December 10, 2009.

NOTE: These figures show the vote shares for the main political parties in legislative elections.

TABLE 3. Party Seat Shares in Parliamentary (Legislative Yuan) Elections (%)

	1992	1995	1998	2001	2004	2008
KMT	59	51.8	54.7	30.2	35.1	71.7
DPP	31.7	32.9	31.1	38.7	39.6	24
NP		12.8	4.9	0.4	0.4	0
PPF				20.2	15.1	0.9
TSU				5.8	5.3	0

SOURCE: Ibid. to Table 2.

NOTE: These figures show the seat shares for the main political parties in legislative elections.

approximately 50% in 2004. There are signs that suggest 2008 is a candidate for a critical election: this was the first time the DPP vote share fell, with the KMT's rising almost another 10% to its highest-ever level of 58.45%.

Next, Tables 2 and 3 show the main parties' respective vote and seat shares in Legislative Yuan elections. Here the patterns are more complex:

the multiple member district electoral system offered more space for third parties than did the single-member presidential elections shown in Table 1. Although in some cases there are disparities in the vote and seat shares that parties received, three contests stand out as potential critical elections: 1995, 2001, and 2008.

First, 1995 was the first election in which a third party, the NP, passed the threshold of becoming relevant in both seat and vote shares. This set a pattern in which at least three parties were competing in legislative elections, a pattern that was maintained until 2008. Nevertheless, the weakness of 1995 as a critical election lies in the NP's subsequent decline in its second national level election in 1998. Thus, the success of the NP in the mid-1990s can perhaps be seen as a deviating election: by the late 1990s there was a return to two-party competition after the NP bubble burst.

The second potential critical election is 2001. This year was significant because of the arrival of two new parties, the TSU and the PFP and the total demise of the NP. This election saw record KMT losses in both seat and vote share, largely in favor of the PFP. In fact, at the time it even looked possible that the PFP might replace the KMT as the largest party in the Pan Blue camp. Moreover, in 2001 the DPP became the single largest party for the first time. The patterns of party competition in 2001 were largely maintained three years later in 2004.

Nevertheless, the case for 2000–01 as a critical election is diminished by the transformation in the Taiwanese party system seen in the 2008 legislative elections, the first under the new single-member-district electoral system.<sup>14</sup> First, the KMT recorded its highest ever vote and seat share increases. The seat share changes were especially dramatic as the KMT's total rose from about one-third of the seats in 2004 to almost three-quarters of all seats in 2008. The DPP's vote share was relatively stable, but the party suffered its first and worst ever fall in seat share: from being the largest parliamentary party with almost 40% of the seats, it was relegated to becoming a small-to-medium sized party with just one-quarter of the seats in 2008. The third major shift that year was the virtual disappearance of the challenger parties, making Taiwan a two-party system of one large (KMT) and one small-to-medium party (DPP). In short, these parliamentary results suggest that after a series

14. In 2005, constitutional revisions were passed that halved the number of legislators from 225 to 113 and moved from a predominantly multiple-member-district system to one of mainly single-member districts.

TABLE 4. Local Executive (Vote Share and Seat) (%)

	1993	1997	2001	2005	2009
KMT	47.3 (61.9)	42.1 (34.8)	35.2 (39.1)	51 (60.9)	47.9 (70.6)
DPP	41.2 (28.6)	43.3 (52.2)	45.3 (39.1)	42 (26.1)	45.3 (23.5)
NP	3.1 (0)	1.4 (0)	9.9 (4.3)	0.2 (4.3)	
PFP			2.4 (8.7)	1.1 (4.3)	
TSU				1.1 (0)	

SOURCES: Ibid. to Table 3, at <<http://www2.nccu.edu.tw/~soo/eng/data/data01.htm>>, accessed December 10, 2009. The 2009 figures are from the Central Election Commission's website, <[http://vote2009.nat.gov.tw/zh\\_TW/PC/0000000000.html](http://vote2009.nat.gov.tw/zh_TW/PC/0000000000.html)>, accessed December 10, 2009.

NOTE: This table shows the main parties' vote and seat shares in local executive elections. The party seat shares are shown in parenthesis. While in 2005, 23 local executives were elected, in 2009, because of administrative district changes, only 17 local executive posts were elected.

of deviating elections, 2008 could mark a return to the patterns of party competition last seen at the outset of democratization in the late 1980s.

The last set of electoral data examined is for the island-wide single-member-district local executive elections, which is displayed in Table 4. These were held for city mayors and county magistrates and took place every four years in the 23 cities and counties (except Taipei and Kaohsiung City). As with the parliamentary statistics, these data suggest that the recent pattern of political competition is returning to a situation rather similar to the early 1990s. After a period of multi-party competition from the mid-1990s to 2004, Taiwan was moving back toward a two-party system after 2005. The local executive contest that stands out is 2005—the year that the KMT had its largest increase in seat and vote shares and the DPP its record seat share loss. In fact, the DPP's local executive seat share in 2005 was almost exactly the same as its 2008 parliamentary seat share, approximately one-quarter of all seats. In other words, 2005 set a precedent for a return to KMT one-party dominance, a pattern repeated at the national level in 2008. Therefore, this table suggests that the critical election or year marking a watershed between political eras is 2005 rather than 2008.

In December 2009, the most recent round of local executive elections was held. However, as a result of administrative mergers and upgrading, the elections for a number of key constituencies were postponed until 2010.<sup>15</sup> This

15. Taipei County was upgraded to a special municipality to be called New Taipei City; the three merged districts are Kaohsiung City and County, Tainan City and County, and Taichung City and County.

meant that only 17 counties and cities elected local executives in 2009, representing only about 40% of Taiwan's total population. Therefore, although I have included the vote and seat shares for 2009 in Table 4, this is not comparing like for like.

Nevertheless, these elections did represent the first island-wide expression of public opinion after the KMT returned to power; they were widely referred to in the media as the "mid-term exam" of President Ma Ying-jeou.<sup>16</sup> Although there was a swing in the vote shares from KMT to DPP, the fact that the KMT won 12 out of 17 districts suggests that the pattern of KMT dominance, set in 2005, has continued. That the KMT would view winning almost three-quarters of available seats and the loss of just one seat as a defeat is reminiscent of its reaction to minor setbacks at the outset of multi-party politics in the late 1980s.<sup>17</sup> In other words, although the 2009 data are not conclusive, continued KMT dominance does support the argument that 2005 can be considered a potential critical election.

Examining only election data has its drawbacks when trying to locate watersheds between eras. First, elections are not held every year; thus, key developments between elections may be missed. Second, elections held at different levels and under different electoral systems cannot be easily compared. Therefore, I also look at developments in party identification surveys, shown in Table 5, which are conducted more frequently. These show some similarity to the election data. For instance, there was a shift toward a multi-party system with the arrival of the NP in the mid-1990s. As with the election data, 2000 seems to mark the start of a new era, with a halving of the number of KMT supporters and the transfer of their support to the PFP. The danger that the KMT would be replaced as the dominant Pan Blue party can be seen from the fact that in 2000 and 2001, the PFP's support levels were actually higher than the KMT's. On the other hand, change for the DPP occurred more within the pattern of secular realignment, with a very steady year-on-year increase in its support levels from just 5% in 1994 to a high of 26.6% in 2000.

16. Li Ming-hsien, "Lan: Diyu 11xi Jiu Baixuan" [Blues: Lower than 11 seats is a defeat], *Lianhe-bao* [United Daily News], December 5, 2009, p. A1.

17. On the KMT's negative verdict on its performance in the 2009 local elections, see Shih Hsiu-chuan and Ko Shu-ling, "KMT Caucus Apologizes for Poll Results," *Taipei Times*, December 8, 2009, p. 3. The KMT viewed these results as disappointing because most seats contested were safe KMT districts with KMT incumbents, and Ma's stumping for the party's candidates failed to prevent significant vote swings toward the DPP.



TABLE 5. Party Identification for Taiwan's Main Parties, 1991–2008 (December figures, %)

	1992	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
KMT	33.8	29	30.5	34.5	24.2	30.3	35.3	14.5	14.1	18.9	21.4	21.9	33.2	34.7	35	33.3	32.9
DPP	5.4	12.1	13	11.2	15.8	21.2	23.2	26.6	24	24.5	25.1	26.3	20.6	19.3	19.8	21.7	19.6
NP		5.6	8.4	9.1	6	3.5	3.3	1									
PFP								17.5	15	13.4	11.2	7.1	2.9	2.1	1.2	1.3	1.3
TSU									1.5	1.7	2.1	2.7	2.9	2.6	1.2	1.3	1.0
Indep.	60.8	53.3	45.1	43.6	53.3	44.3	37.7	40.2	44.2	40.4	39.3	41.5	39.8	40.6	42.2	41.1	44.5

SOURCES: Online database of the Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, "Changes in the Party Identification of Taiwanese as Tracked in Surveys by the Election Survey Center, NCCU (1992–2009/6)," at <<http://esc.nccu.edu.tw/eng/data/data03-1.htm>>, accessed December 10, 2009. The 2009 figures are from the online database of idem, "Trends in Core Political Attitudes among Taiwanese: Party Identification, June 1992–December 2009," at <<http://esc.nccu.edu.tw/english/modules/tinyd2/content/partyID.htm>>, accessed May 13, 2010.

NOTE: Survey figures are from the second half of each year.

Nevertheless, as in the local executive elections, the year that stands out in the party identification surveys as a watershed is 2005. This year saw the biggest single year-on-year rise in party identification for the KMT, from 21.9% to 33.2%. Although the decline in PFP support contributed to this rise, it is likely that some independents (i.e., non-partisans) also shifted allegiance to the KMT. This year was also important because it represents the first significant fall in support for the DPP from 26% to 20%. Although most of these former DPP supporters would likely have become independents, it is at least possible that some may have crossed the divide and become KMT identifiers.

The importance of 2005 is also reinforced by the fact that it was followed for the next four years by relative consistency in party support levels. Surprisingly, it appears that dramatic events such as the Red Shirts Anti-Corruption Movement of 2006, the DPP's more radical nationalist appeals in the last two years of the Chen Shui-bian administration, and even the KMT's landslide victories and return to power in 2008 all had relatively minimal long-term impacts on party support levels.<sup>18</sup> In short, the survey data also support the case for 2005 being a potential critical election year.

#### EXPLAINING THE 2005 CRITICAL SHIFT IN PUBLIC OPINION

If we accept that the roots of the 2008 landslides lie in the political developments of 2005, then the next step is to try to unravel what contributed to this critical shift in public opinion. Therefore, I next review some of the key potential developments in 2005 that could help explain this shift. Because political scientists working on Taiwan mainly concentrate on issues related to national identity/cross-strait relations, this seems to be the first field to consider.

The political event that captured the most media attention in 2005 was of course the April visit by KMT Chairman Lien Chan to China, where for the first time since the 1940s, party-to-party talks were conducted between the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). These talks saw a range of

18. The Red Shirts Anti-Corruption campaign was a large social movement that emerged in the autumn of 2006 calling on Chen Shui-bian to resign the presidency. In the last two years of Chen's second term, the DPP increasingly courted its core supporters with Taiwanese nationalist appeals. For instance, it scrapped the National Unification Guidelines in 2006 and renamed the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall as the Taiwan Democracy Memorial Hall in 2007.

agreements signed by KMT and CCP leaders. Also agreed was a framework for future consultation and meetings that have continued to the present, even after the KMT became the ruling party.

There is no doubt that these talks did help to ease cross-strait tensions and laid the foundation for the de facto government-to-government talks held since Ma Ying-jeou came to power in 2008. Previously, there was concern that voters would react negatively to party-to-party talks and condemn the KMT as being unificationist or defeatist. Nevertheless, what was surprising was that the talks were relatively well received by Taiwanese public opinion, with over 50% of respondents judging the visit a success and helpful for cross-strait relations.<sup>19</sup>

Although there is a correlation between the new détente with the CCP and the KMT's growing popularity, there is no clear evidence that this influenced the public opinion shifts of 2005. The DPP did try to condemn the KMT as defeatist in 2005, but such issues were not salient in the local executive election campaign, which was dominated by corruption scandals. Moreover, we should recall that the agreements were signed by Lien at the end of his term as KMT chair; subsequently, although the agreements were not scrapped, Ma, the new KMT leader, kept a degree of distance from the KMT-CCP forum. For instance, he did not repeat Lien's comments on allying with the CCP against Taiwan independence; nor did Ma visit China under the title of KMT chairman during his two years in that role.

We can also confirm the lack of a clear relationship between the KMT's China visits and the shift in public opinion, by examining party identification polls conducted between 2004 and 2005. Table 6 shows that there was no clear shift in party support levels following Lien's April trip to China; although the KMT did see an increase of support between April and May, so did the DPP. Instead the table reveals that KMT support doubled in the last six months of 2005, and DPP support was halved in the last four months of the year. In other words, this table does not offer any evidence of a direct public opinion benefit from the China visits. However, it does suggest that the answer to the puzzle lies in the last quarter of the year.

Another commonly heard interlinked argument designed to explain the DPP's fall and KMT's rise was that Taiwan's voters rejected the DPP's radical

19. TVBS Survey Center Poll, "Survey after Lien Chan's Mainland China Visit," May 2, 2005, <[http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE\\_DB/DL\\_DB/rickliu/200505/rickliu-20050505142339.pdf](http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE_DB/DL_DB/rickliu/200505/rickliu-20050505142339.pdf)>, accessed December 10, 2009.

TABLE 6. Party Identification, 2004–2005 (%)

	<i>Apr. 2004</i>	<i>Jul. 2004</i>	<i>Feb. 2, 2005</i>	<i>Mar. 30, 2005</i>	<i>Apr. 28, 2005</i>	<i>May 23, 2005</i>	<i>Aug. 24, 2005</i>	<i>Dec. 15, 2005</i>
DPP	23	23	26	24	18	23	21	12
KMT	21	16	23	23	24	31	32	47
PFP	10	10	7	8	5	5	4	3
TSU	2	5	4	4	4	4	4	3
Indep.	40	41	36	37	45	33	37	31

SOURCE: TVBS Poll Center, “Survey on the Nine Main Political Figures after the Three in One (December 2005) Elections,” <[http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE\\_DB/DL\\_DB/yijung/200512/yijung-20051216190351.pdf](http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE_DB/DL_DB/yijung/200512/yijung-20051216190351.pdf)>, accessed December 10, 2009.

independence policies. For instance, Robert Ross argued in 2006 that “[p]olitical developments in Taiwan over the past year (2005) have effectively ended the independence movement there.”<sup>20</sup> He goes on to claim that mainland policy was a major issue in the 2005 elections and that “voters opted for cross-Straits stability” of the KMT rather than the DPP’s extremism. This does seem to have some resonance when we consider portions of the rhetoric of Chen Shui-bian and his ministers in their second term.

The first problem with this argument is that the DPP only really went to extremes in the last two years of its term, 2006 and 2007. For instance, the move to scrap the National Unification Guidelines and National Unification Council occurred in 2006 and the anti-Chiang Kai-shek appeals, along with the policy of renaming state-owned enterprises to use the term “Taiwan,” were in 2007.<sup>21</sup> We need to remember that the major shift in public opinion occurred in 2005. In that year, the DPP actually took a rather moderate stance on national identity issues. For instance, in February, President Chen and Pan Blue leader Soong Chu-yu signed a joint 10-point agreement that included support for the Republic of China.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, an analysis of both main parties’ election advertising in 2005 shows issues related to Taiwan independence or identity received minimal attention.

20. Robert Ross, “Taiwan’s Fading Independence Movement,” *Foreign Affairs* 85:2 (March–April 2006), pp. 141–48, 141.

21. In its last two years, the DPP administration actively tried to rename state-owned enterprises. For instance, *Chunghwa Post* became *Taiwan Post* in 2007.

22. Staff reporter, “Chen and Soong Sign 10-Point Consensus,” *Taipei Times*, February 25, 2005, p. 1. It was agreed that the Republic of China would remain the nation’s official title.

Instead, both parties concentrated on candidate appeal and accused each other of corruption.<sup>23</sup>

### THE POLITICAL CORRUPTION ISSUE AND THE MA YING-JEOU FACTOR

The evidence that the political corruption issue played a more significant role in the public opinion shifts of late 2005 is far more convincing than explanations focusing on cross-strait relations or national identity. Political corruption has been one of the most salient issues in Taiwanese politics since the early 1990s. It was critical in the DPP's expansion of its support base and in eroding KMT support in the 1990s.<sup>24</sup> Voters had traditionally associated political corruption with the KMT, and critiquing such behavior had long been a key weapon for Taiwan's opposition parties, including the DPP and the NP. Even after the DPP became the ruling party, it still owned the clean government issue and continued to employ it against the KMT.<sup>25</sup> Although the KMT, after it lost power in 2000, began to place more emphasis on attacking the DPP for corruption, these appeals had limited effect prior to 2005 because the DPP still maintained a relatively clean image compared to the KMT. For instance, in the 2004 presidential campaign Chen came under attack for receiving illegal donations, but these attacks appeared to have little impact on the election result.<sup>26</sup> The degree to which the DPP still owned the anti-corruption issue can be seen in Table 7, which shows the proportion of voters that viewed the parties as free of corruption between 1999 and 2008. The table shows that until mid-2005, voters still tended to view the KMT as being more corrupt than the DPP.

The major shift in party image on the corruption issue occurred in late 2005: within a few months, the proportion of voters viewing the DPP as being

23. This point is based on the author's examination of newspaper election advertising one month prior to voting day in December 2005.

24. For an analysis of the political corruption issue in Taiwan's electoral politics, see Dafydd Fell, *Party Politics in Taiwan: Party Politics and the Democratic Evolution of Taiwan, 1991–2004* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 55–84.

25. In the first two parliamentary elections after 2000, political corruption was the DPP's sixth most-emphasized issue area. See Dafydd Fell, "Change and Continuity in Taiwanese Party Politics since 2000," in *What Has Changed? Taiwan before and after the Change in Ruling Parties*, eds. Dafydd Fell, Henning Kloeter, and Chang Bi-yu (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 2005), pp. 21–40, 31.

26. In the 2004 presidential election, a former pro-KMT fugitive business leader issued a series of corruption-related attacks against Chen Shui-bian in the final weeks of the campaign. For instance, see newspaper advertisement in *Zhongguo Shibao* (China Times) (Taipei), March 2, 2004, p. A9.

TABLE 7. Party Image of Clean Government (%)

	Nov. 1999	Mar. 2001	Mar. 2002	Aug. 2004	May 2005	Sept. 2005	Nov. 2005	Jul. 2006	Oct. 2007	Jan. 2008	Sept. 2009
KMT	21	22	27	31	30	34	29	40	29	38	31
DPP	47	41	48	38	34	31	17	14	21	23	21

SOURCES: Ibid. to Table 6, "Survey on Party Image and the Chen Shui-bian Case on the First Anniversary of Ma's Inauguration," <[http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE\\_DB/DL\\_DB/doshouldo/200905/doshouldo-20090508114757.pdf](http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE_DB/DL_DB/doshouldo/200905/doshouldo-20090508114757.pdf)>, accessed December 10, 2009. Source for 2009 figures is *ibid.*, "Party Image Survey on the DPP's 23rd Anniversary," <[http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE\\_DB/DL\\_DB/yijung/200909/yijung-20090929184421.pdf](http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE_DB/DL_DB/yijung/200909/yijung-20090929184421.pdf)>, accessed December 10, 2009.

NOTE: This table shows the proportion of voters that viewed the main parties as being free of corruption.

free from corruption declined from 34% to 17%, while those viewing the KMT as clean rose from 32% to 47%. Moreover, the timing of this shift in party image corresponds exactly with the shift in party support levels in late 2005. This can be explained by the string of corruption scandals that emerged in late 2005 and dominated the agenda throughout the final months of the campaign. The allegations that were particularly damaging for the DPP were related to corruption in the Kaohsiung Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) construction project and also to high-level DPP involvement in stock market insider trading.<sup>27</sup> The former deputy secretary-general of the Presidential Office, Chen Che-nan, was the focus of the Kaohsiung MRT scandal, and so this indirectly implicated President Chen. Chen Che-nan had proclaimed his innocence, but pictures of him and the former head of Kaohsiung Rapid Transit Corporation in a casino in South Korea were used by the KMT as ammunition against the DPP.<sup>28</sup> Although Chen Che-nan was expelled from the DPP, the scandal seriously tarnished the image of the party.

After the defeat, DPP legislator Lin Cho-shui explained, "In this election, for every county and city candidate it was a battle between Chen Che-nan and Ma Ying-jeou."<sup>29</sup> The KMT revealed its emphasis on anti-corruption in its advertising and campaign rallies, where it was the dominant issue. For instance, the party's main pre-election rally was called the "Oppose Corruption Save Taiwan, All People Rally."<sup>30</sup> This was in stark contrast to many previous

27. Ko Shu-ling, "KMT Crushes DPP in Landslide Victory," *Taipei Times*, December 4, 2005, p. 1.

28. See KMT newspaper election advertisement, *Zhongguo Shibao*, November 10, 2005, p. A8.

29. *Lianhebao*, December 4, 2005, p. A14.

30. KMT advertisement in *ibid.*, November 26, 2005, p. A1.

elections, where the KMT had tried to steer clear of the corruption issue. One of Taiwan's leading political scientists, Wu Yu-shan, summed up the impact of the issue in 2005, writing that “[c]orruption brought down the Green Camp's Domain.”<sup>31</sup>

Of course, the anti-corruption issue could only benefit the KMT if it improved its own reputation. At the time the KMT lost power in 2000, only 21% of respondents saw it as a clean party, compared to 47% for the DPP. Nevertheless, Table 7 shows that between 2001 and 2005, the KMT's reputation gradually improved. It was only in late 2005 that—for the first time—the KMT had a cleaner reputation than the DPP; it has maintained this advantage up to the present writing. The KMT was able to improve its image despite the fact that the DPP tried to use the corruption issue throughout this period.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, there is no evidence that KMT local executives were any less corrupt than their DPP counterparts: candidates from both parties had pending corruption cases. Instead, it was the parties' contrasting national-level image of corruption that would override local party or candidate images.

How was the KMT able to transform its image? Four key factors contributed to this development. First, with most local executive positions and the national government in DPP hands, there was far less scope for the KMT to indulge in or be accused of corruption. By 2005, memories of the KMT's numerous corruption scandals of the 1990s had faded significantly. Second, since the KMT partly attributed its poor reputation to its fall from power in 2000, officials undertook some organizational reforms to try to erase the party's corrupt image. In particular, they reformed nomination regulations to avoid nominating tainted candidates.<sup>33</sup> A third major factor was the election of Ma Ying-jeou as KMT party chairman in July 2005. Ma was one of the few KMT politicians seen as corruption free, a reputation he initially cultivated by cracking down on KMT vote buying when he was minister of justice in the early-to-mid-1990s. In 2005, as in 1998, with Ma fronting the party, accusations of KMT corruption were less effective.<sup>34</sup>

31. Wu Yu-shan, “Tanfu Yakuale Lüying Bantu” (Corruption brought down the Green Camp domain), *Zhongguo Shibao*, December 4, 2005, p. A15.

32. Fell, “Change and Continuity in Taiwanese Party Politics,” p. 31.

33. Dafydd Fell, “Democratization of Candidate Selection in Taiwanese Political Parties,” *Journal of Electoral Studies* 13:2 (November 2006), pp. 167–98, 181.

34. In 1998, Ma was the KMT's candidate for Taipei mayor. Despite heavy NP and DPP corruption attacks, the KMT won its best legislative results of the decade.

Table 7 shows that the election of Ma as KMT chairman did not have an immediate impact on improving the party's reputation. This may be partly because the DPP made corruption accusations against the KMT in the 2005 campaign. Nevertheless, under Ma, for the two years prior to its 2008 landslide victories, 37%–38% of voters viewed it as a clean party. These are quite remarkable figures compared to the image of the party under Ma's predecessors, Lee Teng-hui and Lien Chan.

Ma's election as KMT chair in the summer of 2005 was a key moment in the party's revival. When we are considering the shift of public opinion in 2005 in favor of the KMT, we must also stress the importance of Ma's popularity. Ma was able to appeal to core Pan Blue voters but also to the many non-aligned independent voters. Surveys of public satisfaction with Taiwan's leading politicians during the DPP era show that Ma was consistently by far the most popular politician.<sup>35</sup> For instance, in a public satisfaction survey in December 2005, Ma had a satisfaction level of 80%, with his nearest rival almost 20% lower at 62% and Chen at an all-time low of only 10% of voters.<sup>36</sup> Ma also had political communication skills far superior to his predecessor, Lien Chan. Although this was particularly evident in his campaigning in the run-up to the 2008 elections, Ma did invigorate the 2005 campaign. He campaigned throughout the island for KMT candidates. At times the KMT tried to frame the election as a referendum on Ma's leadership. For instance, on the eve of the election, Ma threatened to resign his chairmanship if the party failed to win half the seats. One half-page KMT newspaper advertisement showed a solemn Ma and the slogan: "Don't let Ma Ying-jeou disappear from political circles."<sup>37</sup> Undoubtedly, being led by Taiwan's most popular politician helped invigorate the KMT base and also appealed to critical swing voters, who would determine the national-level election in 2008.

35. TVBS Poll Center, "Sanheyi Xuanju hou Guonei Jiuda Zhengzhi Renwu Shengwang Diaocha" [Survey on the popularity of the nation's nine main politicians after the three in one election] (2005), December 12–15, 2005, <[http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE\\_DB/DL\\_DB/yijung/200512/yijung-20051216190351.pdf](http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE_DB/DL_DB/yijung/200512/yijung-20051216190351.pdf)>, accessed December 9, 2009; idem, "Reputations of 10 Taiwanese Major Political Figures," January 7–8, 2009, <[http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE\\_DB/DL\\_DB/yijung200905/yijung-20090508145805.pdf](http://www.tvbs.com.tw/FILE_DB/DL_DB/yijung200905/yijung-20090508145805.pdf)>, accessed December 9, 2009.

36. Chen did eventually beat that level in 2009, when he had a satisfaction level of 6%.

37. KMT newspaper advertisement in *Zhongguo Shibao*, December 3, 2005, p. A10.



## INSTITUTIONAL VARIABLES IN 2005

When we look for answers to why the KMT won in 2008, changes in public opinion can only tell us part of the story. There are also institutional variables that can support the contention that 2005 was the critical turning point. First, in 2005 the KMT's primary elections began to contribute toward a Pan Blue merger. Since the early 1990s, the Pan Blue camp had suffered from severe divisions, both via rebel KMT candidates such as Soong Chu-yu in 2000, and through splinter parties that split the KMT vote, such as the NP and PFP.<sup>38</sup> A key factor in the divided Pan Blue camp was its use of authoritarian nomination methods in the 1990s. The KMT returned to using primaries in 2001, which reduced the number of rebel candidates significantly. However, in 2005 a new precedent for Pan Blue unity was set in the primaries for Taipei County, whereby a number of PFP politicians returned to the KMT to join its primary process. The eventual winner was one of these former PFP politicians who then went on to win the Taipei County seat, a district that the DPP had held since 1989. This kind of Pan Blue primary was held on a far greater scale in the run-up to the 2008 elections, so that on the eve of the election there was effectively only a single Pan Blue Party, the KMT.

The second key institutional reason for viewing 2005 as a critical year was the constitutional reform of the electoral system that was passed that year. This meant that, as noted previously, the number of legislators was halved from 225 to 113; the former single vote multiple member district system was replaced with a single member district two-vote system.<sup>39</sup> These changes only came into effect for the 2008 legislative elections, but looking at Tables 2 and 3 above we can see how the new system was disastrous for all parties except the KMT. The KMT did increase its vote share from 32.8% to 51.2%, but its seat share doubled from 35.1% to almost three-quarters of the seats. In contrast, the DPP's vote share actually rose slightly from 35.7% to 36.9%, but its

38. The way rebel candidates and splinter parties split the Pan Blue vote and led to defeat is evident in Tables 1–3 above. For instance, Soong's candidacy in 2000 meant that although the combined Pan Blue vote was almost 60%, the DPP's Chen Shui-bian won with 39%.

39. Under the Legislative Yuan electoral system prior to 2005, voters cast one vote for a candidate in multiple member districts. After 2005, voters cast two votes, one for a candidate in a single member district and one for their preferred party. There are 73 single member districts, six aboriginal seats, and 34 seats given to parties according to the proportion of votes received on the second ballot.

seat share plummeted from being the largest party, with 39.6% of seats to only 24%. In other words, the system moved from being highly proportional to one that not only offered no space for small parties but was highly disproportional and clearly favored one party.

Two examples can illustrate how the KMT benefited under the new system. First, certain KMT strongholds with small voter constituencies retained their seats relatively unchanged. For instance, the offshore islands, Taitung in the southeast, and aboriginal districts have always been dominated by Pan Blue parties, but these districts were not affected by the reforms.<sup>40</sup> The KMT candidate won in Lienchiang with just 2,182 votes, while in other districts 100,000 votes were required to win election. This meant that the KMT in effect had a 10-seat head start.

A second case that illustrates the impact of the new system and changed political environment is Yilan County in northeastern Taiwan. In 2004, this was a three-seat district in which the DPP won two seats and, as a result of a Pan Blue splinter party candidate, the KMT won just one. Under the new electoral system, Yilan became a one-seat constituency. The Pan Blue party merger since 2005 and shift in party support levels meant that the KMT was able to win this single seat in 2008, and the DPP candidate lost despite receiving over 81,000 votes. Perhaps the greatest mistake of the DPP during the Chen era was promoting this constitutional reform. Although some DPP figures such as Lin Cho-shui had warned that this would be disastrous, Chen was convinced by his presidential victory in 2004 that the DPP could win a majority under the new system.<sup>41</sup> Instead, the new system appears to make long-term KMT parliamentary majorities more likely.

## CONCLUSIONS

This essay has applied the concept of critical elections to Taiwan's recent political history. It has shown that there is more evidence to suggest that 2005, rather than 2008, should be regarded as the watershed or potential critical election. That year saw the decisive shift in public opinion away from

40. Districts like Lienchiang, Taitung, Penghu, and Jinmen remained unchanged, while the aboriginal districts only dropped from eight seats to six. In legislative elections since 1989, the DPP had only ever held one seat out of these districts, an aboriginal seat in 2004.

41. Lin Wei-ren, "Xuanzheng Jiagou yu Guohui Xinmao" [Election structure and the new face of Parliament], *Lianhebao*, May 15, 2005, p. A15.

the DPP toward the KMT. It also saw important institutional developments such as reforms to Taiwan's electoral system and KMT primaries that facilitated a merger of Pan Blue parties. The fact that public opinion since 2005 has been stable and subsequent electoral results have followed the pattern set at that time together highlight the long-term significance of that year. Similarly, the 2005 reforms of the electoral system look likely to continue aiding the KMT in future parliamentary contests. Naturally, it is too early to reach a definite conclusion as to whether 2005 was a critical election: that verdict will require at least two more electoral cycles. For the time being, it can only remain a potential critical election.