

THE STRUGGLE FOR ALTERNATIVE POLITICS IN TAIWAN: MOVEMENT PARTIES IN TAIWAN'S PARTY SYSTEM

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Abstract: *Il sistema partitico di Taiwan si è mantenuto notevolmente stabile sin dalla pacifica transizione democratica avvenuta tra la fine degli anni '80 e l'inizio degli anni '90. Gli stessi due partiti politici che ottennero la maggioranza dei seggi nelle prime elezioni multipartitiche del 1986, il Kuomintang e il Partito Democratico Progressista, rimangono i partiti dominanti oltre tre decenni dopo. Tuttavia, sono stati costantemente sfidati da svariati partiti minori. Questi ultimi generalmente rientrano in due categorie: quelli che si sono separati da uno dei due partiti maggiori e si sono concentrati su richiami ideologici simili a quelli dei partiti originari; quelli che propongono temi nuovi e alternativi e che spesso affondano le loro radici nella vivace società civile di Taiwan. Questo articolo tenterà di esaminare il ruolo che i partiti nati da movimenti della società civile svolgono nella democrazia di Taiwan, spiegandone le mutevoli fortune elettorali e l'impatto sul sistema partitico dell'isola.*


Today Taiwan is regarded as one of the most vibrant liberal democracies in Asia. International organizations such as Freedom House frequently rank the quality of its democracy as being on a similar level to much older democracies, such as Italy or the United Kingdom (Freedom House 2023). Taiwan's democracy has also been widely praised for the way it has promoted human rights. It is ranked among the most gender equal societies in the world, with the highest proportion of female parliamentarians of Asian democracies and in 2019 it was the first country in Asia to legalize same sex marriage.

An important feature of a healthy democracy is a competitive party system. However, many Asian democracies have suffered from unstable or one-party dominant party systems. Between 1945 and 1986 Taiwan was an authoritarian one-party system, in which opposition parties were forbidden. The only party permitted was the ruling Kuomintang (KMT). After over four decades of authoritarian rule, Taiwan went through a gradual process of liberalisation and democratization from the mid-1980s

through to the first direct presidential election in 1996 (Rigger 1999).

The party system that emerged in Taiwan after democratization has been starkly different from its East Asian neighbours (Fell 2016b). Since the first multi-party election in 1986, the party system has been extremely stable. The KMT and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) have won the vast majority of seats in all subsequent national and local elections. Moreover, unlike Japan, the party system has been extremely competitive, with three changes of national ruling parties through elections. Although a wide range of political issues have been contested in Taiwan's elections, the main dividing line between these two mainstream parties lies in their stances on national identity and relations with China. The DPP appeals to voters who identify primarily as Taiwanese and uses strong rhetoric against unification with China. In contrast, the KMT appeals to voters who identify with the Republic of China. In elections the KMT attacks the DPP for advocating Taiwan independence and argues for closer economic relations with China. The competition between these two parties is also often referred to as a contest between the Blue and Green camps. This is because the predominant colour of the KMT party flag is blue, while the DPP's is green.

Given the way that the DPP and KMT have dominated Taiwan's party system, it is not surprising that the majority of the literature on party politics in Taiwan has concentrated on these two parties (Fell 2005; Rigger 2001). Nevertheless, Taiwan is a multi-party rather than simple two-party system. The two mainstream parties have faced challenges from a diverse range of parties, many of which have won significant vote shares and seats in national parliamentary and local elections. The impact of these smaller parties extends beyond just votes and seats though. They have brought alternative and neglected issues on to the public agenda, attempted to




change public opinion and influenced the policy positions of the mainstream parties. For instance, Taiwan's Green Party (GPI) has been a pioneer in promoting gender equality and LGBTQ rights. It was not until much later that a mainstream party, the DPP, came out in favour of same sex marriage.

At its peak, Taiwan had over 300 registered political parties and currently according to the Ministry of Interior (MoI), there are 80 functioning parties (MoI 2023). However, the vast majority of even registered parties are politically irrelevant. Instead, I will just focus on the cases of smaller parties that have run serious campaigns, which involved nominating strong candidates in multiple districts and extensive political communication campaigns. The smaller parties which have entered Taiwan's party system fall into two broad categories. The first are what Paul Lucardie (2000: 176) calls 'purifier parties', which cling "to an existing ideology, which it feels is diluted or betrayed by one (or more) of the established parties". This category neatly fits the splinter parties which have been a major player in Taiwan's party system and tended to be led by politicians that defected away from one of the two mainstream parties. These splinter parties can also be thus categorised as belonging to either the Blue or Green camps, depending on which of the mainstream parties they defected from.

In contrast, Lucardie (2000: 177) terms the second type of smaller parties 'prophetic parties'. These actors base their appeals on a new set of issues and ideologies. Lucardie (2000: 177) notes that such parties will emerge when "established parties appear to ignore or neglect these issues". In the Taiwan case, the main type of prophetic parties has been movement parties, which emerged out of Taiwan's civil society groups. Herbert Kitschelt (2006: 280) defines movement parties as "coalitions of political activists who emanate from social movements and try to apply the organizational and strategic

practices of social movements in the arena of party competition". A key feature of Taiwan's democracy has been the strength of its civil society. For instance, its Wild Lily student movement played a critical role in Taiwan's democratic transition and LGBTQ movement contributed to the legalisation of same sex marriage in 2019. An examination of Taiwan's movement parties can shed light on civil society's attempts to influence and enter political society. This article will focus on these parties that have centred their appeals on alternative issues and ideology, the parties claiming to want to break through the Blue-Green monopoly. In contrast, I have excluded from the analysis the purifier parties which split away from the KMT and DPP, as to a large extent these splinter parties have been ideologically more like factions of the two mainstream parties.

Given its longer history of multi-party elections in western Europe, much of the theoretical work on explaining the impact of small parties emerged from this region. Scholars from sociology and political science have proposed a wide range of arguments for why some small parties succeed and others fail. One classical approach is to focus on political institutions, particularly the electoral system of a country. Small parties are theorised to have more space to develop in countries using proportional representation and less in those with majoritarian (first past the post) systems. A second approach is centred on how salient the small parties' issues are on the political agenda. Other scholars put greater emphasis on party system factors, such as the popularity, strategies or level of resources of the mainstream parties (Meguid 2008). Additionally, some studies give the small parties greater agency in determining their fates. Lucardie (2000) argues two key factors in explaining small party impact are their ability to accumulate sufficient resources, as well as having a relevant political project. In other words, he argues they need the "articulation of a clear and convincing political project



which addresses social problems considered urgent by a significant number of voters” (Lucardie 2000: 176). Similarly, Jae Jae Spoon (2011) shows that small parties can thrive even in hostile electoral systems if they can find a way to get the right balance between winning votes and staying true to their core values. Given that since democratization Taiwan has seen a diverse range of small parties challenging the two mainstream parties, it represents a useful case to test the applicability of theories of small party impact that originated in Western Europe.

The focus of this essay is on these movement parties which have attempted to break the KMT-DPP monopoly and bring greater diversity into Taiwan’s political scene. I will discuss their impact over four time periods. First, I will look at the initial attempts of leftist parties to enter the party system during Taiwan’s democratic transition period from the late 1980s to 1992. The second empirical section will analyse the period from the mid-1990s until the first change of ruling parties in 2000. This was the time when purifier splinter parties, such as the New Party (NP), first emerged and won both national and local seats. However, my focus will be on the early campaigns of a new movement party, the GPI. The third period saw the rise of a new set of splinter parties after 2000, particularly the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) and People First Party (PFP). In this section I will discuss why we see the absence of movement parties, even after the splinter parties fell into decline after 2005. The fourth section analyses the rise in competitiveness of movement parties after 2012. In this period these movement parties won seats in local and national elections and began to have a greater impact on the political agenda and party system.


The failure of the leftist parties during democratic transition

After Taiwan began its gradual

democratization, a large number of political parties were established in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This was made possible with the lifting of martial law in 1987 and legislation allowing new parties to be formally registered in early 1989. Moreover, democratization brought about a large expansion in the number of elected positions, as for the first time the national parliaments became fully directly elected.¹

Among the multitude of new parties, only two posed a serious challenge to the two mainstream parties. These were both new leftist parties, the Worker’s Party (WP) and the Chinese Social Democratic Party (CSDP). In both cases, they were established by figures that split away from the DPP, namely Wang Yi-hsiung of the WP and Chu Kao-cheng of the CSDP. However, these parties adopted a very different set of ideological appeals from the DPP and thus should be categorised as prophetic rather than purifier parties. With its roots in independent trade unions, the WP was a movement party, while in contrast, the CSDP was more of an elite leftist party.

In the first election in which opposition parties were legal in 1989 the WP looked like it had a chance to enter the party system. One activist recalled how “When the Worker’s Party was first founded, many workers showed up on their own and gave us a stack of applications (to become party members.)” (Liu 2015: 104). Wang had already been elected as a legislator for the DPP in 1986, so was standing for re-election in 1989. The party nominated eight legislative candidates and a number of local council candidates, however, only a single WP candidate was elected for Kaohsiung City Council. After this setback its numbers of candidates dwindled, with just one Legislative Yuan candidate in 1992. The WP’s candidate Hsu Hsiao-tan gained extensive media attention as a result of her slogan “the breast fights the fist” and poster in which a topless Hsu breaks through the KMT party flag. In her 1992 campaign, Hsu gained over 32,000



votes and was just 107 votes short of getting elected in Kaohsiung's South District. In the aftermath of this latest setback, the WP dropped out of electoral politics and though it was not formally dissolved until 2022, it had already not been a functioning party for three decades.

Chu Kao-cheng's creation of the CSDP was even more ambitious than the WP. In 1991 the party nominated 58 candidates for the National Assembly and a year later 25 for the Legislative Yuan. Its 1992 candidate list even included Taiwan's best known film director Hou Hsiao-hsien. The party was able to release nationwide newspaper advertising and had enough candidates to be allocated free terrestrial TV advertising time. Nevertheless, despite being much better funded than the WP, the CSDP ultimately was also an electoral flop, with Chu the only successful candidate. After this setback, negotiations towards a merger with the newly created NP began in 1993 and the formal merger was announced in December 1994. A mark of the limited legacy of this first attempt to create a genuine alternative to the DPP/KMT party system was that when a new Social Democratic Party (SDP) was established in 2015, its predecessor was largely forgotten.


What then explains the failure and disappearance of these two leftist prophetic parties? Electoral institutions are not the answer. Not only was there a large expansion in elected offices but also the electoral system used was the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) with Multi-Member Districts (MMD), a system that operates in a semi-proportional way and thus should offer more space for small parties.

Liu Hwa-jen's study (2015: 104) suggests a key factor in the weakening of the WP was the party split with the emergence of the Labor Party, which occurred in early 1989. This led to a loss of momentum as the party approached its first election in late 1989. Moreover, the two parties undercut

each other in a number of elections. For instance, in the 1989 election both contested the labour functional groups constituency, but neither were successful, and all five seats went to the mainstream parties. There was a similar picture in 1992, when both the CSDP and LP stood candidates in the Kaohsiung district in which the WP's Hsu Hsiao-tan narrowly lost.

There were also problems for both leftist parties when it came to their political projects. Although both had quite radical positions on the most salient issue of relations with China, they tended to downplay these in favour of labour or welfare appeals. However, they were undercut by the way the mainstream parties attempted to co-opt such issues. For instance, both the DPP and KMT openly called for welfare system expansion in these early campaigns (Wong 2004). While the mainstream parties excelled at selling their message with catchy slogans, the tone of CSDP propaganda was too abstract and intellectual (Copper 1994: 30-31). Even though the CSDP did have extensive propaganda attacking the mainstream parties and addressing a wide range of issues, a study argued that "it failed to create a sufficiently distinctive image" (Fell 2005b: 238).

Lastly, the party system presented formidable challenges to these new leftist parties. After four decades as the only party, the KMT had huge financial, human and media resource advantages. Moreover, the KMT embarked on "a targeted counterattack" against independent unions from 1988 (Liu 2015: 106). Liu explained how the KMT "revised labor codes so as to impose stricter legal terms on the launching of strikes and to deter the expansion of independent unions and, crucially, prosecuted labor leaders and activists" (Liu 2015: 106). When Chu was asked his view on why his party failed, he put it largely down to party system factors, as "At the time the DPP was heading towards its peak, so it was hard for the CSDP to make much impact."



(Fell 2005b: 238). Moreover, following the CSDP's two defeats and the arrival of the first well-resourced splinter party, the NP, it was hard for the CSDP to turn down the offer to start merger negotiations (Fell 2017).

Movement parties in the Lee Teng-hui era: The promising start and collapse of the Green Party Taiwan


Although Lee Teng-hui became Taiwan's president in 1988, he only became the dominant political figure after winning a KMT power struggle in early 1993. This position was further reinforced when he was re-elected in 1996 in the country's first direct presidential election.² The period from 1993 until the end of Lee's presidency in 2000 is therefore often termed Lee Teng-hui era. In this period the mainstream parties faced a much more formidable set of challengers, which included purifier parties, as well as a new movement party, the GPT. The purifier parties include those from both the Pan Blue and Pan Green sides of the party system. The Pan Blue NP was by far the most successful of these parties, particularly in the elections held in the mid-1990s. In contrast, the Pan Green purifiers, despite nominating extensively, had a much more limited impact.

The main movement party in the Lee era was the GPT, which was established in January 1996, just in time to contest the March 1996 National Assembly elections. While the purifier parties were created by defections of elected mainstream party politicians, the GPT founders were electoral novices (Fell 2021). The party was created as a result of efforts by student activists and a number of civil society groups, particularly environmental organizations. Initially the GPT performed better than the leftist parties. While it took the Green Party of England and Wales four decades to enter the British parliament, the GPT won a National Assembly seat when it was less than two months old. Initially the DPP did

view it as a threat, particularly in 1996 (Ho 2003: 703). However, the party collapsed in the aftermath of its failure to win any seats in 1998. Therefore, the task of this section is what explains the GPT's initial promising performance but subsequent failure to reach its potential?

When the GPT first appeared in 1996 it benefitted from a number of party system factors. The DPP was deeply divided due to the lack of support for its presidential candidate, who was viewed as too extreme by many voters. Moreover, by the mid-1990s many of the DPP's former supporters in civil society began to have doubts about the party's commitment to social justice. The sociologist Ho Ming-sho argues (2003: 701) the GPT's formation reflected the environmentalists attempt to "reassert movement autonomy". The GPT was able to take advantage of this opportunity to project its image as the only alternative to the mainstream parties in 1996.

Although its candidates did not have prior electoral experience, they did have the backing of civil society groups and they had rich experience in a range of social movement or alternative culture sectors. For example, a number of the candidates had been executives in Taiwan's leading alternative record company, Crystal Records (Fell 2021). The GPT was also able to bring in a range of civil society issues on to the agenda. For instance, it benefitted from the anti-nuclear referendum held on the same day as the election in Taipei City. It was able to connect this with the cause of Indigenous injustice by highlighting the scandal of the nuclear waste storage plant located on the Indigenous Lanyu island. The party was also able to gain critical media attention by engaging with the core China issue. The election was taking place during the 1995-1996 cross-strait missile crisis, in which China used a series of military exercises to try to intimidate Taiwan. A key moment in the GPT's campaign was when its leader Kao Cheng-yan went out into the Chinese missile test zone in a fishing boat



to protest against Chinese threats. At a time when the mainstream parties were spending huge amounts on campaign advertising, this catching missile stunt gave the GPT critical media coverage that helped raise this new party's visibility.

Despite the GPT's initial impressive performance it was unable to build on this momentum and collapsed after 1998. One factor in its decline was changes in the party system, causing it to face stiffer competition. By the late 1990s the DPP was more united than in 1996 and was again trying to contest the ownership of the GPT's core environmental protection issue. For instance, the DPP adopted a strong anti-nuclear and pro-environmental stance in the 2000 presidential election. Unlike in 1996, in 1998 the GPT had to compete against the two new purifier parties that had defected from the DPP. Moreover, advertising statistics suggest these two new parties were much better funded than the GPT. Rather than cooperating, these three parties ended up diluting the protest vote against the mainstream parties. That year the GPT concentrated its candidates in Taipei City and numerous districts saw two or more challenger parties contesting the same district. In addition, the GPT was also undermined by other parties poaching its human resources. Two of the GPT's 1996 candidates defected to stand for the Taiwan Independence Party in 1998. Even more damaging was the defection of the GPT's only National Assemblyman Kao Meng-ting to join the campaign team of the Pan Blue linked independent politician Chang Jung-wei in 1997.

Nevertheless, the failure of the GPT to build on its promising first campaign cannot be solely explained by party system factors out of its hands. The party's leadership failed to expand the party's human and financial resources in the aftermath of its first election. The candidates and campaign team in 1998 was also weaker than two years earlier. In


fact its campaign budget in 1998 was little changed from its first election in 1996. This meant that it only took the departure of a few key party workers in the aftermath of the 1998 election for the party to collapse and enter its dormant era.

The 2000-2012: The near absence and reemergence of movement parties

In the aftermath of the 2000 presidential election a new party system began to emerge. Unlike the 1996 presidential election, this was an extremely competitive contest. The DPP's Chen Shui-bian won the presidency with only 39 percent of the vote, followed by a KMT rebel candidate James Soong with 36 percent, while the ruling KMT's candidate only received 23 percent. Soong built on the momentum of his almost successful presidential campaign by creating the PFP in 2000 and at its peak it even looked like it might replace the KMT to become the strongest Pan Blue party. The other party to emerge then was the TSU, which was officially established in 2001 by supporters of the former President Lee Teng-hui. The PFP proved to be much more successful than its Pan Blue predecessor, the NP, winning over 20 percent of the parliamentary seats 2001. There was a similar pattern for the new Pan Green splinter, the TSU, as it gained over 5 percent of the parliamentary seats in 2001. Nevertheless, these splinter purifier parties fell into a rapid decline after 2005, with both losing almost all their parliamentary seats in 2008.³

A key feature of this period was the seeming absence of movement parties until 2006 and it was not until 2012 that a movement party looked like it had the potential to enter the party system. What explains the limited impact of parties appealing on alternative ideologies and issues in this period?

In some respects, the political environment in the latter part of this era offered opportunities for prophetic parties.



The purifier parties that had been so strong in the initial post 2000 era were seemingly in terminal decline by 2006. Also, there was scope for winning voters from the mainstream parties. The DPP's period in office from 2000-2008 had alienated many of its former social movement allies, as it was seen as having betrayed multiple environmental causes in favour of big business. For instance, the DPP had reneged on its pledge to stop construction of the Fourth Nuclear Power Station in 2001 and failed to remove the nuclear waste storage site on the indigenous island of Lanyu (Grano 2015). The DPP also lost support as a result of a series of political corruption scandals, which led to the large 2006 Red Shirts Movement that called for President Chen's resignation. After the DPP's disastrous election defeats between 2005 and 2008, it was demoralised and went through a gradual rebuilding process. The KMT had been the most popular party for younger voters in the run up to it returning to government after the 2008 elections, but it too lost much support soon after coming to power. This was apparent in the way younger voters became much more active in protest movements, such as the Wild Strawberry student movement of 2008. Lastly, the rise of the internet also provided opportunities for non-mainstream political communication to get around the excessively high advertising costs of the mainstream media. The potential of new media technologies was seen in some campaigns during this period. For instance, in 2006 a group of influential bloggers launched a well-organized campaign in support of two GPT local election candidates (Fell 2021: 150).


The key starting point in understanding the squeezed space of smaller parties in this period is the radical reform of the election system in 2005. The former SNTV MMD system was replaced with a mixed majoritarian system. Under the new system voters have two votes, one for their single member district (SMD) candidate and a

second for their preferred party. Although this is a mixed system, the majority of seats (73 out of 113) were now SMDs and comparative studies show that majoritarian systems squeeze the space for smaller parties. The system effect was clear in the first test of the new system in 2008, as the old purifier parties were wiped out. The small parties were now uncompetitive in the SMDs and so pinned all their hopes on the proportional party list seats. But this required them to gain 5 percent to be allocated seats. In addition to the purifier parties, two prophetic parties that contested the party list seats were the GPT and the Third Society Party. However, neither exceeded one percent of the party list vote.

Nevertheless, again institutional factors cannot tell us the whole story. Some of the problems seen in the GPT's earlier campaigns from the 1990s continued to constrain the party's recovery. For instance, although there had been discussions about cooperation between the GPT and Third Society Party for the 2008 election, these were ultimately unsuccessful and led to a dilution of the potential alternative vote. Although the national election system had changed, the local elections continued using the more proportional SNTV MMD system. Despite the GPT running strong campaigns in the Taipei local elections in 2010, its candidates were still uncompetitive. As before, resources remained the Achilles heel of the GPT. Fell's study reveals the weak fundraising capacity of the party during this rebuilding era (2021: 152). Similarly, although the party did try to strengthen its organization, during the 2012 campaign the party still struggled with administering seemingly basic tasks such as putting together campaign leaflets (Fell 2021: 176).

The rise in competitiveness of movement parties: 2012-present

A very different set of developments




has emerged since 2012, as the period has seen the rise in competitiveness of movement parties. The potential for change was apparent in the 2012 election when the GPT came fifth, beating the much better funded NP for the first time. Then in 2016 the New Power Party (NPP) became the first movement party to enter parliament and managed to retain its seats four years later.

The rise of movement parties in the last decade is theoretically puzzling. As discussed in the previous section, the new majoritarian electoral system should be hostile to small parties. However, the movement parties have been much more successful than in the earlier three periods. A further puzzle is why was the NPP the more successful of the movement parties, despite having less experience than the older GPT? The final question to address in this section is why do the movement parties appear to have lost momentum since 2020, with instead the former Taipei mayor Ko Wen-je's Taiwan Peoples Party (TPP) appearing the strongest challenger to the two mainstream parties? I will not offer in depth analysis of the TPP, as though it is not a splinter party, it is more of a personal vehicle party. In fact, the political analyst Brian Hioe (2019) has concluded, "The TPP should not be mistaken for anything but a conservative Pan Blue Party".

The political environment in which the movement parties became competitive was vastly different from earlier periods and offered new opportunities for the movement parties. It was a time of unprecedented social protest activity during the 2008-2016 KMT Ma Ying-jeou presidency. The best known of these was the Sunflower occupation of the parliament in protest against the proposed Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement. During Ma's second presidential term the KMT was extremely unpopular, but many voters were also distrustful of the main opposition party, the DPP. Thus there was a significant pool of potential voters for prophetic parties to target.

In this era of heightened civil society activism, three movement parties attempted to enter the party system as the representative of progressive civil society. These included the newly established NPP and SDP, as well as the older GPT. Originally it had looked like the GPT had the best prospects for making a breakthrough. Following party reforms after 2013 the party was better funded and organized than before. It had already run a strong local election campaign in 2014, making important breakthroughs in winning its first local council seats. Moreover, the GPT and SDP established an electoral alliance for 2016, which added to the party's visibility in the buildup to the election. In the early opinion polls in 2015 the GPT looked best placed among the movement parties. It was clear that the DPP felt threatened by the rise of these parties as it attempted to undercut their appeal. For instance, the DPP poached a number of former GPT leaders to stand for the DPP's party list and made a range of social movement linked appeals, including its presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen openly endorsing same sex marriage. Nevertheless, it was the NPP which came out as the strongest of the movement parties, winning 6.1% of the party list vote and a total of five seats.

During the 2016 campaign the GPT-SDP Alliance and the NPP had many similarities in the issues they addressed. For instance, both highlighted environmental concerns and called for LGBTQ rights in their advertising. However, the NPP had a number of advantages that enabled it to perform better than its rivals. The NPP was much more willing to try to ride the Sunflower wave to appeal to voters. Thus while the GPT highlighted policy issues in its advertising, the NPP emphasised the actual related protests. For instance, in its Party List TV ad we see multiple images of its candidates at the Sunflower Movement occupation site. The NPP also had a major advantage in the realm of resources. Ho and Huang note "all




three successful NPP district candidates had long since become charismatic and arguably good-looking celebrities, particularly popular among young voters, before deciding to join the election, while most of the SDP and TGP candidates struggled to attract media attention” (2017: 363). They also note that the campaign budgets for NPP candidates were more than double those of the GPTs’. A final decisive factor in the NPP’s success was its alliance with the DPP. In return for the NPP’s endorsement of the DPP’s presidential candidate, the DPP gave the NPP three districts to directly contest against the KMT. Up to this point it has proved almost impossible for small parties to win SMDs, so this alliance was critical in allowing the NPP to win these seats. In contrast, the GPT preferred autonomy and refused to back any presidential candidate. Nevertheless, the NPP deserves credit for its campaigns to win those three districts, as they were not safe DPP seats but needed to unseat incumbent KMT legislators. In contrast, though the DPP did offer one seat to a GPT SDP Alliance candidate in Taipei City District 6, the campaign was undermined by disagreements between the two movement parties (Fell 2021).

On entering parliament in 2016 the NPP was able to build up a reputation as a party that was a representative of a range of social movement concerns, bringing something quite different into the nature of parliamentary proceedings. For instance, when the DPP hesitated to push through same sex marriage legislation, the NPP was consistently vocal in its calls for improved LGBTQ rights. It also was able to make an important breakthrough in the 2018 local elections, winning 16 local council seats. The NPP also attempted to break free from its earlier electoral alliance with the DPP and was often critical of the DPP government. Despite not renewing its alliance with the DPP in 2020, the NPP was able to increase its party list vote share to 7.8 percent and

thus retain its presence in parliament. In contrast, despite having a much better funded campaign in 2020, the GPT won almost the same vote share in 2020 as four years earlier. Studies suggest that the majority of its 2016 voters switched to either the DPP or other movement parties as a result of the GPT’s controversial city councillor Wang Hau-yu. He had managed to alienate traditional GPT supporters by his criticism of labour and environmental movements as well as the way he was seen as overly supportive of the DPP government. In other words, the GPT’s 2020 setback reveals even if a movement party has ample resources, it is unlikely to succeed if it is viewed as having betrayed its party values.

The final puzzle to address concerns the decline in support for movement parties in the period after the 2020. Both the GPT and NPP performed badly in the 2022 local elections, with the NPP falling to just 6 seats. Since 2020 the NPP’s party identification levels have frequently been under 1 percent, suggesting it will struggle to break the 5 percent party list threshold in 2024. These trends are puzzling as the political environment since 2020 does seem to present opportunities for a genuine alternative party. After seven years in office, it is not surprising that the DPP has been losing support since its historic peak in 2020. The largest opposition party, the KMT, remains weak, divided and unpopular. While the TPP is a more formidable party than in 2020, the TPP and its leader have managed to alienate the kind of progressive voters the movement parties tend to target. For instance, Ko has a long record of making misogynistic remarks and has taken ambiguous stances on LGBTQ rights.

One way the party system has contributed to the decline in the support for the movement parties appears to be the accommodative strategies of the DPP. It has taken a number of policy positions that could be seen as stealing movement party issues. For instance, despite conservative



opposition, it did push through same sex marriage legislation in 2019 and also facilitated extensive revisions of sexual harassment legislation in response to the wave of #MeToo allegations in 2023. It has also again tried to poach leading figures from civil society or the movement parties and so undercut their human resources. For instance, between 2019 and 2023 the DPP's deputy secretary general was Lin Fei-fan, a former Sunflower leader who had previously endorsed the GPT and NPP. In both 2020 and 2024 the DPP has nominated former SDP, GPT and NPP candidates. For example, it hollowed out the SDP by nominating its founder Fan Yun in 2020.

Additionally, though, recent research has shown that problems internal to the NPP can also help explain its apparent decline in support. The party has been damaged by a string of scandals and well publicised factional power struggles. For instance, the party's former secretary general Hsu Yung-ming was found guilty of corruption and sentenced to seven years. Moreover, the result of infighting has been that many of the party's elected officials switched to become independent, to the DPP or even the TPP. Perhaps the best-known defections were the party's rockstar legislator Freddy Lim and Sunflower leader Huang Kuo-chang. Studies suggest that a key task for new parties to survive is to develop their party organizations, and Lev Nachman's recent study shows that a key NPP weakness was its organizational failure. He argues that "its initial party structure, party hierarchy, and party rules were often informal and minimal. It did not prioritize routinization and subsequently struggled to institutionalize [...] the NPP would have avoided these new party challenges had they prioritized routinization" (Nachman 2023: 3).

Conclusions

Although Taiwan's party system has

been dominated by the DPP and KMT, they have faced the challenges of a diverse set of non-mainstream parties. While initially the main challenger parties were ineffective leftist parties during the democratic transition period, it was splinter parties that dominated the small party scene until 2012. It was only in the last decade that prophetic parties, particularly movement parties, have been competitive and entered the party system. The Taiwan case raises important puzzles concerning movement parties. Why have the movement parties been relatively weak compared to Taiwan's highly influential civil society groups from which they emerged? Why did the movement parties only become competitive over two decades after democratization?

The Taiwan case reveals how political science theories first developed in Europe, can help to understand the electoral fortunes of movement parties in an East Asian country. The SNTV in MMD system has provided opportunities for the small parties, while in contrast, the shift to the predominantly majoritarian system initially squeezed the space for such parties. However, despite the hostile electoral system, genuine alternative parties have become competitive in the last decade. This paper has also shown the importance of party system factors in understanding small party impact. For instance, mainstream parties have tried to undermine challengers by both poaching their policies and human resources. Lastly, the case studies reveal that the movement parties do have agency in determining their fates, even in seemingly hostile political environments. For instance, the ability to build up sufficient human and financial resources has proved a critical reason why movement parties have been more successful in the last decade. Similarly, small parties need convincing political projects to compete and attract voter loyalty. For instance, the movement parties' emphasis on progressive social change on issues such as gender equality and consistent

Notes

¹ Prior to 1991 only a limited number of seats were directly elected in what were known as supplementary elections. The majority of parliamentary seats were reserved for politicians elected in China in 1947 and 1948 and who were frozen in office for over

four decades.

² He had first become president in 1988 when as Vice President he replaced President Chiang Ching-kuo, who had died in office. Then Lee was elected indirectly in 1990 by the old National Assembly.

³ In 2008 the PFP only won a single Indigenous District seat.



Dafydd Fell, New Power Party Election Poster in Kaohsiung, January 2024