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Blessings in Disguise: How Authoritarian Legacies and the China Factor Have Strengthened Democracy in Taiwan

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Abstract

Democracy in Taiwan today appears consolidated and of high quality. Much writing on Taiwan's democratisation explains this outcome by pointing to aspects of its modernisation, but an underappreciated cause is its well-institutionalised party system, which in comparison to most other Third Wave democracies is a model of competitiveness, consistency, and stability. The sources of party system institutionalisation (PSI) in Taiwan can be traced back to two factors: the legacies of the martial-law-era KMT regime, and the emergence of the China question as a fundamental, polarising divide in Taiwanese politics. High PSI has ensured a credible alternative to incumbents in each election, enhanced the responsiveness of governments to citizen demands, and encouraged the greater provision of public goods and development of broad, programmatic policies rather than narrowly targeted, clientelist ones. Thus, Taiwan's democracy is consolidated because of, rather than despite, the legacies of the pre-democratic era and the China factor.

Keywords

democratisation – party system institutionalisation – polarisation – authoritarian legacies – Taiwanese politics

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To Barrington Moore's famous thesis, "No bourgeois, no democracy," we can add a corollary: "No coherent party system, no stable democracy."

LARRY DIAMOND, 'TOWARD DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION' (1994: 15)



Taiwan is one of the most successful cases of the Third Wave of democratisation—that is, countries that began to undergo political liberalisation after the mid-1970s. Although it has struggled through periods of intense partisan conflict along the way, today Taiwan scores at or near the top of most indicators of democracy: for free and fair elections, constraints on executive authority, rule of law, protection of human rights, responsiveness and accountability of government, and freedoms of speech and assembly, among others. Since the beginning of the democratic era, elections in Taiwan have never been interrupted or suspended, there are no reserved policy domains for unelected officials, and leaders have never been removed through extraconstitutional means. Indeed, the suspension of the electoral process is all but unthinkable in Taiwan today, and polls of mass public opinion and political elites alike confirm that for the large majority of citizens, democracy is now 'the only game in town' (McAllister, 2016; Rigger, 2018; Sanborn, 2015; Templeman, Diamond & Chu, 2016).

What explains this successful case of democratic consolidation? Much of the existing writing on Taiwan's democratisation points to aspects of its modernisation: a well-educated population, developed economy, large middle class, relatively equitable distribution of wealth, and a vibrant civil society sector that has strengthened democratic accountability (e.g. Diamond, 2008; Haggard & Kaufmann, 1995; Hsiao & Koo, 1997; Hsiao & Ho, 2010; Tien, 1992; Wong, 2003; cf. Jones, 1998). Other scholarship points to democracy as the fortuitous result of a prolonged, highly contingent process of elite bargaining (Cheng, 1989; Lin, Chu & Hinich, 1996; Lin, 2002). Still other work highlights international factors such as demonstration effects in other countries in the region, the influence of the United States, and the effects of cross-Strait relations (e.g. Chu, Hu & Moon, 1997; Levitsky & Way, 2005; Tan, Yu & Chen, 1996). But few if any of these explanations emphasise Taiwan's party system, which in many accounts is viewed as more of a problem than a benefit to democracy.¹

¹ Recent exceptions which explicitly mention Taiwan's party system as a source of democratic stability include Hellmann (2011), Moberand (2014), and Cheng & Hsu (2015).

Yet from a comparative perspective, the institutionalisation of a country's party system appears to be a key determinant of the quality of its democracy. A number of political scientists have argued in recent years that democracies are more likely to survive and prosper if they have parties that are well-organised and deeply rooted in society, and that engage in predictable patterns of interparty competition for power (e.g. Dalton and Weldon, 2007; Mainwaring, 2018; Mainwaring & Scully, 1995; Mainwaring & Torcal, 2006; Randall & Svåsand, 2002; Roberts & Wibbels, 1999). Stable party systems provide mechanisms to translate the demands of disparate interest groups and individual citizens into coherent, broadly beneficial public policies, and a more reliable way for citizens to hold their governments accountable at the ballot box. When party systems are inchoate or unstable, by contrast, the accountability mechanism of elections is weakened: voters find it more difficult to assign credit and blame, government leaders are less systematically rewarded for good governance and punished for bad, and elected officials can escape collective responsibility. The collapse of party systems has also created openings for populist candidates and antisystem parties to surge into power in democracies as varied as Peru and Venezuela (Seawright, 2012), Poland and Hungary (Grzymała-Busse, 2017), Italy (D'Alimonte, 2019), Brazil (Hunter & Power, 2019), and the Philippines (Teehankee & Thompson, 2016). In the most extreme cases, these outsiders have disrupted the entire political system, weakened horizontal accountability, undermined the rule of law, and degraded the quality of democracy or ended it altogether (Levitsky & Loxton, 2013; Mounk & Kyle, 2018).

Thus, it should be encouraging that Taiwan's party system is quite institutionalised relative to other Third Wave cases. The Kuomintang (KMT) and Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the same two parties that finished one-two in the first fully democratic legislative elections in 1992, finished two-one in 2016. No other party has ever supplanted either one as the ruling or primary opposition party. Both have hierarchical, centralised party organisations that integrate local branches across almost all jurisdictions into a national structure. Both enjoy the firm loyalty of core partisans who make up a significant share of the Taiwanese electorate. Both have staked out coherent, distinct positions on the 'China question'—the most fundamental divide in Taiwanese politics. And each remains the primary threat to unseat the other in almost every election around the island. In contrast to the party systems of other countries in the region which are fragmented or volatile (South Korea, Indonesia, and Thailand), inchoate (Myanmar), predominant (Japan), dominant (Singapore, Cambodia, and until recently Malaysia), or atomised (Philippines), Taiwan's is a model of competitiveness, consistency, and stability.

The sources of party system institutionalisation in Taiwan in turn can be traced back to two factors: the authoritarian legacies of the martial-law-era KMT regime, and the emergence of the China question as a fundamental, polarising divide in Taiwanese politics. In particular, the KMT's ability not only to survive the transition to democracy intact, but also to win elections and prosper after political liberalisation, aided the institutionalisation of a competitive party system oriented around a single primary cleavage. That, in turn, provided Taiwanese voters with a credible opposition alternative to the ruling party, enhanced the responsiveness of governments to citizen demands, and encouraged greater provision of public goods and development of broad, programmatic policies rather than narrowly targeted, clientelist ones. The presence of the China question in Taiwanese politics has also created a clear, long-standing division between the two major parties, encouraged high engagement in politics by the mass public, and ensured that political elites have to be concerned about public opinion on cross-Strait relations. Thus, the comparative literature linking party system institutionalisation to democratic quality and consolidation implies that Taiwan ranks so highly because of, rather than despite, the legacies of the pre-democratic era and the China factor. They have been blessings in disguise for Taiwan's democracy.

1 How Good is Taiwan's Democracy Today?

By most measures today, Taiwan's democracy appears to be of high quality and well-consolidated. For instance, in its latest *Freedom in the World* report, Freedom House ranked Taiwan 'free' with an overall score of 93/100, second in East and Southeast Asia only to Japan's score of 96, and significantly better than Mongolia (85), South Korea (83), East Timor (70), Indonesia (62), the Philippines (61), Hong Kong (59), Singapore (51), Thailand (30), Myanmar (30), and Cambodia (26) (Freedom House, 2019). Taiwan also appears at or near the top of other democracy indices that assess the region's regimes. Polity IV has ranked Taiwan's political processes a perfect 10 since 2003. The Varieties of Democracy's Liberal Democracy Index in 2018 placed Taiwan at the same level as Korea and behind only Japan in all Northeast and Southeast Asia, and Taiwan's Participatory Democracy Index score has consistently led the region since 2008 (Huang, 2017). The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (BTI) in 2018 placed Taiwan equal with or ahead of South Korea on 15 of 16 indicators; its 'democracy status' score of 9.6 out of 10 was a full point above South Korea's 8.5/10, and third overall among all regimes outside the OECD countries, behind only Uruguay and Estonia (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018). Taiwan also

consistently scored high on indicators for rule of law (GAN Integrity, 2016; World Bank, 2015), electoral integrity (Norris, 2016), and media freedom: Reporters without Borders (2018), for instance, ranks Taiwan as the freest media environment in Asia, significantly above both South Korea and Japan.

Further afield, as the Freedom House scores in Table 1 show, Taiwan now compares favourably to almost all other Third Wave democracies, including

TABLE 1 Freedom House scores, 2013–2018

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Northeast Asian regimes						
Taiwan	88	88	89	91	93	93
Japan	90	94	96	96	96	96
Mongolia	86	86	86	85	85	85
Korea	85	84	83	82	84	83
Southeast Asian regimes						
Indonesia	64	64	65	65	64	62
Philippines	63	63	65	63	62	61
Malaysia	29	46	45	44	45	52
Singapore	51	51	51	51	51	51
Thailand	54	33	32	32	31	30
Myanmar	26	25	28	46	31	30
Cambodia	30	31	32	31	30	26
Other selected Third Wave democracies						
Brazil	81	81	81	79	78	75
Chile	95	95	95	94	94	94
Czech Republic	94	95	95	94	93	91
Estonia	95	95	94	94	94	94
Hungary	88	82	79	76	72	70
Mexico	65	64	65	65	62	63
Peru	71	71	71	72	73	73
Poland	93	93	93	89	85	84
Uruguay	98	98	98	98	98	98

nearly all the post-communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the successors to military dictatorships in Latin America. Of the 15 Third Wave cases shown, only Chile and the Czech Republic are at a comparable level today. Some of Taiwan's move up the rankings is due to what Larry Diamond has termed the 'democratic recession'—a global backsliding in democratic practices beginning around 2006 that has accelerated in recent years and has included several prominent countries in Taiwan's peer group (Diamond 2015). But Taiwan's own quality of democracy has also improved over the past few years, with Freedom House, BTI, V-Dem, and other organisations all detecting incremental gains in electoral processes, associational and organisational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy and rights.

The overall picture painted by these comparative indices suggests that Taiwan's democracy is in better shape than many people in Taiwan give it credit for (see also Rigger, 2018: 153–155). Much domestic writing about contemporary politics in Taiwan is quite negative in tone, lamenting the persistence of apparent democratic shortcomings such as partisan polarisation (Huang, 2011; Mattlin, 2011); corrupt, biased, or unprofessional judges and civil servants (Wu, 2012); Chinese influence on Taiwan's media (Hsu, 2014), civil society (Hsiao & Kuan, 2016; Kaeding, 2015), and business groups (Lin & Lee, 2017); and unresolved controversies over the legacies of the authoritarian era (Hwang, 2016; Schafferer, 2010). But from a comparative perspective, these challenges are neither unique to Taiwan nor particularly severe. Since the transition to democracy, Taiwan has, for instance, never faced significant military intervention in politics, in contrast to Turkey and Thailand (Croissant et al., 2013; Esen & Gumuscu, 2017). It has not experienced the impeachment or removal of a sitting president for corruption, as in Korea, Brazil, and Peru in recent years (Hagopian, 2016; Shin, 2019; Vergara, 2018). Its civil service, judiciary, and other accountability institutions remain able to monitor and check malfeasance by public officials, to prosecute criminal behaviour without regard to the identity of the accused, and to respect the human rights of criminal defendants, in stark contrast to the impunity with which public officials and the police operate in the Philippines (Thompson, 2016), Mexico (Vivanco et al., 2014), and Brazil (Ahnen, 2007), among many troublesome examples. And it remains best known for its fiercely competitive elections, including colourful campaign rallies, broad respect for freedoms of assembly and speech, and wide trust in the legitimacy of the electoral process and acceptance of the results by winners and losers alike (Dickson, 2019). Indeed, as Shelley Rigger argues, if we compare Taiwan's democracy to other 'real world democracies' rather than to 'platonian ideals of how a democracy . . . "ought to work"', then it 'appears quite strong' (2018: 153).

Yet even scholars who acknowledge Taiwan's place at the forefront of Third Wave democracies and seek to account for the high quality of its democracy have tended to overlook the role of the party system. Instead, most explanations of Taiwan's democratic successes tend to emphasise a handful of general structural factors: a large middle class, well-educated citizenry, relatively equitable distribution of wealth, robust and critical media, active civil society groups, and international factors such as demonstration effects in other regional countries and the influence of the United States. Few if any of these explanations mention party system institutionalisation, and the stability of interparty competition is in many accounts presented as more of a problem than a benefit to democracy.

This oversight is understandable, as the concept itself in its modern form is only about 25 years old, and it is only in the last decade that research has demonstrated a systematic link between party system institutionalisation and other outcomes correlated with the quality of democracy and democratic survival. But it has meant that most observers of Taiwanese politics who are not familiar with this literature undervalue the benefits its party system provides for democratic accountability and responsiveness. Thus, in the next section, I discuss this concept in more detail and lay out some of the evidence for the centrality of party system institutionalisation to democratic performance.

2 What Is Party System Institutionalisation, and Why Is It Good for Democracy?

The concept of party institutionalisation can be traced back at least to Samuel Huntington's foundational work, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968). Huntington's central thesis was that the strengthening of political institutions, particularly political parties, was critically important for the establishment and maintenance of political stability in modernising societies. The rapid changes in social orders in much of the developing world, Huntington argued, simply could not be effectively managed without the presence of hierarchical, disciplined, well-organised political parties with broad geographic coverage and penetration down to the local level. The presence of institutionalised political parties provided the structure to channel and shape social demands and to provide effective governance in response. Regimes where highly institutionalised parties existed to perform this function would be politically stable over the long run. By contrast, in regimes without well-institutionalised parties, politics would usually become an arena for politicians to gain and retain power without advancing the broader public interest or responding to popular

demands. This dysfunction would frequently lead to the breakdown of democratic politics and its replacement by a nondemocratic alternative, or a collapse into prolonged political instability.

More recent research on links between institutionalisation and democratic consolidation has shifted from Huntington's analytical focus on political *parties* to a broader one on the properties of political party *systems*. This shift began with a now-famous piece by Scott Mainwaring and Timothy Scully (1995), which conceptualised *party system institutionalisation* (PSI) as including four components:

1. Stability in the nature of interparty competition over multiple election cycles. This component has typically been measured using *electoral volatility* scores.
2. The 'rootedness' of political parties in society, usually operationalised via measures of *partisanship*.
3. The legitimacy attributed to political parties and the electoral process, measured through public opinion surveys or turnout rates.
4. The institutionalisation of political party organisations, measured in various ways: headcounts of party members, the number of branches, the presence of mechanisms for making and enforcing party decisions on the membership, the use of regularised procedures for choosing candidates for office and selecting policies to support, and so forth.

It remains an open question as to what degree all of these elements are equally important and linked to one another, and whether individual components such as partisanship or party organisation can independently contribute to the quality of democracy even as others remain underdeveloped (e.g. Bertoa 2018; Hellmann, 2014; Luna, 2014). But there is a general consensus that, in the long run, a well-institutionalised party system is essential to a well-functioning democracy; as Larry Diamond (1994: 15) put it: "To Barrington Moore's famous thesis, "No bourgeois, no democracy," we can add a corollary: "No coherent party system, no stable democracy."

Party system institutionalisation ensures that 'coherent party system'. High PSI is associated with greater stability and predictability across many democratic political processes, which in turn enhances both democratic responsiveness and accountability (Mainwaring & Torcal, 2006). These processes include the three fundamental roles of parties that John Aldrich (1995) described almost 25 years ago: they regulate competition for political offices, encourage the formation of durable policy coalitions, and provide economies of scale for candidates and information shortcuts for voters in election campaigns.

First, a stable, well-institutionalised party system effectively *regulates competition for political office*. When all significant parties are disciplined, hierarchical

organisations that stick to a dedicated set of positions in the policy space, they also help generate collective responsibility among their officeholders and other party members. The fates of elected officials and their challengers depend to a greater degree on the fates of their parties at election time, rather than their individual behaviour, reputation, or following. In contrast, when PSI is low, collective responsibility also tends to be low: the fates of elected officials are not closely tied to their parties, and they can potentially escape eviction from office even if they are part of a ruling coalition that has done unpopular things. High PSI also prevents rampant party-switching: elected politicians cannot escape collective punishment from voters by simply fleeing to another party. Parties in high-PSI systems tend not to nominate party-switchers and instead reward party members who work their way up the hierarchy, take actions that benefit the party's collective interests, and remain loyal to the party in bad times as well as good.

An especially important benefit of high PSI is to create high hurdles for outsider candidates to win elections and take power. Outsider candidates, as Mainwaring (2018) argues at length, present a significant threat to the quality, and even survival, of democracy. They often employ antisystem rhetoric in their campaigns, attacking all existing political parties and advocating for radical change. They tend to lack previous political or leadership experience, and as a result are less committed to respecting existing political norms, institutions, and established patterns of governance, especially if doing so requires sacrificing some of their core policy preferences. And they tend to have much shorter time horizons than establishment politicians: they have not usually had a long career in politics, and they do not expect to be supported in office by a durable party or coalition, so they typically make decisions with an eye towards immediate political payoffs rather than long-term considerations.

Political outsiders pose a challenge to the stability of all democracies, but the problem is especially worrisome in presidential regimes where the chief executive is elected independently of the parliament, does not depend on a party's support to remain in office, and cannot be removed from power through normal parliamentary procedures (Samuels & Shugart, 2010). As Steven Fish (2006) has shown, strong legislatures that can effectively check presidential power are associated with better democratic outcomes in presidential regimes. Legislative independence is aided by the presence of legislators with long experience in government and lawmaking, a strong sense of institutional prerogative and interests, and independent bases of authority (see also Khmelko and Wise, 2019).

When presidents come into office without a legislative majority, as is usually the case with outsider candidates, interbranch conflict is almost inevitable.

Because they railed against existing parties on the campaign trail, outsiders are usually reluctant to engage in an about-face and seek their cooperation after elections, nor do they have the patience for the give-and-take negotiations that pre-existing institutions require of them. Instead, outsider presidents frequently attack the whole existing political system by attempting to expand presidential powers and undermine institutions of horizontal accountability, including the legislature, the courts, and other ostensibly independent agencies such as anticorruption bodies and the electoral commission. In the most extreme cases, outsider presidents have succeeded in closing down parliaments, writing completely new constitutions, and ruling by executive diktat, as in Peru under Alberto Fujimori and Venezuela under Hugo Chavez. In these and other cases, the rise to power of outsider candidates with strong antidemocratic tendencies was made possible by the decline and collapse of existing party systems (Mainwaring, Bejarano & Leongomez, 2006; Seawright, 2012).

Second, a well-institutionalised party system *ensures durable policy coalitions*. As Aldrich observed in *Why Parties?*, political parties offer a lasting solution to a serious problem facing politicians who share similar policy preferences: the fundamental instability of any set of policy choices (1995: 68–96). As social choice theorists showed long ago, under a simple majority voting rule, there is always a policy alternative that can beat the status quo, no matter what the underlying distribution of preferences may be (McKelvey, 1976; Schofield, 1978; cf. Miller, 1983; Shepsle, 1979). Control of the voting agenda, then, can be manipulated to achieve virtually any outcome in the policy space. Without some form of restrictions on what proposals can be introduced and the order in which they will be considered, lawmaking in democracies is in danger of devolving into never-ending cycles of policy change.

Parties provide a solution to this problem. Disciplined party organisations commit groups of elected officials to support a limited set of policies for the period in which they are in office, and to band together to exercise control over the policy agenda. Likewise, opposition parties incentivise their candidates to critique the majority and offer policy alternatives in the hopes of winning the next election. The consequences of high PSI for policy outcomes are profound. First, the presence of well-organised, centralised, and disciplined parties in government provides much greater policy stability and predictability. The agents of the state—policy advisors, but also security forces, tax collectors, teachers, firefighters, and so on—know roughly what each ruling party or coalition seeks to achieve in policy terms and can anticipate and plan for more than one budget cycle. Businesses, investors, and ordinary voters, too, can make a reasonable guess about the viable party alternatives, and what each party will attempt to do if it wins power. By contrast, when PSI is low, neither

the party choices nor the policies they are likely to try to enact are clear: most voters have no idea who will win the next election or what they will actually try to do, and voting is a stab in the dark.

The presence of stable parties and policy coalitions also encourages the development of longer time horizons in politics. If the ruling party or coalition will clearly endure on the political scene, its leaders can invest in programmes or policies that may be costly in the short run but have substantial long-term payoffs, because they still expect to be around to claim credit when the benefits become apparent to voters. One example is technological innovation, which often requires huge upfront investments with an economic payoff not fully realised for multiple terms in office, and sometimes not for decades. Some empirical evidence on this front comes from a recent book by Joel Simmons (2016), who demonstrates a clear positive association between PSI and economic development. Well-institutionalised ruling parties, Simmons finds, are systematically more likely to accept the deferred returns that are necessary to encourage innovation and the adoption of new technology, and to channel investment for the long run. High PSI may also be associated with greater commitment to the rule of law and institution-building, as ruling parties that face an enduring, credible set of opponents have incentives to create institutions that will endure well beyond their time in office, and that will protect their policy interests even if the opposition eventually does take power (Mainwaring 2018).

Third, high PSI means that party labels *provide valuable information cues to voters* in election campaigns, and as a consequence PSI has the salutary effect of enhancing electoral accountability. Well-institutionalised parties are more likely to develop meaningful party 'brands' that stand in the public eye for a distinct and relatively stable set of policies, values, and capabilities. Voters who otherwise have little way of distinguishing between policy differences on complicated and highly technical issues can use party labels as shortcuts to identify candidates who share their values, beliefs, and political goals. At a minimum, a stable party system allows voters to recognise who is in power, versus not, and who the viable alternatives are to the incumbents. The ability of voters to 'throw the bums out' by casting votes against ruling elites will only constrain incumbent behaviour if they also are willing to reward elites that perform well by re-electing them. And highly institutionalised party systems help to make this choice as clear as possible (Dalton, Farrell & McAllister, 2011).

Particularly important here is the development of *partisanship*—a psychological bond with a political party that is 'one's own', or the party that most consistently has one's values, beliefs, and interests at heart. Partisanship has a bad reputation in popular discourse; in Taiwan, for instance, it is regularly

blamed for exacerbating social divisions, adding fuel to the fire of political controversies, and creating an unwillingness on the part of political elites to compromise with one another (e.g. Chu & Chang, 2018; Fell, 2013). But among political scientists, there is widespread agreement that partisanship also serves an extremely valuable role in the democratic process: it anchors party systems (Dalton & Weldon, 2007; Lupu 2015; Randall & Svåsand, 2002; Shin & Tusalem, 2007). The need to respect the wishes of core partisans discourages parties from making radical shifts in policy once in office, commits most of their elected members to a common platform, and increases the sense of collective survival, accountability, and responsibility.

It is true that the deep, uncompromising polarisation of political elites poses a threat to democratic survival—for a particularly severe example, we need look no further than the events surrounding the most recent series of military coups in Thailand (Pongsudarak, 2008; Prasirtsuk, 2015).² But there is also another, equally serious threat to democratic accountability that stems from the lack of a clearly identifiable and consistent opposition—what Dan Slater has termed ‘promiscuous power-sharing’ (Slater, 2018; Slater & Simmons, 2013). When at least some members of all significant parties are willing to cooperate with the government, often in exchange for policy concessions or financial benefits, democratic accountability suffers: it becomes much more difficult for voters to ‘throw the bums out’ at election time since all the viable choices are part of the ‘bums’! When partisanship runs high, conversely, the natural out-group hostility that comes with it limits the ability of opposition party elites to make unprincipled, short-term compromises, and it preserves a clear-cut alternative to the party or coalition in power. The more that political parties share a collective identity and responsibility, the more directly voters can assign credit for policies they like, and blame for those they do not, and to vote accordingly.

In fact, there is growing evidence that some degree of political polarisation may actually be beneficial for democracy. Russell Dalton, for instance, has shown a clear link between political polarisation, measured as the ideological range of positions taken by significant parties in the party system, and the institutionalisation of the party system (Dalton, 2008). Noam Lupu has demonstrated that party polarisation appears to drive increases in mass partisanship, which ‘institutionalizes party systems, stabilizes elections, and consolidates

² The problem of hyperpartisanship in the United States, the most prominent cautionary tale, has been compounded by the weakness of party organisations. The existence of open primaries and the widespread influence of outside interest groups on candidates of the two major parties is at least as problematic as the presence of partisanship per se. On this point, see Azari (2016) and Masket (2011).

new democracies' (Lupu, 2014: 332). And Ching-hsing Wang has found that political polarisation is *positively* associated with democracy, contrary to the expectation that prolonged partisan conflict will lead to democratic crisis and breakdown (Wang, 2014).

More broadly, in Mainwaring's most recent edited book (2018) on the topic of party systems in Latin America, many of the contributors demonstrate a connection between party system instability and declines in the quality of democracy on that continent. Conversely, as PSI increases, they find, the quality of democracy does as well. It is not a coincidence, Mainwaring asserts, that the best-regarded democracies in Latin America, Chile and Uruguay, also have the most stable, institutionalised party systems. Thus, if we want to understand Taiwan's high quality of democracy ratings, then the comparative writing on democratic consolidation suggests that high PSI is an important part of the explanation. It is to establishing this fact in Taiwan that I turn next.

3 Taiwan's High Level of Party System Institutionalisation

Having defined and defended the importance of PSI to democracy, let us now turn to the case of Taiwan. Put simply, Taiwan has one of the most highly institutionalised party systems of any of its Third Wave democracy peers. Measures of electoral volatility, of partisanship, and of party organisation all reflect a party system that is deeply rooted in society and resistant to rapid change (Cheng & Hsu, 2015; Croissant & Völkel, 2012; Sheng, 2007; Wong, 2015).

The first of Mainwaring and Scully's components of PSI is the stability of interparty competition over time. This component is typically operationalised as *electoral volatility*—the change in party vote shares from one election to the next. Electoral volatility is calculated by taking the sum of the net change in the percentage of votes gained or lost by each party from one election to the next, divided by two—that is: $(\sum |v_{it} - v_{it+1}|) / 2$. The resulting *electoral volatility index* varies from 0 to 100; a score of 0 means the exact same parties receive exactly the same share of votes in elections at time t and $t+1$, while a score of 100 indicates that the set of parties winning votes at election $t+1$ is completely different from the set winning votes at election t . The higher the volatility score, the lower the institutionalisation of this component of the party system.

In Table 2 I have calculated this measure for each election to the Legislative Yuan from 1992 to 2016; to provide a context in which to situate these scores, Table 3 reproduces the electoral volatility scores for the rest of Asia calculated by Hicken and Kuhonta (2015: 12).

TABLE 2 Electoral volatility in Taiwan, 1992–2016

Election year	Volatility score
1995	13.1
1998	12.4
2001	33.5
2004	10.3
2008	22.9
2012	7.2
2016	8.4
Average	15.4

TABLE 3 Electoral volatility in Asia

Regime	Years	Number of elections	Volatility: 1 st and 2 nd elections	Volatility: Last election	Average volatility
Malaysia II	1974–2013	10	8.6	4	10.1
Singapore	1968–2011	11	24.6	20.4	15.4
Taiwan	1992–2016	8	13.1	8.4	15.4
Sri Lanka	1947–2010	14	27.7	9	16.6
Japan	1947–2012	24	27.4	16.3	16.8
Philippines I	1946–1969	7	20.4	43.6	18.5
India	1951–2009	15	25.1	11.3	19.2
Cambodia	1993–2013	5	27.9	22.9	24
Indonesia	1999–2009	3	25.2	29.8	27.5
Malaysia I	1955–1968	4	38.8	36.4	30.6
Timor Leste	2001–2012	3	49	22.5	35.8
South Korea	1988–2012	7	41.9	35.2	36.5
Philippines II	1992–2013	8	57	42.9	38.3
Thailand I	1979–1991	4	40.8	32.1	38.4
Thailand II	1992–2011	8	48.7	58.2	42

Source: Hicken and Kuhonta (2015: 12), except the calculation for Taiwan which is mine.

As the data in the tables show, Taiwan's party system has remained fairly stable over this time period, with an average volatility score of 15.4. This measure puts Taiwan at the low end of the region; only Singapore and Malaysia, both long-time dominant party systems, have similar or lower electoral volatility over roughly the same time period. By contrast, average volatility is significantly higher in South Korea (36.5), the democracy to which Taiwan is most often compared, and even slightly higher in Japan (16.5), which has a much longer history of democratic elections and for much of the post-war period was a predominant party system. And Taiwan is not even in the same ballpark as the leading democracies of Southeast Asia: Indonesia (27.5), the Philippines (38.3), and Thailand prior to the 2006 coup (42). Hicken and Kuhonta also calculate an average electoral volatility for regions of the world, including Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet states (44.1), Latin America (25.5), and Western democracies including Australia and New Zealand (10.4). Taiwan's electoral volatility score puts it far below the averages in the former two regions and fairly close to the average in the West. In other words, the low electoral volatility of Taiwan's party system makes it appear more like that of a developed democracy than a young Third Wave case.³

Mainwaring and Scully's second component is partisan attachment, or *partisanship*. Here the common measure is taken from a party identification question asked in public opinion surveys of the general population. Figure 1 reproduces the well-known data on partisanship collected regularly since 1994 by the Election Study Center (2019) at National Chengchi University.

As one can see from the figure, since 1997 at least half of all respondents in each year have identified with one of the significant political parties in the party system. The share of 'partisans' in the electorate has varied significantly over this period, ranging from as high as 69.5 percent in 2011 to as low as 50.9 percent in 2018. But, with the exception of a brief period in 2001, the KMT and DPP have retained the largest shares of partisan supporters over Taiwan's entire democratic history, outpacing all other competitors in the party system. Moreover, in recent years declines in partisans of one of the major parties have

3 The drop in electoral volatility in the 2012 and 2016 elections may be due in part to a new, more majoritarian electoral system introduced in 2008. Nevertheless, it is not self-evident that Taiwan's low volatility (and high PS1) of recent years is related to the change in electoral system. For one, majoritarian electoral systems can also produce extremely high volatility under some conditions, as recent elections in Canada, France, and Malaysia demonstrate. For another, both South Korea and Japan now use systems very similar to Taiwan's to elect their legislatures yet have recorded significantly higher electoral volatility over the last decade.

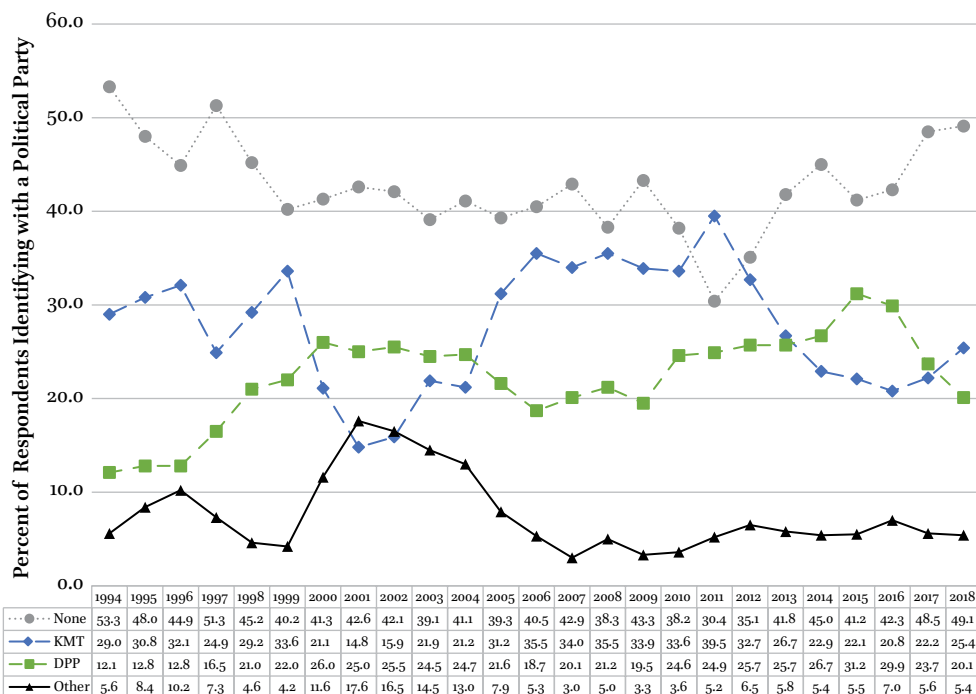


FIGURE 1 Partisanship in Taiwan, 1994–2018
 SOURCE: ELECTION STUDY CENTER (2019), NATIONAL CHENGCHI UNIVERSITY.

been correlated with increases in identification with the other: the surge in identification with the KMT starting in 2005 corresponded to a slump in DPP identification, and a similar drastic decline in KMT partisans beginning in 2012 was followed by an uptick in DPP partisanship. The pattern shows some signs of repeating again, as the DPP has slumped since its high point in 2016, and the latest public opinion data show a modest recovery in KMT partisanship, to the point where there are now again more self-identified KMT partisans than DPP ones in the electorate.

It is also revealing what these data do not show: a rise in third-party partisanship. In particular, the number of respondents who identify with the New Power Party (NPP) has remained small since 2016. The NPP burst onto the political scene during the 2016 election campaign, winning 6.1 percent of the party list vote and five seats in the legislature, and its relative success inspired a fair amount of breathless commentary about a fundamental realignment of Taiwan's party system around issues orthogonal to the China question and a potential end to the old Green–Blue duopoly (cf. Chen & Liao, 2019).

Yet these data suggest that the NPP remains a niche party in the party system, rather than the usurper and potential future major competitor to the DPP as it is sometimes portrayed. Partisanship in Taiwan remains strong and persistent enough to anchor the party system into two major camps and to raise a high bar for third-party challenges⁴ (McAllister, 2016; Yu, 2017).

The third component that Mainwaring and Scully define is the legitimacy of political parties and trust in the political system. This dimension has been mostly ignored in subsequent work (but see Croissant & Völkel, 2012), so I leave it aside here, although it is worth noting that in public opinion surveys, most Taiwanese consistently recognise the right of political parties to contest elections and acknowledge the legitimacy of the electoral process for choosing political leaders (Sanborn, 2015; Shyu, 2010).

The fourth component of PSI is party organisation. On this dimension, there is wide variation across the parties in Taiwan that have held seats in the legislature during the democratic era. The two largest parties, the KMT and DPP, are highly institutionalised: both have well-developed organisations that include party branches in almost all local jurisdictions, integrated into a coherent hierarchy, with power concentrated at the top and wielded by a central executive committee and chairperson. Both retain tight party control over their nominations for elected offices, are able to raise and deploy significant financial and personnel resources to aid party activities, and have effective mechanisms for disciplining wayward members including current officeholders. And both are clearly much more than electoral vehicles for the party chairperson: they have survived long periods in political opposition, rapid rises and falls in political fortunes, and multiple changes in party leadership. This persistence of robust party organisations is particularly noteworthy because Taiwan is a presidential regime, and there is a strong tendency for presidents to dominate and hollow out the organisation of their political parties; when presidents leave office, their political parties sometimes struggle to survive as coherent, meaningful organisations (Samuels & Shugart, 2010).

The other significant parties in the party system have much less robust party organisations and have been more clearly associated with a single founding

4 This is not to say that high PSI prohibits successful third-party or independent candidacies in Taiwan, only that they are difficult to pull off and even more difficult to sustain beyond a single election. Sceptics might point to the many independent candidates who have run serious campaigns for local office in recent years, most prominently the current Taipei Mayor Ko Wen-je. Ko, however, is the exception that proves the rule: his election in 2014 relied on the implicit backing of the DPP, which did not run its own candidate and campaigned for him on the stump. When the DPP nominated a challenger in 2018, by contrast, his share of the vote dropped by nearly 20 percent and he barely won re-election, despite high approval ratings of his performance as mayor.

leader: James Soong in the case of the People First Party (PFP) and Lee Teng-hui in the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU). As both leaders age out of politics, neither party looks like it has a particularly bright future; the TSU was even shut out of the legislature in the most recent election and is fighting to stay relevant. The more interesting and uncertain case is the NPP, which in its earliest days made a point of pledging radical transparency in its policy and strategy deliberations and attempted to foster a more open process of collective decision-making among its mostly young, politically inexperienced membership. After entering the legislature, however, it remains an open question whether it will retain its initial deliberative democratic impulses or instead become increasingly hierarchical and bureaucratic in order to survive in the political system (Chen & Liao, 2019: 90–91).

In addition to Mainwaring and Scully's canonical components of PSI, one can also observe other evidence that suggests a high degree of stability in Taiwan's party system. One additional measure is the frequency and consequence of attempts at party-switching, which Dafydd Fell has studied in detail in recent years (Fell, 2014, 2017a, 2017b). Fell finds that, while party-switching is not exactly rare, in the legislature it has occurred almost entirely within the pan-Blue camp (i.e. the KMT and allied parties), typically from the KMT to the PFP or New Party and back again. Party-switchers on the Blue side of the spectrum have fared a bit better than those who have attempted to switch to or from the DPP, which has been exceedingly hostile to defectors. But overall, Fell finds very few cases of successful party-switching in which incumbent officeholders manage to win re-election under the banner of another party, suggesting that partisanship and party organisation effectively limit this kind of opportunistic behaviour.

One can also look at the fates of new parties in legislative elections, which are an indicator of the party system's 'permeability' and thus provide yet another alternative measure of PSI. From 1992 up to 2008, Taiwan's legislators were elected using SNTV in multi-member districts, which provided realistic opportunities for parties winning as little as five percent of the vote to capture seats. And since 2008, parties winning at least five percent of a separate party list vote are guaranteed seats from the PR portion of the electoral system. Thus, Taiwan's electoral system, while not guaranteeing proportionality, has also had a rather low threshold of exclusion for party entry. Yet it turns out that the vast majority of new parties that have run candidates in legislative elections have had no success. The exceptions have been a very specific kind of party: those which took more extreme positions on the China question than the DPP or KMT (cf. Fell, 2005). In 2001, for instance, both the PFP, whose chairman James Soong initially took up a position to the right of the KMT on cross-Strait relations, and the TSU, which took up a position to the left of the DPP, managed

to win a significant number of seats in the Legislative Yuan elections held that year (Fell, 2005: 225–226). Indeed, one can line up on a single China question dimension every single party to hold at least three seats in the legislature since 1992. The parties in the current legislature are no exception. In particular, the success of the NPP is in no small part due to the party's positioning itself as a more pro-independence ally of the DPP—a position that it has only amplified since its legislators took up their seats in 2016. Thus, the fate of new parties, too, suggests that Taiwan's party system, while permeable enough to allow some replacement of small parties with others, remains deeply rooted in the original cleavage around which it became oriented shortly after democratisation (Achen & Wang, 2017).

4 Taiwan's Well-Institutionalised Party System: Where Did It Come From?

To this point I have argued, first, that Taiwan's democracy looks quite good in comparative perspective, second, that PSI is a key variable in the quality of democracy, and third, that Taiwan has enjoyed a highly institutionalised party system for most of its democratic history. This in turn raises the question: *why* is Taiwan's party system so well-institutionalised, when so many of the other Third Wave democracies have been beset by wild vote swings, fragmented and ephemeral party coalitions, little ideological or programmatic differentiation among political parties running for office, and partisanship that is weak or absent altogether in their electorates? The answer I offer in this section is two-fold: the legacy of the authoritarian KMT party-state regime, and the China factor in Taiwanese politics. I review each in turn.

First, the nature of the Leninist-style KMT regime during the authoritarian era, along with the gradual, regime-led transition to democracy, fundamentally shaped the party system that emerged in the democratic era. Even under martial law, competitive local elections had been permitted, even encouraged, by the KMT leadership. Elections served as a way to add some degree of legitimacy to the regime's claim to be 'Free China', but more importantly, they served the same purposes that elections do in most authoritarian regimes that permit them—as a tool to identify and recruit new political talent into the party, to solidify the KMT's connections to local factions and co-opt them into the party, to demonstrate the party's popularity and strength, and to act as a source of information about regime performance (Kuo, 1995; Wu, 1987). To accomplish these tasks, the KMT developed a dense, hierarchical set of party networks that extended vertically down to the village and city ward level, where

most elected leaders were party members, and horizontally into the most remote corners of Taiwan such as indigenous villages in the mountain highlands, where as much as 25 percent of the adult population joined the KMT (Dickson, 1996). These networks served a variety of purposes, but a critical one for most of the martial law era was the mobilisation of supporters at election time. The party used its financial and informational advantages to drive up turnout for KMT candidates and ensure that the party won the vast majority of contested offices.

These elections were hardly free or fair, and they ultimately presented little threat to the KMT's grip on power so long as the central government remained off-limits to contestation. Nevertheless, as T. J. Cheng and Yung-ming Hsu (2015) argue, by allowing open competition for local offices, KMT party leaders were incentivised to build a hegemonic party organisation that could turn out voters and win elections. The existence of local elections which the KMT could actually lose (and occasionally did!), in turn, also helped channel opposition to the regime into electioneering as well (Rigger, 1998). Thus, when the DPP was founded, it was created first and foremost as a vehicle for coordinating the election campaigns of non-KMT candidates, and it retained its electoralist orientation even as it used civil disobedience on the streets and grandstanding in the legislature to push for greater liberalisation of the political system. Moreover, in order to challenge the KMT's formidable political organisation, the DPP built its own centralised, hierarchical, and relatively disciplined party, one that, in an ironic twist, copied its basic form and incentives from the KMT (Rigger, 2001).

Consequently, both parties were well-institutionalised even at the beginning of the democratic era. The organisational capacity that the KMT and DPP enjoyed gave them a lasting advantage over new entrants into the party system, and it allowed them to frame issues and mobilise voters in ways that contributed to their mass appeal over newer, smaller parties. In particular, unlike many authoritarian successor parties in Third Wave democracies around the world, the KMT not only survived the transition to democracy, but flourished. It retained control of the legislature and presidency when these offices were first directly elected, and its party resources, membership, and share of partisan supporters in the electorate initially dwarfed that of all other challengers, including the DPP. As Cheng and Hsu argue, the KMT was greatly aided during the transition by a robust economy and a long track record of economic growth with equity, which provided significant residual popularity and a boost to its electoral fortunes even after it lost the presidency in 2000 (2015: 133; see also Haggard & Kaufmann, 1995: 267–307). The KMT's ability to retain its resource and reputational advantages, as well as its China-friendly position to

the right of President Chen Shui-bian, allowed it to emerge from this defeat as the indispensable alternative to the DPP, and to stabilise the party system over the next several election cycles (Fell, 2013; Wong, 2008).

The second factor contributing to PSI is what I have termed in this paper the China question.⁵ Scholars as a whole have been inconsistent in how they refer to this fundamental cleavage in Taiwan politics. One approach is to speak of the China question as primarily a conflict over national identity, driven by an ongoing tug of war between exclusive, competing Chinese and Taiwanese national projects which neither side is strong enough to win outright (e.g. Fell, 2006; Hsieh, 2005; Wang & Liu, 2004; Wu 2011). Another way is to emphasise the policy dimensions of the China question, and to characterise it as primarily a struggle over competing proposals for how Taiwan's leaders should handle relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) (e.g. Huang and James, 2014; Niou, 2008; Wu, 1999). Rather than defend one of these interpretations, here I will simply note that there is considerable overlap between the identity symbols that each party's core partisans embrace or avoid in their campaigns and public statements, and their positions on how best to manage cross-Strait relations—enough so that one can speak accurately of a single, fundamental political dimension along which all major political parties must take distinct positions in order to be viable at election time (see also Achen and Wang, 2017: 12–13).

This cleavage emerged as Taiwan democratised in the early 1990s, when the axis of partisan competition rapidly reoriented away from pro vs. antiregime issues and towards the China question. Since at least the election of Chen Shui-bian in 2000, the two major parties have taken distinct positions and drawn their respective support from segments of the electorate that hold opposing views on this dimension. In turn, partisanship grew rapidly as Taiwanese elites, media, and society became more polarised around the China question, helping to solidify the leading positions of the more China-friendly KMT and the more pro-independence DPP (Fell, 2013; Hsieh, 2014; cf. Sheng, 2007; Yu, 2005). Indeed, it appears that the sharp political polarisation of the mid-2000s, which drove many observers of Taiwanese politics to despair about the long-term prospects of its democracy (e.g. Chu, 2005; Copper, 2009; Fell, 2010, 2013), also

5 Note that I am taking a position at odds with T. J. Cheng and Yung-ming Hsu (2015), who argue that what they term 'identity-based political cleavages' were not sufficient to contribute to high PSI. My own view is that, if one includes cross-Strait policy in this fundamental cleavage, then the disputes over how to handle relations with the PRC were clearly salient and polarising enough to make a lasting contribution to the development of partisanship in Taiwan.

had the unexpected benefit of deepening partisan attachments, sharpening policy differences between the major parties, and presenting a clear alternative choice to the increasing numbers of voters unhappy with the direction of the Chen Shui-bian government (Rigger, 2016; Stockton, 2006). The result was a landslide victory for the KMT in the 2008 presidential and legislative elections and a significant change in cross-strait policy under Chen's successor Ma Ying-jeou (Lacy & Niou, 2012).

A similar dynamic occurred in reverse during the course of President Ma's eight years in office. Ma began his first term by prioritising closer economic connections to the mainland and better relations with Beijing, and he managed to win re-election in part based on the initial benefits this approach delivered to the median voter. But when he attempted in his second term to open more sectors of Taiwan's economy to mainland trade and investment, his administration found itself increasingly out of step with Taiwanese public opinion, which was moving in the other direction. The growing opposition to his cross-strait policies culminated in 2014 in a student-led protest and occupation of the legislature, which effectively blocked the adoption of a trade agreement signed the previous year with the PRC. By the end of his second term, Ma and the KMT were deeply unpopular, and the DPP became the main beneficiary in the 2016 election when it won both the presidency and a majority in the legislature (Batto, 2018; Hsieh, 2019). Thus, over the last 20 years, partisan polarisation around the China question has arguably helped to strengthen the mechanisms of electoral accountability and responsiveness to public opinion in Taiwan, and to aid democratic consolidation⁶ (McAllister, 2016).

5 High Party System Institutionalisation and the Threats to Democracy in Taiwan

Let us pause here and recap the argument. I have asserted, first, that Taiwan's democracy has actually fared quite well in recent years, when compared with other countries within the Asia-Pacific region and other Third Wave democracies around the world. Second, I have noted the comparative evidence for a link

6 This pattern of accountability to public opinion has also been true for many issues beyond cross-strait relations. I lack space to develop the point here; suffice it to note that both major parties remain broad-tent coalitions which are internally divided on many other key policy issues, from energy policy to labour laws to same-sex marriage, and both have shown considerable ideological flexibility and a willingness to reverse course and follow shifts in public opinion, whether for political advantage or survival.

between party system institutionalisation and the quality of democracy: High PSI is associated with greater stability and predictability of electoral politics, greater collective responsibility in government, better information cues and more easily-identifiable alternatives for voters, and consequently more direct and effective electoral accountability and responsiveness. Third, I have made the case that Taiwan has unusually high PSI for a young Third Wave democracy. And finally, I have linked this pattern back to two sources: (1) the survival of the formerly hegemonic ruling KMT into the democratic era and its effect on opposition party development, especially on the DPP; (2) the emergence and persistence of the China question as the fundamental, polarising political cleavage in Taiwanese politics.

If one accepts the arguments made up to this point, then we are faced with a rather ironic conclusion: the same two factors that many critics decry as problems that have 'distorted' or 'warped' its democracy have, in fact, been crucial to its success. The deep-seated partisanship of supporters of the two major political parties and the polarisation of political elites, the hypercritical partisan media, the intensity of political feelings and activism throughout much of Taiwan's electorate—these factors have, by helping to stabilise the party system, actually *enhanced* the responsiveness and accountability of its elected leaders. And that, in turn, has contributed to the high quality of Taiwan's democracy.

Yet this is most certainly *not* the view one gets when reading much of the scholarship on the state of democracy in Taiwan over the last decade. For instance, in *Politicized Society: The Long Shadow of Taiwan's One-Party Legacy*, Mikael Mattlin argued that Taiwan's democratic consolidation remained incomplete because of the persistence of political polarisation. 'The intense politicization of society', he wrote, 'has brought about a decrease in social trust, a general lack of trust in political institutions and a loss of faith in representative democracy' (2011: 19). He attributed this 'structural politicization' in part to the fact that the old dominant party has been 'incompletely dismantled' and in part to the fundamental nature of political conflict over national identity and Taiwan's relationship with mainland China. Consequently, 'Taiwan's political transition seems to have become stuck at a halfway house' (2011: 19).

Similarly, J. Michael Cole has argued in a recent book that Taiwan's democracy 'hasn't fared that well' and maintains many elements of an 'illiberal democracy'. The blame for these apparent illiberal tendencies, Cole asserts, should be attributed first and foremost to the persistence of the KMT:

Given its Leninist roots, the KMT was never intended to operate as a political party in a pluralistic environment. Though survival compelled

it to adapt and eventually to democratize the system over which it had ruled as an authoritarian regime for 40 years . . . the KMT has yet to divest itself of all the advantages it accumulated under authoritarianism. This includes immense wealth, deep and far-reaching connections within the business community, indirect control of or substantial influence over the media, privileged relationships with the military and security branches, and a tendency to treat internal dissent undemocratically The KMT adapted, and it adapted well [to democracy], but by joining the democratic game it also warped the ideal (2016: 51–52).

These views are not isolated ones. Commentators and academics in Taiwan, especially those sympathetic to the DPP, frequently bemoan the fact that the KMT survived into the democratic era and continues to play a leading role in politics (e.g. Baum & van der Wees, 2012; Hwang, 2016; Schafferer, 2010). In this view, the KMT's authoritarian inheritance, including a murky collection of businesses, investment holding companies, buildings and land plots, and other assets that it acquired during the authoritarian era, have given the party an unfair advantage in contested elections; if the electoral playing field were really level, it would have faded into oblivion a long time ago. Thus, the current DPP government is justified in seeking to force the KMT to provide a full account of its finances and disgorge any 'ill-gotten assets' back to the state from which it acquired them. Yet the persistence of the KMT as a major electoral force, and in particular as a credible threat to retake power even after it lost control over the central government in 2000, has also had unambiguously positive consequences for the party system, and thus for democratic accountability. And if reformers push too hard to disrupt the current party system in a misguided attempt to resolve these 'distortions', they might end up doing more harm than good to Taiwan's democracy in the long run.

On the other side, a number of writers and scholars can be found lamenting the persistence of divisive national identity issues as the fundamental cleavage in Taiwan politics, the harsh criticism levied against President Ma's cross-Strait policies, and the deep scepticism, and sometimes outright ethnic chauvinism, directed against China-friendly voices in Taiwanese politics during the Chen and Ma eras (Chu & Chang, 2018; Copper, 2009; Hsieh, 2014; Hsiung, 2017). For instance, in the introduction to a recent volume on Taiwanese politics after the 2016 election, Wei-chin Lee writes, 'In a broad comparison, the quality of Taiwan's democracy remains positive and promising Regrettably, [however], Taiwan's national identity dispute has long been embedded in various policy debates, and harsh partisan competition has made it difficult to reach a middle ground for dispute resolution' (2019: 7).

Yun-han Chu and Yutzung Chang (2018: 83) have a similar take on democratic practice in contemporary Taiwan, emphasising how rank partisanship has made it hard for political leaders of either major party to govern effectively once in power:

The most difficult challenge for Taiwan's elected leaders is how to navigate through a highly turbulent, volatile and polarized society. Over the last fifteen years or so, Taiwan has acquired all the elements of an un-governable society. First there is a total breakdown of trust and mutual respect between the two contending political blocs, the so-called Blue camp and the Green camp. Their mutual hostility has burned down all the bridges and ruined even a façade of civility and courtesy. The rules of engagement are nothing but political strangling and annihilation. Democratic norms and procedures are oftentimes twisted or ignored for the sake of partisan gains. The hasty move of the DPP government under Tsai Ing-wen to purge the KMT of its party-owned assets in the name of 'transitional justice' is the most revealing example.

Chu and Chang's views are widely shared among observers of Taiwanese politics, especially those sympathetic to the KMT. The China question, however it is defined—as an ethnic conflict, a struggle over national identity, or simply a question of how best to handle relations with the PRC—appears to many scholars to be a unique challenge that has inhibited what otherwise would be a smooth consolidation of democratic values and practices in Taiwan. But this assumption, too, needs to be questioned: political polarisation over the China question has also contributed to the consistent differentiation of the major political parties, provided voters with a clear way to signal their preferences on cross-Strait relations, and made the ruling and opposition parties highly attuned to shifts in public opinion on this critical dimension of politics.

These features set Taiwan's political system apart in a good way from many other Third Wave democracies, where the persistent weakness of ideological and programmatic position-taking, poor electoral accountability, the instability or outright collapse of party systems, and the subsequent rise of illiberal populist candidates have contributed to widespread democratic regression over the last decade. The comparative literature on PSI suggests that the presence in Taiwan of a credible opposition alternative to the ruling party with a clearly defined set of policy positions has, over the long run, enhanced the responsiveness of governments to citizen demands, encouraged the development of broad, programmatic policies rather than narrowly targeted, clientelist ones, and contributed to more effective provision of public goods.

The irony is that the unique factors that have made democracy in Taiwan appear precarious to so many observers at so many moments in fact may have been critical to its survival over the long run. Taiwan's authoritarian legacies and the China factor have together been blessings in disguise for its democracy.

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