

Authoritarian Legacies and Electoral Integrity in Taiwan

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1. Electoral Integrity in Taiwan

Elections in Taiwan are some of the best-managed in the world today. There are few effective limits on the right to vote, the participation of opposition parties and candidates, or campaign advertising and canvassing for votes, and the process of voting and counting is low-tech, transparent, efficient, accurate, and fair. Elections are competitive and fiercely contested, but winners and losers alike nonetheless accept the results as decisive and conferring the legitimate right to rule, and there are no reserved domains in which unelected officials exercise undue influence over government policy.

Comparative indices confirm these qualitative impressions. Taiwan ranks near the top of countries in Asia in the most recent Perceptions of Electoral Integrity index, above Australia and Japan and slightly behind only Korea and New Zealand. The Varieties of Democracy project Electoral Democracy Index score for Taiwan has risen in recent years to near the maximum, close to those of Korea and Japan. Freedom House gives Taiwan its highest score for electoral processes, and 15/16 on political pluralism and participation. And the Bertelsmann Transformation Index ranks Taiwan third among all countries in its database, behind only Estonia and Uruguay, for Political Transformation, including perfect scores for free and fair elections and association and assembly rights.

It was not always this way. As late as 1992, unelected officials held the presidency and the majority of seats in the legislature—the highest positions in the political system—and only a single party, the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT), had ever held power. Taiwan's elections regime included significant restrictions on campaign activities and the media, vote-buying in elections was rampant, and the judiciary and prosecutors were under the sway of the ruling party. Nevertheless, the professional management of the electoral process under the aegis of the Central Election Commission (CEC) was already a hidden strength of Taiwan's emerging democracy, one that smoothed the way for the transition to multi-party politics and the introduction of competitive elections for the central government. Unlike in many other Third Wave democracies such as Mexico and the Philippines, the

independence and integrity of Taiwan's CEC was never in question during this transition, and both the ruling and opposition parties could be confident that the votes would be counted fairly.

In this chapter, I review the strengths and weaknesses of each step of the electoral process in present-day Taiwan: how the electorate is defined, how electoral competition is regulated, and how voting and counting are conducted. The most apparent weaknesses of Taiwan's electoral process are related to malapportionment and disproportionality of the electoral system, and to the regulation of campaign finance and vote-buying. Nonetheless, these problems are not especially severe by comparative standards, and vote-buying, in particular, has declined in prevalence and effectiveness over the past two decades to the point where it is no longer much of a threat to electoral integrity. Moreover, many other electoral practices in Taiwan are among the best in the world: voters are registered automatically and voter rolls are accurate and up to date; there are few restrictions on forming new parties, registering to run, and campaign activities; parties and candidates receive public subsidies which help level the playing field; and the voting and counting processes are exceptionally transparent and efficient. Together, these practices ensure the high level of integrity of Taiwanese elections.

In the last part of the chapter, I consider how electoral integrity in Taiwan has changed over time. In the 1950s and 1960s, many of the kinds of blatant electoral manipulations documented in other cases in this book were also widespread in Taiwan. From 1949 to 1987, Taiwan was under martial law, opposition parties were banned, and the central government was not subject to direct elections. But contested local elections were still held, and they were important for both the external and internal legitimacy of the regime. Intriguingly, many of the current exemplary election practices were actually introduced by the KMT itself during the authoritarian era. The party shifted tactics over time, gradually moving away from the most egregious kinds of violations, such as ballot stuffing, in favor of more subtle interventions in the rules of the electoral game, such as patronage. As the reputational costs of arresting non-KMT candidates and stuffing ballot boxes rose, the KMT leadership developed new procedures to eliminate these practices, and its candidates pivoted toward vote-buying to win elections. A key moment in this process came in 1980 with the passage of the Civil Servants Election and Recall Act and the establishment of the Central Election Commission to oversee all elections in Taiwan. With these reforms, the KMT leadership sought to eliminate electoral fraud, ensure a free and accurate count of the vote, and bolster the domestic legitimacy of elections—and they largely succeeded. At the same time, the party center was more willing to introduce these crucial reforms because they themselves were still *not* vulnerable to electoral defeat at the national level, which remained walled off from electoral competition, and because most of the party's candidates enjoyed massive resource and advertising advantages over the nascent political opposition. Only later, well after the improvements in voting and ballot counting procedures, were other important reforms introduced: the liberalization of speech and assembly laws, the relaxation of restrictions on

campaign activities, improvements in campaign finance regulation, changes to the electoral system, and finally, the prosecution of vote-buying, which led to its gradual decline in prevalence and effectiveness. Thus, the Taiwan case demonstrates how a high-quality system of election management can be established even under electoral autocracy.

2. Defining the Electorate

The first stage of the electoral process at which electoral malfeasance can occur is in how the right to vote is defined and enforced. Around the world, malpractice at this stage usually occurs through two processes: inequitable registration and access to the polls which effectively disenfranchise parts of the electorate; and malapportionment, gerrymandering, or other manipulations of the electoral system which systematically benefit some political groups over others. Neither is very severe in contemporary Taiwan.

Voter Registration and Access

Taiwan's voter rolls are generated 20 days prior to election day from the comprehensive national household registration system. This system, known in Chinese as the *huji zhidu*, assigns every citizen a national ID number that is linked to a unique "household" (*huji*) at an address within the territory of the "free area" of the Republic of China (in addition to the island of Taiwan, this includes the offshore islands of Kinmen, Matsu, Penghu, Green and Orchid Islands.) The system is maintained and regularly updated by agents of the Taiwanese state, including local branches of the national police force, and it is how citizens access state services and benefits such as health care, unemployment, social security, and public education.

As a consequence, the *huji zhidu* provides as close to a complete accounting of all eligible voters as possible, ensuring that each voter is registered in one (and only one) jurisdiction, that newly eligible voters (those turning 20 by election day, or acquiring citizenship) are automatically registered to vote, and that those who have exited the electorate (through death, or suspension¹ or termination of their household registrations) are dropped from the rolls. The direct link between national ID cards and the registration

¹ ROC residents normally must have established residence in Taiwan for the previous six consecutive months to be eligible to vote. ROC passport holders who have lived abroad for more than six consecutive months normally have their residency suspended and are not eligible; they may, however, apply at their local government office to be included on the voter rolls for the next election. See *Presidential and Vice Presidential Election and Recall Act*, Article 12.

system also ensures that all voters already have an official ID to show² when they arrive to vote—they must present it to receive their ballots—and impersonating another voter is exceptionally rare.

The main drawback of this system is the lack of an absentee ballot or early voting option. Voters who do not live at their official place of residence (and there are many Taiwanese who do not) have to return there to cast their ballots—in some cases necessitating long and arduous journeys back to their hometowns for election day. The practical effect of this rule is to increase the burden of voting on subsets of the electorate who are typically absent from their official household: students away at college, active duty military personnel, overseas residents (including in mainland China and further abroad), businesspeople on trips, and so forth. However, two other features of Taiwan’s electoral process mitigate this problem somewhat: elections are always held on Saturdays from 8am-4pm³, and most anywhere on the island is accessible within a day’s travel, so that casting a vote can usually still be accomplished with a weekend trip home.⁴

Malapportionment, Gerrymandering, and Disproportionality

The second way electoral integrity can be undermined at this stage is through the electoral system itself, via malapportionment, gerrymandering, and disproportionality. On this dimension, practices in Taiwan are not ideal, but these problems are also not particularly severe by comparative standards. At every level of government, from the president, to county magistrates and city mayors, to township heads and village and ward chiefs, executives are elected to a four-year term by simple plurality vote of the entire jurisdiction. Thus, malapportionment and gerrymandering only affect legislative branch elections, and they are most severe in the elections to the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan’s national parliament.

The Legislative Yuan is a unicameral assembly which since 2008 has been elected using a mixed-member parallel system, with voters casting two separate votes, one for a candidate in their district, the other for a national party list. The regular single-member district (SMD) seats comprise a little under two-

² One exception is overseas residents; they may show a passport in lieu of a national ID card, provided they have applied to vote. *Civil Servants Election and Recall Act*, Article 14.

³ This practice is by custom, not by law; the Elections and Recall Act does not specify a requirement but leaves this decision up to the Central Election Commission.

⁴ The introduction of absentee balloting is particularly fraught because of the large number of Taiwanese who live and work in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It would be hard to ensure that ballots sent to and from the PRC in the mail would be secure, and that votes cast there would be free of undue interference from the Chinese Communist Party. Moreover, the prospect of several hundred thousand votes cast from mainland China deciding the outcomes of close elections in Taiwan, and the kinds of controversies this might ignite, should give pause to even the staunchest advocates of absentee balloting.

thirds of the total (73/113) and are elected under simple plurality rule. The party list seats make up about 30 percent (34/113) and are distributed under closed-list proportional representation using the Hare quota (largest remainder) formula with a minimum threshold of five percent. The remaining six seats are reserved for indigenous representatives, elected by indigenous voters from two separate three-seat multi-member nation-wide constituencies using the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system.

Legislative Yuan districts vary a lot in population size. The Civil Servants Elections and Recall Act discourages severe malapportionment of single-member districts, but it also lists the equitable distribution of voters as only one of several competing goals, including keeping together significant communities of interest and guaranteeing that every county and city has at least one legislative representative. As a consequence, the actual number of voters in each constituency varies significantly across the country. For instance, the offshore islands of Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu are all in separate counties and therefore entitled to their own representatives, even though Penghu has less than 90,000 voters, Kinmen has less than 120,000, and Lienchiang County less than 11,000, putting the electorate there at less than a 20th the size of the median district on the main island of Taiwan, which has about 250,000 voters. At the other extreme, the most populous electoral district, Yilan County, has over 362,000 voters. As a consequence, in the 2020 LY election, the legislator elected from Yilan represented over 30 times the number of people as the legislator from Matsu. The same rule leads to malapportionment elsewhere as well, although not quite so severe: the rural counties of Taitung and Hualien, for instance, each have a single legislative seat, despite the size of the electorate falling significantly below the median.

Another source of malapportionment, albeit one that is more defensible on other normative grounds, are the indigenous reserved seats. About 2.4 percent of Taiwanese hold official indigenous status, but the reserved seats make up 5.6 percent of the total in the Legislative Yuan—so the vote of an indigenous voter is worth more than twice as much as a voter in the median non-indigenous legislative district.⁵

This inequality in the size of Taiwan’s legislative districts is especially problematic because it maps onto the partisan divide in Taiwan: the smaller districts of Kinmen, Lienchiang, Taitung, and Hualien, as well as the indigenous reserved seats, tend to be much “bluer”, or pro-KMT, than the electorate as a whole.⁶ Thus, since 2008, the KMT has enjoyed a modest bonus of between 3-5 seats in

⁵ On the reserved indigenous seats, see Kharis Templeman, “When Do Electoral Quotas Advance Indigenous Representation?: Evidence from the Taiwanese Legislature,” *Ethnopolitics* 17(5): 461-484.

⁶ See Nathan Batto, “Sources and Implications of Malapportionment in Taiwan,” *Taiwanese Political Science Review* 20, no. 2 (2016): 263-307.

the legislature from this malapportionment—one that helped deliver the party a supermajority in 2008, and cushioned the blow of its losses in 2016 and 2020.

At lower levels of the political system, representatives are still chosen under the old SNTV system in multi-member districts (MMDs). In clear contrast to Japan, where malapportionment among multi-member districts played an important role in keeping the LDP in power until the electoral reform in 1993,⁷ in Taiwan seats have routinely been added or reallocated to ensure a roughly equal distribution of representatives. The SNTV system has other well-known drawbacks that continue to bedevil local council elections: it creates difficult coordination problems for both parties and voters, which can result in a distinct advantage to the party that more accurately forecasts its expected vote share and gets its supporters to evenly distribute their votes across all the party's candidates. But on the whole, the apportionment of seats across local districts, at least, has remained reasonably equitable.

In contrast to malapportionment, gerrymandering has been only a minor issue to date in Taiwan. Since the switch to the two-vote system in the 2008 legislative election, the drawing of SMDs to maximize partisan advantage has generally been kept in check by the Central Election Commission (CEC), which has authority over how district boundaries are drawn. This is not for a lack of trying: in the first round of districting in 2007, both the KMT and DPP were not shy about pushing the CEC to draw boundaries that favored their own short-term electoral chances. In the end, the parties and the CEC resolved the issue by drawing lots; the KMT's map for Pingtung County was adopted, while the DPP's was for Taoyuan, and the TSU's for Taipei County.⁸ Nevertheless, the requirement that townships and districts serve as (relatively large) building blocks for districts within counties and cities has meant that there are simply not many different ways to draw district boundaries, and gerrymandering has not featured prominently as a partisan tool despite the large share of legislative seats elected from SMDs.⁹

A potential concern for the future is that the CEC has recently proven susceptible to pressure from incumbent legislators, who tend to oppose changes to their constituencies. Article 35 of the *Civil Servants Elections and Recall Act* requires that the CEC reapportion electoral districts at least once every 10 years. In the most recent adjustment in 2018, before the 2020 elections, the CEC shifted two seats to account for changes in population: Tainan and Hsinchu County gained a seat, while Pingtung and

⁷ For instance, see Ethan Scheiner, *Democracy without Competition in Japan: Opposition Failure in a One-Party Dominant State*, Cambridge University Press (New York, 2006).

⁸ Shih Hsiu-chuan, "Su, Wang Break Electorate Deadlock," *Taipei Times*, February 1, 2007, p. 1. <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2007/02/01/2003347163>

⁹ See Nathan Batto, "Partisan Politics and Redistricting in Taiwan, 2005-2007," *Journal of Electoral Studies* 12 no. 3 (2016): 1-37.

Kaohsiung each lost one, which necessitated completely redrawing the districts in these four localities. However, the CEC did not adjust existing boundaries within any other cities and counties to take into account population changes, even though in some localities the electorate has become increasingly unevenly distributed across districts. In New Taipei, for instance, eligible voters per legislative district in 2020 varied from only 216,000 (LY District 6) to about 355,000 (LY District 1). In 2018, the CEC apparently gave in to demands from incumbent legislators not to redraw the boundaries even in places like New Taipei¹⁰, all but guaranteeing that this malapportionment will continue to get worse; without reapportionment in the future, this trend could eventually lead to egregious violations of the principle of one-person, one-vote even within counties and cities.

The LY electoral system is also fairly majoritarian in its effects, though not to the extreme degree of Singapore and some other cases in this volume. The PR tier of Taiwan’s mixed-member system makes up only a little under one-third of all seats, and it is not compensatory—that is, the PR seats are not used to “compensate” parties that are underrepresented in the SMDs, but instead are allocated solely based on each party’s share of the second ballot votes. This design allows for the possibility of significant divergence between overall party vote and seat shares in the legislature. The most egregiously disproportionate election outcome to date was in 2008, when the KMT won 72% of the seats in the LY on only 53% of the district vote, while the DPP won only 24% of the seats on 39%. In 2016, this advantage was reversed: the DPP won 60% of the seats on 45% of the district vote, while the KMT won only 31% on 39%. This disproportionality has contributed to “manufactured” majorities in the LY as well: in 2020, for instance, the DPP won 55% of the seats and maintained its majority despite winning only 46% of the district vote, and 33% of the PR vote—the latter a 10-point drop from 2016.

Nevertheless, the PR tier is still large enough to mitigate somewhat the majoritarian effects of the SMDs. It has tended to bolster the party that comes in second in the most district races, and it also provides an opportunity for small parties that cannot compete in most SMDs to win seats as long as they can secure at least five percent of the party list vote. Thus, despite macro-level incentives driving Taiwan toward a two-party system—a president directly elected without a runoff, a unicameral legislature now elected concurrently with the president, a long-standing unidimensional cleavage between pro- and anti-China camps, and an increasingly nationalized party system—at least two smaller parties have held enough seats to form their own party caucuses in every legislature except for the 7th, from 2008-2012.

Finally, it is worth noting that Taiwan has long had a gender quota for all multi-member districts. For the Legislative Yuan, this quota is now enforced in the party list tier, where at least one-half of all

¹⁰ See Nathan Batto, “The CEC Abdicates Its Duty,” *Frozen Garlic* blog post, May 30, 2018:

<https://frozensgarlic.wordpress.com/2018/05/30/the-cec-abdicates-its-duty-中選會推動票票不等值原則/>

party nominees must be women. This rule guarantees that at least 17/113 legislators will be women—a significant drop from the previous rule under the old SNTV system in place before 2008, when the quota was 25% of seats in each multi-member district. Nevertheless, Taiwan’s share of female legislators is still quite high by comparative standards: in the term beginning in 2020, 38 percent were women. At lower levels, councilors and township representatives are still elected using the old SNTV system with a 25% quota. There is good evidence that the long-term existence of the gender quotas has helped gradually to increase women’s participation in politics, to the point where the share of female office-holders far outstrips the minimum requirements now in Taiwan’s national parliament.¹¹

3. Regulating Electoral Competition: Parties, Candidates, and Campaigning

Taiwan’s campaign rules are quite lenient in practice. It is relatively easy to found a new political party, run for office, hold campaign events, advertise for one’s campaign, and canvass for votes. In theory, the electoral laws on the books still impose quite strict limitations on campaigning for office—a holdover from Taiwan’s authoritarian era—but in practice most of these restrictions have long ceased to be enforceable. For instance, the official campaign period for the presidency is still only 30 days long; but under Taiwan’s liberal free speech and assembly regime, candidates can and frequently do hold election rallies, parades, and demonstrations well before that period. Indeed, Taiwanese politics often feels like it is in a state of a permanent election campaign, with public appeals and rallies taking place months or even years before the date of the next election.

Registering Parties and Candidates

Since the late 1980s, it has been straightforward under Taiwanese law to found a new political party. Registration of a new party requires holding a founding assembly, drafting a party charter, and submitting a membership roster of at least 100 people. The ease with which new parties can be founded means that they have multiplied over the last 30 years, so that in 2019 there were over 300 political parties on record.¹² A new *Political Parties Act*, passed in 2017, tightened the requirements for political parties to retain legal standing, including holding a party assembly at least once every four years and

¹¹ Huang Chang-ling, “Gender Quotas and Women’s Increasing Political Competitiveness,” *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 15 no. 1 (2019): 25-40.

¹² Huang Hsin-po and William Hetherington, “Several Parties Have Yet to Make Charter Amendments,” *Taipei Times*, July 18, 2019, p. 2. <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/07/18/2003718886>

submitting a declaration of party finances that meets actuarial standards. Parties are also prohibited from investing in or managing for-profit businesses—a provision aimed at the KMT, which for many years used assets from its party-linked businesses to fund its party activities.¹³

In order to qualify for the ballot, individual candidates must register with the CEC and pay a deposit. The requirements for registration vary based on the type of office. The rules for the presidential election are the most restrictive: prospective candidates must be at least 40 years old, must have maintained a residence in the ROC free area for at least 15 years, and cannot be a naturalized citizen (the electoral law explicitly rules ineligible naturalized immigrants from mainland China, Macau, or Hong Kong). Access to the ballot is also somewhat restricted for presidential elections and favors candidates of the major political parties. All parties which obtained at least five percent of the party list vote in the previous LY election, or which ran a ticket that won at least five percent in the last presidential election, have an automatic presidential ballot line. Other aspiring candidates are required to collect valid signatures equivalent to 1.5 percent of the total electorate within 45 days in order to qualify. All candidates must also pay a large deposit of NT\$15 million, or about US\$500,000, that is to be refunded within 10 days after the election unless the candidate fails to win at least 5% of the vote.¹⁴ (Any fines that the CEC assesses for violations during the campaign can be withheld from this deposit.) The signature and deposit requirements are high enough that independent candidacies are rare: not since 2000 has an independent managed to qualify for the presidential ballot.¹⁵

For legislative district elections, candidates must be at least 23 years old and reside in the district where they intend to run at the time of registration (though not once they are elected). They also cannot be active duty soldiers, electoral personnel, or serving jail time for a serious crime. Most candidates are

¹³ “Legislature Passes Political Parties Act,” *Central News Agency*, November 10, 2017, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/201711100020>

¹⁴ *Presidential and Vice Presidential Election and Recall Act*, Article 31. In the most recent presidential election in 2020, perennial candidate James Soong won only 4.16% of the vote, so he failed to meet the threshold and duly forfeited his deposit.

¹⁵ This was James Soong, in his first of five attempts at the presidency (he also ran in 2012, 2016, and 2020, and in the VP slot on the KMT ticket in 2004). This signature requirement also had real political consequences in the 2020 race: the former DPP vice president Annette Lu, unhappy with President Tsai’s moderation on cross-Strait issues and nursing a series of other grudges against the party, declared her own independent run for president. There was some speculation that she might pull significant votes away from the DPP, but in the end she was unable to gather enough signatures to qualify, and she had to abandon her candidacy before it formally began. See Chen Yun, “Annette Lu Withdraws Presidential Bid,” *Taipei Times*, November 3, 2019, p. 3, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/11/03/2003725169>

nominated by a political party, but party affiliation is not required to run, and many district races feature several independent candidates as well as the major party nominees. Legislative district candidates have to pay a deposit—set by the CEC at its discretion—that is subject to forfeit if they do not win at least 10 percent of the vote. In practice, this rule means that many candidates lose their deposits after the votes are counted. Nevertheless, the deposit requirement remains low enough that many independent candidates with little shot at winning still run. In the 2020 LY election, for instance, the CEC set the deposit amount at NT\$200,000, (about US\$6250), and in the majority of single-member districts at least five candidates appeared on the ballot. In the most extreme case, in Kaohsiung’s Third District, 11 candidates qualified; of these, eight won less than 10% each (and six less than 1%), and so had to forfeit their deposits. (As in the presidential race, the CEC also can withhold part of these deposits to cover any fees it has assessed for campaign violations.)

For the legislature’s proportional representation (PR) seats, parties have to meet at least one of the following criteria for their list to appear on the ballot:

1. The party nominated a presidential ticket in the last election, and its candidate won at least two percent of the total vote;
2. The party has won at least two percent of the party list vote for the last three consecutive legislative elections;
3. The party has at least five legislators in the current legislative term;
4. The party has nominated at least 10 candidates across all geographic districts.

In recent years, these criteria have forced new parties, most notably the New Power Party (in 2016) and the Taiwan People’s Party (in 2020), to nominate additional “sacrificial” candidates in districts in order to qualify their party list for the ballot, adding to the financial and logical hurdles that new small parties face in competing for the legislature.

It is also worth noting that candidates cannot run for more than one type of election at the same time. This clause (Elections and Recall Act, Article 25) precludes the possibility of so-called “best loser” or “zombie” candidates for the Legislative Yuan—a common phenomenon in Japan, where candidates who lose their district races are sometimes still able to enter the Diet by simultaneously running on the party list.¹⁶

Below the national level, broadly similar rules apply to aspiring candidates: they must meet residency and age qualifications and submit a deposit in order to register, but there are no other practical barriers to running. The CEC has the discretion to set the size of the deposit. In recent years it has ranged

¹⁶ Robert Pekkanen, Benjamin Nyblade, and Ellis S. Krauss, “Electoral Incentives in Mixed-Member Systems: Party, Posts, and Zombie Politicians in Japan,” *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 2 (2006): 183-193.

from NT\$200,000 for city/county executive races to NT\$2 million for special municipality mayors, and from \$12,000 for city and county councilors, to NT\$200,000 for special municipality councilors.¹⁷

Overall, Taiwan’s candidacy rules appear to strike a reasonable balance between allowing access to the ballot for serious candidates, including from the leading opposition parties, while still discouraging completely frivolous ones. They also include several provisions that increase the value of belonging to a political party, and that tend to privilege the larger, longer-established parties over smaller ones and independent candidates.

Campaigning

When it comes to campaigning for office, there is significant divergence in Taiwan between the letter of the law and accepted practice. In theory, the Elections and Recall Act places strict legal limits on the length of the campaign periods for each type of elected office. The longest, for president, is only 30 days. Candidates for the LY, mayors and county executives, and city and county councilors are allowed only the 15 days before the election to campaign, and candidates for lower offices, only five!¹⁸

In practice, however, these restrictions have been superseded by Taiwan’s quite liberal constitutional protections for free speech and assembly. The CEC has not attempted in the democratic era to regulate the speech of declared candidates for office who engage in political activities before the official start date of the campaign—and if it did, it would probably end up losing in court. Candidates can still hold public rallies, advertise, or solicit support ahead of their own party primaries as well, and in practice they are allowed to (and often do) put up campaign billboards and flags well before the official campaign period begins.

There remain a handful of important restrictions that the CEC does continue to enforce during the official campaign period. Campaign activities are limited to between the hours of 7am and 10pm. Civil servants cannot participate in campaign activities, and campaign offices cannot be located in public buildings.¹⁹ Campaign materials cannot be displayed on public property, including roads, bridges, and parks, except as explicitly permitted by the local government. Most prominently, the CEC continues to

¹⁷ The large deposit required for prominent offices briefly became a salient issue in 2018. The social activist Fan Yun declared her candidacy for the Taipei mayor’s race but struggled to raise the NT\$2 million (US\$62,500) required for the deposit. She later quit the race, complaining bitterly that this requirement put candidates from small parties, and especially young activists, at a disadvantage. She proposed changing the law to allow signatures to be submitted in lieu of a deposit. See: <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/01/09/2003707616>

¹⁸ Civil Servants Election and Recall Act, Article 40.

¹⁹ These restrictions were introduced in 1980 to forbid what was previously a common practice: KMT officials would often draw on state resources for partisan purposes.

enforce a polling blackout for the 10 days prior to the election—no polls can be announced during this period, although campaigns and other pollsters can still conduct them privately (Article 53)—and no campaign activities of any kind are allowed on election day itself (Article 56).²⁰

Rather than attempt the quixotic task of preventing campaign rallies or forbidding advertising on private billboards, Taiwan’s election regulators instead have focused much of their limited capacity on trying to detect, deter, and punish the most pernicious violations of campaign laws—especially vote-buying. Candidates are not allowed to provide “gifts” to a voter worth more than NT\$30 (about one USD); they may pass out pens, tissue paper, notebooks and other cheap merchandise as campaign publicity, but are forbidden to distribute anything more substantial. Election law also explicitly forbids the exchange of money for a promise to vote a certain way (Articles 99 and 100). Taiwan has a long tradition of extensive vote-buying, especially for local offices, that became quite pervasive in the early 1990s as the island democratized and competition became fierce. But over the last 20 years, local prosecutors have made it a top priority to investigate vote-buying allegations, and several winning legislative candidates have subsequently been convicted and stripped of their seats.²¹ Anecdotal evidence suggests the effectiveness and prevalence of vote-buying has steadily declined over the last two decades, though it likely continues to be practiced in in some local elections and in the remaining indigenous SNTV seats.²²

Campaign Finance

One area where the legal restrictions and enforcement remain quite lax in practice is in campaign financing. The *Political Donations Act* (PDA), first adopted in 2004, permits individuals, political parties, civil associations, and businesses to donate to individual political campaigns, though public-owned enterprises and businesses seeking government contracts may not. There is also now an explicit ban on donations from foreign individuals and businesses (Article 7), including those based in mainland China,

²⁰ This requirement has been quite aggressively enforced. In 2012, for instance, the Facebook page of the campaign of incumbent President Ma Ying-jeou posted a message early on election day reminding supporters to head to the polls and vote for Ma. The CEC interpreted this as a violation of the “no campaigning” restriction and fined the Ma campaign NT\$500,000. See Huang Hsin-po, “2012 Elections: CEC Warns of Ban on Canvassing Today,” *Taipei Times*, January 11, 2012, p. 3, at: <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2012/01/11/2003729075>

²¹ After the 2008 elections, an unprecedented five different legislators were convicted of vote-buying and stripped of their seats. One legislator each was convicted of vote-buying after the 2012 and 2016 elections—both in the indigenous constituencies.

²² For instance, the Varieties of Democracy project includes a variable measuring the prevalence of vote-buying by year; it shows a significant decline since 2008.

Hong Kong, or Macau. Campaign donations to all candidates are capped at NT\$300,000 (about US \$10,000) for individuals, NT\$2 million for businesses, and NT\$1 million for civil associations, of which at most \$100,000 (NT\$1 million, NT\$500,000) can go to any one candidate (Article 18). Donations under NT\$10,000 (about US\$500) are not required to be reported (Article 14). Donations directly to political parties are also permitted, and capped at NT\$300,000 per individual, \$3 million per business, and \$2 million per civil association (Article 17). Notably, the time period in which donations can be made to individual candidates (though not to political parties) is limited by law: to 1 year prior to the election for aspiring presidential candidates, 10 months for the legislature, 8 months for county/city level offices and township heads, and only 4 months for township and village representatives (Article 12). Separately, the Elections and Recall Act imposes total spending limits on campaigns, enforceable via fines levied by the CEC.

Nevertheless, in practice the reporting and disclosure requirements for these donations and expenditures are quite weak, undercutting the effectiveness of campaign spending limits. The PDA gives the power to collect and enforce campaign donation requirements to the Control Yuan, which has few enforcement powers. Each candidate is supposed to submit a comprehensive list of his or her campaign's donations and expenditures within 70 days after the election, and to keep all donations in a special account approved by the CY. There are few penalties for misreporting, however, and the Control Yuan only has the ability to impose fines on campaigns which exceed the donation caps. In addition, the CY does not make the detailed campaign reports public, allowing donors to contribute anonymously to campaigns.²³ In practice, this design means that most campaign reports have only the roughest approximation to the true amount of funds, their sources, and the total expenditures, and enforcement of campaign finance restrictions, to the extent it does occur, comes mostly from prosecutors investigating candidates and parties for violations of other laws—especially vote-buying and covert foreign influence—rather than from the CEC or the CY.

Taiwan also provides public funding for political parties and individual candidates. For political parties, this funding is distributed annually based on the party list vote in the last legislative election: NT\$50 per vote earned, for all political parties obtaining at least 3.5 percent of the vote. For candidates, a one-time subsidy is provided after the election: all candidates winning at least 1/3 of the winning candidate's vote share receive NT\$30 per vote, paid out at least 30 days after the final results are certified.²⁴ The practical effect of these subsidies is to give the large parties, and candidates who run

²³ On this point, see especially Po Liang Chen, "Money in Taiwanese Politics: A Historical Analysis of Taiwanese Campaign Finance Law." Unpublished dissertation, School of Law, University of Washington, 2018.

²⁴ Civil Servants Elections and Recall Act, Article 43; Presidential Elections and Recall Act, Article 41.

under their banners, a significant financial advantage over new, smaller parties and independent candidates.

Media Regulation

A final concern is the regulation of media. Since the transition to democracy, Taiwan’s media regulators have had a very light touch, and media outlets have been free to publish controversial stories and critical editorials without fear of censorship or retaliation. No state body oversees print media, and the National Communications Commission, an independent agency responsible for regulating TV and radio broadcasting, has generally not interfered with programming either. This laissez-faire approach to the media industry has changed somewhat in recent years, as the ruling DPP has become increasingly alarmed at allegations of PRC interference in election campaigns and close coordination between some traditional media outlets and Beijing—particularly during the 2018 local elections. In response, the executive branch has stepped up enforcement of foreign influence laws and combatting the spread of deliberate disinformation online, the DPP-led legislature has passed several new laws and amendments tightening reporting requirements, and the NCC has become more assertive about fining (but importantly, not closing down) TV outlets for unbalanced news coverage.²⁵ It remains too early to tell whether this shift in approach will eventually lead to a significant chill in freedom of expression and the press, or whether it was a reasonably calibrated short-term adjustment to combat a serious outside threat to the integrity of Taiwan’s electoral process.

At present, however, Taiwanese voters still enjoy access to media offering a wide variety of coverage and opinions that span the political spectrum from pro-unification to pro-independence. There is no notable state censorship of private media companies, and both parties and individual candidates of all political stripes are able to appeal directly to voters without significant restrictions on messaging or campaign activities.

4. Voting and Counting

Arguably the greatest strengths of Taiwan’s election management system are its procedures for voting and for counting the ballots. Polling stations are usually in public buildings, which tend to be centrally located within the precinct—schools, community centers, markets, town halls, and so forth.

²⁵ For more details, see Kharis Templeman, “How Taiwan Stands Up to China,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (2020): 85-99.

Because these exist in any town or village, no matter how small or remote, access to them is not dramatically different across Taiwan. Election law requires that most poll workers be public schoolteachers or government employees, who if requested must serve in this role, and who are paid a small honorarium for their time.²⁶ They are responsible for setting up the polling station, checking IDs against registrations and ensuring voters receive the right ballots.

All polling stations open at 8am and close at 4pm. The 4pm cutoff is strictly enforced: anyone still waiting in line is permitted to cast a ballot, but anyone still outside is not allowed in the door. During this period, there are strict rules against voter intimidation. Campaign materials are not allowed within 100 feet of a polling place, and voters are not allowed to wear any paraphernalia linked to a campaign. Cell phones are not allowed in the voting booth—though this can now be enforced simply by requiring voters to power them down—and no photography is allowed in or around polling stations (though since 2012, photo-taking has been permitted during the vote count after the polls have closed.) At least one police officer is posted to each precinct to back up election workers enforcing the rules and to maintain order if necessary.

Taiwan’s ballot design is also exemplary. The CEC produces a separate ballot for each type of race, distinguished by color.²⁷ Each candidate’s picture, name in Chinese characters, and party affiliation, if any, are listed on each ballot. Candidate and party order is assigned via lottery, conducted by the election commission in each jurisdiction in a public ceremony. The voter indicates her choice by placing a mark in a large blank box below the candidate’s name and picture with a special election stamp supplied in each polling booth. The CEC also issues permissive guidelines for discerning voter intent—if a voter stamps a candidate’s picture or name instead, or stamps multiple times in multiple places, the vote is to be counted. If a stamp crosses over into another candidate’s box, however, it is invalid. Ballots also cannot be marked with items other than the official stamp, or signed, or otherwise provide markings that could conceivably make it possible to identify who cast a particular ballot. This ballot design, and the

²⁶ Yen-tu Su, “Angels are in the Details: Voting System, Poll Workers, and Election Administration Integrity in Taiwan,” in *Authoritarian Legality in Asia: Formation, Development and Transition*, edited by Weitseng Chen and Hualing Fu (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 280-302.

²⁷ For instance, in the 2020 elections, the presidential ballot was colored pink, the district legislative race ballot yellow, the indigenous highland ballot blue, indigenous lowland ballot green, and the party list ballot white. The different colors help poll workers to assign voters the proper ballots (important for the legislative races), and to quickly sort the ballots during counting.

permissive guidelines for what counts as a vote, mean that the spoiled (invalid) vote count is quite low, ranging from 0.5% to 2% in any given precinct.²⁸

Control over printed ballots is carefully monitored. They are delivered to the polling place three days before the election and kept under lock and key until the morning of the election. The number of ballots supplied to each polling station is at least equivalent to the total number of voters registered there, plus a small set of extras. (When the count is concluded, the polling supervisor must report the total number of unissued ballots as well, and these are returned to the CEC along with the ballots cast.)

The most unique and symbolically powerful part of Taiwan's elections is the public vote count, which takes place at the polling stations as soon as the polls have closed. After the last vote has been cast, the poll boxes are immediately sealed and moved to the center of the room. A rope or other barrier is drawn across the room to separate the poll workers from observers (both from the campaigns and any interested members of the public), who are then allowed into the polling place to watch the count proceed. The boxes are then opened, ballots pulled out one by one and held high so that they are visible to all observers, and the name and number of each candidate or party marked on the ballot is called out and marked on a paper at the front of the room. The count proceeds until all votes in each box have been recorded, and then the empty box is shown to the audience to confirm no votes have been missed. The number of votes on each sheet are then totaled up and final counts posted on an official slip outside the polling station, and the poll supervisor calls in the precinct results to the CEC.

The entire process takes, on average, 2-3 hours for a national election, and final results for the entire country are typically confirmed in less than six hours. The greatest drawback of this system is that it is labor-intensive: the 2020 general elections, for instance, required over 200,000 poll workers for an electorate of 19.3 million people.²⁹ However, it has many other advantages: it low-tech, transparent, efficient, fast, and accurate, and nearly impossible to manipulate without being spotted.

The only serious problems to occur during election day in recent years have involved referendums.³⁰ In December 2017, the legislature drastically lowered the requirements for qualifying a referendum for the ballot, and there was a rush to put this new political tool to use. In November 2018, an unprecedented 10 referendums were held on the same day as Taiwan's consolidated local elections, which

²⁸ Author calculation, from 2020 legislative election results, available at Central Election Commission website: <https://db.cec.gov.tw/histMain.jsp?voteSel=20200101A2>

²⁹ Jake Chung, "CEC To Have 1,346 More Polling Stations Next Year," *Taipei Times*, September 13, 2019, p. 3, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/09/13/2003722203>

³⁰ The first referendums held in Taiwan, in 2004 and 2008, also sparked heated partisan fights over the voting process and the validity of the referendum power itself.

now feature concurrent elections for all local elected offices. As a consequence, voters received as many as 15 separate ballots (10 referendum ballots plus up to five for local races), and the voting process slowed way down. Many voters faced long waits and were still standing in line to vote as the counts began in other precincts—an almost unprecedented situation for Taiwan. After widespread criticism and complaints, the head of the CEC resigned to take responsibility, and the legislature eventually amended the law again to require referendum votes to be held on separate days from other elections.³¹

5. The Historical Path towards Electoral Integrity in Taiwan

In this section, I consider how electoral integrity in Taiwan has changed over time. Intriguingly, many of Taiwan’s current election practices were actually introduced by the KMT itself during the authoritarian era. From 1949 to 1987, Taiwan was under martial law, opposition parties were banned, and the central government was not subject to direct elections. But contested local elections were still held, and they were important for both the external and internal legitimacy of the regime. Externally, the KMT used them to bolster its claim during the Cold War to be “Free China,” in contrast to the communist regime across the Taiwan Strait, and that the Republic of China (ROC) in exile on Taiwan was the rightful government of all of China. Internally, elections were useful to the regime for some of the same reasons autocrats today employ them: they served as a source of information about the ruling party’s popularity, a way to recruit talented people into the party, a method to divide and coopt opponents, and a signal to potential challengers outside and defectors inside the party of the regime’s strength.

The KMT was originally a party in exile. It lost control of mainland China at the end of the Chinese civil war, fleeing to Taiwan with over a million refugees and reestablishing the Republic of China government in Taipei in December 1949. The regime immediately faced an ethnic divide—the “mainlanders” who had come over with the party in 1949 dominated the party and state, but made up only about 15 percent of the total population. Thus, to win elections, the KMT needed to incorporate local “native” or *benshengren* Taiwanese into its networks. Elections helped serve this purpose—they channeled potential opposition to KMT rule into competition that did not threaten the regime, helped identify popular local leaders to recruit into the party, and provided information to the leadership about its overall level of popularity.

³¹ “Civic Group Leaders Slam Referendum Act Amendments,” *Focus Taiwan*, June 17, 2019, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/201906170023>

Elections in Taiwan went through three distinct periods under KMT rule. During the “hard authoritarian” years of the 1950s and 1960s, local electoral competition was allowed, but the KMT leadership frequently employed the security apparatus to arrest or intimidate potential opponents it did not like. For instance, in 1960, the liberal critic (and mainlander) Lei Chen, the founder of a newspaper called *Free China*, attempted to start a new political party in contravention of the martial law restrictions then in place. Rather than allow the new party to compete, Chiang Kai-shek simply ordered it to be shut down and had Lei arrested and sentenced to a prison term of more than 10 years. In other instances, party agents engaged in blatant fraud during the vote-counting process. In 1954, the independent candidate Kao Yu-shu won the Taipei mayor’s election, becoming the most prominent non-KMT office-holder in Taiwan. When he ran for reelection in 1957, however, he was defeated through what was almost certainly widespread electoral fraud—sudden power failures during the vote count in polling stations provided an opening for party agents to stuff ballot boxes with additional votes for his opponents. Kao ran again in 1964, and, helped by a new clause that allowed each candidate to nominate poll-workers, and in combination with a friendly opponent’s nominees, there were enough poll-workers independent of the KMT to prevent a repeat of the 1957 fraud. No electoral irregularities were detected in this election, and Kao won a clear victory.³² But in most other contests, the KMT’s preferred nominees won without much suspense.

The introduction of supplementary elections to the Legislative Yuan, first held in 1969 to replace the many old mainlander representatives who were becoming incapacitated or dying of old age, marked the beginning of a transition toward a “softer” authoritarian regime. By the early 1970s, the KMT was less able or willing to simply arrest or coopt all opponents, and acutely sensitive about its declining international and domestic legitimacy. In 1971, the ROC lost control of the China seat in the UN Security Council to the PRC, and in 1972, US President Richard Nixon traveled to Beijing in a sign of warming ties between the former enemies. In 1975, Chiang Kai-shek himself died and was succeeded as party leader (and eventually, president) by his son, Chiang Ching-kuo (CCK). The younger Chiang accelerated a process of “Taiwanization” of the KMT, seeking to increase the numbers of *benshengren* who held high-level posts. CCK also refocused the regime’s energies on development at home, rather than preparing for a war to reconquer mainland China, and he placed greater emphasis to foreign audiences on the presence of regular, contested elections as a demonstration of the regime’s “democratic” credentials.

³² Emily M. Ahern and Hill Gates, *The Anthropology of Taiwanese Society*, Stanford University Press (Stanford, 2020), 71; Su, “Angels,” p. 298. Kao’s repeat success was so disturbing to the KMT leadership that Taipei was then converted into a directly administered municipality, which changed the mayor’s office from an elected to an appointed position. Kao was nevertheless kept in his post until 1972, and later formally joined the KMT.

Under these changing macro conditions, summary arrests of opponents and blatant electoral fraud became more costly to the party leadership. They also revealed a widening gap between the interests of the party center and local factions, which had few compunctions about manipulating the electoral system to ensure their preferred candidates won. A particularly searing illustration of this changing dynamic occurred during local elections in 1977. In Taoyuan County, a former KMT member named Hsu Hsin-liang defected from the party and ran as an independent for the mayor of Chung-li City. As the votes were being counted, rumors began to spread that KMT agents were stuffing ballot boxes, and a riot broke out. In the end, Hsu was declared the winner in the mayor's race, no doubt helped by the public protests. 1977 also marked the first time that independent candidates attempted to coordinate their campaigns with one another; to get around the prohibition on new political parties, they began calling themselves the "Dangwai," or "outside the party." When non-KMT candidates won four county executive races, an all-time high, it suggested that the KMT was facing declining popularity and needed to rethink its recruitment and nomination strategies.

Other problems with voting and counting were also widespread in the mid-1970s, further undermining the legitimacy of the KMT's continued rule and leading to a push to create an independent electoral commission to oversee elections, which had up to that point been managed by county-level commissions supervised by the Ministry of the Interior. The pressure on the KMT leadership to improve electoral administration strengthened further when the US suddenly announced in December 1979 that it was switching diplomatic recognition to the PRC. Shocked by the surprise abandonment by the ROC's staunchest ally, Chiang Ching-kuo indefinitely suspended supplementary elections planned for later that month. A year later, the growing opposition took to the streets on the one-year anniversary to protest the suspension and call for the lifting of martial law, legalization of opposition parties, and introduction of direct elections for the central government. The regime cracked down and arrested the leaders of the protest, in a move that became known as the Kaohsiung Incident (also called the Meilidao Incident). But it also moved forward quickly with reforms to strengthen the integrity of elections, passing the Civil Servant Election and Recall Act and the Organic Law of the Central Election Commission in early 1980. Together, these two laws transferred election management out of the hands of local county commissions and into the authority of the new CEC, which was staffed by central-level party technocrats. With these reforms, the KMT leadership sought to eliminate electoral fraud, ensure a free and accurate count of the vote, and bolster the domestic legitimacy of elections—and they largely succeeded. At the same time, the party center was more willing to introduce these crucial reforms because they themselves were still *not* vulnerable to electoral defeat at the national level, which remained walled off from electoral competition, and because most of the party's candidates enjoyed massive resource and advertising advantages over the nascent political opposition.

Taiwan's gradual transition to democracy began with the (unauthorized) founding of the DPP in 1986. Rather than crack down on the new party, Chiang Ching-kuo allowed the group to compete in year-end supplementary elections, and the next year he announced the lifting of martial law. Other important reforms followed: the gradual liberalization of speech and assembly laws, the relaxation of restrictions on campaign activities, improvements in campaign finance regulation, and changes to the electoral system and other political institutions, including the direct election of the president. The KMT leadership (headed by CCK until January 1988, Lee Teng-hui after that) was willing to open the political system up to greater competition in part because it still enjoyed significant resource advantages over the opposition, and because it also had a long track record of running in and winning free elections at the local level. Ironically, the KMT's demonstrated ability to win elections by buying votes also made it more willing to risk allowing contested elections for the presidency and national legislature. Only much later, after the KMT lost power in 2000, was the scourge of vote-buying finally prosecuted more vigorously. But by then, Taiwan already had a long record of good election management.

Thus, the key innovations in Taiwan's electoral process developed over a period of more than seven decades. The household registration system and SNTV electoral system were actually holdovers from the Japanese colonial era, as were the initial stringent limits on campaign activities. The practice of counting the ballot boxes at the polling stations was introduced by Yang Chao-chia and Hsiang Chang-chuan, both KMT liberal reformers who were given a largely free hand to write the regulations for local elections after 1949.³³ The requirement that each candidate be allowed to nominate some of the poll workers was introduced in 1960, after Kao Yu-shu's suspicious defeat in 1957, and was directly related to his second victory in the Taipei mayor's race in 1964.³⁴ Other reforms were introduced during the "soft authoritarian" period: most importantly, the passage in 1980 of the Civil Servant Elections and Recall Act and the creation of the Central Election Commission, which put election law on a statutory basis and hastened the professionalization of election management. The reform of the electoral system and liberalization of campaign and media regulations came later; they, rather than the independence of the electoral commission, were major points of contention during the long transitional period from 1986-1996, but had largely been resolved by the time the first direct presidential election was held in 1996. These reforms did not completely level the electoral playing field—the KMT still enjoyed enormous resource advantages over the other political parties, and it remained the favorite to win any given race—but they did raise the possibility that the long-time ruling party could actually lose power under the right conditions. In the 2000 presidential election, to the surprise of many, the KMT in fact did lose power,

³³ Su, p. 294.

³⁴ Su, pp. 297-8.

ushering in a long period of gradual consolidation of democracy. The remaining electoral reforms introduced during this period are mostly related to party financing and anti-vote-buying, and have on the whole further strengthened the integrity of elections in Taiwan.

Considered in comparative perspective, the Taiwan case demonstrates how past authoritarian practices do not necessarily have to leave a negative legacy for contemporary politics. Indeed, the Taiwan experience suggests the opposite: the KMT regime built a high-quality system of election management precisely because it wanted to strengthen the legitimacy of elections—elections that it was confident it could win in a free and fair contest. One of the great ironies of Taiwanese politics is that such a long period of authoritarian one-party rule has left such a positive legacy for democracy today.