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Opposition Success in Dominant Party Regimes: Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party in Comparative Perspective

Chapter 5: Identity Politics

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Abstract

“Dominant-party regimes” (DPRs) are those in which a single party or coalition maintains a tight grip on national power by repeatedly winning competitive elections rather than through outright coercion. The long-term persistence of these DPRs is puzzling—they combine genuine electoral competition with an absence of party turnover, even when there is widespread dissatisfaction among the electorate with the incumbent party’s performance. In this paper I focus on the ways identity issues can affect DPR durability and breakdown. I argue that mobilization of voters along identity lines can accomplish two difficult tasks for opposition parties. First, in societies in which there exists considerable heterogeneity in group identities, the politicization of latent identity cleavages can realign the dimensions along which parties compete, neutralizing the advantages, typically financial and organizational, that dominant parties possess, and increasing the salience of identity issues that systematically favor the opposition over the incumbent party. Second, depending on the distribution of such cleavages among the opposition and incumbent party camps, appeals to in-group solidarity can help to keep otherwise fractious opposition coalitions together. I illustrate this argument with reference to Taiwan, where the upstart opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) built a strong electoral challenge to the dominant Kuomintang (KMT), eventually resulting in the incumbent’s defeat in the 2000 presidential election. From an early date, the DPP consciously sought to highlight the “foreignness” of the mainlander-dominated KMT, in contrast to the Taiwanese origins of its own leadership. By skillfully advocating policies to “Taiwanize” the island’s public institutions, the opposition was able simultaneously to attract many new voters who had formerly supported the KMT, to maintain unity among opposition supporters, and to create serious divisions within the ruling party camp between “mainlanders” and “Taiwanese.” Thus, mobilization around identity issues enabled the opposition to defeat a very formidable dominant party. The argument is not limited to Taiwan: a similar pattern of mobilization may be behind the defeat of the Congress Party in India by the BJP, the realignment of the US “Solid South” toward the Republican Party, and the surprising durability of UMNO in Malaysia. The politics of identity appears to be an important influence on the durability of dominant parties.
5.1. Introduction: What are Dominant Parties, and When Do They Lose?

The pre-2000 Chinese Nationalist (Kuomintang or KMT) regime in Taiwan is one of the most prominent of a type of regime variously referred to as one-party dominant, hegemonic, or dominant party regimes (DPRs), in which a single party or coalition maintains a tight grip on national power by repeatedly winning contested elections for the highest offices of government. Three key features differentiate DPRs from other regimes. First, there must be a political party that both selects the regime leader and exists independently of him. In other words, the regime leader’s authority depends to a significant degree on the support of other key figures within the party; the party is not merely a vehicle for his personal ambitions. Similarly, the party continues to exist as a functioning organization if the leader dies, retires, or is otherwise deposed. Second, the incumbent party retains power primarily through regular victories in contested elections rather than through intimidation, fraud, and other forms of coercion. That is, at a minimum, opposition candidacies are not banned, electoral contestation is allowed and occurs regularly, and non-ruling-party candidates do win some races, but the incumbent party routinely wins majorities and remains in power. Third, the incumbent party controls the central government for an extraordinary period of time. The exact measure used to identify “extraordinary” dominant-party (DP) durability is by necessity arbitrary; one definition is to define a DP as one that rules (absolutely or in a coalition) for at least 20 years. As I show in Chapter 2, by this measure there are at least 40 dominant party regimes that exist today or that have ended in the recent past. These include a number of the most prominent “competitive authoritarian” regimes, including Mexico, Malaysia, Taiwan, Singapore, Botswana, and Senegal (Levitsky and Way
They also include a number of countries widely considered to be democracies, among them Japan, Italy, Luxembourg, and Sweden.

The extreme longevity of dominant party regimes is puzzling—they combine genuine electoral competition with an absence of party turnover, even when there is widespread dissatisfaction among the electorate with the incumbent party’s performance. In Japan, for example, the LDP has since 1955 remained the party of government for all but 10 months, 22 days, surviving the end of the Cold War, the bursting of property and stock market bubbles, and an entire decade of zero economic growth; it was decisively defeated only in 2009. Similarly, since winning control of Malaysia’s government at independence in 1957, the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) in Malaysia has survived serious ethnic riots, multiple leadership succession crises, and the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997; it, too, remains the ruling party there today. In Mexico, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in its various incarnations remained continuously in power at the federal level for 71 years, lasting through both rapid economic growth and devastating recessions, bloody student protests and peasant uprisings, wild fluctuations in world oil prices, and a five-fold rise in population, among other dramatic changes. In Italy, the DC was included in every single government (and there were many!) formed there from 1948 to 1992 (Boucek 1998).

These and other cases attract attention precisely because they call into question one of the most fundamental mechanisms through which governments are held accountable by citizens—the ability of voters to “throw the bums out” (Riker 1982). It is a basic truth of politics that incumbent governments, no matter how effective at meeting popular demands, eventually lose popularity. The semi-regular alternation of different parties in power allows for the infusion of new ideas and energy into government and is part of what we typically think of as the “normal” pattern of democratic politics. Thus, when parties remain in
government over multiple decades, their longevity raises challenging questions for social scientists, both positive—how is multi-party competition consistent with a single party equilibrium winner?—and normative—if the incumbent party never loses an election, is it still accountable and responsive to the electorate? Understanding why some parties persist in power for decades, and with what consequences, is therefore an important challenge for political scientists.

Existing Explanations of Dominant Party Breakdown

The most prominent recent contributions to the comparative literature have focused on material explanations to account for dominant party defeat (Scheiner 2006; Magaloni 2006; Greene 2007). Ken Greene, for instance, argues that dominant parties “typically have access to five types of illicit public resources they can use for partisan purposes,” including (1) diversion of funds from state-owned (and in the KMT’s case, party-owned as well) enterprises; (2) diversion of funds directly from the public budget; (3) the use of public-sector jobs for patronage and spoils; (4) the manipulation of state laws to solicit kickbacks and illegal campaign contributions from businesses, and equally importantly, to prevent those businesses from funding opposition challengers; and (5) the use of state administrative resources to support party mobilization of voters (see also Aldrich et al. n.d.).

Taken together, these resources provide incumbent candidates with formidable advantages in electoral campaigns, decreasing the probability that any given opposition candidate will be able to win a seat. As a consequence, those candidates who nevertheless choose to run under opposition party banners tend not to be motivated to participate by the prospect of winning office but rather by a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo. And, in general, the more unlikely their prospects of victory against the incumbent party’s
candidates, the more radical their own preferences must be to motivate them to run—a process that in DPRs often involves great personal sacrifice and risk of bodily harm or worse.\(^1\) Opposition parties also rarely, if ever, have access to significant financial resources which can be used to support paid staff—thus, they usually must resort to a labor-intensive organizing strategy that relies heavily on ideologically-driven volunteers to staff their party offices, spread the party’s message, recruit candidates, and take care of all the other tasks of party-building. Therefore, the opposition parties which do form in dominant party regimes tend to be “niche” parties which (1) advocate positions which are extreme relative to the median voter in the electorate, and (2) nominate candidates most of whom are perceived as radical relative to those of the dominant party. Thus, Greene provides a simple but compelling general explanation for the fact that dominant parties tend to exist alongside ideologically polarized, relatively extreme opposition parties.

**Dominant Party Defeat in Taiwan**

Greene portrays Taiwan, among other cases, as confirmation of his theory’s explanatory power. The erosion of the party’s resource dominance, he argues, leveled the electoral playing field and allowed the opposition party to attract and put forward more moderate candidates for office. State-owned enterprises fell from 7% to 5% of Taiwan’s GDP over the 1990s; as a consequence, “[t]his reduction deprived the federal [sic] government of substantial assets and large numbers of jobs that could have been used for patronage purposes” (266). In addition, “the KMT’s businesses came under more pressure

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\(^1\) A review of the backgrounds of the prominent founding members of Taiwan’s DPP provides a particularly good illustration of the dangers of attempting to work as part of an organized opposition. Among the more egregious examples, Chen Shui-bian’s wife was run over by a truck and paralyzed in what was widely regarded as a KMT-sanctioned attack. The wife and two daughters of one former DPP chairman, Lin Yi-hsiung, were murdered in their home while he was in police custody. And another former DPP chairman, Shih Ming-teh, served 27 years in prison during the martial law era.
for efficiency gains to compete in increasingly open domestic markets and internationally. As a result, these firms were transformed from protected organizations that could be milked as cash cows for patronage into competitive ones in which managers more strictly controlled budgets” (ibid). The erosion of this resource advantage, Greene asserts, combined with a permissive electoral system, allowed the opposition parties to attract more centrist, office-seeking candidates, which in turn made them more competitive in head-to-head competition with the KMT. The split in the incumbent party, and the DPP’s victories in 2000 and 2004, he suggests, are therefore attributable primarily to declining dominant party resources.

In reality, the KMT’s defeat in 2000 looks quite odd in light of explanations that center on resource asymmetries, economic crisis and the breakdown of clientelist networks. During its 50 years in power, the party governed Taiwan as one of the most effective single-party regimes the world has ever seen. Unlike dominant parties in Mexico and Japan, the party had an impressive, sustained track record of economic stewardship right up through the 2000 election—starting from a poor, predominantly agricultural base in the 1950s, Taiwan’s economy had rapidly been transformed into one of the richest and most advanced in Asia, and its economy continued to grow at a robust 6-8% clip for most of the 1990s. It also weathered the Asian Financial Crisis better than just about any other economy in the region; by the 2000 presidential election the island’s economy had rebounded to its pre-crisis growth rates. Likewise, the argument that the KMT’s party machine was suffering from “resource vulnerability” seems questionable. It remained one of the richest political parties in the world at the time of its defeat, with a net worth in 1998 estimated at about US $5 billion, and evidence that the party used those resources to win elections for its candidates was not hard to find in the 1990s (Chu Yun-han 2001; Wang Chin-shou 2004). The KMT’s enormous private wealth dwarfed the main opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP),
which remained close to broke and often unable to pay party worker salaries throughout the
1990s (Arrigo 1994: 163-66; Rigger 2001: 67-69; Chu Yun-han 2001: 94, fn. 11; Randall and
Svasand 2002: 18; Chin Ko-lin 2003: 134-139). The KMT also maintained an absolute
majority in the legislature and controlled the presidency from the lifting of martial law in
1987 until the 2000 presidential election, giving it the ability to manipulate public budgets
and government agencies for political purposes (Luor and Wann 1999; Arrigo 1994). KMT
enjoyed an advantage in the media, as well—while the number of opposition-oriented radio
stations and newspapers grew rapidly after martial law was lifted in 1987, KMT- or central
government-owned print and broadcast media still possessed a qualitative advantage in
funding, readership, and range well into the 1990s. In addition, the KMT had considerable
residual support in the electorate for its managerial know-how—its export-oriented
industrialization policies had delivered near-double-digit economic growth for a generation,
and by the early 1980s the island’s level of inequality was the lowest of any developing
country in the world (Chu 1999: 68). Finally, the party had accumulated vast experience in
its campaigns for local elected office and built up a formidable and entrenched electoral
machine, which benefited from several large captive blocks of supporters including most
mainlanders and their descendants, most government employees, and workers in the large
number of state-owned and operated enterprises. In short, from the time multi-party
elections were first allowed in 1986 until its defeat in the 2000 presidential election, the KMT
competed on an electoral playing field tilted heavily in its favor.

2 The term “Mainlanders” (waishengren – 外省人) refers to those residents of Taiwan born on the mainland who
fled with the KMT to the island after 1945. They and their descendents make up about 12-13% of the
Taiwanese electorate. Many were veterans or family members of veterans. Loyalty to the KMT among this
group was reinforced, among other methods, by a generous government budget for veterans’ care, and the
preferential hiring of many veterans in state-controlled enterprises through the Vocational Assistance
Yet it still lost in elections that its own leaders had initiated. In a hotly contested race in 2000, the main opposition party’s candidate Chen Shui-bian took advantage of an internal KMT split to win a close, three-way election for president with less than 39% of the vote, ending 50 years of unbroken KMT rule on Taiwan. Four years later and running against a now-unified KMT ticket, Chen raised his vote share more than 12% over the 2000 total, winning re-election by a razor-thin margin. Understanding the KMT’s defeat can teach us something about the wider class of dominant party regimes—how they emerge, why they persist, and what factors lead to their breakdown. Taiwan’s party transition also suggests a different mechanism at play than what has usually been identified in the literature as the most important in such breakdowns—the deteriorating material advantages of the ruling party (Magaloni 2006; Greene 2007). Rather, the KMT’s defeats had much to do with the mobilization of voters around the question of Taiwanese national identity—a highly salient but non-material cleavage that put the ruling party at a distinct disadvantage. The next section sketches the outline of a general argument to this effect, suggesting an answer for the question: what role does identity politics play in sustaining or undermining one-party dominance?

5.2. A Theory of Identity and Electoral Competition

Elsewhere in the dissertation (Chapter 3), I presented a theory of opposition party development in dominant party regimes, and concluded that opposition party success in such regimes required solving or mitigating two problems: recruitment of high-quality candidates, and coordination among opposition elites and voters. In Chapter 4 I considered the effects formal institutions have on the difficulty of these two problems for oppositions. Here I wish to consider the effects social structure has on the difficulty of these problems, and to develop some of the preconditions for which social identities might help or hinder
opposition competition in dominant party regimes. My ultimate objective is to develop an alternative explanation of voting behavior that introduces non-material identity issues—ethnicity, race, religion, etc.—into explanations of dominant party persistence and defeat.

I begin with a set of findings from social psychology about social identity, which is “the social categories, attributes, or components of the self-concept that are shared with others and therefore define individuals as being similar to others” (Monroe et al. 2000: 421). The first finding is that socially-defined individuals “identify with the in-group, support group norms, and derogate out-groups members along stereotypical lines, even when there is no individual gain at stake” (435). The self-esteem that individuals receive from evaluating their group positively in relation to other groups appears to be enough both to shape their own self-identification as a member of the in-group and to drive stereotyping and derogation of out-groups. Pride in one’s own identity as a Muslim, a Bostonian, or a Wolverine goes hand-in-hand with a derogatory attitude toward those not in one’s identity group. Thus, this result implies that any particular identity derived from membership in a group is zero-sum: when in-group membership offers self-esteem benefits, out-groups are viewed negatively.

Second, appeals to a shared in-group status—i.e. to a particular social identity an individual holds—can influence voter choice of a party or candidate, independent of material interests. Key here is that both in-group pride and out-group derogation are present and affect voting choice even in the absence of competition for resources. In other words, social psychology provides evidence that appeals to ethnic, racial, or religious identities are not effective only because they proxy for some material distribution of state resources, but also because the act of voting in support of an identity community triggers feelings of positive self-esteem (ibid.: 441).
Third, not all identity differences become politicized or influence behavior to the same degree. There always exist multiple ways to divide up a collection of individuals into distinct groups. Therefore, an account of voter realignment based on shifting identity categories needs to include an explanation of which group categories form, which group categories become most salient in particular contexts and why, and how these identifications affect observable behavior. Put differently, a theory of identity mobilization requires answering the question: why are some social cleavages more salient than others?

The answer in the cases I examine in the next section has two components. First, political entrepreneurs work to activate certain identities over others because it gives them electoral advantages (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972). In societies with clear identity divisions, office-seeking politicians choose their mass appeals by aiming to “define[e] the election in terms of the issues on which they feel advantaged” (ibid., 60). Politicians have incentives to use campaign rhetoric or imagery to prime racial, ethnic, or religious differences that promise them a winning share of votes (cf. Kinder and Sanders 1996; Mendelberg 2001).

Second, not all divisions are equally potent as ways to define elections: some group identities are inherently more easily mobilized than others. The salience of different identities can be affected by the locus of political competition—tribal identities, for instance, that are most salient in local races can be subsumed under larger ethnic identities in national races (Posner 2007). It can also be affected by historical patterns unique to particular societies—racial appeals based on perceptions of a black-white racial divide have long influenced voting behavior in the United States, for instance, while in Latin America an indigenous-non-indigenous divide has consistently been more salient, even in countries with a large black population (Wade 1997). Education (Darden n.d.) and historical memory
(REF) can also affect which identities have “staying power” and which are transient or only weakly influential.

Finally, and crucially, political affiliation itself is a kind of identity. To the extent political parties develop reputations among the electorate as being closely associated with one identity group, they are limited in their ability to reposition themselves to compete for votes from other groups. In other words, parties closely associated with a particular race or ethnicity—the KMT with mainlanders among voters in Taiwan, the Democratic party with blacks among southern Whites after the 1960s, the BJP with Hindu nationalists in India in the 1990s—cannot easily reframe their appeals to capture large numbers of out-group voters.

Ultimately, then, I am advancing a claim here that group identity is as important a political battlefield as the resources of the state. It follows that even ruling parties with a major advantage in media, security, and financial resources to use in persuading voters can be limited by pre-existing group identities. Political elites, even very powerful ones, have only limited ability to reshape group identities in their favor. And the difficulty of opposition recruitment and coordination is affected as much by identity politics as it is by redistribution, patronage, or rent-seeking.

In the next section I illustrate these general claims with the example of the KMT’s defeat in Taiwan, which I argue can be better understood as the result of identity mobilization that favored the opposition.

5.3. Ethnic-Minority DPR: Identity Mobilization in Taiwan
A closer examination of the DPP’s victory in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections suggests a different explanation than the conventional resource decline story that I reviewed in 5.1. Rather than the KMT losing hold of funds that kept its supporters in the fold, the rise of the DPP as a potent electoral force is better understood as fueled by the rising salience of national identity, which created more advantageous electoral conditions for the opposition.

The question of what constitutes the “nation” to which the inhabitants of Taiwan belong remains unsettled today. During the martial law era (1949-1987), the official answer to that question was simple: everyone in Taiwan was unambiguously “Chinese.” The regime on Taiwan was the “Republic of China,” and suggesting otherwise was considered tantamount to treason. Messages to that effect were delivered through the state media, public education, and during mandatory military service.

Yet that answer covered a much more complicated set of ethno-nationalist identities that lurked just below the surface of Taiwanese society. The most obvious and, from the point of the KMT regime’s leaders, the most dangerous social distinction was that between “mainlanders” (外省人, waishengren)—those who had come over with the Nationalist government on the heels of its defeat by the Communists in 1949, or whose parents had—and “native Taiwanese” (本省人, benshengren) who had been born and raised on the island. The differences between these groups, especially in two decades directly after the 1949 defeat, were stark, and reinforced by a wide range of policies that in practice favored mainlanders. For instance, the Nationalist government required teachers and civil servants to speak good Mandarin as a condition of their employment. But educated native Taiwanese who might have been expected to fill those positions had come of age when the island was
still a Japanese colony; most spoke Taiwanese as their native tongue and had learned to read, write, and speak Japanese in school. The Nationalist language policy ensured that most positions on the public payroll initially went overwhelmingly to mainlanders. In addition, a huge slice of the government budget (80+% in some estimates) was directed toward the military, a sizeable chunk of which went to social welfare programs—housing, health care, and old-age pensions—for military families and their dependents, most of whom had fled from the mainland at the end of the civil war. Admission to universities on the island included special quotas for students from each Chinese province, which again led to an anti-Taiwanese bias: because students from Taiwan province far outnumbered those whose official registration was from all other provinces combined, admissions standards were significantly lower for children of mainlanders. The island’s ostensibly representative political bodies—the legislature and National Assembly of the ROC, which elected the president—were drawn from all of China as well, rather than chosen by the Taiwanese electorate. Because the government in Taipei only effectively controlled Taiwan and a few offshore islands, however, elections for the vast majority of legislative seats were suspended until the regime could “retake the mainland”—a possibility so unlikely by the 1960s that it effectively granted the legislature life-long tenure. Native Taiwanese were also barely represented in the KMT’s Central Committee, and their numbers only grew slowly at lower levels of the party.

Arguably as important to later developments was the historical legacy of the KMT regime’s appointees in the short period after Taiwan returned to Chinese control but before the ROC’s defeat on the mainland. The KMT leadership appointed to take over Taiwan from the Japanese rapidly ran the island’s economy into the ground. By 1947, economic and political grievances, exacerbated by linguistic and cultural differences, sparked an unpriring
by Taiwanese against the KMT regime. This rebellion, called the 2/28 Incident for the day it began, Feb. 28, 1947, was brutally suppressed by military force, resulting in an estimated 30,000 deaths including many of the island’s former political and economic elite. The legacy of 2/28 added to the sense of distrust by many native Taiwanese, especially the older generation, in later eras.

Strict authoritarian control by the party kept these grievances under wraps in Taiwan until the 1970s. The death in 1975 of the KMT’s long-time leader Chiang Kai-shek and the succession of his son Chiang Ching-kuo to the presidency coincided with a gradual loosening of the regime’s security apparatus and, a decade later, to the lifting of martial law, which had been in place since 1949. As I detail elsewhere in the dissertation (Ch. 7), the regime also allowed greater non-KMT opposition in local races, although the national government remained walled off from electoral competition until 1992. Opposition candidates began to test the regime’s ban on opposition parties by attempting to coordinate their campaigns across districts, forming a loose organization known as the Dangwai (literally, “outside the party”) to get around the formal ban. Opposition parties were eventually legalized in 1987, and the regime gradually loosened restrictions on freedom of the press and opposition campaigns. By 1992, few of these remained.

With the legalization of opposition parties and the lifting of martial law in the late 1980s, the motley collection of regime opponents coalesced under the newly founded Democracy Progressive Party (DPP). The DPP had little access in its early days to the resources of state that were the lifeblood of local power in Taiwan, and it could not hope to gain control of these resources as long as it remained firmly in the minority. It therefore needed to find some kind of alternative strategy to attract voters and mobilize activists.

Ethnic, and later national, identity was a readily available and potent weapon that enabled the
DPP not only to attract voters with ideological appeals but also to usher in a partisan
realignment that put the dominant KMT at a distinct disadvantage.

The rise of national identity as a politically salient issue provided two benefits to the
nascent opposition. First, it presented a cause around which most of the disparate elements
of the party could be unified. Second, it proved uniquely divisive for the dominant KMT.
As pressure rose for a more explicit acknowledgement of Taiwan’s special historical
experience, new president Lee Teng-hui began to adopt a number of policies close to those
of the opposition. Lee responded to the opposition’s increasing use of Taiwanese nationalist
appeals by reshaping a number of ROC policies toward mainland China, culminating in his
statement that cross-Strait relations should be considered “special state-to-state relations”
rather than merely “two political entities” both laying claim to the right to govern all of
China (Lin and Teddards 2003: 38-40; Kuo Su-feng 2000; Qi Jia-lin 2005: 176). The DPP’s
efforts to brand itself as a party for the “Taiwanese,” in contrast to the “mainlander” KMT,
put increasing pressure on the incumbent party to address questions of national identity; its
response included educational reforms to increase emphasis on Taiwanese (rather than
mainland Chinese) history, geography, and culture (for examples of this new approach, see
Lee Teng-hui 1995; cf. Qi Jia-lin 2005). Lee’s background as the first native Taiwanese to
become head of the KMT also gave the party much-needed credibility on the identity issues
and initially allowed it to make these moves toward the new political center.

The DPP’s efforts to make national identity the dominant cleavage in the island’s
politics also were aided by developments across the Taiwan Strait in the People’s Republic of
China. The bloody crackdown on student protestors in 1989 swung Taiwanese public
opinion sharply against reunification with the mainland and added further fuel to rising
nationalist sentiments on the island. The idea of a distinct Taiwanese “nation” was not only
open for debate but also looked increasingly appealing: while tanks rolled through the streets of Beijing, electoral and political reform continued to move forward in Taipei, culminating with the forced retirement of all remaining lifetime National Assembly (NA) members in 1991 and legislators in 1992, and for the first time, the direct election by Taiwanese of all the seats in the legislature. This was followed four years later by Taiwan’s first direct presidential election in 1996.

Notably, in the short run, these moves under Lee Teng-hui took the wind out of the opposition sails and left the DPP struggling to provide voters with a reason to vote for it over the more experienced KMT. The KMT handily won both the NA and legislative elections, maintaining the party’s hefty majorities. But over the course of the decade, Lee’s efforts to reposition the KMT toward the center on national identity questions led to major turmoil in the party and resulted in a serious split in its base. National identity was no ordinary issue; many mainlanders in the party were furious about changes that played up Taiwan’s distinctiveness from China. This anger helped motivate a band of mainlanders to break away and form the New Party in 1993. In the second legislative elections in 1995, the defections of mainlanders to New Party candidates was sizeable, and the KMT retained only a 2-seat majority in the legislature. In 1996, Lee Teng-hui won the first direct presidential elections, but with only 54% of the vote. And in 1997, the KMT’s inability to prevent intra-party splits in races for local county executives allowed DPP candidates to win a majority of counties for the first time, in many cases with much less than 50% of the vote. These local offices allowed the party to cultivate its own candidates for national office and moderate the party’s image (see Ch. 4).
Unlike comparative work, which tends to focus on dominant party resource advantages, the role of ethnic or national identities features prominently in the work by Taiwanese scholars on Taiwan’s democratic transition. Zhou Hui-jun (2004) is perhaps representative of this scholarship when he argues that the DPP’s intra-party unity was due to the strong “Taiwanese consciousness” of DPP voters. Taiwanese nationalists, he asserts, identify with the DPP as the true “Taiwanese nationalist” party, and therefore view defectors as traitors to the greater cause of the Taiwanese nation. Curiously, he also claims that Taiwanese consciousness is “exclusionary”—that is, membership in the “Taiwanese nation” is based on birthright and language, and those who were born on the mainland or cannot speak Taiwanese (also known as Minnanhua, Hoklo, or Taiyu) are part of the out-group. My own interviews with former DPP members and with local political observers tend to come around to the same explanation—the DPP early on in its history established itself as the party of the “Taiwanese,” in explicit contrast to the “foreign” KMT, and those in the electorate who favored the construction of a new Taiwanese nation quickly came to identify strongly with the new party. Ever since, it has been in the DPP’s interest to play the ethnic/nationalist identity card in elections—it serves both to rally the party’s base and to put the KMT on the defensive.

On balance explicit mobilization around the national identity question appears to be a key factor for the DPP’s sustained success in the 1990s and 2000s. It provides a plausible explanation for why there were regular defections from the KMT despite the party’s enormous resources, and despite the fact that Taiwan’s economy was growing rapidly. The increasing salience of ethnic identity issues could also account for the DPP’s ability to make inroads among the local factional networks so important to electoral competition—by fanning the flames of Taiwanese nationalism, the party was able to neutralize the KMT’s
resource advantage. The ethnic cleavage in Taiwan also may have reduced the importance of a strong centralized party organization to the DPP’s success. By running ethnic Taiwanese candidates all over the island, speaking in Taiwanese at election rallies, promising to right perceived past KMT wrongs against the ethnic majority, and playing up the party leadership’s local roots at every opportunity, the DPP could paper over policy differences among its elected members. And when the KMT adopted DPP-proposed reforms, as it did several times, the party could always fall back on the national identity question.

There is also considerable evidence to support this explanation in the many studies of Taiwanese voting behavior conducted over the past decade. The DPP has never attracted many mainlander votes; Chen Lu-huei (2001) finds that less than 5% of mainlanders supported the DPP between 1992 and 1998. The DPP’s growth instead has been among ethnic Taiwanese (Hoklo) voters, whose support for the party increased almost continuously through the 1990s.

Epilogue: The 2004 Election Proves Taiwanese Identity Appeals are Not a Fluke

On March 14, 2004, Taiwan was in the final stages of a fiercely contested presidential campaign. The incumbent president, Chen Shui-bian of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), had won a historic victory four years before, ending 55 years of unbroken Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT) rule of Taiwan. Nevertheless, he was a distinct underdog in the 2004 race: he had received less than 39% of the popular vote and captured a plurality in 2000 only because the incumbent party’s vote had been split between two major KMT contenders, Lien Chan and (James) Soong Chu-yu, who between them had won 60%. In 2004 they were running again, this time as a unified ticket with Lien as the presidential candidate and Soong in the vice presidential slot. Simple arithmetic suggested they should
win handily if they maintained roughly the same levels of support as in 2000 (REF). Chen, by contrast, faced the challenge of increasing his vote share by at least 12% in order to win re-election, a task made more difficult by an economic recession early in his term, allegations of corruption among his wife and aides, and a pro-KMT majority in the legislature which had managed to block most of his administration’s policy initiatives over the previous four years.

Yet on that Saturday, a week before election day, Lien and Soong did something odd for a campaign that was supposed to be leading comfortably: at separate rallies, in melodramatic fashion in front of huge crowds, each prostrated himself and kissed the ground to “show their love for Taiwan.” Even by the carnival standards of Taiwanese politics, the move stood out, and it reflected a changed dynamic in the race: rather than the Chen administration’s lackluster performance in office, the election outcome appeared increasingly likely to hinge on the issue of national identity, a major disadvantage for the KMT ticket. Both Lien and Soong had been born in mainland China and had fled with their families to Taiwan as the KMT lost the Chinese civil war to the Communists, and both had held prominent positions in the party during the final years of the long martial law era, which did not end until 1987. In a political environment polarized around the question of what it meant to be “Taiwanese,” that mainlander background proved a huge vulnerability for the KMT candidates.

In contrast to his opponents, President Chen’s personal story was his greatest political asset: he had been born into a poor farming family in rural Tainan County, had by dint of hard work tested into the top university on the island and earned a law degree, and had become a key figure in Taiwan’s democratization movement in the 1980s. Like many of the leading members of the DPP, he had suffered personally during the struggle for political
liberalization—shortly after he had run unsuccessfully for a local council seat in 1985, his wife had been intentionally struck and run over by a truck and was paralyzed in what was widely viewed as a KMT-sanctioned act of intimidation. Chen was also clearly despised in Beijing, where the pro-independence leanings of his party were anathema to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders there. The CCP had responded to Chen’s election in 2000 by continuing a buildup of missiles across the Taiwan Strait from the island, and PRC leaders did little to hide their hope that he would be defeated by a more mainland-friendly KMT ticket.

These facts were old news in 2004. But absent many tangible achievements to run on, the DPP worked actively and aggressively to make them the centerpiece of the presidential campaign. Chen advocated a series of constitutional reforms that would ultimately result in a new constitution and opened the possibility of changing the country’s official name, the Republic of China. Chen also called a referendum to put to voters a question about whether Taiwan should acquire weapons of a defensive nature should China refuse to remove its missiles and renounce the right to use force against Taiwan. As the campaign shifted toward these and other questions about what the island’s proper relationship with the PRC should be, the race appeared to tighten. On February 28, the anniversary of the beginning of a harsh military crackdown by the KMT on Taiwanese elites in 1947 in which at least 10,000 people died, DPP held a giant rally in which themes of universal peace and Taiwanese nationalism were intertwined, and for which an estimated two million people turned out island-wide. These and other campaign events appeared to put Lien and Soong on the defensive, highlighting their links to the mainlander-dominated authoritarian regime of the past and by implication raising the question of whether they were really true “Taiwanese” who would look out for the interests of the island’s majority. In the
end, by a margin of less than 0.2%, and undoubtedly benefiting from a sympathy vote due to a controversial assassination attempt on the day before the election, Chen Shui-bian won re-election in stunning fashion. It was the first time the DPP as a party had ever captured over 50% of the vote in any island-wide election.

Conclusions from the Taiwan Case

The trajectory of politics in Taiwan illustrates one way in which identity issues may contribute to opposition success in DPRs. The DPP would not have been so unified had it not been able to activate and maintain a potent identity cleavage that, in sheer numbers, was to its great benefit. Voting along “Taiwanese nationalist” lines prevented the opposition from fragmenting along class and occupational lines, or on other ideological ones. The activation of the identity cleavage also put the KMT at a serious disadvantage—the party was, as the colloquialism goes, stuck between a rock and a hard place. If it remained steadfast in its commitment to the ideal of the ROC as the government of all of China, and to the eventual unification of Taiwan with the mainland, it risked a rapid deterioration of its electoral position among the majority Taiwanese. But if it tacked toward the center, as it eventually did under Lee Teng-hui, and embraced policies that promoted a separate “Taiwanese” identity for the island, it risked losing its core constituency—mainlanders. The defection of many mainland party members to form the New Party marked the first blow in the party’s decline. Without the identity question to divide the KMT coalition, such a serious split would have been less likely.

Can we develop this identity argument into a more general theory? To this end, the Taiwan case suggests that ethnicity is an important factor. But it also suggests that the mere presence of a strong ethnic cleavage is not enough; instead the relationship of ethnic cleavages to the dominant party and the opposition are crucial to the competition between the two
sides. Taiwan may be highly unusual in that the dominant party regime was also associated with the island’s ethnic minority—mainlanders, who together made up less than 15% of the population. The KMT had to win a sizeable share of the ethnic Taiwanese vote to build winning electoral coalitions, while the DPP could benefit from being rooted in an ethnic group that was 70% of the electorate. By contrast, in DPRs where the dominant party’s leadership is drawn mostly from the ethnic majority, such as the Malay-dominated UMNO in Malaysia, the opposition is in a much less auspicious position. Mobilization along ethnic lines cannot provide it with an electoral majority; instead, it must attempt to build a cross-ethnic coalition. The dominant party itself may have a strong incentive in this situation to sustain the salience of ethnic divisions, which keep both the opposition fragmented and its own majority more unified.

5.4. Ethnic-Majority DPR: Identity Mobilization in Malaysia

[To be written: main theme here is that the dominant party in Malaysia was strongly associated with the majority ethnic group in the country—Malays. Thus, the opposition could not exploit ethnic divisions to increase its vote share. In fact, the opposition there has been systematically hindered by a need to build coalitions between Islamists and secular Chinese and Indian parties.]

5.5. Dominant Party Breakdown: Other Examples of Identity Mobilization

India—BJP
US South—Republican Party’s “Southern strategy.” (Tali Mendelberg; Kinder and Sanders)

5.6. When Are Opposition Parties More Likely to Succeed?

• Dominant party is supported by a multi-ethnic coalition
• There is an identity cleavage available that unites most opponents of the ruling party.
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