

Two-party contests and the politics of electoral reform: the case of Taiwan

By Democratic Audit UK

Taiwan recently took the decision to implement electoral reform, shifting from a single non-transferable vote and multi-member district system to a first-past-the-post mixed system, with both main parties supporting the decision. Enuju Chi argues that they did so largely out of self-interest, and that the parties' goals of maximizing their respective number of seats led to electoral reforms.



The Taiwanese Parliament (Credit: Jerry Kan, CC BY NC SA 2.0)

The Politics of Electoral Reforms in Taiwan

Taiwan adopted the first-past-the-post (FPTP) mixed system for the Legislative Yuan election in 2005. A mixed system combines the traditional British style of voting for candidates in single seat districts by FPTP with the typical continental European election by proportional representation. In 2002, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) led the electoral reforms and formed a party coalition with the Kuomintang (KMT). The DPP and the KMT judged that the current single non-transferable-vote and multi-member district system (SNTV-MMD) would not produce the ideal number of seats for them.

After the reform, analyses of it were introduced, explaining the cause and results. Yet, the motivations of political parties and their strategic interactions were not sufficiently analyzed. What were the motivations of the DPP and KMT for electoral reform? How did the DPP open and lead the reform? How could the party coalition be successful in spite of strong opposition from small parties? How could the DPP mobilize people?

What was the motivation of the DPP and the KMT for the electoral reform?

Political parties initiate electoral reform to attain their political goals. The main actors in 2005 electoral reform were the DPP and the KMT. These two parties wanted to maximize their seats in the Legislative Yuan. The DPP had been dissatisfied with its achievement under the SNTV-MMD. They could not receive more than 40 percent under the SNTV-MMD. But, they performed better in other elections such as presidential and mayor elections which adopted the FPTP system. Based on these experiences, the DPP began to believe that their chances of winning a majority would improve under the FPTP system.

As for the KMT, the SNTV-MMD had long been a bridging foundation with local factions, and it allowed them to enjoy a favorable proportionality. However, as the DPP came to develop its electoral skills and new parties were formed, the SNTV-MMD did not allow the KMT to have a majority anymore. In 1995 election, the KMT gained 46.6 percent of the seats; it was the first election during which they had less than half of the seats. The KMT attributed it to the SNTV-MMD and concluded that they would recover a majority if the FPTP system were adopted.

How did the DPP open and lead the reform?

Since the DPP proposed its first reform bill in 2002, 11 bills among a total of 19 submitted included a reduction of seats along with electoral system change during the 5th legislative term from 2002 to 2005. Unlike the electoral system change, the reduction of seats happened abruptly. Jiang Xue-xun, a DPP legislator, suggested it during the 2001 Legislative Yuan election campaign and the public, disenchanted by political corruption, welcomed his idea.

Constitutional revision is an essential process for the reform in Taiwan. For this, a bill needs to be passed by three fourths of the legislators, with three-fourths in attendance in the National Assembly. At that time, the total number of legislators was 217; the DPP had 87 and the KMT had 68. Thus, any single party could not pass a bill alone. In addition, even though the two parties agreed on the reform, 14 more seats were needed to pass the bill.

Whereas the KMT refrained from commenting, the DPP opened the debate. Since coalition building did not make progress, Lin Yi-hsiung, the DPP ex-party leader, commenced actions to achieve compromises among the parties. First, he persuaded the opposing forces within the party. Then he proceeded to persuade the KMT to join the reforms. Lin and his supporters led three street protests in front of the KMT headquarters in December 2003. Soon after, Lin visited Wang Jin-pyng, the Speaker of the Legislative Yuan, to request help with the reform. Wang adhered to a neutral position but arbitrated a consensus among the parties.

The Constitution Amendment Committee was formed on December 26, 2003. The first Inquire Council was held on March 10, 2004. The Committee agreed to a preliminary amendment bill effective from the 7th Legislative Yuan election in 2008, and decided to approve the bill on March 19, one day before the presidential election. Nevertheless, this plan was abated due to opposition from the small parties.

How could the party coalition be successful in spite of strong opposition from small parties?

After his successful reelection to the presidency, Chen Shui-bian argued that the current Constitution was in need of comprehensive reform as most of the articles did not meet the contemporary demands. He also supported the reduction of seats to increase the overall quality of the Legislative Yuan and eradicate political corruption. His inauguration address delivered this message to the public on May 20, 2004.

Around that time, public sentiment toward politics was extremely negative, particularly due to the '3-19 shooting incident.' Under pressure from the public, the parties formed a coalition again. In May 2004, the DPP and the KMT resumed discussions. The initial proposal by the DPP included the FPTP mixed system and a reduction of seats to 150. During negotiations, parties could not come to consensus on the reduced number due to the opposition from small parties.

At the end of 2004, the 6th Legislative Yuan election took place. In this election, the DPP and the KMT gained enough seats to pass the bill without cooperation from small parties. Small parties eventually changed their stance, assuming that the bill would pass although they opposed it. Finally, the 4th National Assembly passed a bill to revise 'Article 4 of the Constitution on the Republic of China' on June 7, 2005. All 201 legislators who attended the assembly agreed to pass. After the reform, the electoral system changed to the FPTP mixed system and the total number of seats was reduced from 225 to 113.

How could the DPP mobilize the people?

Benoit posits that the electoral system is able to change when a party coalition forms with the power to alter electoral rules and when each party in the coalition expects to benefit by gaining more seats under the new system. In Taiwan, the DPP and the KMT successfully formed a coalition with the expectation of seat maximization. Additionally, Katz found that 'public outrage' was a common factor in all electoral reforms. Public

anger concerning current politics triggers reform controversy and gives legitimacy to the reformist.

Public outrage in Taiwan also triggered some reform-minded KMT politicians in the mid-1990s and the DPP politicians in the early-2000s to push for electoral reforms. Due to public anger after the 2004 presidential election, any politician who raised objections to the reforms was criticized as being unjust. In this vein, Wang Jin-pyng pointed out that populism was the main driving factor for the success of the reform.

As a matter of fact, the public did not fully understand what the FPTP mixed system was. According to the survey conducted by TVBS in 2004, 40 percent did not know what the FPTP mixed system was but 76 percent supported seat reduction. Thus, the public supported the electoral reform based on the simple idea that the reforms could punish corrupt politicians. And the DPP gathered support for the reform by stimulating and mobilizing this public sentiment for their political purpose.

For further discussion of this topic see Enuju's recent article in the Government and Opposition Journal

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