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Discussion Paper

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**A Critical Election: Taiwan's 2008 Legislative Election in
Comparative Perspective**

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During the Qing Dynasty Taiwan acquired an infamous reputation for being a rebellious corner of the Empire. It was commonly claimed that in Taiwan, “Every three years an uprising, every five years a rebellion.”¹ In the second half of the twentieth century, Taiwan developed a starkly contrasting image, as an island of regular elections. Since the initiation of local level elections in the late 1940s, Taiwan has gradually expanded the scope of its elections to also incorporate the national level and seen a virtually uninterrupted pattern of holding elections.² Taiwanese often complain that they have too many elections. When we consider the electoral calendar since 1991 such sentiments are understandable, with major elections for the last 17 years held every year except 1999 and 2003. However, elections in Taiwan are not only noteworthy for their quantity. During the 1990s and initial post-2000 period the island was praised as a model Asian democracy, a healthy democracy and as having the most institutionalized multi-party system in Asia.

Following the controversial 2004 presidential election some Taiwanese espoused more critical perspectives of the island’s political system, employing slogans such as “Democracy is dead” or “the Judiciary is dead.” However, recent elections results appear to have reinvigorated confidence in the political system. Such a positive evaluation was reflected in Ma Ying-jeou’s presidential inaugural speech when he stated that, “Taiwan is the sole ethnic Chinese society to complete a second democratic turnover of power. Ethnic Chinese communities around the world have laid their hopes on this crucial political experiment. By succeeding, we can make unparalleled contributions to the democratic development of all ethnic Chinese communities.”³

The KMT’s electoral victories in 2008’s parliamentary and presidential elections have brought to an end the DPP era. Judging by the mass media interpretations and the actual election results it would appear that 2008 is a watershed in Taiwan’s political history. Or to use a more formal political science term, it is a critical election. The term is defined by Norris and Evans as, “Those exceptional contests which produce abrupt, significant and durable realignments in the electorate with major consequences for the long-term party order.”⁴ This paper thus examines whether Taiwan’s 2008 election represents the start of a new era in the structure of party competition in government and the electorate.

¹ Quoted in George Kerr: *Formosa Betrayed* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 4.

² The prior to 1998 only exceptions to this pattern were the postponement of elections in 1978, the ending of direct elections for Taipei and Kaohsiung mayor.

³ See President Ma’s Inaugural Address at <http://www.president.gov.tw/en/> (accessed July 12, 2008).

⁴ Pippa Norris and Geoffrey Evans: *Critical Elections: British Parties and Voters in Long-term Perspective* (London: Sage Publications, 1998).

Critical elections are actually extremely rare in mature democracies, where continuity or what political scientists call, “maintaining elections” tend to predominate. This is where elections essentially reflect a continuation of the status quo in party competition. A type of elections that comes between the two is referred to as a deviating election. This is where there is a temporary shift in the normal share of votes for the main parties, perhaps due to the impact of certain political scandals, issues or events. However, after this short-term deviation, there is a return to the old pattern of party politics in the subsequent election. As Norris and Evans put it, the deviating election is one, “leaving no permanent imprint on the party system.”⁵

The other major categories of realignment in the party literature attempt to capture the phenomenon of long-term change. The concept of secular dealignment refers to where we see a long term gradual loosening of voter party ties. This is closely associated with the “party in crisis” arguments that claim that the weakening of the class cleavage in West European democracies has not been replaced with new cleavages that tie social groups to parties. The other long-term change category is known as secular realignment. This describes how party allegiances shift due to generational changes or the impact of new issue cleavages.

While a maintaining election is straightforward to recognize, considerable time is required before we can be certain whether an election is bringing a permanent or temporary transformation to the political system. The concept of critical elections becomes clearer if we think in terms of actual cases in modern democracies. In the case of the United Kingdom the most frequently cited example of a critical election is New Labour coming to power in 1997. Labour had been in opposition for almost twenty years, losing four consecutive general elections. But under the leadership of Tony Blair, the party recovered and dominated the political scene for well over a decade by winning a series of elections. In fact until recently it appeared that Labour was likely to be the governing party for the foreseeable future.

After two decades of multi-party politics in Taiwan, can we talk of any critical elections prior to 2008? Each of Taiwan’s major elections has its own unique feature. 1986 was the first multi-party election, 1991-2 were the first full parliamentary elections, 1992 was the start of the DPP’s long transformation, in 1995 the NP’s showing implied the start of a multi-party system, 1996 was the first direct presidential election and in 1997 the DPP’s vote and seat share exceeded the KMT for the first time. Nevertheless, John Hsieh is correct in his assertion that rather than change, there is far more continuity in the first era of multi-party elections in Taiwan.⁶ Unlike most other former authoritarian parties following democratic transition, the KMT was able to remain in power by continuing to win national

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See John Hsieh: “Continuity and Change in Taiwan’s Electoral Politics,” in: *How Asia Votes*, John Hsieh and David Newman eds. (New York, Chatham House, 2002), 32-49.

level elections. Despite the success of the NP in the mid 1990s, this can perhaps be seen as a deviating election, as by the late 1990s there was a return to two party competition after the NP bubble burst.

Therefore the first election that could be categorized as a critical election should be the 2000 presidential election, which saw the first change of ruling party through a free election in a Chinese country. After ruling Taiwan for almost five decades the KMT candidate came third with a humiliating 23% of the vote. This election also laid the foundation for the multi-party system of the DPP era, with the PFP and TSU formed in its aftermath. The degree of change was also apparent in the DPP's ability to retain the presidency in 2004 and become the largest parliamentary party in both the 2001 and 2004 legislative elections. Of course we can take issue with the classification of 2000 as a critical election because the DPP won with only 39% of the vote and even with its ally the TSU, it never won an overall parliamentary majority during Chen's presidency. However, 2000 is as close as Taiwan came to the definition of a critical election prior to this year.

2008 A Critical Election?

There is no standard measurement to judge whether an election should be categorized as a critical election. In the edited volume *Critical Election*, the question of whether 1997 represents a critical election was examined through multiple perspectives, such as ideological change in the party system, change in party identification, voting behaviour, and issue saliency. In this short paper I will also try to examine whether 2008 was a critical election in Taiwan through a variety of dimensions.

Table 1: Party Seat Shares in Parliamentary Elections

	1986	1989	1991	1992	1995	1996	1998	2001	2004	2008
KMT	80.8	71.3	78.2	59.6	51.8	54.8	54.7	30.2	35.1	71.7
DPP	16.7	20.8	20.3	31.1	32.9	29.6	31.1	38.7	39.6	24
NP					12.8	14.7	4.9	0.4	0.4	0
PFP								20.2	15.1	0.9
TSU								5.8	5.3	0

Note: These figures show the seat shares for the main political parties in legislative (1986, 1989, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2004 and 2008) and National Assembly (1991, 1996) elections.

The first place to evaluate an election should of course be the actual results. Table 1 shows the major parties' seat shares in national parliamentary elections be-

tween 1986 and 2008. The table suggests that a number of elections have the potential to be categorized as critical elections. 1992 saw a major shift in seat shares from the KMT to the DPP, this was followed by a number of elections with a degree of stability in relative seat shares of the main parties. We see a similar pattern in the 2001 election, with significant increases for the DPP and decreases for the KMT and the arrival of the two challenger parties. The subsequent 2004 legislative election showed almost no change, suggesting that 2001 was not just a deviating election.

The huge swing in seat shares in 2008, with the KMT rising from 35 to 71 percent of seats and the DPP falling from almost 40 to only 24 percent of seats, and the disappearance of the PFP and TSU means that the election clearly has the potential to be a critical election. These are the biggest seat swings in the history of Taiwan's multi-party politics. Nevertheless, we need to wait for at least two more parliamentary elections before we can conclude whether the change in seat share of 2008 represents a long-term trend or if it is just a deviating pattern.

If we consider the pattern of party system fragmentation, the number of relevant political parties and their relative size, then once again we can see that 2008 has the potential to be a critical election. In the initial years there were clearly just two major parties, the KMT and the DPP, with the KMT as the overwhelmingly dominant party. However, on this dimension 1995 looks to be a critical election, as this marked the start of a period of multi-party politics, with at least three (sometimes four) relevant parties. Table 1 also shows that in terms of party fragmentation 2008 has the potential to be a critical election. The picture of just two parliamentary parties and KMT domination after 2008 suggests a return to a one party dominant system, similar to that of the late 1980s. Once again only time will tell.

When we consider the question of the party in government, then once again 2008 looks like a watershed election. Prior to 2000 Taiwan had experienced five decades of unified government in which the KMT held the presidency, the Executive Yuan and a majority in the Legislative Yuan. On this dimension 2000 is a critical election as it marked the start of Taiwan's first taste in divided government or minority government. In other words, while the DPP held the presidency, the KMT and its allies maintained a comfortable majority in the Legislative Yuan. The DPP appointed Premier thus tried to run the government without the backing of a majority in the LY, contributing to the frequent instances of parliamentary stalemate. Divided government in Taiwan affected democratic accountability, as both the DPP and KMT tried to blame each other for the deadlock. The KMT victories in both parliamentary and presidential contests in 2008 have brought a return to unified government. Whether we see a long-term period of unified government will depend on KMT government performance and the ability of the DPP to recover from its recent disastrous election results.

So far the dimensions have all suggested that 2008's elections have the potential to be a critical election, with major shifts in party seat shares, party system fragmentation and the return to unified government. However, data pertaining to other dimensions reveal a more complex pattern of change.

Table 2: Parliamentary Elections Yuan (Vote Shares)

	1991	1992	1995	1996	1998	2001	2004	2008
KMT	71.2	53	46.1	46.9	46.4	28.6	32.8	51.2
DPP	23.9	31	33.2	29.9	29.6	33.4	35.7	36.9
NP			13.0	13.7	7.1	2.9	0.1	4
PFP						18.6	13.9	
TIP					1.5	0	0	
TSU						8.5	7.8	3.5

A key ingredient for a critical election should be a major shift in partisan support. Table 2 shows the main parties' vote shares in elections since 1991. We can see that the patterns of vote shares are often quite distinct from the seat shares displayed in Table 1. Table 2 shows that patterns of vote share actually display far more stability than seat shares. If we take the DPP vote, there has been remarkable continuity, with a very gradual increase from the early 1990s. Although 2008 was correctly judged a disastrous DPP defeat, Table 2 shows that the DPP vote share actually was higher than 2004 and a record high for parliamentary elections. Therefore the vote share suggests that the DPP should not yet be dismissed as no longer politically relevant. In contrast, there has been more variation for the KMT, with drops on vote share of almost 20% in 1992 and 2001 and an increase of almost 20% in 2008. When we also factor in trends in vote share for challenger parties then we can classify the following elections as turning points: 1992 (KMT fall), 1995 (NP vote share), 2001 (KMT fall, PFP vote share) and 2008 (KMT rise, PFP fall).

Comparing the two tables reveals the impact of Taiwan's constitutional reform of the electoral system. The move to a single member district two party system clearly has benefited the KMT enormously. Despite its increased vote share rising from 32.8 to 51.2, its seat share rose from 35.1 to 71.7! In contrast, the DPP vote share rose slightly to 36.9 but seat share fell from almost 40 to 24%. This kind of disparity in vote and seat shares can damage the accountability and sense that there is a level democratic playing field. Of course we should remember that such disproportionality exists in many mature democracies too. For instance, in the UK in 2005 Labour won 55% of seats with only 35% of the vote. The introduction of the new electoral system with its in-built advantages for the KMT does suggest however, that the pattern of KMT dominance will last for at least one or two par-

liamentary cycles. Another factor is the tendency for greater stability in single member district systems, which tend to offer a major advantage to incumbents. It is also quite possible that an increasing number of constituencies will become safe seats for the KMT, where the DPP or other parties have no hope in contesting. In the past places like Taitung or Jinmen fell into this category, but under the new system most seats north of Chiayi appear to becoming safe KMT seats. This also has implications for democratic accountability, as under the old system non-KMT candidates could get elected in multiple member seats in the vast majority of constituencies. The new system creates a sense of disenfranchisement in places such as Keelung, which traditionally had a Green legislator. However, as Granger Hermione explains to Harry Potter, “It sounds like fortune-telling to me, and Professor McGonagall says that’s a very imprecise branch of magic.”⁷ We political scientists should be cautious of rash long-term election predictions, it should not be forgotten that back in 1997 the DPP won in single member district elections at the local executive level in many areas that are currently viewed as hopeless seats. Therefore DPP reforms and KMT government performance will determine whether the electoral system will mean 2008 represents the start of a new era of one party dominance.

Table 3: Parliamentary Elections Vote Shares for the two political blocs

	1991	1992	1995	1996	1998	2001	2004	2008
Pan Blues	71.2	53	59.1	60.6	53.5	50.1	46.8	55.2
Pan Greens	23.9	31	33.2	29.9	31.1	41.9	43.5	40.4

Although there has been a degree of fragmentation and merging in the party system, all Taiwan’s parties can be categorized as either belonging to the Pan Blue (KMT and its allies) or Pan Green (DPP and its allies) camps. A true revolution in the party system would see either the emergence of new parties independent of the Green/Blue divide or a radical shift in support in favour of one of the two camps at the expense of the other. As I have discussed in another publication, new issue parties (Greens, social democratic, religious etc.) have failed to pass the electoral threshold after numerous attempts. Instead I thus attempt to tap into the changing balance of power between the two existing camps by combining the total vote shares of parties in the two camps. These trends are displayed in Table 3. This shows that change has been far more incremental or secular, as it appears voters may switch parties but not switch camps. Based on Table 3, 1992 most deserves the classification as a critical election, as it saw a significant fall (for the Blues) and rise (for the Green), and was followed by a high degree of continuity on party

⁷ JK Rowling: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*.

bloc support, particularly for the Blues. For the Greens 2001 marked a significant improvement in overall support, but not significantly at the expense of the Blues. Although in 2008 there was a corresponding rise in Blue votes and fall in Green votes, compared to 1992, the level of change is insufficient to warrant critical election status.

The next dimension that I examine in this draft paper is party identification. These surveys have the advantage of being conducted more regularly than elections and can be more sensitive to long term change. Table 4 shows the main parties' levels of party identification between 1992 and 2007. This table also suggests the long-term and complex patterns of change seen in some of the previous dimensions. Firstly, although we only have data up to December 2007 (a month before the legislative election), there are no signs that 2008 was a trend setting year. This table again supports Hsieh's stability thesis, particularly in the 1990s, with minimal change for the KMT despite the appearance of the NP and steady rises in DPP support levels. As in some of the previous dimensions, 2000 is clearly a watershed year, featuring a dramatic fall in KMT support from 35% to 14%, the DPP reaching its peak support of 26% and the new PFP actually more popular than the KMT. At least in terms of identification 2000 represents a critical election as it sets new patterns for the next few years, with the KMT gradually recovering support, the PFP losing support, and the DPP levels stagnant.

Table 4 also suggests the importance of the period 2004-5. This period saw the biggest single year on year rise for the KMT and fall for the DPP, and was then followed by relative consistency for the next three years. Surprisingly it appears that events such as the Red Shirts Anti-Corruption movement had relatively minimal long-term impact on support levels. Instead the roots of the 2008 landslides appear to lie in the political developments of 2004-5. When we consider the pattern of election results and the interpretation of electoral results, there is also support for the importance of 2004-5 in explaining 2008. The KMT was deemed to have won the 2004 legislative elections, won a landslide in 2005 local executive elections and won in the 2006 mayoral and council elections. Moreover, 2004-5 was also the time when constitutional reform to the electoral system was debated and passed. These reforms were as we saw in the KMT seat bonus (higher seat to vote share), critical in the KMT's 2008 victory.

A common feature of a critical election is that we see a new salient issue cleavage or massive shift in public opinion causing an earthquake in the party system. Journalistic accounts often like to simplify Taiwan's elections as a victory for either Taiwan independence or unification forces. However, such accounts are more likely to be based on the comments of the taxi driver to or from Taoyuan International Airport than on solid empirical evidence.⁸

⁸ I should point out that for political scientists taxi drivers are also an invaluable source material. Partly because they are the occupational group most willing to talk politics in Taiwan!

If we examine the well known survey questions of unification versus independence and identification as Taiwanese or Chinese (or both) we find a high degree of public stability in the last eight years. Most voters see themselves as Taiwanese or as both Taiwanese and Chinese and prefer to maintain the status quo (decide later or indefinitely). In both spectrums, the key period of change was in the 1990s, with steady reductions of those in favour of unification and identifying themselves as Chinese. Thus the 2008 landslide cannot be explained by a shift in public opinion on national identity.

Moreover it should be pointed out that though Taiwanese elections have shown parties are punished for being too radical (pro unification or independence) on national identity, other political issues tend to be more visible and sometimes more salient in election campaigns. In Tables 5-7 I show the main parties top issue appeals in their TV election ads for three legislative campaigns based on my own content analysis. These three tables show a degree of consistency from both the KMT and the DPP messages. However, I would argue that a key component of the KMT's success was its ability to combine its attack DPP government performance + economic recession (that it had used since 2001) with political corruption in 2008. Although this data cannot prove this point, I believe that the critical nature of 2005 should again be emphasized. Recall that the DPP came to power (1990s gradual rise, 1997 local executive, 2000 presidency) on a wave of anti-corruption sentiment. Until 2004 the DPP "owned" the anti-corruption issue, while the KMT tended to steer clear of it. In the 2005 local executive election, on the back of a number of DPP related corruption scandals, the KMT employed this DPP government performance + economic recession + political corruption effectively for the first time. Although as we see in Table 7 the DPP still stressed the clean government issue in 2008, the problem was that it had "lost" the issue by then. Instead it was the KMT that was able to ride on the anti-corruption wave. On this issue the KMT now faces an enormous challenge as it holds most local, parliamentary and executive positions. Can it avoid the scandals that caused it to fall in 2000? Thus we may see history repeating itself again in four or five years with the KMT again being brought down by failure to deliver clean government.

This short essay has discussed how we should view the 2008 elections from a comparative perspective. It is still too early to conclude whether 2008 will be a critical election; we still need to wait for two or three more election cycles. The essay has highlighted the complexity of change, showing the high levels of continuity in party support levels and public opinion that have been overshadowed by the huge KMT majorities of parliamentary seats. When I tell Taiwanese that the DPP vote share in 2008's legislative election actually increased most of them tend to look at me in disbelief. We have seen how the roots of the 2008 landslide lay in developments in 2004-5 and did not come out of the blue. Whether 2008 marks

the start of a new party system has significant long-term implications for the quality of Taiwan's democracy. If Taiwan is moving towards a return to a one party dominant system in which change of ruling party becomes possible on paper but impossible in practice, then it will no longer be touted as a model western style liberal democracy. But we should recall that there is more to democracy than just change in ruling parties. Though the DPP warns of a return to KMT authoritarianism, this is not convincing as the policy-making process was increasingly democratized in the late KMT era.⁹ Moreover, could, as Ma hinted in his inaugural speech, a period of one party dominance contribute to making the Taiwan model of democracy more appealing to other Chinese societies, including the PRC?

⁹ See Joseph Wong: *Healthy Democracies* (Ithaca ; London : Cornell University Press, 2004).