

# **An Etiology of Party System Development and Voter Alignments in Democratic Taiwan<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

Seminal works by Maurice Duverger in the 1950s discusses the development of party systems in modern Europe as a consequence of struggles between liberals and conservatives as well as between left and right. Duverger argues that the liberal-conservatism is a struggle for political rights which after its resolution led to a new conflict – the left-right conflict. Left-right conflict, unlike the liberal-conservative conflict of the early 1800s was a conflict about the proper role of government in the economy.

In a similar vein, Lipset and Rokkan in their classic work in the 1960s added that party systems are results of the national revolutions, industrial revolutions and the societal cleavages that result from it. Furthermore, these cleavages over time have resulted in a stable voter alignment that eventually saw a stable European party system – the so-called frozen party system thesis.

Whether it be liberalism versus conservatism, left versus right, it cannot be denied that what Duverger as well as Lipset and Rokkan aver is the importance of social cleavages to the formation of party systems. Recent research has cast an important light on the need to supplement the explanatory power of cleavages, political parties and party system to the filtering power of

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institutional variables (Ockey 2005; Manacsa and Tan 2005; Batto, Huang, Tan and Cox, forthcoming 2016).

Indeed it is interesting to note that while party systems do reflect existing social cleavages, some cleavages do not become represented in the party system. The infancy of Taiwan's democracy notwithstanding, Hsieh (2001; 2002a,b) in numerous studies argues that Taiwan's electoral politics has exhibited a high degree of stability due in large part on the stability of certain cleavages that underpin the party system configuration. In particular, he asserts that the national identity issue has been the galvanizing cleavage in Taiwanese society (see Hsieh and Niou 1996). Inferring from the evidence and arguments presented in the extant literature that maintains the stability and continuity of electoral politics in Taiwan, it may not be too premature to surmise that Taiwan's party system exhibits a tendency of becoming frozen not too unlike the party systems of Western Europe in the 1960s.

### **Party Choice, Cleavages and Party Systems**

Duverger (1972) in his classic work on European party systems argues that the development of European political parties revolved around two basic historical conflicts. The first conflict, a conflict between conservatives and liberals, began in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and continued as a major force in European politics through the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This conflict was a class struggle over legal and political rights between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie.

The second conflict discussed by Duverger was the conflict between socialists and the capitalists. Duverger holds that the basis for this class struggle

was more economic rather than political. He states that “the demands of the working class were primarily material and economic at the outset” (Duverger 1972, 50). This contrasted with the liberal-conservative conflict which was more political than economic.

Based on these two conflicts, Duverger argues that the European party systems reflect these two conflict continua. Early European parties were divided along the liberal-conservative continuum. With the expansion of suffrage by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the liberal-conservative continuum has settled in favour of the liberals.

However, with the Industrial Revolution a new conflict continuum was brewing – left versus right. Leftism-rightism is a conflict based on the proper role of government in society and in particular the economy. The left were the workers and the proletariat who wanted more government redistribution of economic rewards. The right were the bourgeois who wanted less government intervention in the economy. Scholars (Duverger 1972; Inglehart 1979) have suggested that the left-right conflict is becoming more settled in favour of the left as the welfare state has expanded and that a new postmaterialist dimension is beginning to appear. In effect, one can infer from Duverger’s theory that there seems to be a path for party system development that parallels national political development.

Complementary to Duverger’s work is Lipset and Rokkan’s seminal work on party systems and voter alignments wherein they suggest that party systems are generally a reflection of cleavages that exist in a society. Cleavages are social divisions that exist in a political system. However, how cleavages become politically salient requires the presence of three important criteria. Firstly, there

should be distinct distinguishing social characteristics that serve to differentiate the group. Secondly, the group involved in the division must be conscious of their collective identity. And last but not least, a cleavage must be expressed in organization terms in order to aggregate the identifiers.

Analogous to the political rights and economic rights conflict that Duverger describes, Lipset and Rokkan suggest that the cleavages were borne out of the conflicts resulting from the National Revolutions and from the Industrial Revolution. The resulting cleavages such as class, religion, language, urban-rural, center-periphery eventually reflected themselves on the European party landscape. In fact, European parties such as the Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, Agrarian, and Liberal parties are apt representation of how cleavages were reflected in national party systems.

Though Taiwan's political development and in particular its democratic development is of more recent history there seems to be interesting parallel examples that Duverger's and Lipset and Rokkan's studies can inform us. Hsieh (2001; 2002b) rightly asserts that in Taiwan political cleavages also get reflected on the party system. He goes on to argue that in Taiwan the dominant cleavage deals with the national identity issue which refers to "people's attitude towards the political association between Taiwan and mainland China" (Hsieh 2001, 933).<sup>2</sup>

Indeed in a later work, Hsieh (2002b) notes that there was an implicit social division of labor in Taiwan from 1949 onwards wherein the mainlanders

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<sup>2</sup> The national identity cleavage in Taiwan fulfills Lipset and Rokkan's three criteria of a cleavage. That is, i) there exists a distinguishing social differences which in Taiwan is in language and provincial origin; ii) there is a collective identity – mainlander and islander; and iii) organizational terms.

were dominant in politics and the islanders were dominant in the economic sphere. However, the informal social arrangement broke down as Taiwan's continued economic development brought about an increasing middle class, composed mainly of islanders, who are keen to enter politics and have their say in the political future of Taiwan. Reminiscent of the liberal-conservative conflict that Duverger describes in Europe of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Taiwan's political parties begin to reflect this societal cleavage. This cleavage that was introduced with the move of the KMT to Taiwan and the mass immigration of mainlanders fleeing the communists in China was transformed into the head-butting between the KMT and the opposition that organized as the *Tangwai*.<sup>3</sup> This antagonism pre-dates the political liberalization under Chiang Ching-kuo in the late 1980s and the democratization process that was conducted under the auspices of Lee Teng-hui in the 1990s.

This interesting stability in the cleavage and the underlying party configuration may indicate that there seems to be a movement towards the freezing of Taiwan's party system on the national identity cleavage. What does it mean, then, if a party system is showing signs of "freezing" or is "frozen?" There are three important components to Lipset and Rokkan's observation of a "freezing" party systems and the persistence of cleavages. First, the values as represented by the social cleavages have remained the same. Secondly, the party actors have remained largely similar. Thirdly, the levels of voter support for political parties have remained largely stable. Let us tackle each of these features in more detail.

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<sup>3</sup> *Tangwai* literally refers to one that is 'outside the party.' In Taiwan, this would mean a politician outside of the Kuomintang.

## **Taiwan Case**

### *Political Cleavage – National Identity and Ethnicity*

Hsieh and Niou (1996) argue that political issues are the most salient in Taiwanese electoral politics. Of the most significant issue that forms Taiwan's main political cleavage is the issue of independence versus unification. This cleavage was brought to bear on Taiwanese politics with the end of the Chinese Civil War on 1949, when the Nationalists (Kuomintang or KMT) government of Chiang Kai-Shek was forced to form a government-in-exile after it lost the war to the Chinese Communists. The KMT maintained that its government is the legitimate government of China and vowing to reunify the mainland. Over the decades, the claim of representing the whole of China was increasingly eroded as the People's Republic of China increased its international diplomatic space with its accession to the United Nations replacing Taiwan (or the Republic of China) on the permanent seat of the UN in 1972 and then with the United States formally recognizing the PRC and de-recognizing Taiwan in 1979.

The national identity cleavage was also undergirded by an ethnic dimension that was brought to the fore during the massive migration of civil war refugees from mainland China after 1945. In terms of China's long history, Taiwan has also been seen as provincial backwater hardship post. Even during the Qing dynasty, Taiwan was never considered an important political assignment by the mandarins of Qing court. After the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, the Qing court agreed to cede to Japan the island of Taiwan. From 1895 until the end of the Second World War in 1945, Taiwan was a colony of Japan. With this

colonization, islander Taiwanese identity began to be shaped by different forces and factors vis-à-vis mainlander Chinese.

After the WWII ended in 1945, Japan returned Taiwan to the government of the Republic of China soon after KMT established a provincial government to administer the island. By 1947, relations between the KMT provincial government and the islanders have deteriorated which culminated in 2-28 Incident which saw the islanders and the mainlanders on opposing sides of the conflict galvanizing a new islander versus mainlander ethnic cleavage. In general, islanders tend to have a stronger Taiwanese identity while mainlanders tend to have a stronger Chinese identity. This ethnic or national identification is relevant in the context of Taiwanese politics, even today, as it forms the basis of how an individual views Taiwan's international status. That is, citizens with stronger Chinese identity tend to see Taiwan as part of a greater China and view closer relations with the PRC while stronger islander and Taiwanese identity generally means seeing Taiwan as a separate nation-state from China.

The current data corroborate the saliency of the independence-unification dimension as well as the importance of ethnic identification. As mentioned earlier, the national identity cleavage concerns Taiwan's status in relation to China and it divides the electorate according to how they view Taiwan's international status should be. Should Taiwan maintain its status quo (being de facto separate from China but de jure part of a Chinese nation) or should it be part of the China or should it declare de jure independence as a separate nation-state without claims to being part of a Chinese nation?

**Table 1 Preference for Taiwan's International Status**

	Independence	<i>Status Quo</i>	Unification
1994	14%	61%	25%
1996	17%	56%	27%
2000	18%	59%	23%
2004	24%	61%	15%
2008	26%	63%	11%
2010	24%	64%	12%
2014	26%	64%	10%

Source: National Chengchi University Election Study Center.

Table 1 shows Taiwanese preferences pertaining to its national identity and international status. There are two clear trends that can be observed from the data, one is the increase in support for independence and a decline in the support for unification. In 1994, 14 percent of respondents prefer independence while 25 percent prefer unification. By 2014, this figure is essentially reversed with 26 percent preferring independence to 10 percent preferring unification. Another very important statistic is the majority support for maintaining the status quo, i.e., no de jure declaration of the creation of a separate Taiwanese state nor unification with the mainland. With the stability of this cleavage, political parties in Taiwan have arrayed along this unification versus independence continua offering various positions, perspectives and policies vis-à-vis China.

As with the unification-independence cleavage, ethnic identification has been very salient in the Taiwanese political context. As mentioned earlier, ethnic identification has underlined citizen preference on Taiwan's international status. This situation is fairly unique when compared to other countries in the world, as Taiwanese are ethnically and culturally Chinese. Many Taiwanese – islanders and mainlanders – do identify as Chinese (not as citizens of China but having a



pan-Chinese identity) while others only identify as Taiwanese. In public opinion polls conducted by National Chengchi University's Election Study Center, respondents are asked the question: Do you consider yourself Taiwanese, Chinese, or both? Table 2 shows the answer to this question over the years.

**Table 2 Ethnic Identification of Taiwanese Voters**

	Taiwanese	Both	Chinese
1992	20%	52%	28%
1996	24%	56%	20%
2000	39%	47%	14%
2004	43%	51%	6%
2008	51%	45%	4%
2010	55%	42%	3%
2014	63%	34%	3%

Source: National Chengchi University Election Study Center.

As shown by the data on Table 2, beginning with Taiwan's first truly democratic presidential election in 1996, the changes in Taiwanese and Chinese identity is very significant. As Taiwan's democracy consolidates over time, a significant majority of respondents now only identify as Taiwanese. Still, there is a significant minority – 34 percent in 2014 – that still identify themselves as both Taiwanese and Chinese. The overlap of both the ethnic identification and national identity cleavages is reflected in Taiwan's party system with the current opposition party – the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) – representing the pro-independence and strong Taiwanese identity, while the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) having more pan-Chinese identity.

Why do we see the persistence of the national identity issue? Why do we not see the emergence of other issues (particularly the left-right issues) in Taiwanese electoral politics? Hsieh (2002a,b) observes the multimodal

distribution of opinions on the issue of national identity ensures that political parties will be fragmented along those lines. In addition, I suggest that one explanation can be inferred from Duverger's theory. The emergence of Taiwanization of politics did not occur in earnest until the early 1990s. In addition, the true debate about Taiwan's national identity did not emerge to the forefront of Taiwanese political debate and become "legalized" until after the emergence of the DPP as a major force in Taiwanese elections and eventual lifting of martial law. The fact that settlement of the national identity issue is not likely to happen in the near future due to the unique international political situation of Taiwan implies that the national identity issue will persist and remain contentious.

Likewise, another explanation to the non-issue of the left-right dimension in vis-à-vis the national identity dimension can be attributed to Taiwan's unique economic development experience. In the years of rapid economic growth and development in Taiwan since the 1950s, the Taiwanese state has been described in many ways, such as "developmental state" or "entrepreneurial state." These labels portray the large and active role of the state in industrial policy-making and economic development. With such an experience, left-right issues tend to settle in favour of more pro-government role in the economy.

#### *Party Actors and Stability of Voter Identification*

How stable is Taiwan's party system? How stable is partisan identification? A cursory inspection of Taiwan's party system shows a consolidation around a two-party system with the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) and

the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) serving as the two anchors.

Table 3 shows the party identification of Taiwanese voters from 1996 to 2012.

**Table 3 Party Identification of Taiwanese Voters**

	IND	KMT	DPP	NP	PFP	TSU
1996	53.3	29	12.1	5.6		
2000	44.9	32.1	12.8	9.8		
2004	41.3	21.1	26	2.4	9.1	
2008	41.4	21.2	24.7	1.0	9.6	2.4
2010	38.2	33.6	24.6	0.8	1.8	1.0
2012	45.0	22.9	26.7	0.8	2.7	0.9

Source: NCCU Election Study Center

As shown on Table 3, voters mainly identify with the KMT and the DPP. Both political parties command from 40 percent to 50 percent of the electorate. Partisan identification is clearly unsettled as in the case of the KMT partisan identifiers fluctuating between 21 percent and 33 percent in the period included in Table 3. We can infer from the data that in the last 15 years, Taiwan has seen several new political parties successfully represented in the parliament with voters identifying with other minor parties such as the New Party, People's First Party, the Non-Partisan Solidarity Union and the Taiwan Solidarity Union. So in terms of party actors, the number of political parties have increased since 1996 – the year of the first democratic presidential election. Yet, while there have been an increased in the number of party actors, it is clear that both the KMT and the DPP has essentially formed the anchors of a two-party system with several minor parties.

If one observes the number of party actors in Taiwan, several parties have been able to gain legislative representation since 1996. The most obvious difference among Taiwan's parties is on the issue of national identity. Hsieh

(2001; 2002a, b) attributes the fragmentation of the party system to the multimodal distribution of voters along the national identity continuum. He argues that the three category of independence – status quo – reunification on the national identity conflict continuum is a natural stimulator of parties.

Taiwan's ruling party, the KMT, has been a dominant player in Taiwanese politics since Chiang Kai-shek established a government-in-exile on the island of Taiwan. Although the KMT claims that Taiwan is part of mainland China, it does not call for outright unification with the People's Republic of China (PRC); rather, it recognizes Taiwan as a separate territory but part of a larger whole. This is a nuanced view of the relationship with China, which outside observers do not always understand. In the past three decades, the KMT has undergone substantial changes, notably 'Taiwanization' (or indigenization) of the party by allowing 'islanders' to rise to senior party ranks in place of 'mainlanders.' Since the electoral defeat in the presidential election in 2000, the KMT has been slowly shedding its Leninist party structure and becoming more internally democratic. From 2008 to the present, the KMT has controlled both the executive and legislative branches.

Taiwan's main opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), has come along way from the ragtag band of opposition activists formed in 1986 to become one of Taiwan's major parties. Within 14 years, the DPP managed to win the presidency, and, by 2004, had become the largest single party in the Legislative Yuan, effectively ending the 50-year dominance of the KMT in Taiwan politics. Since that historic victory, the DPP had become the largest single party in the Legislative Yuan and has since then consolidated its position as a heavyweight in Taiwanese politics. The DPP's main issue position is that Taiwan

is not part of China and is a separate political entity independent of China, which distinguishes it from the parties of the pan-blue alliance. It is a well-organized electoral party that appeals mainly to native Taiwanese with a strong islander identity and a staunch opposition to unification with China.

There are other small parties that are prominent in national politics: New Party (NP), People's First Party (PFP), Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU), Non-Partisan Solidarity Union (NPSU). All three began as splinters off from the main parties. Founded in 1994, the NP was formed by a split in the ruling KMT, the formation of NP was the result of a divergence of views on Taiwan's national identity between President Lee's mainstream faction and the non-mainstream faction composed mainly of first- and second-generation mainlanders. This increasing divergence between the two factions over unification, independence, or the status quo, is generally attributed to the indigenization of the KMT. As a challenger and protest party, the NP's main conflict with the KMT is on the issue of national identity, but its other issue concerns are not clearly distinguished from the ruling party. Consequently, the party struggles to find a niche outside the unpopular position of unification with China. Today it struggles to win elections with its last legislative representation in 2004 and currently holds two seats in city councils.

The PFP is another KMT splinter party resulting from the conflict surrounding the 2000 presidential nomination within the KMT. As a splinter from the KMT, but within the broad pan-blue alliance, the PFP also favours closer relationship with China and generally views Taiwan as part of a greater China. Thus, although the PFP has challenged the KMT in legislative and local elections since 2000, it has taken largely similar issue positions as the KMT. For the 2004

presidential election, the PFP and the KMT fielded a joint team to maximize the pan-Blue camp's chances of capturing the presidency. Today, PFP has a small representation within the parliament and has solidified its small party status.

The TSU was founded in 2000 by several ex-KMT and DPP politicians with strong Taiwanese identity and prefers an independent and separate Taiwan. TSU is generally recognized as part of the Pan-Green coalition with the DPP and has been relatively successful in parliamentary elections. And lastly, the NPSU was established in 2004 and is generally considered a part of the Pan-Blue coalition. Since its formation, the party has successfully gained representation in national legislative elections gaining from two to six seats from elections in 2004 to 2012 confirming its small party status.

The veneer of fluctuating number of party actors notwithstanding, Taiwan's party system seem to be stabilizing towards two large camps dubbed by scholars and political analysts as Pan-Blue and Pan-Green.<sup>4</sup> Several indicators can point to the increasing congregation and stabilization towards a low multiparty system and specifically the Pan-Green and the Pan-Blue camps. One indicator is the voters' inability to distinguish parties along other issues besides the national identity issue. Secondly, the absence of galvanizing conflict lines that is often associated with creation of new parties. And lastly, the rules are controlled by the major parties such as the change in electoral rules that will have an impact on the smaller parties.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hsieh (2002a,b) uses the term pan-KMT and pan-DPP in lieu of the pan-blue and pan-green designation now commonly used.

<sup>5</sup> Taiwan has a two-vote mixed member majoritarian electoral system for its legislative elections.

Corollary to the inability of the electorate to distinguish the current parties beyond the national identity issue is the fact that there are no other galvanizing conflict lines that exist in Taiwanese society. Unlike West European societies that have deep religious, center-periphery, landed versus industrial cleavages, Taiwan's political landscape is relatively less complex and featureless contributing to a restricted party system. Lastly, the expected changes in the electoral system may have an impact towards the consolidation of the party system along the pan-blue and pan-green lines as the largest parties ensure their survival in the political system and shelter their support base from competitors.

### *Volatility*

Lipset and Rokkan suggest that persistence of cleavages and the freezing of party alternatives can be observed from the stability of the distribution of voter identification for the political parties in Taiwan. Table 4 rearranges the data shown on Table 3 but instead of showing voter partisan identification by individual political parties, Table 4 groups the Taiwanese parties along party groups. As mentioned earlier, political parties array mainly along the lines of national identity – unification and independence – or the so-called Pan-Blue versus Pan-Green.

There are several interesting observations that can be inferred from Table 4. Just gleaning on the last column of total percentage of voters expressing partisan identification, over half of Taiwanese voters identify with either the Pan-Blue or the Pan-Green group. Indeed from 1996, the trend was decreasing number of partisan independents until the latest survey results that shows a drop in partisan identification. Another interesting observation is the relative

stability of partisan identification within each party group. As opposed to the data on Table 3, when parties are grouped based along cleavage lines the fluctuation of party identifiers seems to be less volatile. Pan-Blue supporters average about the mid to low 30 percent since 2000s while the Pan-Green partisan identifiers are approximately 25 percent of all voters.

**Table 4 Party Identification of Taiwanese Voters by Party Groups**

	Pan-Blue (KMT, PFP, NP)	Pan-Green (DPP, TSU)	Total
1996	41.9	12.8	54.7
2000	32.6	26.0	58.6
2004	31.8	27.1	59.9
2008	38.4	23.1	61.5
2010	36.2	25.6	61.8
2014	26.4	27.6	54.0

Source: NCCU Election Study Center

From the evidence provided thus far, we can infer that there seems to be a solidifying of voter support around the respective party camps. In this case, the Pan-Blue and Pan-Green voter base has been quite stable. This seems to corroborate Hsieh’s assertion that the pan-KMT and pan-DPP votes have largely been stable over the various elections. As he suggests, “the broad pattern remains quite stable over the years, explaining, to a large extent, the stability in the relative strength between the pan-KMT and pan-DPP forces in Taiwan’s electoral politics. Nevertheless, despite this relative stability, there have been significant changes within each camp” (Hsieh 2001, 934).



## **Summary and Conclusion**

At the outset of this study, I posed the question: Does Taiwan's party system show signs of stability or not? Using Lipset and Rokkan's theoretical framework as a guide in examining Taiwan's cleavage structure, party actors and voter support, we can infer from the currently available data that Taiwan's party system and voter alignment seems to be relatively stable. Despite the relative youth of Taiwan's democracy, the persistence of the national identity cleavage and the coagulating of the Pan-Green and Pan-Blue alliances, increasing consolidation of voter support within the party camps have all contributed to the increasing stability of Taiwan's democratic political system.

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