The Decline and Resurgence of the Kuomintang in Taiwan

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The plunge and resurgence of dominant parties seems to be a pattern in the party politics of most East Asian countries. In Japan, the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) toppled five decades of rule by the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in the 2009 elections but the LDP took back control of the government in 2012. South Korea reveals a more complex dynamic from the conservative Liberal Democratic Party to the opposition Democratic Party in the 1997 presidential election, and then the return to conservative rule with the 2007 presidential election. In Taiwan, the 2000 presidential and the 2001 Legislative Yuan elections ended a half-century of Kuomintang (KMT) rule and installed a new Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) government, although the KMT regained power in the 2008 election. All in all, these countries experienced a decades-long one-party or quasi-one-party rule, a temporary electoral defeat, and then a resurgence of the old dominant parties. What explains such an unprecedented shift from the long-term ruling parties to never-tested opposition parties in these East Asian countries? What, then, accounts for their revival of the old dominants?

Economic performance, political clientelism, policy adaption, electoral rules, and generational replacement have been offered as common explanations for the maintenance and decline of one-party dominance (see, for example, Pempel 1990; Giliomee and Simkins 1999; Diaz-Cayeros and Magaloni 2001; Magaloni and Kricheli 2010). However, the case of Taiwan challenges the prevailing explanations of one-party dominance. Why did the KMT lose its domination despite its outstanding economic performance,
plenty of resources, and policy adaptability. Furthermore, generational replacement had little relevance because the DPP’s vote shares have been rather steady for the past two decades (see Table 1).

This paper focuses on how splits from the KMT and their (dis)coordination with the KMT undermined and recovered the dominance of the KMT. Furthermore, this study pays particular attention to the cross-strait relations in shaping the dynamics of electoral coalitions in Taiwan. China’s military threat and Taiwan’s deepening economic integration to the mainland, along with other international forces, have influenced Taiwanese public opinion on the cross-strait policy and thus affected electoral coalition formation and the electoral fortune of the KMT. This study provides a comprehensive view on party politics in Taiwan by focusing on the status changes in the KMT and offers an insight on how a previous dominant party regains power and maintains another dominance through the case of Taiwan.

Explaining the Dynamics of the KMT Dominance

Economic success, political clientelism, and a “dynamic conservatism,” which is ready to adapt changes to defend what a dominant political party has, are known to be the key for maintaining the dominance (Arian and Barnes 1974; Krauss and Pierre 1990). In that regard the KMT has been successful, except for maintaining its dominance. Then, what deteriorated its domination? The following sections cover the major forces of changes in the status of the KMT over the past three decades.

Maintaining the Dominance:
Since political liberalization in 1986, the ruling KMT had never lost control of the presidency or the Legislative Yuan until 2000. The KMT had mobilized broad support through organizational and clientelist ties with its key constituencies under authoritarian rule. The party’s ability to co-opt most democratic reform issues initiated by the opposition party and its indigenization (or Taiwanization), as well as persistent economic prosperity, contributed to continuous KMT dominance after democratization (Dickson 1996; Tien 1996a; Chu and Diamond 1999; Chu 1999).

**Organization and clientelist ties**

Single-party regimes sustain themselves through “a combination of fear, the penetration and atomization of society, and material inducements” (Magaloni and Kricheli 2001, 129). However, monopolizing political and material resources is the key to maintaining not only single-party regimes but also one-party dominant systems. As a quasi-Leninist party-state, the KMT had complete control over the state’s assets and distributed spoils to loyal elites and citizens, which made it possible to co-opt the opposition and to build a mass patronage system. Furthermore, unlike other one-party states, Taiwan was in part an “electoral authoritarian” or “competitive authoritarian” regime (Gandhi and Przeworski 2007; Levitsky and Way 2002), which allowed direct and competitive local elections in a way to differentiate itself from mainland China as well as to assimilate native elites through patron-client networks in elections. In particular, the single non-transferable voting (SNTV) system induced the intense intra-party competition and facilitated the KMT’s co-optation of local elites. Candidates had to compete for access
to KMT’s financial and organizational resources to win their elections in multi-member districts. Through competitive but limited lower-level elections, the KMT could not only divide the opposition and local factions but also mobilize quite a few of Taiwanese into electing the KMT candidates as well as legitimizing the KMT rule (Rigger 1999). The KMT’s grassroots organizations also contributed to building a broad patronage system through vote-buying practices, which provided material benefits to local vote brokers and supporters. Meanwhile, the party secured the loyalty of mainlanders and voters in northern region through early welfare provision to the military, civil service, and education sectors, allocating 74% of the government welfare spending to those groups (Fell 2005a). Clientelism was one of the main driving forces to maintain the KMT’s popularity and dominance even after democratization.

Co-optation of issues

The ethnic cleavage between Chinese mainlanders—who came to Taiwan after 1945—and native Taiwanese—who immigrated to Taiwan in 17\textsuperscript{th} century—has been the major division within Taiwanese society due to the disparity of political power between these two groups. However, Chiang Ching-Kuo initiated the Taiwanization of the party long before political liberalization in 1986 and escalated the process by appointing native Taiwanese Lee Teng-hui as his successor and co-opting many native Taiwanese elite, invalidating the strategic use of national identity by the opposition (Chu 1999). Furthermore, there were no pressing socio-economic issues that could cut across the broad support of the KMT did not exist
because relatively low inequality was created and maintained amid rapid economic development under the KMT rule. As shown in Figure 1, the pattern of inequality was upward but the change in the Gini index that measures income inequality ranging from 0 to 1 was less than .05 over 20 years. In other words, the opposition had little opportunity to mobilize class conflict. Social welfare expansion, the so-called Welfare State platform, was introduced by the DPP in the early 1990s but co-opted by the KMT, which brought in a universal health insurance plan in 1995 and a national pension plan in 2000 (Chu and Diamond 1999; Diamond 2001). The DPP also attempted to mobilize the issue of political corruption that separated itself from the KMT, which had monopolized all the state resources and been involved in “mafia and money politics” also known as “black-gold politics” to sustain its authoritarian regime (Chu 2001). Because of the pervasive problem of black-gold politics even after the democratization of Taiwan, political corruption has received much attention during campaigns since 1992. Fell’s (2005b, 111) content analysis of 583 official party newspaper ads between 1991 and 2000 and an elite survey on the most prominent political issues in Taiwan’s elections between 1991-2001 find that political corruption was one of the top issues. However, while parties and candidates paid close attention to political corruption, the public did not. Economy and cross-strait relations were much more salient issues than political corruption to most Taiwanese voters. For example, according to the 2000 Interdisciplinary Study of Voting Behavior in Taiwan, only 5.8% of the respondents reported corruption as the most important issue Taiwan faced (Choi 2010). In short, Chiang Ching-quo and Lee Teng-hui’s elevation of
Taiwanese socio-political profile and the KMT’s adaptability to newly emerging issues blurred the difference between the KMT and the main opposition party.

Figure 1. Inequality (1976-2000) and Economic Growth (1952-2000) in Taiwan


Economic Success

Taiwan, as one of Asia’s “Four Tigers,” followed a strategy of growth and export-oriented industrialization, which achieved fast and constant economic growth recognized as a “miracle.” Through state-led economic policies, Taiwan enjoyed a rapid and unprecedented economic growth, recording average growth rate of 9.03 from 1952 to 1979. As illustrated in Figure 1, the economic growth rate slowed from 10.31 in the 1970s to 8.17 in the 1980s and to 6.51 in the 1990s. However, even the low growth rates were quite high for a country that has already achieved industrial maturity since advanced economies tend to slow down and stabilize after reaching a
certain point of development (Diamond 2001). Furthermore, the Asian financial crisis of 1997 did not have much impact on Taiwan’s economy in comparison with neighboring countries such as South Korea (Cheng and Liao 1998; Diamond 2001). It is hard to vote against long-standing ruling parties with a record of economic prosperity. It is even harder when the opposition parties have never been tested for governability (Magaloni 1999; Aldrich and Magaloni 2006; Choi 2010).

Considering the resources, flexibility, and steady economic performance of the KMT, its defeat to the untested opposition DPP seems inexplicable. Solinger (2001, 31) identified six “structural actors” in ending one-party dominance in Mexico, South Korea, and Taiwan—a history of elections, at least one viable opposition party, electoral reforms, a high level of corruption, defectors from the dominant party, and a charismatic opposition figure. There is no doubt that all these factors pave the way for the first power transition in the one-party dominant countries but the KMT’s splits are one of the most crucial determining factor for the KMT’s loss of dominance. Therefore, the KMT’s comeback in 2008 can also be explained by the management of the splits.

Erosion and Resurgence of the KMT Dominance:
Party Splits over the Issue of National Identity

Democratization and the indigenization of the KMT through the power transition from mainland elites to native Taiwanese did not occur without damaging the KMT’s hegemonic status. Taiwan’s transition to democracy launched a new era of party competition. The political reforms of the 1980s
under Chiang Ching-kuo, the son of Chiang Kai-shek, lifted martial law and the ban on political parties, allowing an opposition force called *Tangwai* (anti-KMT elites) to establish the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 1986. The DPP opened up the discussion over the issue of Taiwanese identity by advocating Taiwanese identity and “One Taiwan.”

Taiwan’s democratization process in the 1990s spawned multiple but closely intertwined political issues, such as the indigenization of the KMT and conflicts over Taiwanese identity and the issue of Taiwan’s independence from mainland China. In turn, these salient political issues created severe internal strife and precipitated the split of the KMT. In this sense, the decline of one-party dominance in the late 1990s can be understood as an implosion and factionalization of the party, not necessarily the loss of an electoral contest to the DPP.

Table 1. History of Party Systems in Taiwan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Majority Party</th>
<th>Minority Party</th>
<th>Configuration of Parties and Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1949-1972</td>
<td>Kuomintang (KMT)</td>
<td>No opposition party allowed</td>
<td>KMT total hegemony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972-1986</td>
<td>KMT</td>
<td>Tangwai (independent) movement</td>
<td>KMT dominant DPP formed in 1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986-1993</td>
<td>KMT</td>
<td>DPP</td>
<td>One-party (KMT) dominant NP formed in 1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-1998</td>
<td>KMT</td>
<td>DPP, NP</td>
<td>KMT lost dominance Two and a half parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>KMT</td>
<td>DPP, NP</td>
<td>Two highly competitive parties PFP formed in 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2004</td>
<td>DPP</td>
<td>KMT, PFP, NP</td>
<td>Multiparty system TSU (Taiwan Solidarity Union)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The issue of Taiwan’s independence has been the most important factor in party formation and realignment in Taiwan after democratization (Cheng and Hsu 1996; Ho and Liu 2001; Schubert 2004). The KMT underwent several intraparty splits after Lee Teng-hui succeeded Chiang Ching-kuo in 1988 (see Table 1). Lee Teng-hui’s success in the power struggle and in the further indigenization of the party isolated a group of mainlanders within the KMT (Tien 1995, 1996a). The disenchanted KMT leaders led by Chao Shao-kang defected to launch the New Party (NP) in 1993. The NP mobilized mainlanders who were suspicious of Lee’s commitment to the unification with China, as well as younger middle-class voters (Hsieh 1996; Lin, Chu, and Hinich 1996; Tien 1995, 1996b; Clark 2001). The formation of the NP signaled changes in the party system by undermining the KMT’s dominance and enhancing the DPP’s opportunity to seize power (Cheng and Hsu 1996). The 1995 Legislative Yuan election, the first national election in which the NP ran their candidates, manifested the KMT’s loss of predominance, garnering 46.1% of the vote share, which was 7% drop from the 1992 election. The NP was the main beneficiary of the votes defected from the KMT and attracted many independent voters, gaining 13% of the popular votes, while the vote share of the main opposition DPP was up only 2% to 33.2%.
The KMT’s failure to recapture the presidency in the 2000 election further damaged its status by handing over the presidential power to the main opposition DPP for the first time. The DPP’s historic win was not simply a result of the success of the DPP or its charismatic candidate, Chen Shui-bian. Rather it resulted from the defection of James Soong, who was the Governor of Taiwan Province and ran for the presidency as an independent candidate after losing the KMT presidential nomination to Lien Chan. As seen in Table 2, in a three-way competition, the KMT’s Chan and the independent Soong won 60.57% together, while the DPP’s Chen gained 39.4%. In other words, the intra-party split within the KMT generated the first turnover in the executive power of Taiwan and precipitated the decline of the KMT.

After the 2000 presidential election, two more political parties broke away from the KMT. James Soong established the People First Party (PFP), opposing former president Lee’s policies over constitutional reform, and the removal of the Governorship of Taiwan province in particular, which was perceived as a further separation from mainland China (Diamond 2001). Lee Teng-hui who had briefly retired from politics also formed the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU) in 2001 because of his discontent with the KMT’s position shift over Taiwan’s independence. After Lien Chan assumed the leadership of the KMT from Lee, he tried to distance himself from Lee on the issue of unification-independence by emphasizing unification as a strategic choice for a better electoral performance (Wu 2002; Schubert 2004). The only goal for Lee to form the TSU was to empower President Chen and the DPP to remain in power and resist mainland China’s pressure toward unification (Wu 2002). That is, newly formed parties, such as the PFP and
the TSU also joined national identity conflicts and deteriorated the status of the KMT, while improving the relative position of the DPP. All five political parties fielded their candidates for the 2001 Legislative Yuan elections and the KMT recorded the lowest vote share in the history winning only 28.6%, while the PFP and the NP acquired 18.6% and 2.6%, respectively. The DPP and another pro-independence party, the TSU, received 33.4% and 8.5% each. Even this time, the main beneficiaries were the PFP and the TSU, not the DPP. The KMT splits not only cost the KMT’s majority status but also handed it to the DPP.
Table 2. Vote and Seat Shares by Party at the National-Level Elections in Taiwan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legislative Yuan and National Assembly Elections</th>
<th>Presidential Elections</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KMT 53.0 (59.6) 46.1 (51.8) 49.7 (54.8) 46.4 (54.7) 28.6 (30.2) 32.8 (35.1) 38.9 (39.4) 53.5 (71.4) 44.6 (56.4)</td>
<td>54.0 23.1 49.9 58.5 51.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PFP 20.3 (20.4) 13.9 (15.1) 6.1 (6.1) 0.3 (.9) 5.5 (.03)</td>
<td>2.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NP 13.0 (12.8) 13.7 (14.9) 7.1 (4.9) 2.9 (.4) 0.1 (.4) 0.9 (1.0) 1.5 (0)</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPP 31.0 (31.1) 33.2 (32.9) 29.9 (29.6) 29.6 (31.6) 33.4 (38.7) 35.7 (39.8) 42.5 (42.9) 38.7 (35.4) 34.6 (34.9)</td>
<td>21.1 39.4 50.1 41.6 45.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSU 8.5 (5.8) 7.8 (5.3) 7.1 (7.1) 1.0 (0) 9.0 (0.3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others 16.0 (9.3) 7.7 (3.9) 6.8 (.9) 17 (9.3) 9 (4.5) 9.6 (4.5) 4.5 (3.6) 6.9 (9) 4.9 (0.3)</td>
<td>24.9 37.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Election Study Center, N.C.C.U.
Note: 1. The numbers within the parentheses are seat shares. 2. 1996 and 2005 are National Assembly elections; the rest is Legislative Yuan Elections. 3. Others in the 1996 presidential includes independent candidates, Lin Yang-kang and Chen Li-an, who defected from the KMT. In the 2000 presidential election, James Soong ran as an independent candidate gaining 37.47%.
Despite these divisions, the parties fell into two camps based on their views on Taiwan’s future in relation to mainland China: pro-unification parties of KMT, PFP, and NP and pro-independence parties of DPP and TSU. Each camp formed a coalition for the 2004 presidential election, showing the possibility of two-party system: the “pan-blue” for parties embracing “One-China” and the “pan-green” for parties advocating “One-Taiwan.” As shown in Figure 1, although the KMT hit the bottom in 2001, the pan-blue has never lost its electoral advantage. It is also clear that the KMT’s vote shares improved when the KMT and its splinters formed electoral coalition. While the KMT could not surpass the DPP in the 2001 and the 2004 LY election in which the KMT and the PFP of the pan-blue camp ran their own candidates, it took back its majority position in 2008 when most pan-blue candidates ran under the KMT banner, recovering its highest vote share dating back to 1992.

Although the DPP has enhanced its place in the legislative body over the years, it has reaped little benefit from the KMT’s electoral decline. Most previous KMT supporters switched to one of the KMT splinters and their votes were restored to the KMT once they were united. This suggests that the electoral fortune of the KMT have depended on the unity of the pan-blue coalition, not much on the opposition force. There is no doubt that President Chen’s poor performance in the economy and cross-strait relations contributed to the KMT’s decisive victories in the 2008 Legislative Yuan and presidential elections. Furthermore, a few changes within the KMT and in the electoral system also helped the KMT return to power. Leadership change in the KMT from Lien Chan to Ma Ying-jeou improved the public image of the KMT. Ma, a former Justice Minister and mayor of Taipei, was a charismatic
figure with media skills and provided clear vision for the Taiwanese economy and cross-strait relations (Muyard 2008). Finally, Taiwan moved from the single nontransferable voting (SNTV) system to a mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) system. Compared to the SNTV system, the MMM system favors the larger parties, which encouraged the electoral coalition between the KMT and its junior partner PFP and offered disproportionate benefit to the KMT in 2008. However, again without the unity between the KMT and the splinters, the KMT would get the most votes, but not the majority of the votes.

Figure 2. Vote Shares by Party in the Legislative Yuan Elections in Taiwan (1992-2012)

Source: Election Study Center, N.C.C.U.

Cross-Strait Relations

The issue of national identity is closely related to, and perhaps even inseparable from, the issue of cross-strait relations (Ho and Liu 2001; Lin, Chu, and Hinich 1996). While the issue of national identity is abstract and
symbolic, the policy choices in cross-strait relations by each party illustrate its own vision of Taiwan’s future. As previously discussed, the unity of the pan-blue camp has determined the electoral performance of the KMT. But the KMT’s policies over cross-strait relations influence the unity and thus explain much of the decline and resurgence of the KMT.

After being defeated by the Chinese communists in the civil war (1945 – 1949), Chiang Kai-shek and his KMT suppressed Taiwanese consciousness and imposed the “One China Principle” according to which the Republic of China (ROC) is the only legitimate government of China to justify its rule in Taiwan. However, democratization opened up the space for discussion over Taiwanese identity (Chu and Lin 1996; Chu 2004; Wang and Liu 2004; Wu 2004). With democratization, the identity of Taiwanese as a political form of ethnic identity was translated into political cleavages, especially after the DPP proclaimed itself as the Taiwanese party and set the goal of self-determination (Chu and Lin 1996; Alagappa 2001). Furthermore, the Taiwanization of the KMT and the party’s response to the opposition force led the party to move toward a moderate position on the future of Taiwan. In particular, during Lee Teng-hui’s administration in the 1990s, cross-strait relations moved to a new phase. Lee, as a native Taiwanese, won the power struggle within the KMT after succeeding Chiang Ching-kuo and speeded up the Taiwanization, which troubled mainland China. His promotion of an exclusive Taiwanese identity and private visit to his alma mater, Cornell University in June 1995 provoked military threats from China (Chu 2004). China tried to influence the first democratic presidential election of Taiwan in 1996 by missile tests in the waters of northeastern and southwestern
Taiwan, but Lee won the election by a landslide. Lee’s aggressive pursuit of a Taiwanese identity and cross-strait policies such as “no haste, be patient” to restrict investment to China and the “special state to state relationship” as a departure from the “One China” principle generated more awareness of Taiwanese identity in Taiwan, while bringing more tension within the KMT and in the cross-strait relations. As seen in Figure 2, since the mid-1990s, Taiwanese with exclusive Taiwanese identity have been doubled, while exclusive Chinese identity has shown a significant drop. It is also quite interesting that exclusive Taiwanese identity increased even after the KMT recaptured the presidency in 2008.

Figure 3. Changes in National Identity of Taiwanese (1992-2011)

![Graph showing changes in national identity]

Source: Election Study Center, NCCU

However, the trend of national identity has not been translated into Taiwanese standing on cross-strait relations. Contrary to the significant growth in Taiwanese identity, supporters for immediate independence and
moving toward independence are not the majority. Most Taiwanese prefer the status quo, either deciding the future later or staying as it is indefinitely. More Taiwanese supported independence in 2011 than in 1994, but the change has been very modest, in contrast to the significant increase in Taiwanese identity.

Military threat from and rapid economic growth in mainland China as well as international constraints made Taiwanese and the government more practical in dealing with mainland China (Wu 2004). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tried to influence Taiwanese domestic politics, elections in particular, not to elect independence-oriented candidates such as Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian. Missile tests in 1996 and harsh warning to Taiwanese voters by former Premier Zhu Rongji in 2000 failed, but were enough to attest the possibility of military retaliation from mainland China. Furthermore, the National People’s Congress, the legislature of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), passed an anti-secession bill to demonstrate China’s determination to use military means to prevent Taiwan from moving toward independence. The international political climate also induces Taiwanese pragmatism in cross-strait relations (Chu 1999; Wu 2004; Ho, Clarke, Chen, and Weng 2013). Taiwan lost international recognition as a sovereign state when it lost its seat in the United Nations to the PRC in 1971. Since then, Taiwan has lost diplomatic ties with other countries. U.S. President Clinton established the “three-no’s” policy: opposition to Taiwan’s independence, the concept of two Chinas, and Taiwan’s entree to international organizations that require statehood (Cabesta 1999). Corresponding to Clinton’s three-no’s, President Chen vowed the “Four Nos”—no declaration of independence,
no change in Taiwan’s formal name from the ROC, no inclusion of “state-to-state” relation with the Mainland in the Constitution, and no referendum on Taiwan’s independence (Chu 2001).

Figure 4. Changes in the Unification-Independence Stances of Taiwanese (1994-2011)
Source: Election Study Center, NCCU

Finally, economic development in China and Taiwan’s economic dependence on the mainland make it more difficult for Taiwanese to choose an extreme position in cross-strait relations. China as a growing global economic power is Taiwan’s biggest export and foreign direct investment destination (Tung 2005; also see Figure 5). Right after Chen Shui-bien took power, Taiwan’s economy plunged, recording minus GDP growth (-2.52) in 2001. Taiwanese businesses looking for new markets to sell and invest lobbied to reestablish the “three links”—direct postal, transport, and trade link between the mainland and Taiwan. President Chen partially lifted the ban
on these three links and emphasized direct transportation links as a first step for economic and cultural integration (Tung 2005). In addition, the accession of Taiwan and the mainland to World Trade Organization (WTO) accelerated the cross-strait economic integration (Chu 2004). As shown in Figure 5, Taiwan’s dependence on China in exports has significantly increased since 2001, while Chinese export destinations have been more diversified. Ma intensified the economic integration with China through the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), a preferential trade pact between Taipei and Beijing. The process of economic integration is not reversible and much of Taiwan’s economy depends on mainland China, as Beijing insists that any free trade agreements (FTA) involving Taiwan should be approved by Beijing (Chen 2013). China’s increasing economic and political presence in the international community and Taiwan’s economic dependence on the mainland marginalized the possibility of Taiwan’s independence, which most Taiwanese and politicians tend to accept.

As the post-Lee KMT repositions itself closer to the unification, the major obstacle for a coalition between the KMT and its splinters, the NP and the PFP, has been removed. In spite of forming a coalition, the KMT lost to the DPP again in the 2004 presidential election but by a very narrow margin. The pan-blue camp, and especially the KMT, had a momentous success in the 2008 presidential and Legislative Yuan elections by retaking both executive power and legislative majority.

Figure 5. Economic Interdependence between Taiwan and the Mainland
One-Party Dominance Again?

The KMT has been successful in the recent consecutive presidential and legislative elections and seems to recover its popularity of the early 1990s. In particular, the 2008 Legislative Yuan and presidential elections seemed to signal the resurgence of the KMT as a dominant party. Under the new electoral system of a Mixed-Member Majoritarian (MMM), the KMT gained 53.48% of the popular votes, which secured 61 seats out of the 79 district-based LY seats (including 6 aboriginal district seats) and 20 seats from the 34 party-list seats. The KMT and its junior partners seized 72% of the LY seats, while the DPP won only 27 seats worthy of 24% of the LY seats and the TSU failed to win any seat. In other words, most pan-blue candidates in the single-member districts run under the KMT banner defeated the pan-green candidates. The seat share of the KMT tended to exaggerate its
dominance but the unity within the Pan-blue camp, new electoral rule and unpopularity of incumbent president Chen assured a landslide victory for the KMT. The KMT’s electoral performance in the 2012 Legislative Yuan election was less impressive than it was in 2008, garnering 44.55% of popular votes and 64 total seats in the LY elections. The DPP performed better in this election, obtaining 40 seats, and the TSU also secured three seats. The division between the KMT and the PFP and the TSU’s success contributed to the drop of the KMT. In contrast to the 2008 election, popular votes for the party-list seats were diversified to minor parties such as the PFP and the TSU in particular. Under the new electoral system, minor parties had little chance to win single-member districts, while they could get seats proportional to their popular vote shares with a 5% threshold. The margin of victory by Ma in the 2012 presidential election was also much smaller than that in 2008. That said, the KMT still won the majority of the popular vote and a majority of seats (56%) in the legislative body and remain in executive power.

Do all these mean the start of another period of KMT dominance? It is very likely as long as the KMT performs well. There is little difference among the political parties, within the pan-blue camp in particular, in cross-strait relations moving toward the middle. As confirmed by President Ma, the KMT has no intention of deviating from status quo in the relation with mainland China, while supporting for unification like other pan-blue parties. In other words, there will be little conflict within the pan-blue camp over the cross-strait relations and unification, which were the major reason for splits from the KMT. The more extreme position toward independence the DPP takes, the more electoral disadvantage it will have since more than 80% of the
population supports for status quo. Furthermore, voters who support for independence will vote for the TSU, rather than the DPP, as evidenced in the 2012 LY election. In short, the KMT’s current position in cross-strait relations prevents a serious division within the pan-blue camp and attracts practical Taiwanese voters who want stability in cross-strait relations, which Chen could not achieve during eight years of his presidency.

Electoral reform to the majoritarian system will also keep the KMT less susceptible to its allies in keeping the majority status. The mixed-member majoritarian system is more likely to bring a majority party disproportionately benefiting larger parties. Because voters do not want to waste their votes by voting for a minor party candidate who has little chance to win the district, they tend to vote for one of the major party candidates. This discourages minor parties from fielding their candidates against major party candidates in single-member districts, while focusing solely on the party-list competition based on national party votes. That is, it is not necessary for the KMT to make an effort to form an electoral coalition; furthermore the majoritarian system systematically reduces the chance of minor parties to spoil major parties’ elections. Splits of the pan-blue camp will affect the KMT’s seat share in the party-list seats but the damage is relatively limited compared to the previous SNTV system. Under the new electoral rule, not the intra-party competition but the inter-party competition becomes more intense. Therefore, the electoral fortunes of the KMT will be more dependent on the major opposition party than on its splinters, as seen in the 2012 election. The new leadership in the DPP led by Chairwoman Tsai Ing-wen turned its attention from the symbolic issues of national identity and independence to
income inequality and the disadvantaged and affirmed that she would not change Ma’s economic policies toward the mainland such as the ECFA (Chen 2012). Incumbent Ma’s disappointing performance and the DPP’s effort toward the median voters’ position in cross-strait relations and engagement in the class issues narrowed the margins in the 2012 presidential and LY elections. Ultimately, the KMT’s ability to maintain its dominance in the future will depend upon its performance, rather than on help from its junior partners. The new majoritarian electoral system leads two major parties move toward the middle in many issues and reduces the influence of the minor parties. Furthermore, Taiwan voters have experienced both major parties, the KMT and the DPP, as governing parties so that they can evaluate them in terms of their performance, rather than their positions on national identity, which is a rather politically and socially constructed symbolic issue. In this regard, the KMT has an advantage over the DPP since its reputation for economic performance and governability is stronger than the DPP’s. These suggest that the dominance of the KMT is possible but the DPP’s electoral strategies could change the dynamics of the party system in Taiwan.
References


