Rough draft

TAIWANESE PARTY MANIFESTOS AND ITS PURPOSES:

SOME INITIAL FINDINGS AND THOUGHTS[[1]](#footnote-1)

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Introduction

The questions of why do parties write election manifestos and how they draft these documents have generated scholarly attention recently (Rienhardt and Victor 2009; Harmel 2011). Indeed, as Harmel (2011) correctly states, our understanding of the roles that manifestos play in electoral politics is derived mainly from the experience of the advanced industrial democracies, in particular the United States and the United Kingdom. Our extant understanding of party manifestos in established democracies show that variations exist about the document itself, why it is written, how it is used and whether it is easily available. Regardless of these variations, we are able to point to a document that contains the policy positions of political parties.

Despite being latecomers, political parties in newer democracies are also able to point to a document that serves as a policy guideline. Whether the adoption of party manifestos in newer democracies are a result of copycatting, diffusion, or for functional reasons, it is probably not too far-fetched nor unreasonable to expect that, like the variations in manifestos that exists in established democracies, there are likely to be variations in the purposes and functions of manifestos in the electoral politics of newer democracies. Yet, for us to corroborate this conjecture, we need to conduct more in depth studies of party manifestos in new democracies. Unfortunately, little is known about the purposes and functions that manifestos have in the electoral and party politics of the newer industrial democracies such as Taiwan. And no systematic studies exist for us to be able to conduct a comparative study of the role and purposes of party manifestos.

In the specific case of Taiwan, we know that party manifestos exist and are readily available at least for the two major parties. There are scholars who have begun to study manifestos following the footsteps of the Manifesto Research Group to code and measure issue positions of the major parties in Taiwan (Liu 2012; Liao 2011). These efforts focus on the use of manifesto data to understand the continuity and changes of Taiwanese parties’ issue positions over time or uses the manifestos to assist voters in their vote choice. In these works, manifestos are used as independent variables predicting party system change or in spatial analysis of vote choice. As a dependent variable, however, the question of why do the Taiwanese parties felt compelled to produce a manifesto is less known.

In this paper, we use the template proposed by Harmel (2011) to examine the why’s of Taiwanese manifestos for the two major parties -- the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). In the next section, we provide a brief background of Taiwanese electoral politics. In the following sections, we explore and compare the purpose of the election platform for both the KMT and the DPP. We conclude by providing some remarks about the role of the environment in explaining the similarities and differences between the two major parties.

Taiwanese Electoral Politics – Some Background

Prior to 1996, Taiwanese elections are not generally considered as truly open and fair competitions. With the introduction of the first direct presidential election, Taiwan for the first time inaugurated a free and democratic election. In Taiwan, the issue of national identity and cross-Strait relations dominates electoral politics. These issues form the main cleavage line of Taiwanese politics. On the one side, the formerly authoritarian KMT hold a pan-Chinese view that sees Taiwan as part of a larger democratic China (not to be confused with the PRC) and therefore the party does not rule out unification into a greater democratic China if that becomes a reality. Though unification with China is highly unlikely (at least in the near to medium term), KMT’s pan-Chinese view is more recently translated into policies, that while continuing to hold on to the concept of a greater “Republic of China” with a separate identity from the PRC, emphasizes more engagement with China and promotes a “Chinese” identity instead of a more particularistic “Taiwanese” identity.

Taiwan’s second largest party, the DPP traces its origins to a band of opposition politicians dubbed as ‘Tangwai’ (or outside of the party), who organized themselves in 1986. Since then it has become institutionalized, captured the presidency from 2000-08, regularly wins county level executive offices, and is entrenched as one of Taiwan’s two major political parties. In its early days the DPP distinguishes itself from the ruling KMT in its domestic social policies and anti-corruption stance. However, the conviction of President Chen (who is from the DPP) on corruption charges and the malfeasance scandals of the DPP presidential administration between 2000-08, the party has lost some of its moral high ground and luster. The DPP’s call for an independent and separate identity for Taiwan continues to be its most prominent and controversial policy position that is in stark contrast to the KMT position. For the DPP, the issue of national identity defines the party.

Besides these two major political parties, Taiwan also has several minor parties – the People’s First Party, the Taiwan Solidarity Union, and the New Party. These three political parties were established following from splits with the major parties. The New Party, for example, became a challenger and protest party organized in 1994 resulting from the divergence of views on national identity following the indigenization of the KMT under then President Lee Teng-hui. The New Party continues to contest elections but has been substantially weakened as a result of defection of its members back to the KMT and the result of the new mixed member majoritarian electoral system that favors larger parties. The People’s First Party (PFP) was also created following the public split between James Soong and the KMT leaders in the 2000 presidential election. More radical Taiwan Independence activists that see the DPP’s independence stance as too soft founded the Taiwan Solidarity Union (TSU). These three minor parties are generally grouped into one or the other party grouping in Taiwan – the pan-Blue versus pan-Green – depending on their position in the national identity cleavage. In general, these are largely challenger parties but with very little distinguishing positions from the main parties.

In Taiwan’s electoral politics, national identity is the main dividing line and the prominence of cross-Strait relations while traditional left-right issues that divide political parties in established democracies seem to be weak or absent. Whilst in the United States, for example, health care issue became embroiled in traditional left-right language placing Republicans and Democrats in strong and raucous opposition to each other, in Taiwan the universal health care bill passed with support from the two major parties. Another example is trade and economic issues. In Taiwan, the role that the state played in its march towards rapid economic growth and development has made voters and parties agree that the government has an important role in the management and regulation of the economy. Since the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 and then the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, Taiwan’s government continues to play a prominent role in providing economic stimulus with the major parties in concurrence. In other words, the left-right issue in Taiwan is not a salient and prominent divide. Instead, parties, politicians and candidates tend to be split according to how to deal with China. The debate surrounding the trade and economic agreement with China are not necessarily couched in terms of the economic merits but instead are debated along the lines of pro or anti-China sentiments as well as issues of national security.

With a brief background of Taiwanese parties and electoral politics, let us now turn to an examination of the why’s of the party manifestos of the two major parties -- the KMT and the DPP.

The Why’s of Taiwanese Manifestos

Despite the dominance of national identity issue in Taiwan’s electoral politics, the relative non-prominence of traditional left-right issues, and the convergence of position in many issues, Taiwanese parties continue to produce manifestos or policy guidelines to distinguish themselves from each other (Hsieh and Niou 1996). Known under different official titles, the KMT makes no distinction between its election manifesto and its party manifesto that the KMT simply refers to as “party policy guidelines” while the opposition DPP terms its election manifestos as the party’s “guiding principles.” Regardless of the official title used to describe the document, these guidelines provide the basis for governance of the KMT and the DPP. Putting aside how parties in Taiwan come to adopt manifestos in the first place, that is whether by copycatting or by diffusion, election manifestos do seem to serve several interesting functions for political parties in Taiwan.

Harmel (2011) suggested that manifestos serve many different purposes to political parties such as direct appeals to voters, as a means of controlling elected officials, as a draft legislative program, the mobilization of voters, for arming and rewarding the activists, and for resolving internal disputes. In the following discussion, we briefly highlight these varying purposes of manifestos in the two major Taiwanese parties – the KMT and the DPP.

As direct appeal to voters, indirect mobilization of voters, or arming the activists?

The use of manifesto to appeal to voters is probably the most obvious function of producing the document. From a Downsian perspective, parties adjust their issue positions to attract voters and capture the ‘median’ voters. Though questions have been raised about how informed voters are about issues in a given election or whether voters ‘pick and choose’ a handful of salient issues, political parties continue to draft manifestos expecting to appeal to voters to a certain extent.

However, it is also just as likely that the manifesto is adopted to ‘preach to the choir members,’ so to speak. The debate about substance versus the packaging of manifestos, described by Harmel et al (1995) remind us that election manifestos can serve many different purposes for the parties. Whether these functions are necessarily at odds with each other or they can be accommodated within one document is a matter worth further investigation.

In the Taiwan case, more in-depth study is required before we are able to fully ascertain whether the manifesto is used as a direct or indirect appeal to voters who are not otherwise already committed to the party. In other words, if we are to array the voters according to the strength of partisan identification here from the one end you have activists and partisans and on the other end you have partisan independents, the evidence in Taiwan is that the manifesto’s primary audience is more towards its stronger partisan identifiers. The use of the manifesto in Taiwan, at least for the two major parties, as an appeal to partisan independents and maybe even weak partisan identifiers is most likely a low priority. Instead, the manifesto in Taiwan is used to target the base constituencies of both parties, i.e., the moderate to strong partisan identifiers and the activists of the DPP and the KMT. A recent survey of party experts shows that the primary audience of party platforms in Taiwan, for both the DPP and the KMT, are the base constituents.

Besides the expert survey findings, other evidence points to the low priority placed on voter mobilization are the infrequency of changes to the manifestos. Since 1996 presidential elections and legislative elections (since 2004) occur every four years but both the KMT and the DPP have manifesto changes that tend to be very infrequent. Unless issues are extremely stable or that the median voter in Taiwan never changes, the infrequency of manifesto changes does not fit the Downsian model of party changing positions to capture the median voter. The KMT, for example, last revised its manifesto on October 2009 while the DPP last revised its platform on September 2007. The KMT’s last revision was after the 2008 presidential and legislative elections. The DPP manifesto has had an even longer tenure considering that the party lost the presidential election, had a disappointing legislative election in 2008, and elected a new party leader, no revision to the manifesto was done.

Despite the main target being the party’s base constituents, both the KMT and the DPP platforms are readily available in the respective parties’ internet homepage. The media regularly report on both platforms when party members reference them. Although there are some evidence that KMT members tend to refer to their manifestos less frequently vis-à-vis the DPP party members.

Why is it, then, that Taiwanese parties do not seem to place higher priority in direct appeal or indirect mobilization of voters? One likely explanation is the proportion of voters that are considered partisan independents. Strong partisan identifiers of both the DPP and the KMT make up over half of the voters. The KMT can count on at least 30 to 40 percent while the DPP can rely on 25-30 percent of the voters for electoral support. These figures do not account for the fact that Taiwanese elections tend to be characterized by competition of party groups such as the pan-Blue group (comprising of the KMT and its allies) and the pan-Green group (comprising the DPP and its allies) and voters tend to identify to the large party groupings. Evidence from Taiwanese election studies show high level of stability of voting patterns when party groupings are taken into account (Clark and Tan 2012). Though volatility does exists to a certain extent (and prior to 2008 under the single non-transferable vote system), volatility of the voter support is mainly observed within party groupings, i.e., pan-Blue or pan-Green, rather than across party groupings.

A second plausible explanation is the fact that Taiwanese electoral politics tend to have a small number of salient issues and often times these issues are subsumed or filtered through the main national identity cleavage (Hsieh and Niou 1996; Clark and Tan 2012). The limited number of issues mean that vote choice amongst the Taiwanese electorate tend to only be weakly influenced by issue position on the very limited salient issues. Accounting for the solid vote support of relatively large base constituencies, partisans and activists, the role of short-term campaign factors such as candidate image becomes more influential in the vote choice calculation of the weaker partisan identifiers.

Furthermore, without corroborating evidence from national election surveys, it is difficult to ascertain whether the manifestos have actually affected voter perception of the parties themselves. The stability of the voter support noted above is such that in Taiwanese electoral politics one often hears the term ‘iron votes’ to describe the solid and unwavering vote support from base constituencies. In this sense, the Taiwanese parties tend to use the manifesto to ensure that their constituency’s views are well represented and that the manifesto is an expression or articulation of positions of their base constituencies.

As draft legislative program

Harmel suggested that “beyond just being a tool for voters and/ministers to hold legislators and other public holders accountable, the manifesto can also be envisioned as an actual legislative agenda, with the office-holders themselves as primary audience...[and] in situations where voters are unaware that a manifesto exists...it could serve the purpose of informing office holders what their party expects of them” (2011, p.3). From this perspective, the manifestos of the two major parties in Taiwan also perform the function of a draft legislative program which is reinforced by the party charter or constitution that obligates party members (of which legislators are) to obey and follow.

Taiwanese manifestos for both major parties are seen as legislative programs and the basis of governance rather than a document for the explicit purpose of electioneering. This is evidenced by the fact that both the DPP and the KMT do not frequently revise their manifestos and that the timing of manifesto revisions are not exactly in coordination with the election cycles. The formal rules of both major parties have no provisions allowing for the adoption of manifestos at the local branch or county levels and as Taiwan has a small landmass, the local branches do not deviate from the national party. Though local legislative candidates may publish their campaign programs and opinions, these are largely in agreement with the national party platforms as formal rules obligate party members to abide by the national manifesto.

Formal rules, stated in the KMT and DPP party constitutions obligate party members, legislative candidates, and legislators to abide by the national manifesto. The KMT party charter, for example, states that members are obligated to “support the policies of the party platform” (KMT party charter chapter 2, article 9). The DPP party constitution has similar provisions that require party members to abide by all party regulations and resolutions.

How much of the party’s manifesto is fulfilled in a given legislative and executive term is less known in Taiwanese electoral politics. Studies of pledge fulfillment similar to those conducted by Pomper and Lederman(1980), Bara (2005), and Mansergh and Thomson (2007) have not been conducted for the Taiwanese parties.

As a means of controlling elected officials and resolving internal disputes.

In Harmel et al’s (1995) work on party manifestos and issue positions, they suggested that party platforms are written with two audiences in mind – the party activists and the voters. In both the DPP and the KMT, the party manifesto becomes part of agreed policy guidelines that by the provisions of the party charter obligates party members (of which legislators are) to abide by agreed. From the voter’s perspective, a party’s platform can also be used as ruler to hold elected officials accountable.

The assertion that voters use the manifesto and its pledge fulfillment as a grading sheet to mark the performance of elected officials assumes that a) voter loyalties are fluid and less stable; b) voter are aware of the manifesto and its contents; and c) individual legislators have freedom of action independent of their party. In examining the Taiwanese case, however, these three assumptions do not hold up particularly well. As mentioned earlier in this paper, the base constituencies of the parties and the large party grouping in particular are quite stable (Clark and Tan 2012). Inter-party group volatility in Taiwan is low, that is if one considers the pan-Blue and pan-Green groupings there is very low level of vote defection from these groupings (see Liu, Chiu, and Tan 2011). Long term factors such as partisan identification and ethnic identification tend to be critical factors in determining vote choice in Taiwan (Clark and Tan 2012).

Furthermore if voters are to hold legislators accountable for their pledges assumes that individual legislators in Taiwan would have more maneuverable policy space outside of the party’s constrained position. In Taiwan, the strength of party discipline that is reinforced by centralization of power of the party organization does not give legislators too much leeway to deviate from party policy guidelines. In fact, instead of voters holding legislators accountable, party manifesto and policy guidelines performs the function of holding the agent (in this case the legislator) accountable to his/her principal (in this case the party executive).

Harmel (2011) also suggested that platform also function as a mechanism to settle internal party disputes and present a united image to the electorate. In the Taiwan case, there are some anecdotal evidence to support this function of the manifesto and more accurately the party charter.

As mentioned earlier, the dominant issue in Taiwanese electoral politics is the national identity issue and cross-Strait relations (i.e, Taiwan-China relations). For both the KMT and the DPP, policy guidelines pertaining to the attitude, position, and strategies on this dominant issue is the result of conflict and compromise of factions with these two major parties. Within the DPP, for example, factional disputes concerning making a de jure declaration of an independent Taiwan part of its policy guidelines are very public and in the end a more moderate position was adopted by the party. The KMT policy guidelines also saw some changes resulting from the conflict between the mainstream and the non-mainstream factions in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The conflict, though initially arising from the conflict between the islanders and mainlanders within the party for power, is also on the national identity issue. For the KMT, it is placed in an awkward position of being pro-unification although it is not entirely accurate. Since the early 1990s, the KMT has settled into a more pro-status quo position recognizing a de facto separate Taiwan without declaring de jure independence or a Republic of Taiwan.

In both parties, the internal disputes on this most dominant of issue in Taiwanese politics have seen the two major parties experiencing dissension and later on party splits. The creation of the New Party, People’s First Party, Taiwan Solidarity Union, and Taiwan Independence Party are examples of internal disputes regarding the party guidelines. The departure of dissenting party members resolved much of the internal disputes and the adoption of more moderate guidelines by the KMT and the DPP on the national identity issue.

Concluding Remarks: Some Points to Consider

The brief examination of the election manifestos of Taiwan’s two major parties offers us a glimpse as to the purpose and function of election platforms from an internal party perspective. However, we would be remiss in failing to consider the impact of factors external to the parties themselves that may hinder or buttress these functions of party manifestos, at least in the case of Taiwan. Several factors are important to consider in order to have a better understanding of the functions and purposes of party manifestos in Taiwan such as the role of party discipline and the centralization of power, the stability of voter support and strong partisan identification, and the limited number of salient issues or the dominance and primacy of one over-arching issue in Taiwan politics.

The last two factors have been cursorily explored in earlier parts of the paper but the issues of party discipline and party centralization have not been examined yet. As observed in parties of established democracies, party discipline and the power of the party national executive – due to its control of legislative candidate selections and ability to distribute resources ensures – allow the party to exert considerable influence and control of the party members and in particular the parliamentary party members. The formal rules of both parties state that party members and legislators are obligated to the national party guidelines, however, without the reinforcement of the parties’ ability to select legislative candidates and distribute ‘pork,’ it is highly unlikely that formal rules alone will restrain and constrain elected officials from deviating from the national party guidelines. Though, as noted earlier, Taiwanese legislative candidates do have their own campaign pledges and positions they are largely within the confines of the national guidelines. In Taiwan, there is very little incentive to be a party defector or a rebel as evidenced by the fate of politicians that have split away from the two major parties.

In many ways, the purpose of the manifesto as a guidelines for party officials to follow and as a mechanism of accountability to evaluate the performance of the party’s legislators and elected officials is reinforced by the three external factors cited directly, indirectly, and interactively.

Clearly much remains to be done in order for us to uncover the why’s of Taiwanese manifestos. In this brief exploratory paper, we simply want to shed some light on the purpose of manifestos in Taiwan. Future work, at least in the Taiwan case, can take on how the environment external to the party organization itself affects the function, role, and purpose of party manifestos.

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