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The Effects of Electoral Systems on Party Systems

The Cases of Japan and Taiwan

Topic and Research Question

This thesis deals with the question how electoral systems affect party systems, and whether exogenous societal factors influence the party system. Under the assumption of Duverger's hypotheses, majoritarian systems lead to two-party systems and proportional representative (PR) systems rather lead to multi-party systems. Yet they are just one variable among many political and societal variables. Thus it is important to take exogenous factors into consideration for party system research as well. Japan and Taiwan offer the opportunity to answer this, as they both first used the single non-transferable vote system (SNTV) for parliamentary elections. After the electoral reforms (Japan in 1993, Taiwan in 2005) they switched to similar mixed-member majoritarian systems (MMM), a combination of majoritarian (SMD) and proportional representative components.

State of the Art

The first theoretical foundation for the analysis of electoral system research was set by Maurice Duverger in *Political Parties* (1958). In the 1970s the next important theoretical works were published: Rae (1971) offered a first try at operationalizing variables of electoral systems and Sartori (1976) looked more closely at party systems and parties per se. Another essential work for the operationalization of variables is Taagepera and Shugart's *Seats and Votes* (1989) which is among the most comprehensive books on this topic. First approaches on issue dimensions were done by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) covering the development of socioeconomic and religious cleavages in Europe. Further scholars like Sartori (1994) and Lijphart (1999) also look at issue dimensions and the left-right continuum of political parties. Jou (2011) is a good example of possible other theoretical issue dimensions in East Asia.

Important authors and sources for Japan are Heinrich (2007), Hrebenar and Nakamura (2015), Reed (2002, 2003) and Reed, McElwain and Shimizu (2009). Japan is relatively well researched in regards of SNTV and the changes of the electoral reform. Main sources for Taiwan are Fell (2012) and Jou (2009). Taiwan's developments after the electoral reform are only marginally or not at all researched so far (like intra-party factions or party cohesion), pointing at a lack of research here.

Methodology and Approach

First the electoral systems of one country in regards of single components, average district magnitude, number of districts, and legal and effective thresholds is compared. Then the effective number of legislative parties alone, the percentage of seats of the two largest parties and effective number of elective and legislative parties split into single components are shown. By starting with the effective number of legislative parties (Taagepera & Shugart 1986), this offers the opportunity to show general trends first and start to introduce the developments of the polity. The seat percentage of the two largest parties show the relative distance between them, how the vote shares for them changed and whether an alternation of governing power occurred. The effective number of elective and legislative parties split into single components show more details about how Duverger's law works over time. Subsequently, the Fractionalization Index by Rae (1971) in form of a graph is given to show overall trends, and the degree of defractionalization gives first impressions of how the mechanical factor works. Proportionality will be looked at then by first showing the seats-to-vote ratio (Rae 1971) of the two largest parties. This illustrates how stable electoral outcomes are over time. Then the Gallagher Index offers a concrete look at the disproportionality. In the end, the advantage profile (Taagepera & Shugart 1986) with the break-even point of first the SNTV system and the MMM system are shown to see when parties get under- or overrepresented and whether there are any other particularities. Afterwards issue dimensions and developments of the party systems will be analyzed to give a more detailed explanation of developments in each country.

Main Facts

Japan: Electoral system developments

An equilibrium of number of parties was reached in the 1970s with five long-standing parties, though the LDP remained the dominant party until 1993. SNTV was more proportional than the MMM system, which is reflecting in the higher number of effective number of legislative parties with an average of 2.92 (1963-1993), compared to an average of 2.6 under MMM. Parties with higher vote-shares were less advantaged under the SNTV system, and the advantage ratio was low with about 15 percent of votes, compared to the MMM system. Now more than 35 percent are needed to get a seat bonus.

Japan: Societal developments

Societal cleavages started to develop only after 1945. The left-right axis of the political parties was more reflected in their stance towards remilitarization than in a real class conflict. This turned into the salient peace cleavage. There was further a growing rural-urban cleavage. Both were embraced by the dominant party LDP by shifting the focus to economic development and supporting the countryside. After the electoral reform in 1993, the rural-urban cleavage has been remaining salient. The old left-right cleavage is still a matter of relevance but the old socialist parties declined in the 1990s and the political position of the parties have become blurred.

Taiwan: Electoral system developments

Under SNTV, slowly a multi-party system emerged. An equilibrium of number of parties was starting to develop by early 2000, with five parliamentary parties before the electoral reform. The new MMM system proved to be more restrictive to smaller parties and reduced the effective of number of parties drastically from well above three to an average of 1.99. Less small parties are represented in the parliament and well above 40 percent of the votes are now needed to get a seat-bonus.

Taiwan: Societal developments

During the martial law period, the only societal cleavage that emerged was the ethnic one (between mainland Chinese and Taiwanese). This then was incorporated into other issue dimensions developing after 1990, the most important one being the national identity cleavage. There has been a growing polarization between the pro-independence camp and the pro-China camp since early 2000. Only in 2012 a first shift away from national identity towards economic policies was seen during election campaigns.

Results

Effect of SNTV and MMM on the party systems

The electoral system may be seen as a frame, but within its rules and restrictions actors and societal on-goings determine how the party system actually develops.

Under SNTV Duverger's extended law should lead to a multi-party system, which came true in both Taiwan and Japan with five established parliamentary parties. Yet in Japan the dominant party LDP stayed in power until 2008 (MMM system), while in Taiwan an alternation of power already occurred under SNTV.

The MMM system caused the development of two large parties in Japan, but the effective number of parties hardly decreased and the actual number of parliament parties increased. MMM is more permissive to smaller parties in Japan than in Taiwan, which is reflecting in the constantly newly formed minor parties. The effect of MMM is more drastic in Taiwan, reducing the effective number of parties to around 2. Yet the Taiwanese party system has not changed much under MMM, pointing that more time might be needed to adapt.

Other factors affecting the party systems

It showed that issue dimensions and the position of established parties in Japan and Taiwan were crucial for shaping the party system under SNTV. In Japan, the polarization of the peace cleavage (1950s) led to the formation of new center parties. In Taiwan, the moderate position of the major parties on national identities led to new extremist parties.

MMM in Japan was introduced when the country was in economic recession with growing social gaps. As those problems are still ongoing, the party system too seems to be in turmoil. Further there seems to be a growing alienation between the population and the political parties, resulting in higher numbers of floating voters.

In Taiwan, a shift to economic issues and a toned-down national identity issue may imply an issue dimension shift. So not MMM but a shift of issue dimensions and the demand of de-polarization by the electorate may be important in changing the party system in the future.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at/>

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